

A report from the **Education Futures Council**

Ours to Solve, Once—and for All

Securing the outcomes our students need



HOOVER
INSTITUTION

Ours to Solve, Once—and for All

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Introduction

In 2023 the Hoover Institution at Stanford University convened a group of innovation leaders to take stock of K–12 public education in the United States. The Education Futures Council quickly focused on designing a new approach for America’s traditional public school system. Schools operated and overseen by local school boards—often called “traditional” or “district” schools—enroll 75 percent of all students in the United States and will continue to be a prominent part of the education landscape no matter what other schooling choices exist.

The Council was unanimous in the view that dramatic action is no longer a matter of public urgency; it is a matter of public emergency. High-performing public schools are

one of the cornerstones of a safe and healthy democracy. Providing a consistently high quality of education to all students, in all communities, entails a unique public trust, and the success or failure of that endeavor has a direct and determinative effect on the future prosperity and security of our country. Unless we urgently undertake a thorough revamp of the most utilized school option, our children will bear directly the harms of our complacency.

The Council immediately confronted a perplexing contradiction. We are abundantly blessed with dedicated teachers and other school personnel, the best education research apparatus in the world, and strong support from families and communities. At the same time, academic outcomes in district schools vary widely but on average achieve underwhelming results, despite decades of funding increases and attempts at reform. According to virtually every available metric, the overall quality of American schools has either declined or remained stagnant since the 1970s. On a per-pupil basis, we now spend 40 percent more than the average spent by member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). At the same time, we are ranked thirty-fourth in math globally on the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) evaluations.

Change Is Imperative

A full understanding of the long trend of student performance includes a sober recounting of the astounding array of efforts to improve our schools and the learning they provide. Retrospective reviews and evaluations identify a set of common design features that help explain their shortcomings. Most reforms target marginal changes, mostly to inputs, that are expected to catalyze systemic change. Many are singular designs that may not suit local conditions equally. Proposed solutions originate far from classrooms, imposed via regulation or mandate, insinuating that other parties know what's best. Finally, the impatience for rapid impact leads to pervasive churn of reforms, in turn fueling mistrust and frustration at every level of the hierarchy.

It is little surprise that, rather than realizing their original aims, multiple well-intentioned but ill-fitting efforts have instead created the unintended consequence of pervasive resistance to change and resilience in maintaining the status quo. We now preserve a system that doesn't serve us.

Even without considering poor results for students, we should have grave concern about an immutable hierarchy. The number and magnitude of structural changes that are underway in our nation—we call them “tectonic shifts”—are reshaping

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our population, its demographic composition, our communities and their labor forces, and the collective social contracts that bind us. Importantly, these shifts singularly and in total will affect communities in uneven ways, requiring almost all to react, albeit in different ways. The outlook does not bode well if our chief engine of human capital development is incapable of adapting to a changing world.

THE EDUCATION FUTURES COUNCIL APPROACH

This proposal starts from a different premise than that of many past reform proposals. Many of the barriers that impede the education progress our country needs lie in the structure and function of the system itself—that is, the arrangement of, and interactions among, the

institutions we have charged with the critical public service of educating our children.

These institutions—the local school boards, state agencies, and federal authorities that all have a say in the workings of modern schools—are not the product of coherent and thoughtful design. Rather, they evolved over decades to a point where they hinder more than help the cause of improved outcomes for all students.

Changing the way these institutions are organized and function—what we call the “operating system” of public education—will raise trust, respect, agency, and empowerment for teachers and principals and will provide essential support from other education leaders. In refocusing change in this way, we increase

the chance that existing examples of success can be expanded to accelerate improvement.

It bears noting that we specifically separated the exercise of design from questions of how to implement it. The guiding thinking is to decide on what is the best approach; implementation concerns will become clearer and more manageable with a specific destination in hand.

