

# **Public Education and the Strength of Democratic Communities**

## ***A Policy Framework for Strengthening Public Education***

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### **Introduction**

Public education has long been one of the central institutions of American democracy. A functioning republic depends on an educated public capable of critical thinking, civic participation, and informed decision making. From the earliest days of the United States, public schools were understood not only as places where children learn academic subjects, but as institutions that prepare citizens to participate in democratic society.<sup>1</sup>

Public schools also serve a broader role in community life. In many communities, particularly rural ones, the local school is one of the most important public institutions. Schools provide stable employment, support local economies, create shared civic experiences, and serve as gathering places for communities. When schools are strong, communities tend to be stronger as well.

Over the past four decades, however, American education policy has undergone a significant shift. Beginning in the 1980s, policymakers increasingly promoted market-based approaches to education, including voucher programs, charter schools, and various forms of school-choice policy. Advocates argued that introducing competition into education would improve outcomes and efficiency. Critics warned that these policies could fragment public education systems and weaken the neighborhood schools that communities rely on.<sup>2</sup>

These debates have intensified in recent years. Some contemporary policy proposals explicitly call for expanding privatization mechanisms and redirecting public education funding toward private or semi-private education systems.<sup>3</sup> These proposals have renewed concerns among educators, parents, and community leaders about the long-term stability of public education as a shared civic institution.

Understanding these debates requires recognizing the fundamental role public education plays in democratic society. Public schools are not simply service providers operating in an education marketplace. They are public institutions designed to serve entire communities and to prepare future generations for participation in civic life.

This policy paper outlines a framework for strengthening public education by focusing on several foundational principles. Rather than proposing a specific legislative package, the goal is to clarify the values and policy direction that should guide education policy moving forward. Effective legislation must ultimately be developed in collaboration with educators, school boards, parents, and communities across the state.

Three principles guide this framework. First, public education should be treated as a fundamental democratic right. Second, public funds should be used to support public schools, ensuring transparency and accountability for how those funds are used. Third, strong public schools are essential to strong communities, particularly in rural areas where schools often serve as economic and civic anchors.

The sections that follow explore these principles, examine the historical development of modern education policy, discuss the challenges currently facing public schools, and outline policy directions that can strengthen education systems while preserving the community-centered nature of public education.

## Author Context

My perspective on education policy is shaped by several years of direct involvement with public schools. I have worked in the classroom as both a teacher and a substitute teacher and served for two years on a local school board. I also see the daily realities of the profession through my daughter's work as a high school teacher. My family has a personal connection to the history of federal education policy as well. My wife's grandmother, Elva Buskirk Dreibelbis, worked with the Kennedy administration during the early development of the Head Start program. These experiences have reinforced my belief that strong public schools are essential to strong communities and to the long-term health of American democracy.

## I. Three Core Principles

Public education policy often becomes tangled in debates over funding formulas, testing systems, governance structures, and curriculum standards. While those discussions are important, they can obscure the more fundamental question of what public education is meant to accomplish. Before examining specific policy challenges, it is important to establish several core principles that define the role of public education in a democratic society.

These principles do not attempt to resolve every policy dispute. Instead, they provide a framework for evaluating education policy and guiding future decisions.

### Public Education Is A Right

Public education should be understood as a fundamental democratic right. A functioning democracy depends on an educated population capable of evaluating information, participating in civic life, and holding institutions accountable.

Education is also one of the primary mechanisms through which societies attempt to ensure equal opportunity. While education alone cannot eliminate social or economic inequality, access to high-quality public schools has long been viewed as an essential part of expanding opportunity across generations.

The principle that education should be broadly available to all children has deep roots in American history. Early advocates of public education argued that democratic government could not function if education were limited only to those who could afford it. Public education was therefore conceived as a public responsibility, funded collectively and available to all members of society.<sup>1</sup>

Treating education as a right does not mean that every school will look identical or that every community will make identical choices. Communities may emphasize different academic programs, career pathways, arts education, or other priorities. The principle instead recognizes that every child should have access to a strong public education system capable of preparing them for participation in civic life and the modern economy.

