



From Midterm Wins to Weathering a Mounting Storm

Policymakers Must Put Families, Not Politics, at the Center of 2023 Legislative Agendas

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Introduction

With the 2022 midterm elections behind us and 2023 state legislative sessions ahead, policymakers must shift their time and attention from winning reelection to addressing the perfect storm brewing in education. Three significant challenges paint a grim picture for students and public schools unless policymakers step in to help: catastrophic COVID-19 pandemic impacts on learning, declining enrollment, and looming fiscal cliffs.

A better-funded or lightly tweaked version of the status quo won't solve these problems. Instead, policymakers must develop politically viable solutions responsive to the needs and preferences of parents and students. The range of potential policy solutions will vary significantly by state based on political dynamics. Single-party control of states is reaching a new high following the midterm elections: The number of states with veto-proof majorities increased from 21 to 26.¹ Only 10 states have divided control of legislative chambers and/or the governorship — the lowest level since 1952.² While these states share common educational challenges, solutions that can pass their legislatures will necessarily vary.

With these factors in mind, we look specifically at three states with different political environments and with varying paths toward empowering families and students:

- ◆ **Michigan:** The 2022 midterm election produced a trifecta of Democratic control in the executive branch and both state legislative chambers for the first time since 1984.³ The state has experienced declining enrollment and test scores both statewide and, more notably, in its largest district, Detroit. Michigan was a crucial swing state in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections but saw a sizable blue shift in 2022 as Gov. Gretchen Whitmer improved on President Biden's 2020 margins in every county across the state.⁴
- ◆ **Georgia:** This reliably red state has had a Republican trifecta in state government since 2005.⁵ Its biggest district, Atlanta, experienced large enrollment and test score declines during the pandemic. While Georgia has been more competitive in elections for national office, sending two Democratic senators to Washington in special elections in 2021, Gov. Brian Kemp's easy reelection over a well-known Democratic opponent signaled strength among Republicans and enough independent support to ensure victory.⁶ Kemp surpassed former President Trump's 2020 margins in 97% of Georgia counties.⁷
- ◆ **Arizona:** A historically red state that trended purple in recent years with a series of tightly contested marquee races, Arizona is a bellwether in American politics. In 2022, Gov.-elect Katie Hobbs replicated the narrow margins President Biden achieved in his 2020 victory in the state.⁸ The Arizona Senate and House remain under Republican control.⁹ The state has experienced declining enrollment and math performance but has implemented some of the boldest school choice and family agency policies in the country.¹⁰

These states, ranging from blue to red to purple, provide lessons that can be instructive for policymakers in almost any state. Each state demands different policy solutions, but all should aim to put family empowerment, not politics, at the center of their legislative agendas.

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A Perfect Storm Is Brewing in Education

State policymakers will face a combination of interrelated educational challenges as they convene for legislative sessions in 2023. Some of these problems have already manifested in many states — including learning loss and enrollment declines — while fiscal challenges loom in the not-too-distant future. Taken together, they demand action by policymakers *before* their impacts compound into even more significant consequences for students.

Challenge One

National test scores and other measures show catastrophic learning loss and rising inequity.

Early reports of test score data from multiple test vendors, including district testing providers such as Curriculum Associates, NWEA, and Renaissance Learning, as well as college entrance exams like the ACT, illustrated the potentially devastating impact of pandemic-related learning loss.¹¹ More recently, the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) confirmed the sheer magnitude of the academic cost of three years of disrupted schooling. Fourth-grade scores in both math and reading dropped to their lowest levels since 2003.¹² Declines in eighth-grade scores were starker: Performance in math fell to its lowest level since 2000, and reading scores fell back to levels not seen since 1994.¹³

On top of the broad decline, the NAEP scores continue to show large gaps in performance for students based on family income and between Black and Hispanic students and white students.¹⁴ In addition, the percentage of students in the lowest performance category (Below Basic) grew while there was little change in the percentage of students in the highest performance category (Advanced).¹⁵

The three states we highlight in this brief are no exception to these trends, and while test score declines varied across and within states, most states saw a marked downward trend (Table 1).¹⁶

TABLE 1: NAEP SCORE CHANGE IN SELECT STATES AND LARGE URBAN DISTRICTS, 2019 TO 2022

	Grade 4		Grade 8	
	Reading	Math	Reading	Math
STATE				
Arizona	0 points	-6 points*	-1 point	-9 points*
Georgia	-2 points	-3 points	-2 points	-8 points*
Michigan	-6 points*	-4 points*	-4 points*	-8 points*
National Average	-3 points*	-5 points*	-3 points*	-8 points*
DISTRICT				
Atlanta	-8 points*	-7 points*	-1 point	-6 points*
Detroit	-6 points*	-12 points*	-5 points	-6 points*
Large City Average	-3 points*	-8 points*	0 points	-8 points*

*Statistically significant change from 2019.

Note: Arizona does not participate in the Trial Urban District Assessment program, so district scores are unavailable.

Source: *The Nation's Report Card*.

