

The Cycle of Disinvestment in Public Schools: How Public School Criticism Drives Policy and Disinvestment



Huriya Jabbar and Daniel Espinoza
University of Southern California

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National Education Policy Center

School of Education
University of Colorado Boulder
nepc.colorado.edu

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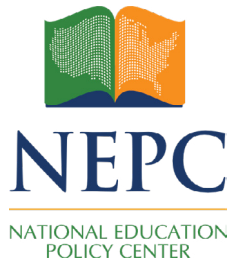
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I. Executive Summary

Critiques of public education have intensified in recent years. While some of these criticisms have merit—public education has many areas in need of growth and improvement—many of today’s critiques are generated and trumpeted by organizations seeking to manufacture crises. These critical narratives about public school failure often ignore counterevidence, instead employing deceptive language to persuade the public that the system as a whole is problem-ridden, perhaps hopelessly. While honest critiques of public education can drive beneficial reforms and investments necessary for school improvement, these claims of purported school crises have led to a weakening of the public system and are attached to attempts to undermine that system.

Accordingly, this policy brief examines the subset of public education critiques that are about demolition, not improvement. We identify five core themes: (a) underachievement, (b) inefficiency, (c) inequality, (d) lack of school choice; and (e) indoctrination. After exploring these and related attacks on public education, we take a step back and consider the cycle of disinvestment that the attacks are feeding.

The achievement attack is grounded in disappointing test scores, with critics continually and loudly proclaiming that public schools are failing in their basic responsibility to educate students. Such criticism, however, ignores the large influence of poverty and inequality on student performance. Moreover, polling data consistently show that parents rate their *own* public schools highly—but given the pervasiveness of the failure myth, they accept that public schools *in general* are failing. This mis-

alignment between a broader constructed critique of public schools and what adults perceive about the schools they know suggests that the crisis narrative is fabricated.

A second charge is that public schools use funding inefficiently, purportedly as a way to meet the demands of overly powerful unions, ignoring the multiple ways unions have helped improve school conditions and advanced policies that benefit middle- and working-class families. Other critics touting inefficiency in schools contend that more money has brought little return on investment in terms of student outcomes—based on narrow student test scores that obscure more than they reveal. Yet, recent rigorous research underscores that increased school funding improves student achievement, particularly for low-income students.

A third critical claim is that public schools exacerbate inequality, citing tracking practices and discipline disparities. While these practices do need reform, the system as a whole is necessary to positively address inequality—and research has demonstrated the link between conditions of inequality and inequitable funding and resources for marginalized groups of students.

Some public school critics have attached to the inequality and inefficiency arguments a fourth claim that schools lack sufficient choice for parents, and they propose school choice and vouchers as a remedy—particularly for marginalized families. However, recent research shows large-scale voucher programs lowering student outcomes and furthering segregation.

Finally, critics allege public schools indoctrinate children. But these critiques rely on sensationalized evidence that ignores the reality that most content is uncontroversial and inclusive.

Again, while some of the criticisms may hold true for some schools in some places and should be addressed in those cases, there is a very real and problematic danger in the overstatement and in the manufacturing of a crisis. When people believe that these overstated crises apply to the public school system overall, the negative portrayals undermine public support, fueling a cycle of disinvestment, with reduced funding following from reduced political support and reduced enrollment. With fewer resources, school quality suffers, generating still further criticism, repeating and deepening the disinvestment cycle. Moreover, reductions are continuously being made amidst high, and growing, levels of need among students.

Disinvestment weakens the public system while advancing the privatization of what has long been considered a public good. Even as sustained underinvestment has led to school closures disproportionately impacting Black and Latine communities, states have adopted policies that entice other families to move their children out of neighborhood schools. In particular, voucher and other school choice policies further drain resources from already struggling schools, sometimes resulting in state takeovers of school districts. In such cases, states often turn to private providers, as

contractors tasked with to managing public schools.

This steady march toward privatization has not been slowed by high-quality research finding little to no benefit to students—and that sometimes finds very real harm. Meanwhile, policies that micromanage schools, purportedly to improve matters, have ignored research showing detriments to schools and students, causing harm to those students. For example, California’s ban of effective pedagogy for English Language Learners in Proposition 227 turned out to be so harmful that it was rescinded within a decade. What such policy trends have in common is that they strategically ignore research evidence on the societal forces that shape schooling, such as poverty, segregation, and chronic inequality.

Recent developments, including COVID-19 disruptions, culture wars, universal voucher expansion, immigration enforcement in schools, and other federal policy changes threaten public schools still further. Policies to expand choice, constrain schools, and restrict funding are being adopted on a rapid timeline. The Trump administration has made and threatened additional major cuts in federal funding while laying off U.S. Department of Education staff and sending immigration agents after schoolchildren.