## Public Funds Belong In Public Schools

Public education relies on public trust. Taxpayers fund schools with the expectation that those funds will be used transparently and accountably to educate the public.

For that reason, public education funding should support only institutions that are democratically governed and fully accountable to the communities that fund them. Traditional public schools operate under systems of oversight that include elected school boards, open meeting laws, public budgeting processes, and democratic accountability through elections.

Some charter schools are formally classified as public schools because they receive public funding. In practice, however, many charter schools operate under governance structures that differ significantly from traditional public schools. Charter governing boards are often appointed rather than elected, and the communities that fund these schools may have limited ability to influence their leadership or policies.

Debates over vouchers, charter schools, and other school-choice policies ultimately come down to a fundamental question: should public education funds be used to support institutions that are not directly accountable to the voters and communities who fund them?

Over time, the expansion of charter schools and other parallel education systems has created a structural challenge for public education. When public funding is divided among multiple competing systems, the neighborhood public schools that serve the majority of students can experience reduced resources and increased financial instability.

A strong public education system requires stable institutions that serve entire communities. For that reason, education policy should focus on strengthening publicly governed schools and gradually transitioning away from parallel systems that rely on private governance structures.

The goal of this approach is not to disrupt the education of students currently enrolled in charter schools. Families who choose charter schools often do so because they are seeking smaller learning environments, specialized programs, or better responsiveness to their children's needs. Those needs should be addressed within the public education system itself.

Strengthening public schools so that they can meet those needs is a more sustainable approach than maintaining multiple parallel systems competing for the same public funding. Over time, policy

should move toward reintegrating educational resources into a single, strong public system that is democratically governed and accountable to the communities it serves.

## Public Schools Are Crucial to Strong Communities

Public schools are more than educational institutions. They are foundational components of community life.

Schools employ teachers, administrators, support staff, and service workers. School events bring communities together through sports, arts programs, and civic activities. In many areas, particularly rural communities, the local school is one of the largest employers and one of the most visible institutions in public life.

Strong schools also support economic stability. Communities with stable school systems tend to attract families, maintain stronger property values, and support local businesses. Conversely, when schools decline or close, communities often experience broader economic and social consequences.

Public schools are often the shared space where communities come together across differences, building the relationships and sense of belonging that hold communities together.

Because of this relationship, education policy cannot be viewed solely through the lens of individual consumer choice. Education systems also play a collective role in maintaining the stability and vitality of communities.

Recognizing this role does not diminish the importance of meeting individual student needs. Instead, it highlights the broader responsibility communities share in maintaining a strong public education system that serves all students while supporting the long-term health of the communities in which those schools operate.

## II. Local Control of Curriculum and Educational Priorities

Public debates about education policy often include claims that the federal government controls what students are taught in classrooms. In reality, the structure of education governance in the United States has historically been far more decentralized.

Curriculum decisions are made primarily at the local level. Local school boards, which are typically elected by community members, oversee school districts and establish the general direction for educational programs. School administrators and teachers then develop curriculum and classroom instruction within the framework established by those districts.

State governments also play an important role in education governance. States establish minimum academic standards, graduation requirements, and broad learning objectives intended to ensure that students across the state receive a basic level of educational preparation. These standards define what students should learn and demonstrate at different stages of their education, but they generally do not dictate the specific curriculum materials or day-to-day instructional decisions used in classrooms.

Historically, the federal government has played a more limited role in determining what schools teach. Federal education laws have primarily focused on funding programs, civil rights protections, and accountability measures tied to federal funding. These laws may influence how schools measure outcomes or report performance, but they rarely prescribe specific curriculum content.

In recent years, however, national policy proposals have increasingly attempted to influence curriculum priorities, instructional approaches, and education governance. These efforts represent a departure from the traditional balance of authority in American education and raise important questions about the preservation of local control.<sup>1</sup>

Local control also strengthens democratic participation by keeping decision-making close to the communities schools serve. Local schools serve communities with distinct economic needs, cultural traditions, and workforce priorities. Allowing communities to shape their own educational direction helps ensure that schools remain responsive to the people they serve.