New Foundations: The Operating Essentials

Mirroring other high-performing efforts across sectors, countries, and institutions, the new operating system depends on essential operations at the outset in order to work productively. These operations include:

- **Environmental conditions.** Universal baseline conditions are needed to create safe, healthy, and orderly schooling environments.
- **Definitions of student success.** Ubiquitous criteria for multifaceted student success that stress and also go beyond academic mastery create shared performance targets.
- **Regular, arm's-length evaluation of student performance.** Independent assessments that produce fair, valid, and reliable information on student learning and advancement at the individual

and aggregate levels propel critical functions throughout the operating system.

- **Accountability for performance.** Feedback systems map results from learning assessments and educator evaluations onto benchmarked frameworks that drive decisions about future actions. Schools' learning scores are associated with differing improvement pathways, including an evidence-based, community-engaged process for addressing underperforming schools and a menu of programmatic choices that grows as performance increases.

A New System Design

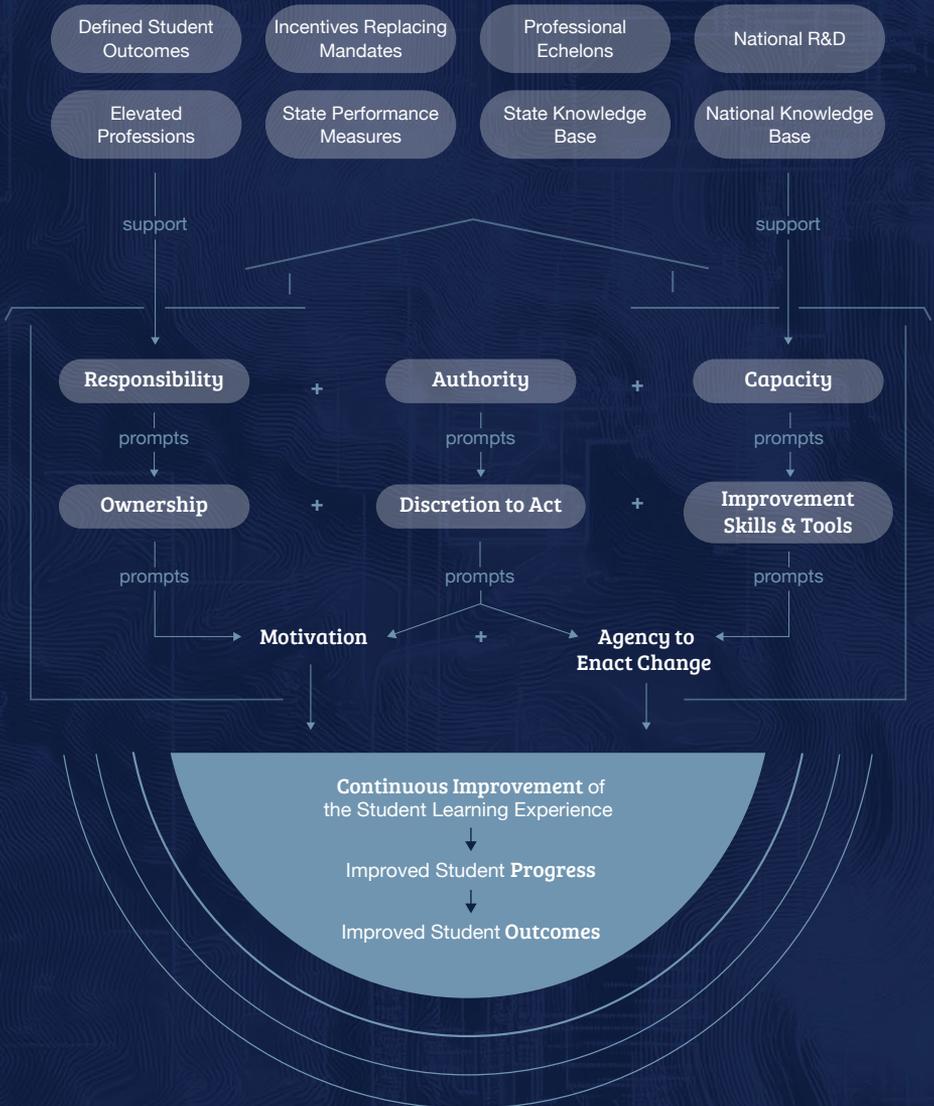
RATIONALE

The new system builds on a singular reality: only teachers and principals have both the unique local knowledge of their students, families, and communities and the ability to shape the classroom experience to create learning that meets the identified needs.