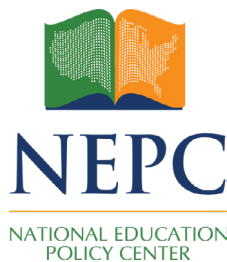
In this moment, the threat to public education is at an all-time high. The cycle of alarmist critique and disinvestment in public schools threatens students, schools, and communities. Unless it is disrupted, manufactured crises will be leveraged to continuously underinvest in schools, exacerbate inequalities, and roll back hard-won gains in equity and student outcomes.

Policymakers can do much to disrupt this ruinous cycle and to renew and strengthen a collective commitment to thriving public schools. We do not include specific recommendations here focused on federal policy, which would necessarily involve reversing recent damage. But federal policy could also facilitate the following recommendations for state lawmakers, district leaders, and school leaders:

- Reject policies that privatize or otherwise undermine public education;
- Invest in public education by addressing the daunting resource needs facing public schools, through increases in school funding using progressive school finance formulas and dedicated money for aging facilities and deferred maintenance;
- Target these resources to support students from low-income backgrounds;
- Prioritize spending on effective instructional programs and strategies, including small class sizes and salaries that recruit and retain great teachers;
- Adopt instructional materials and programs that have a sound research base,

including ethnic studies programs and other types of culturally relevant pedagogy;

- Close opportunity gaps and improve educational outcomes by counteracting the effects of poverty through alignment of education policy initiatives with housing, health and economic policies, such as community schools and expanded access to childcare and early education;
- Conduct systematic regular polling of parents to help understand what parents truly desire and what their critiques are of public schools, rather than relying on advocacy group narratives, and use this information to guide key decisions and counter extremist voices; and
- Adopt tested messaging strategies, such as those from the Frameworks Institute, when engaging the general public and policymakers about policy ideas.



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II. Introduction

A robust system of public education is essential to democracy. Public schools unite and ground communities, teach critical thinking and strategies for civic engagement, and bring children together across social class, racial, and ethnic lines.¹ Yet, for decades, public schools have been critiqued from the political right and, at times, from the political left. Such critiques range from those expressed in 1983’s *A Nation at Risk*, which criticized U.S. schools for falling behind globally, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and math . . . to progressive critiques that schools are unresponsive to community needs or impose racially disproportionate discipline . . . and to right-wing claims of indoctrination.²

While criticism is certainly not new, it has been heightened in recent years concurrent with the rapid increase of students of color in the public system, where they now constitute a majority.³ To be sure, there are real concerns with public schools and, of course, areas for growth and improvement. For example, a large body of evidence points to racially disproportionate discipline policies that limit opportunities for students of color, as well as efforts to remedy these inequities.⁴ But the fact that many recent concerns have served as rationale for a steadily advancing march toward privatization raises questions about whether many critics are interested in promoting positive change in the public system—or seeking to undermine it. The recent charge that public schools indoctrinate children into “wokeism,” for example, has helped advance policies such as universal voucher schemes that drain funds from, and so weaken, public schools. Despite the fact that research offers evidence countering widespread damning claims, such criticism is continuously being used to

characterize the entire public school system as being hopelessly broken.

This policy brief examines how for decades such purported—or manufactured⁵—crises have created a destructive cycle leading to systematic disinvestment in public education with accumulating harms to the system. We review evidence on common criticisms of public schools, including failure, inefficiency and union control, inequity, lack of choice and parental control, and as noted above, recent claims of indoctrination. Then, drawing on research and polling data, we examine how the strategic deployment of these narratives lends support to policies that erode public support, reduce funding, and steadily increase privatization, decreasing public control and oversight of schools. Moreover, at least since the Great Recession of 2008 and despite research indicating funding affects outcomes, states have consistently underfunded public schools—which especially harms marginalized students and so generates yet more criticism.⁶ The result is that public schools are caught in a vicious cycle, facing increased and unrealistic expectations with diminished resources and capacity to provide adequate services.

Following the discussion of critiques, we move on to examining how recent developments, including COVID-19 disruptions, culture wars, universal voucher expansion, immigration enforcement in schools, and federal policy changes, have accelerated the disinvestment cycle. Finally, we offer recommendations to help educators, leaders, and policymakers to counter manufactured narratives with evidence and to work toward reversing prior disinvestment by promoting equitable funding of instruction and facilities.