Even without direct mandates, schools can still feel pressure to adjust what they teach. Standardized testing systems, accountability requirements, and funding constraints can narrow the range of instructional choices available to schools. When testing frameworks place heavy emphasis on certain subjects, schools may feel pressure to devote more time to those areas while reducing time for subjects such as civics, history, or the arts.

Strengthening public education does not require centralized control over curriculum. It requires reinforcing systems of local governance and community involvement while ensuring that all

students receive the knowledge and skills necessary to participate fully in civic life and the modern economy.

### III. Education Must Prepare Students for Real Economic Futures

Public education does not serve only an academic purpose. It also plays a central role in preparing students for the economic realities they will face as adults. Schools help shape the workforce, support economic mobility, and provide the knowledge and skills necessary for individuals to participate productively in their communities and in the broader economy.<sup>1</sup>

For much of the twentieth century, the American education system offered multiple pathways to economic stability. Students could pursue college degrees, technical training, apprenticeships, or direct entry into skilled trades. Public schools, community colleges, and state universities worked together to create opportunities suited to different talents and career goals.<sup>2</sup>

Over time, however, this balance has shifted. Increasingly, students have been encouraged to view four-year college degrees as the primary path to success. While higher education remains an important opportunity for many students, the growing emphasis on a single pathway has created unintended consequences for both students and the broader economy.<sup>3</sup>

One major challenge has been the rising cost of higher education. Over the past several decades, many states reduced their financial support for public universities. In response, universities raised tuition to make up the difference. As tuition increased, student borrowing expanded significantly, leaving many graduates with substantial debt burdens that can limit their economic mobility for years after leaving school.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, many public schools have struggled to maintain vocational and skilled trades programs that once provided students with practical career pathways. Shop classes, technical training programs, and apprenticeship partnerships have declined in some districts, narrowing the range of opportunities available to students who might thrive in skilled trades or technical fields.<sup>5</sup>

In many communities, however, the challenge is not a lack of interest in vocational education but a lack of qualified instructors. Some schools still have workshop facilities and equipment that are rarely used because districts cannot find teachers with the necessary trade experience who are willing or able to work within current pay structures.<sup>6</sup>

This challenge reflects broader issues affecting the teaching profession. Skilled trades professionals often earn significantly higher wages in private industry than they could as classroom instructors. At the same time, many educators report increasing pressures in their work environments, including heavy administrative demands, declining professional support, and growing challenges in maintaining classroom discipline and productive relationships with families.<sup>7</sup>

As a result, schools may struggle to recruit and retain instructors capable of teaching specialized technical skills. When vocational programs cannot be staffed, students lose access to valuable career pathways and communities lose an important source of workforce development.

A stronger public education system should reconnect high schools, community colleges, and regional industries in order to rebuild practical career pathways for students. Community colleges and technical education programs play a particularly important role in this system by providing affordable training aligned with regional workforce needs while offering students opportunities to develop valuable technical skills and stable career opportunities.<sup>8</sup>

Rebuilding these pathways requires renewed investment in public education institutions at multiple levels. Strengthening state support for public universities can help stabilize tuition costs; while reinvesting in vocational and technical education can restore opportunities for students whose talents and interests lie outside traditional academic pathways. Rebuilding these pathways also requires strengthening the teaching profession itself, including improving teacher compensation, reinforcing professional authority in the classroom, and supporting productive partnerships between schools and families.<sup>9</sup>

Treating these pathways with equal respect is essential. A strong education system should prepare students not only for college but also for the wide range of skilled professions that sustain communities and drive economic development.<sup>10</sup>

#### IV. Civic Education, Critical Thinking, History, and the Arts

Public education serves not only to prepare students for employment but also to prepare them for participation in democratic society. Schools play a central role in helping young people understand

their rights and responsibilities as citizens and in developing the critical thinking skills necessary to navigate an increasingly complex world.<sup>1</sup>

Civic education and the study of history provide students with the context needed to understand how democratic institutions function and why they matter. Students who understand the structure of government, the development of constitutional principles, and the struggles that have shaped American democracy are better prepared to participate thoughtfully in public life.<sup>2</sup>