Challenge Two

Public school enrollment is down, with financial implications for districts.

Public school enrollment levels are 1.3 million students lower than they were pre-pandemic.¹⁷ Enrollment decline is the result of several factors, including demographic shifts, families relocating out of urban centers, and declining immigration that predate the pandemic. However, the pandemic catalyzed student mobility between schools, and a higher number of families pursued other educational options due to the pandemic.¹⁸ Research by Tyton Partners indicates mobility across the sectors increased by 75%, with students leaving public schools to enroll in private or charter schools or to home-school.¹⁹ Regardless of the cause, these enrollment declines present short- and long-term challenges for public schools that require action by policymakers.

Many states have experienced more than a 3% decline in public school enrollment,²⁰ and some urban districts have experienced even higher losses (Table 2).²¹

TABLE 2: ENROLLMENT CHANGE IN SELECT STATES AND LARGE URBAN DISTRICTS, 2019-20 TO 2021-22

District, State	Percent Change in District Enrollment	Percent Change in State Enrollment
Mesa, Arizona	-6.5%	-1.7%
Atlanta, Georgia	-4.8%	-1.6%
Detroit, Michigan	-4.3%	-3.7%

Source: *National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data*.

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The enrollment shift away from public schools will have ripple effects on several fronts. School systems will see less state funding from formulas that allocate funding on a per-pupil basis.²² At the building level, schools may have to reduce the variety of classes or programs they offer due to reduced student participation. In districts where enrollment loss is more pronounced, it may even force tough conversations about facilities use and school consolidation or closure.

Districts will have to navigate these fiscal challenges while dealing with inflation-driven price increases on everything from fuel for buses to food for students.²³ These challenges could be magnified if a recession or slowdown hits the economy in 2023.²⁴

Challenge Three

Federal COVID-19 relief dollars will run out.

A looming set of fiscal challenges will only compound the academic and administrative challenges facing public schools.

In 2020 and 2021, the federal government passed three emergency stimulus bills that provided \$190 billion in additional money to states and districts to help address the impact of COVID-19 through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER).²⁵ States and local education agencies must obligate the last of the funding by Sept. 30, 2024, and spend it by early 2025.²⁶

While data on ESSER expenditures is limited, some districts used this money for one-time projects, such as updating facilities or HVAC systems or purchasing remote learning devices such as laptops for students.²⁷ But some districts chose to use the ESSER funding for ongoing expenditures such as additional staff and/or higher salaries.²⁸ While these relief dollars will temporarily ease the impact of declining enrollment, a fiscal cliff will come soon, and districts will need to find other funding to cover those costs or cut programming. Given Republican control of the U.S. House of Representatives in 2023 and a razor-thin Democratic majority in the U.S. Senate, it's unlikely, absent a serious economic downturn, that schools can expect another massive bailout from Washington.

Policymakers Must Respond With Policies Aligned To Parent- and Student-Stated Needs and Preferences

Parent attitudes and preferences on education are nuanced and have evolved throughout the pandemic, but they are nonetheless an essential input into designing policy solutions to the challenges ahead.

- Numerous public opinion polls show consistently high levels of parent satisfaction with their child's school.²⁹ Even so, many parents remain concerned about their child's academic and social-emotional well-being and want schools to change to address the effects of the pandemic.³⁰
- Many parents have changed their child's school enrollment, moving to charter schools, private schools, or opting to home-school.³¹ Others are frustrated and *want* to change their child's school, but hesitate to do so because of the disruption to the student's and family's routine, the uncertainty that another option will truly be better, or financial or logistical barriers.³²
- In lieu of changing their child's school, many parents indicate interest in extracurricular activities that can help their students recover from the effects of the pandemic and thrive in and outside of school. As with changing their child's school, however, parents face numerous barriers to accessing these opportunities, including costs, information, and transportation.³³

A recent shift in parent perception further complicates our understanding of what parents think about their children's experience in school. Parents' concern about their children's academic performance *declined* during the 2021-22 school year — a time when most children were transitioning back to a somewhat "normal" in-person schooling environment.³⁴ In May 2022, more than four in 10 parents believed that their child had not experienced *any* learning loss.³⁵

However, more recent nationwide polling data underline the urgency — and political support available — to address parent concerns. Three in four voters recently agreed that students are mostly still behind due to school closures during the pandemic.³⁶ Between 29% and 49% of parents report dissatisfaction with the direction of their local public schools.³⁷ Six in 10 parent voters indicate public schools are "off on the wrong track," 72% of all voters indicate that improving K-12 education should be a top priority for state policymakers, and almost half of parent voters think schools should make "bold changes."³⁸

Parents may be less sure that these trends are affecting *their children*, but concerns about learning loss are rising among voters. Policymakers would be wise to step up and address these concerns head-on.

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Policymakers Can Empower and Support Families, Regardless of the Political Environment

Heading into 2023, state policymakers are inheriting a public education system in crisis. They will likely face pressure to direct more public dollars into the existing system. Or they may be tempted to ask beleaguered systems to do more with less. Instead, policymakers should provide options that are responsive to the needs of parents and students — including solutions that empower them.