III. Review of the Literature

Common Criticisms of Public Schools: Oversimplified, Overstated

Following is a review of what research indicates about the most common criticisms of public schools, which charges them with failure to educate, inefficient use of funds, inequality, sidelining of parents, and indoctrination.

Public Schools Are Failing

Failure, most often defined as low school performance on standardized tests, is one of the most prominent critiques of public schools. Researchers have noted the growing use of the term “failing schools” since the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, which blamed schools for a “rising tide of mediocrity” and for the decline in globally competitive industrial productivity.⁷ Yet, national long-term trends assessments from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicate overall growth in reading and math scores since the 1970s, with only a recent post-pandemic decline.⁸

Critics often blame schools and teachers for low student performance, rather than poverty and inequality in the broader society.⁹ Yet, research consistently shows that social class is a primary predictor of students' performance on state exams.¹⁰ However, the student test scores that typically inform this charge are an overly narrow measure of student outcomes.¹¹ National trends reveal significant increases in other outcomes over the past decade, such as high school graduation rates.¹² Further, claims describing how the U.S. is falling behind globally, especially in STEM, neglect the vastly different societal contexts and social welfare policies in other countries, as well as the differences in educational practices and policies in other countries, such as the higher rates of professional time for teachers to collaborate.¹³ A clear case of these differences is the often cited example of Finland, which has lower income inequality than the U.S., stronger social welfare supports, and substantially more paid time for teacher professional collaboration—and, as a result, higher and more equitable student outcomes.¹⁴ And, the issues of underfunding and inequitable funding are additional factors this criticism fails to take into account, an issue detailed in a later segment of this brief.¹⁵

Public Schools Are Inefficient, Largely Thanks to Unions

A common criticism of the public school system, levied early and notably by Chubb and Moe in their 1990 argument for privatization, is that it has been captured by adult interests. They claimed that public schools are bloated, inefficient bureaucracies more focused on teacher pay than student learning—an inefficient use of taxpayer dollars.¹⁶ This critique continues to be advanced by groups such as the Heritage Foundation, which has called for the closure of the U.S. Department of Education to thwart teachers' unions and limit bureaucratic control of schools.¹⁷ There is some evidence that can be used to support this claim. One review of research on teachers' unions finds union strength is associated with increased district expenditures and insignificant or modestly negative effect on student outcomes, and another study finds that restrictive collective bargaining agreements are associated with lower district efficiency.¹⁸

However: Other scholarship indicates that when union influence improves working conditions for teachers (in the form of higher salaries or lower class size, for example), students benefit. Better conditions attract and retain high-quality teachers, a major benefit to students' learning.¹⁹ Research shows that increased spending on instruction—including spending to improve work conditions—is associated with increased student achievement.²⁰ Further, teachers' unions partner with broader coalitions to advance the interests of student populations with particular needs as well as those of middle- and working-class families.²¹ For example, they negotiate to increase supports for immigrants, LGTBTQ+ youth, and students with special needs. And, their work with other labor groups advances policies that promote students' broader social and economic well-being. Labor's support for adequate minimum

wages, health care, and housing, for example, all help ensure students' basic needs are met, enabling them to focus on learning without such distractions as hunger and homelessness.

Another charge of inefficiency is based on the contention that spending in public education systems offers a poor return on taxpayer dollars. Prominent critics, including Education Secretary Linda McMahon, have used misleading spending figures to argue that school spending has skyrocketed without improving student achievement.²² Proponents of this view argue that despite decades of rising costs, educational outcomes are stubbornly stagnant.²³ These critiques, however, miss several critical points. First, per-pupil funding increases are occurring amidst rising costs of education, whether from inflation, rising student needs, or efforts to make up for prior underfunding.²⁴ More critically, a review of research on the topic indicates that recent literature from quasi-experimental (rather than observational) studies consistently demonstrate that schools use increased funding in ways that improve student outcomes, and the benefits are greater for students from low-income backgrounds than their more privileged peers.²⁵

Public Schools Foster or Exacerbate Inequality

School funding disparities, teacher quality gaps, the “factory model” of schooling, and the school-to-prison pipeline (the characterization of schools as preparing students primarily for a future as criminals and prisoners) are flaws that critics from the political left have highlighted.²⁶ Critics from the political right have also drawn on related critiques to limit support for public schools, arguing that schools are overly bureaucratic, rigid, or unresponsive to parents.²⁷ Unfortunately, too often the public school system mirrors and even exacerbates the inequities of the broader societal system in which it is nested. Decades of research have revealed how schools can, in fact, further inequities. For example, they often track racially minoritized and working-class students into academic pathways that can limit their options after high school, such as vocational tracks and lower-level or remedial/developmental courses.²⁸ The “school-to-prison pipeline,” characterized by such practices and policies as zero tolerance and expulsion or even arrest for minor infractions, is now established as a field of study and a problem that has received national policy attention.²⁹ Likewise, scholars have documented the impacts of grade retention and the uneven use of discipline policies that negatively impact Black and Latine³⁰ students.³¹ Studies show that these disparities can be driven by individual teacher bias and racialized school climates of heightened blaming where all students are seen as blameworthy.³²