Critical thinking is an essential component of this preparation. Students must learn not only to absorb information but also to evaluate sources, weigh evidence, recognize bias, and form independent judgments. These skills are increasingly important in an era where information is abundant but not always reliable.<sup>3</sup>

Education policy discussions often focus heavily on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. These subjects are undeniably important for economic development and technological advancement. However, a balanced education system must also recognize the value of the humanities and the arts.<sup>4</sup>

Courses in literature, history, civics, music, visual arts, and other creative disciplines help students develop communication skills, cultural literacy, and the ability to interpret and express complex ideas. These subjects help students understand human experience, communicate effectively, and think critically about the world around them.<sup>5</sup>

Because education policy often focuses on measurable academic outcomes, debates about curriculum frequently intersect with questions about standardized testing and accountability systems.

Standardized testing plays an important role in a well-functioning education system. When properly designed and used, standardized assessments help measure student learning over time, identify areas where instruction can improve, and provide educators with valuable information about how well students are mastering key skills.<sup>6</sup>

However, testing systems can create challenges when they are implemented inconsistently or used in ways that extend beyond their intended purpose. In many districts, the specific standardized tests used to measure student performance change frequently, making it difficult to track meaningful progress over time or compare results across years.<sup>7</sup>

Frequent testing can also consume valuable instructional time and place additional administrative burdens on teachers and schools. When large portions of the academic calendar are devoted to test preparation and test administration, less time is available for classroom instruction and deeper learning.<sup>8</sup>

In practice, heavy testing requirements can also narrow the educational focus of schools. When performance metrics emphasize a limited number of subjects, instructional time devoted to civics, history, and the arts may decline even though these subjects play a critical role in preparing students for democratic participation and long-term intellectual development.<sup>9</sup>

A strong public education system should maintain a broad curriculum that prepares students not only for employment but also for thoughtful citizenship. Civic knowledge, historical understanding, critical thinking, and creative expression are essential elements of a well-rounded education and of a healthy democratic society.<sup>10</sup>

## V. Historical Context: How Public Education Shifted

Understanding the current debates surrounding public education requires examining how education policy has evolved over time. Shifts in national priorities, economic conditions, and political philosophies have shaped how schools are funded, governed, and evaluated.

For much of the early twentieth century, public education focused on ensuring broad access to basic academic skills. Reading, writing, and arithmetic formed the foundation of most school curricula. Schools were primarily viewed as local institutions responsible for preparing young people for participation in their communities and the workforce.

During the mid-twentieth century, national priorities began to influence education policy more directly. Following the launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik in 1957, the United States placed increased emphasis on science and mathematics education.<sup>2</sup> Federal and state initiatives encouraged stronger instruction in technical subjects in order to strengthen the country's scientific and technological capabilities.

The 1960s also saw increased attention to educational equity and early childhood development. Policymakers recognized that children who began school with fewer educational resources often

faced long-term disadvantages. Programs developed during this period sought to expand early learning opportunities and improve access to educational support for disadvantaged students.

One of the most notable outcomes of this period was the development of the Head Start program, which was formally launched in 1965 as part of the broader effort to address educational inequality.<sup>3</sup> My wife's grandmother, Elva Buskirk Dreibelbis, worked with the Kennedy administration during the early development of the program.

Beginning in the late twentieth century, education policy began to shift in a different direction. During the 1980s, new political arguments emerged suggesting that public education systems were underperforming and that introducing market-based mechanisms could improve educational outcomes.<sup>4</sup> Policies promoting vouchers, charter schools, and various forms of school choice gained increasing attention in national and state policy discussions.

In the decades that followed, accountability and testing systems also expanded. Federal legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act increased the emphasis on standardized testing as a method of measuring school performance.<sup>5</sup> While these policies were intended to improve accountability, they also contributed to a growing focus on measurable outcomes and performance metrics.

In the early twenty-first century, additional reforms sought to standardize educational expectations across states. Initiatives such as the development of common academic standards attempted to establish shared benchmarks for student learning while leaving curriculum decisions largely in the hands of states and local districts.<sup>6</sup>

Taken together, these shifts have significantly shaped the modern education landscape. Policies emphasizing testing, competition, and market mechanisms have altered how public education systems operate and how communities think about schools.