If we assign teachers and principals the *responsibility* for student learning—and we should—we also must provide them with the appropriate authority and the necessary *resources and capacity* to execute on the responsibility we assign to them. None of these required ingredients is sufficient on its own, but together they create the

Design for New US K–12 Public Education Operating System

Continuous Improvement in Schools to Elevate Student Outcomes



Source: Education Futures Council

correct motivation and agency for focused learning environments to thrive. Even more important, teachers and principals who are empowered with these endowments have shown that they continuously improve their approaches in response to feedback about their students. This is the heart of the new operating system design, presented in the opposite figure.

NEW ROLES FOR EDUCATION AGENCIES

A priority of the new operating system is to lessen regulatory mandates so as to free up school-level personnel to choose program and instructional modifications that will help students learn better. To do this, local school boards, state agencies, and federal authorities that currently have a say in the workings of schools will refocus their energy on supporting the efforts of local schools to build capacity and to deliver strong student results.

These agencies, by scaling back their efforts to control activity in classrooms and schools through regulation and mandates, can instead focus on leveraging their respective assets and position to accomplish these goals:

1. **Achieve economies of scale** to reduce costs—monetary and operational—faced by schools, including supporting regional collaborations.
2. **Create new evidence and expand our knowledge** about education. In particular, the federal government has a unique role to play in supporting a significant increase in education research and development to expand the scope of proven education approaches.
3. **Translate and disseminate current knowledge**, facilitating the local capacity for continuous improvement by building shared Knowledge Bases to accelerate improvement work in schools.
4. **Design incentives and allocate resources** to prompt voluntary local change that aligns with desired student outcomes and accelerates progress.

A NEW PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIP

Teachers and school leaders provide to the nation a critical public service that deserves better recognition. The new design recasts the occupations' professional status and recognition. Most teachers and principals today are highly committed to their roles; the new system design builds on and promotes these efforts. It also provides a path to a new professionalism, reinforced by state and federal incentive programs for local adoption of competency-based designations for teachers and principals. These designations will augment existing compensation and recognition programs to better shape the teacher labor force in the direction of producing the student outcomes our students and our nation desire.

How to Build the New Operating System

Fortunately, our existing institutional arrangements already have components needed by the new operating system. Using them along with new roles and responsibilities, we can create a blueprint for the new operating system. The blueprint depends on new commitments in four areas:

COMMITMENT 1: ORGANIZE SYSTEM-WIDE FOR STUDENT RESULTS

All roads in the new system should be directed to the “True North” pursuit of student outcomes. Student progress toward and attainment of a broad set of clearly defined outcomes must galvanize and drive the new design. This overarching architecture ensures that student performance becomes the lens through which all educational decisions are processed and made. Student performance results not only will be transparent and illuminated, but also will serve as the primary reference point around which the effectiveness of programs, policies, and operating practices is assessed.

COMMITMENT 2: FLIP THE SYSTEM FROM TOP-DOWN TO BOTTOM-UP

In the flipped system hierarchy, schools are the apex organization. They need sufficient discretion to make decisions in situ to manage

their own operations and to adapt their efforts to address the needs of their students. Local education agencies, such as districts or networks of districts, take on the role of delivering supportive leadership to schools by ensuring that they have effective leaders, managing important operational functions on their behalf and serving as local governors of performance.

State agencies will contribute what they and only they can provide. They are best suited to functions that require equivalence in all school settings, such as standards, assessments and accountability determinations, efficient management of funding, and the design of evidence-based improvement pathways for their schools. States also have a unique and untapped capacity to accelerate improvements in student learning. By linking their measures of performance to local contexts, they can provide a curated Knowledge Base that guides local adoption of effective education solutions.