While such research suggests that these flaws exist in some situations and do require urgent attention, there is no evidence to suggest that the system *as a whole* suffers from such weaknesses. Rather, in general the research just cited indicates such problems appear to be most pervasive in schools serving lower-income communities, where both underfunding and other challenges for schools also tend to be

most acute. As early as the 1960s, interpretations of the Coleman Report argued that school resources could not undo the inequalities driven by family background and socioeconomic status without complementary social and economic policy reforms.³³ This reality has been consistently demonstrated in copious research since.³⁴

Public Schools Lack Choice and Parental Control

Another related line of critique claims that lack of school choice locks parents and children into educational options that do not meet their needs. Scholars and advocates since Milton Friedman's pro-privatization publications in the 1960s argue that the government should be responsible only for ensuring minimum standards for formal schooling—akin to restaurant sanitation ratings—rather than directly providing and running schools.³⁵ These critiques often lead to voucher policies and other market-oriented solutions, allowing private actors to operate schools that families can choose among, allowing families to “vote with their feet.” Critics claim that expanding choice in this way this will improve the quality of schools available to voucher recipients.³⁶ However, research shows that voucher policies often fail to achieve positive student outcomes and sometimes worsen them.³⁷ In many cases, they are tools for maintaining racial segregation.³⁸ Finally, claims about lack of choice often ignore the range of public school choices currently available—including open enrollment, magnet schools, charter schools, and schools based on distinct educational models.³⁹

Public Schools Are Indoctrinating Children

A recent vehement criticism claims public schools are indoctrinating children with progressive political viewpoints. Document and media analyses of state-level anti-Critical Race Theory (CRT) policies in Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, North Carolina and at the national level find that the far right frames CRT as divisive, indoctrinating, dangerous, Marxist, anti-American, and as a gateway to a radical takeover of American culture.⁴⁰ Advocates such as Chris Rufo, who sparked this line of thinking beginning in 2020, have used CRT to attack public schools broadly, resulting in bans on books and curriculum that include people of color and LGBTQ+ people.⁴¹ However, CRT is an academic theory underpinning research into the effects of racism and is not taught in K-12 schools.⁴² Instead, the underlying concerns and objections prompting this critique seem to arise from accuracy in U.S. history instruction and recent efforts to implement ethnic studies and culturally responsive pedagogy, both teaching approaches known to advance learning.⁴³ Some emerging research using a nationally representative sample suggests that some divisive topics are covered in schools—but infrequently; the majority of curricular content appears relatively uncontroversial or in line with state standards.⁴⁴ This suggests that narratives of indoctrination are a “caricatured distortion” of educators' efforts to offer accurate and inclusive teaching.⁴⁵

Overall, then, the purported crises in schools are oversimplified and overstated, and they ignore counterevidence as well as complexities in issues facing schools. Nevertheless, the inaccurate, alarmist picture they paint has serious consequences.

Outcomes: Eroded Public Support and a Steady March Toward Privatization

Polling data consistently shows that parents rate their *own* public schools highly but are more likely to believe that public schools *in general* are failing, a trend that has steadily increased over time. According to a 2022 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, the majority of adults (54%) grade public schools in their communities as A or B. However, adults rate “the nation’s schools” far worse, with only 23% of adults reporting an “A” or “B” letter grade.⁴⁶

Parents have the most direct experience with public schools, and the misalignment between their high regard for their own schools and their impression of public schools at large suggests that the “public schools as failing” narrative is manufactured. Indeed, research documents the concerted efforts of advocacy groups to create a narrative promoting the idea of failing schools, with *A Nation at Risk* serving as a key example of these efforts and their success.⁴⁷ Data does support claims of some serious issues in some types of schools—but not systemic failure. Instead, schools are often blamed for a broader, societal lack of social support, high rates of poverty, and growing inequality, with all affecting school and student performance.⁴⁸ Indeed, research continues to show that family background, social class, and community/neighborhood opportunities drive student test scores.⁴⁹ Schools are tasked with raising student achievement and outcomes—under high-stakes accountability—without sufficient funding to counteract the effects of systemic inequality. Furthermore, the almost exclusive focus on test scores ignores student growth as well as the other goals and purposes of public education.⁵⁰