Understanding this historical trajectory is important for evaluating current policy debates. Many of today's disagreements about education funding, governance, and curriculum reflect broader questions about the purpose of public education itself. Whether schools should function primarily as public institutions serving communities or as competitive providers in an educational marketplace remains one of the central policy questions facing education systems today.

## VI. Charter Schools and School Choice Laws

Charter schools and school-choice policies have become prominent features of education policy debates over the past several decades. These policies were originally introduced with the intention of encouraging innovation within public education systems and providing families with additional educational options.<sup>1</sup>

Charter schools were initially conceived as small experimental institutions operating within the broader public education framework. Educators were meant to have greater flexibility to test new teaching approaches or organizational models while still serving public education goals. Successful ideas developed within charter schools could then inform improvements across traditional public school systems.<sup>2</sup>

Over time, however, charter schools have evolved into a parallel system of publicly funded schools operating under governance structures that often differ from those of traditional public schools. While charter schools receive public funding, many are governed by appointed boards rather than elected school boards. This structure can limit direct democratic accountability to the communities whose tax dollars support those schools.<sup>3</sup>

In Colorado, charter school governance also raises questions about local democratic authority. Charter schools were originally intended to operate with the approval of locally elected school boards. However, state law allows charter applicants to appeal local rejections to the State Board of Education. In some cases, the state has required districts to authorize charter schools despite opposition from their elected boards. This structure can place local school districts in the position of funding and overseeing schools they did not approve, raising important questions about community control and democratic accountability in public education.<sup>4</sup>

School-choice policies have expanded alongside charter schools. These policies typically allow families to move students between schools or enroll in institutions outside their neighborhood attendance boundaries. Supporters argue that such policies provide families with greater flexibility to select educational environments that best meet their children's needs.<sup>5</sup>

However, education systems depend on a degree of stability in order to function effectively. Schools operate best when teachers, students, and families build long-term relationships based on trust, continuity, and shared expectations. Policies that encourage frequent movement between

schools can disrupt those relationships. When students move repeatedly between schools in response to academic challenges or disagreements, continuity of instruction can suffer, classroom environments can be disrupted, and students may lose the consistent support necessary for long-term academic success.<sup>6</sup>

Frequent enrollment shifts can also create financial instability for school districts. Public school funding is typically tied to enrollment, meaning that sudden changes in student numbers can produce unpredictable fluctuations in school budgets. Schools must still maintain buildings, staff, and core programs even when enrollment changes mid-year, making long-term planning more difficult.<sup>7</sup>

Another concern involves the duplication of administrative systems. When public education funding supports multiple parallel systems with separate governance structures, a larger portion of available resources can be directed toward administrative overhead rather than classroom instruction. In some cases, administrators in charter systems receive compensation levels significantly higher than comparable positions within traditional public school districts.<sup>8</sup>

In Colorado, charter schools have also become part of broader political and legal strategies surrounding public education. Some organizations have promoted charter models that incorporate religious instruction or governance structures designed to test the constitutional boundaries between publicly funded education and religious institutions. These efforts have contributed to ongoing legal and policy debates concerning the separation between church and state in publicly funded education.<sup>9</sup>

Families who choose charter schools or other school-choice options often do so for understandable reasons. Parents may be seeking specialized programs, smaller school environments, or educational settings they believe better meet their children's needs. Recognizing these motivations is important when evaluating education policy.

The long-term goal of education policy, however, should not be to maintain multiple competing systems of publicly funded schools. Instead, policy should focus on strengthening neighborhood public schools so they are capable of providing the diverse programs, responsive leadership, and strong learning environments that families seek.

Over time, education policy should prioritize reinvesting in community-based public schools so that publicly funded education once again operates within a unified, democratically governed system. As public schools regain the resources and flexibility needed to serve families effectively, charter schools and broader school-choice mechanisms can gradually be transitioned out in favor of a stronger and more stable public education system.<sup>10</sup>

The expansion of charter schools and school-choice policies has played a significant role in reshaping public education systems over the past several decades. Reversing the fragmentation that has developed will require renewed investment in the public institutions that have historically served as the foundation of both education and community life.

