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A Look Forward in US Education

Based on the work of Nora Gordon and Paul E. Peterson

“What We Know About Our Schools,” an essay by Nora Gordon and Paul E. Peterson, concludes with a forward-looking analysis of the challenges and opportunities facing US education.

Key Facts on the Future of US Education

1. Public education has been a growth industry throughout US history, with increasing enrollments, per-pupil expenditures, and achievement levels for most of the twentieth century.
2. For nearly a decade before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a growing share of students were not learning basic skills, and substantial disparities in educational outcomes across racial and ethnic groups remained.
3. The pandemic led to major setbacks in math and reading achievement, with no swift recovery in sight.
4. Chronic absenteeism has increased significantly postpandemic, threatening the efficacy of further investments.
5. By 2031, 46.9 million students are projected to be enrolled in public schools, down from 49.3 million in 2021, a drop of about 5 percent.
6. Education spending as a share of GDP fell to 3.2 percent in 2023, down from its peak of 4.4 percent in 2009.
7. Families are increasingly choosing alternatives to district-operated schools, both with and without government assistance.
8. Improvements in student data systems and data processing have facilitated major advances in education research.
9. Local experimentation and discretion in providing education services raise concerns about ensuring adequate and equitable outcomes, necessitating continued public demand for accountability and transparency.
10. Well-designed merit pay systems for teachers can have positive effects on student achievement, but there are challenges that often limit adoption or effective implementation, including opposition from teacher organizations.

**Based on “What We Know About Our Schools,” by Nora Gordon and Paul E. Peterson,
at www.hoover.org/fact-based-policy-program.**



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