There are valuable and unique contributions that are possible only from the national or federal level as well. There is no question that protection of civil rights, the assurance that necessary services will be provided to students with special needs, and the provision of targeted support for at-risk populations are worthy of federal attention and support. Rethinking and redesigning the state-federal relationship, with a goal of lifting

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regulatory burdens and establishing roles and responsibilities in a clear and coherent fashion, would advance our schools. Through national benchmarking of student performance, the federal government would also serve the critical role of aligning state performance assessments and tracking performance of US students relative to international competition. The federal sphere also is uniquely positioned to build new knowledge about success in public education. No other entity at any level of the system has the scope and means to build programs of research and evaluation to advance the body of fundamental knowledge about effective strategies to educate our students. Having a nationwide perspective lends itself to creation of a national-level Knowledge Base to disseminate what we already

know about successful school models and programs. There are economies of scale in the endeavor because all states and localities can benefit simultaneously from better knowledge.

**COMMITMENT 3:
MINIMIZE MANDATES,
EMBRACE INCENTIVES**

Decades of positive disposition toward regulations have built massive tomes of federal and state requirements; these need to be significantly reduced to free talent and resources throughout the system for higher purposes. Incentives have been proven tools to promote behavior in ways that directly align with overall goals. Evidence shows that students, families, teachers, and communities respond to incentives they perceive as working to their benefit.

COMMITMENT 4: CULTIVATE AND REWARD PROFESSIONAL MASTERY IN THE EDUCATOR WORKFORCE

Our country is blessed with an abundance of dedicated and high-performing teachers, so any discussion about professionalism of US educators implicitly has a dual purpose. The first is to elevate the standing of high-performing teachers to higher levels of regard inside and outside the workplace. Improving the social standing and perception of teachers and principals as valued professionals directly relates to the ability to recruit and retain teachers, as well as positioning the field for enriched recognition for their contributions. The second purpose is to establish the requirement inherent in all professions to define and uphold high-quality work as the expected standard.

The System in Motion: How the Parts Fit Together

We can expect different behavior from educators under the new system design. If student results serve as the beacon, it is easier to create common purpose inside schools. When school teams have operating latitude because of

fewer mandates, they can focus more on effective instruction and family engagement. They have the freedom and personal agency to modify models and practices to elevate instructional success, using regular feedback and performance benchmarks to guide the process. If needed, they are free to select proven context-appropriate alternatives to improve their students' learning, including new school models, aided by local state and federal efforts to use their considerable stores of performance information to identify and share proven approaches from within their own domains.

But this design is not an à la carte menu from which policymakers pick and choose. We are proposing a comprehensive operating system, and we can't install portions and expect favorable results. The approach we propose here is designed for deep interaction and interdependency. Each component of the new operating system interacts with and is influenced by the other parts, on purpose. None of the parts standing alone can deliver the impact we need for our children; staggered adoption triggers the all-too-familiar resistance and functional failure, long before the full model is given the chance it needs to breathe and flourish.

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Conclusion

The sustained, deep improvement we need in US public K–12 education will not happen by focusing only on a subset of the system or going all-in on one aspect or element. Improvement happens by sustaining a series of small wins throughout the system. This is what creates and feeds conditions for long periods of change. This is what retrains and reorients the underlying conditions, behaviors, incentives, resources, and work of the system. The Operating Essentials and systems commitments

outlined in this report highlight that, at this critical juncture, skill building must be matched with will building. We must collectively create the will to fundamentally reorient to True North to build the sector we and our children need for productive, civil, and fulfilled futures.

We cannot spend another minute delegating the fate of our children—and our collective future—to the people who come after us.



HOOVER
INSTITUTION

Hoover Institution, Stanford University

434 Galvez Mall
Stanford, CA 94305-6003
650-723-1754

Hoover Institution in Washington

1399 New York Avenue NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
202-760-3200

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