## VII. Education Funding as Public Safety and Fiscal Responsibility

Education policy is often discussed primarily in terms of academic outcomes, workforce preparation, or educational opportunity. However, investment in public education also plays an important role in broader social stability and public safety.

Communities with strong education systems tend to experience lower crime rates, higher employment levels, and greater long-term economic stability. Students who receive a quality education are more likely to secure stable employment, participate in civic life, and contribute positively to their communities. Conversely, students who fall behind academically or disengage from school face a greater risk of long-term economic hardship and social instability.<sup>1</sup>

For this reason, education funding should also be understood as a form of long-term public safety investment. Every dollar invested in effective education programs can reduce future public expenditures in areas such as criminal justice, incarceration, and social support services.<sup>2</sup>

The financial costs associated with incarceration provide a clear example of this relationship. Housing an inmate in prison often costs tens of thousands of dollars per year. Over the course of a long sentence, the public expense associated with incarceration can reach hundreds of thousands of dollars for a single individual. By comparison, the cost of providing strong educational opportunities is significantly lower and produces long-term economic benefits for both individuals and communities.<sup>3</sup>

Education also strengthens communities in ways that extend beyond crime prevention. Schools help develop the skills necessary for stable employment, entrepreneurship, and local economic development. Well-educated populations attract businesses, support stronger local economies, and generate the tax revenue needed to sustain public services.<sup>4</sup>

In rural communities, these effects can be particularly important. Public schools often serve as major employers and economic anchors. Investments in education help sustain the economic vitality of communities that might otherwise struggle to attract new industries or maintain stable employment opportunities.<sup>5</sup>

Education funding should therefore be viewed not simply as a budgetary expense but as a long-term investment in social stability, economic resilience, and public safety. When policymakers invest in strong public schools, they are investing not only in students but also in the long-term strength and stability of the communities those students will eventually lead.

These investments also shape the long-term resilience of the state itself, influencing its ability to adapt to economic change, support stable communities, and maintain strong democratic institutions.

## VIII. Education Funding and State Resilience

Public education also plays a critical role in the long-term resilience of states and communities. A well-educated population strengthens a state's ability to adapt to economic change, respond to emerging challenges, and maintain stable democratic institutions.<sup>1</sup>

Education systems help build the human capital necessary for economic innovation, technological development, and workforce flexibility. As industries evolve and new economic sectors emerge, communities with strong education systems are better positioned to adapt and remain competitive.<sup>2</sup>

Education also supports the long-term stability of communities by helping individuals develop the skills needed for stable employment and civic participation. These factors contribute to stronger local economies, more engaged citizens, and communities that are better able to navigate economic or political disruptions.<sup>3</sup>

Strong public education systems also help states maintain resilience in the face of shifting national policy priorities. When states invest in education, they strengthen their ability to support local industries, retain skilled workers, and sustain the institutions necessary for long-term democratic governance.<sup>4</sup>

For these reasons, investment in public education should be understood not simply as a short-term budget decision but as a long-term strategy for maintaining the economic, civic, and institutional resilience of the state.

## IX. Parent Partnership and Shared Responsibility

Successful education systems depend on strong partnerships between schools, families, and communities. While teachers and school leaders play a central role in delivering instruction, the broader educational environment is shaped by the shared responsibility of educators, parents, and students.

Parents and guardians are a child's first teachers. The habits students develop at home, such as reading regularly, completing assignments, respecting others, and approaching learning with curiosity, have a significant influence on educational outcomes. When families reinforce the value of education, students are more likely to develop the discipline and motivation necessary for academic success.<sup>1</sup>

Teachers, in turn, are responsible for creating structured learning environments where students can develop knowledge, skills, and critical thinking abilities. Effective classrooms require professional expertise, clear expectations, and the authority necessary for educators to maintain productive learning environments.<sup>2</sup>