Policymakers in any political context have many mechanisms available to support families. This includes providing families access to better information about their children's academic performance, tools and resources for finding and accessing existing options, and programs to address technological and practical barriers to access — including transportation and broadband internet.³⁹

Of course, there are more traditional avenues for policymakers to provide families and students with more educational agency: directly creating and funding more educational opportunities. These can run the gamut from public charter schools to education savings account (ESA) and voucher programs, to options within traditional districts like online courses or work-based learning. In the context of scarce financial resources and increased appetite for different approaches to schooling, expanding family and student access to learning experiences within or outside the school system can help alleviate the burden on schools to meet all needs of all students, while empowering families and students to get the support they need.

How policymakers can empower parents by increasing access to educational options will vary depending on the political contexts of their state.

In reliably red states like **Georgia**, policymakers could consider creating or expanding policies that maximize optionality for families and students. For instance, depending on how the question is asked, national public opinion polls show that ESA programs enjoy 50%-72% support among Republican adults and 45%-77% support among Democratic adults.⁴⁰ These trends hold within Georgia, where 69% of Georgia's adults and 77% of school parents support ESAs.⁴¹ Nearly three in four Georgians favor a system allowing a child's state education dollars to follow the student to a school that best fits their

needs, including private, virtual, or home-school options; these numbers include 79% of Republicans and 64% of Democrats.⁴² ESAs have gained momentum in other states with Republican trifectas in recent years and could be a possible outcome for state education policy in Georgia.⁴³ Depending on the state's orientation to expanding choice and educational equity, policymakers can target programs to specific student groups based on learning needs, family income, or attendance at a struggling public school.

In purple states like **Arizona**, which have been historically red but are becoming increasingly blue, policymakers may focus on ensuring strong implementation of policies that already exist and, in the process, build a diverse and durable constituency of participating families invested in the program's continuation. For instance, in the wake of Arizona's newly enacted universal ESA, policymakers should dedicate resources to ensuring underserved families are aware of the program and know how to participate if they want to.⁴⁴

In other purple states, including those where robust choice programs don't already exist, policymakers may pursue policies that balance the Republican enthusiasm for school choice policies with the Democratic predisposition to increase public school funding. An example of such a compromise would be to provide families with microgrants that allow them to supplement, but not supplant, the education provided within the traditional public school system.⁴⁵

Microgrant dollars can travel with students when they move or change systems within the state. A microgrant program — even one that sunsets after a few years and is perhaps funded by remaining federal relief dollars — could also help families and students recover from learning loss in the short term, reduce the need for schools to develop new programs only to discontinue them through the fiscal cliff, and serve as a test case for efforts to empower families and students when conditions improve down the road.

Blue states like **Michigan** may not have the political coalition to pursue school choice or funding that flows directly to families — yet. Elected Democrats are reliably less supportive of a range of choice policies than their Republican counterparts, in large part because of powerful special interests including the teachers' unions. In addition, while hot-button issues like abortion clearly fueled Michigan's shift left in the 2022 midterms,⁴⁶ Democrats should consider the longer-term political environment when abortion is not on the ballot. In the meantime, blue states can expand access to educational options within the school system. For instance, a November 2022 poll of voters found that 96% believed that offering more work-based learning was important for improving K-12 education in their state.⁴⁷ This means that offering additional technical and career education and work-based learning opportunities is an option that appeals broadly across the political spectrum. It provides a path forward even when there is insufficient political support for broader choice policies.

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Policies Are Powerless Without Participation

Every state is facing a mounting and multifaceted set of educational challenges that call for urgent action by policymakers. The exact course of action will vary from state to state, but should share a common direction: equipping families with the support they need to weather this educational storm.

Regardless of political conditions and appetite for policies that empower families, all states can and should do more to ensure parents have increased options to customize their child's education to meet their individual needs — whether within, in addition to, or in place of their current school.

But passing legislation to create new options won't be enough. Parents and students must also be aware of the policies and programs that offer them new or different learning options. They need better information about their child's academic progress⁴⁸ so they can be effective advocates for their child. Parents and students must be aware of the available resources and have the guidance they need to navigate those resources. And they need funding and logistical support to overcome barriers that might stand in their way.

Whether state policymakers launch or expand an ESA program, establish a short-term microgrant, or incentivize participation in career-connected learning, they must ensure policies are accompanied by resources and support that help families take the reins of their education and learning recovery.

Conclusion

K-12 education is facing a tough road ahead, with increased student needs and declining resources, and there is not one right answer for how policymakers should respond. Solutions will vary. Local dynamics, family and student needs, and political context will all shape the policies that are needed and those that are possible. Nonetheless, from ESAs to work-based learning, policymakers across the political spectrum can and should champion policies that empower families and help meet student needs. ✦

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About Bellwether

Bellwether is a national nonprofit that exists to transform education to ensure systemically marginalized young people achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we work hand in hand with education leaders and organizations to accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and share what we learn along the way. For more, visit bellwether.org.

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