Strong education systems function best when families and educators work together toward shared goals. When parents and teachers communicate openly and support one another's roles, students benefit from consistent expectations and stronger educational support.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, however, many educators have reported increasing strain in these relationships. Teachers across the country have described rising challenges related to classroom discipline, growing administrative demands, and declining professional support. In some cases,

disagreements between families and educators can escalate in ways that undermine trust and cooperation.<sup>4</sup>

Policies that encourage frequent movement between schools can further complicate these relationships. When students move repeatedly between schools in response to academic challenges or disagreements, it becomes more difficult for teachers and families to build the long-term relationships that effective education requires. Stable school communities allow expectations, trust, and accountability to develop over time, creating a stronger foundation for student success.<sup>5</sup>

Rebuilding strong partnerships between schools and families is therefore an important part of strengthening public education. Parents deserve transparency and open communication from schools, and educators deserve the professional respect and support necessary to maintain effective learning environments.

Strengthening neighborhood public schools and reducing reliance on fragmented school systems can help restore the stability that strong parent–teacher partnerships require. When students, families, and educators remain connected to consistent school communities, schools are better able to support student learning and maintain the shared responsibility that successful education demands.<sup>6</sup>

## X. School Safety and Student Well-Being

A safe and supportive learning environment is essential for effective education. Students learn best when they feel physically secure, emotionally supported, and able to focus on their studies without fear of disruption or harm. Schools must therefore provide environments where safety, respect, and personal responsibility are clearly reinforced.<sup>1</sup>

School safety involves more than physical security measures. While appropriate safety protocols are important, the broader climate of a school plays a significant role in shaping student well-being. Clear expectations for behavior, consistent discipline policies, and a culture of mutual respect among students and staff contribute to classrooms where learning can take place effectively.<sup>2</sup>

Educators must also have the authority and institutional support necessary to maintain productive learning environments. Teachers cannot focus on instruction if they are constantly forced to

manage disruptive behavior without meaningful support from administrators or families. When discipline policies are unclear or inconsistently enforced, classroom stability suffers and students who are ready to learn often lose valuable instructional time.<sup>3</sup>

Student well-being also includes emotional and mental health support. Many students face challenges outside the classroom that can affect their ability to concentrate, complete assignments, or participate fully in school life. Schools that provide access to counselors, support staff, and appropriate student services are better equipped to help students navigate these challenges while staying engaged in their education.<sup>4</sup>

Stable school communities play an important role in maintaining safe learning environments. When students, families, teachers, and administrators remain connected to consistent school communities over time, relationships develop that support accountability, trust, and shared expectations for behavior. These relationships help schools address challenges early and maintain a stronger sense of community responsibility for student well-being.<sup>5</sup>

Strengthening community-based public schools helps reinforce these relationships. When schools operate as stable institutions within their communities, educators and families are better able to work together to create environments where students feel safe, supported, and prepared to succeed.<sup>6</sup>

## XI. Current Challenges Facing Public Education

Public education systems today face a combination of pressures that have developed over several decades. While many individual challenges have been discussed in earlier sections, the cumulative effect of these pressures is now placing significant strain on the stability of public schools and on the profession that sustains them.

One of the most visible challenges is the growing difficulty of maintaining a stable and experienced teaching workforce. School districts across the country report increasing difficulty recruiting new teachers and retaining experienced educators. While compensation plays an important role, many educators also point to broader working conditions, including administrative demands, classroom management challenges, and declining professional support. When experienced teachers leave the

profession and fewer new teachers enter it, schools lose institutional knowledge and stability that are essential for effective instruction.<sup>1</sup>

Another challenge involves policy instability. Over time, schools have been required to adapt to frequent changes in testing systems, administrative requirements, and education policy priorities. These shifts often occur faster than schools can reasonably adapt, creating uncertainty for teachers, administrators, and families. When policy frameworks change repeatedly, schools may spend significant time adjusting to new requirements rather than focusing on long-term educational improvement.<sup>2</sup>

Public education has also become increasingly entangled in broader political debates. Issues related to curriculum, governance, and school policy have drawn heightened public attention, sometimes leading to conflict within school communities. While civic engagement in education policy is important, sustained political conflict can place additional strain on educators who are responsible for maintaining productive learning environments.<sup>3</sup>

These combined pressures have contributed to a growing sense of instability within the education system. Teachers, school leaders, and families often find themselves navigating an environment shaped by competing expectations, policy uncertainty, and increasing demands on limited resources.

Addressing these challenges will require restoring stability and public trust in the institutions that support education. Strengthening public schools, supporting educators, and reinforcing the role of schools as community institutions will be essential steps in ensuring that public education remains capable of serving future generations.<sup>4</sup>

## XII. Policy Direction for Colorado

Strengthening public education in Colorado will require a long-term commitment to policies that reinforce the role of schools as community institutions while supporting educators and students in meaningful ways. The goal should not be to impose rapid or disruptive reforms, but to restore stability, strengthen public institutions, and ensure that public education remains capable of serving all students.<sup>1</sup>

First, public education funding should be directed exclusively toward institutions that are democratically governed and publicly accountable. Public funds exist to support public institutions. Ensuring that education funding remains within the public system helps maintain transparency, community oversight, and long-term stability.<sup>2</sup>

Second, Colorado should prioritize strengthening neighborhood public schools so they are capable of offering diverse programs and educational pathways that meet the needs of students and families. Strong public schools should provide rigorous academic instruction alongside vocational education, technical training, arts programs, and extracurricular opportunities that support well-rounded student development.<sup>3</sup>

As public schools regain the resources and flexibility needed to provide these opportunities, the state can begin transitioning away from fragmented systems created by charter expansion and other school-choice mechanisms. The long-term goal should be to reintegrate publicly funded education into a unified system that is democratically governed and accountable to the communities it serves.<sup>4</sup>

Third, education policy should prioritize support for the teaching profession. Addressing teacher recruitment and retention challenges will require policies that improve compensation, strengthen professional support, and ensure that educators have the authority and resources necessary to maintain productive learning environments.<sup>5</sup>

Fourth, Colorado should continue strengthening partnerships between schools, families, and communities. Parents play a central role in supporting student success, and effective education systems depend on constructive collaboration between families and educators. Policies that encourage transparency, communication, and mutual respect can help rebuild the trust necessary for these partnerships to thrive.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, policymakers should approach education reform with an emphasis on stability and thoughtful implementation. Strengthening public education will require long-term commitment and collaboration among educators, school boards, parents, and community leaders. The goal should be to guide gradual transitions that strengthen public institutions while ensuring that students, families, and educators are supported throughout the process.<sup>7</sup>

### XIII. Commitment to Listening and Representation

Education policy affects every community and every generation. Because of this, no single policy paper can fully capture the perspectives and experiences of all the people who are directly involved in public education. Teachers, school administrators, parents, students, and local communities all bring valuable insights into how schools function and how they can be strengthened.<sup>1</sup>

For this reason, effective education policy must be developed through ongoing collaboration and public engagement. Policymakers should work closely with educators, school boards, parents, and community leaders to ensure that proposed policies reflect the realities of classroom instruction and the needs of local communities.<sup>2</sup>

Public education works best when it remains closely connected to the communities it serves. Local school boards, teachers, parents, and community members all play an important role in shaping the educational environment for students. Strengthening these relationships helps ensure that education policy reflects the values and priorities of the communities that support public schools.<sup>3</sup>

This policy framework is intended to outline principles and directions rather than prescribe immediate legislative solutions. Any specific policy proposals should be developed through consultation with educators, administrators, parents, and community leaders who work directly within Colorado's education system.

At its core, this paper argues that public education is one of the foundational institutions of American democracy. Strong public schools strengthen communities, support economic opportunity, and prepare future generations to participate fully in civic life.<sup>4</sup>

Over the past several decades, policies that expanded charter schools and other school-choice mechanisms have contributed to the fragmentation of many public education systems. Rebuilding strong public education institutions will require renewed investment, thoughtful policy development, and a commitment to restoring the role of community-based public schools as the foundation of the education system.<sup>5</sup>

Strengthening public education is not simply a policy objective. It is a long-term investment in the democratic institutions, civic culture, and community stability that sustain a free and prosperous society.<sup>6</sup>



## Notes

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