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, research has found that many states—which typically designate an inadequate budget for school funding—have failed to acknowledge and address greater need in districts housed in low-income areas as they disperse funds. Because school funding relies primarily on local property taxes, poor communities, which are often large minority communities, lack a local tax base adequate to meet the greater needs of their schools and students.⁵¹ One recent study, for example, found that as the population of Latine students increases in lower-income districts, spending per pupil decreases.⁵²

Together the manufactured narratives paint a picture of failing schools squandering tax dollars, pandering to unions, treating students inequitably, ignoring parents, and indoctrinating students with exaggerated “woke” perspectives, promoting the idea that the system is so broken that there is little or no hope for improving it. No-

tably, such arguments ignore research that points to other ideas for reform that have demonstrated potential—especially adequate funding for all schools.⁵³

Rather than serving the parents and children who inhabit schools, crisis narratives serve to advance ideology and policy agendas,⁵⁴ including policies that take still more resources away from public schools through privatization and school choice.⁵⁵ Advocates of privatization—including for-profit privatization—use “discursive practices,” such as calling public schools “failing,” or capitalizing on a crisis or emergency situation, to destabilize the public sector by suggesting further investment in it would be wasted. Instead, the damning narratives have functioned to divert funds to the private sector.⁵⁶ To advance a privatization agenda, the rhetoric is sometimes imbued with political “dog whistles,” coded messages that appear neutral on the surface but carry specific meanings to targeted audiences “in the know.”⁵⁷ For example, “parental rights” sounds neutral but has often been used to oppose teaching about racism, LGBTQ+ issues, or accurate historical information.

Conservative and far-right actors also use social media and memes to paint public schools as liberal strongholds that discriminate against conservative viewpoints.⁵⁸ At the same time, some have adopted and generalized the meanings of such words as “equity,” “diversity,” or “discrimination” to sever them from their original connections to race and systemic injustice.⁵⁹ This enables far right activists to use the same words as progressive advocates to make entirely different arguments.⁶⁰

Together, these strategic narratives are then leveraged to advance voucher and other choice policies along with increased local parental control at the expense of public institutions serving the public good of a democratic citizenry.⁶¹ And, the success of these efforts threatens the very future of the public school system long thought to be essential to that citizenry.

IV. Recent Developments

The critiques and threats to public education are at an all-time high. Policies to expand choice, constrain schools, and restrict funding are being passed on a rapid timeline, with higher stakes than before.⁶² This is driven, in part, by external shocks to the system of public education, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which opened a policy window for anti-masking and anti-vaccine movements to morph into parents’ rights movements. For example, the radical group Moms For Liberty⁶³ made headlines as its members aggressively promoted censorship in schools under the banner of freedom and parental rights. The recent reelection of President Donald Trump, who has drawn on these manufactured crises to support his agenda, further created shocks for schools, with federal funding cuts and delays, immigration raids and deportation efforts, and attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion.⁶⁴ Such efforts draw on and amplify the now pervasive distorted image of public schools.

In recent years, the critique that public schools are failing has also been advanced by a purported “reading crisis,” sparked in part by a podcast called *Sold a Story*.⁶⁵ News media and advocates report that one in three children cannot read fluently, citing the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), despite the fact that these statistics have often been misinterpreted and misused.⁶⁶ Yet, as with similar crisis narratives in the past, most parents believe that their own child’s elementary school is doing fine teaching reading skills, with perhaps some issues but not in crisis.⁶⁷ Furthermore, the remedy proposed by “science of reading” advocates—a curriculum prioritizing phonics instruction—is a contested field.⁶⁸ This manufactured reading “crisis,” however, is advancing legislative policies like retaining students in grade, despite research showing that policy’s social harms, high costs, disproportionate implementation, and null or short-term academic benefits.⁶⁹

The narrative that public schools are beholden to adult interests, and teachers’ unions in particular, has also been heightened. The Supreme Court’s *Janus* ruling,⁷⁰ which no longer requires teachers who opt out of the union to pay fees, has threatened resources available to teachers’ unions. And, in many states targeting critical race theory (which, as noted earlier, has no place in K-12 education), broader critiques of teachers are now tied to culture wars. Right-wing actors have portrayed teachers as the source of the indoctrination problem, as educators or “groomers” seeking to brainwash children into liberalism.⁷¹ Yet, even the right-wing Heritage Foundation reports that teachers are not ideologues, finding little support from a nationwide survey for the claim that teachers are “radical activists.”⁷²

Furthermore, critiques that public schools are inefficient have further fueled school vouchers and school choice, with advocates arguing that choice will spark competition. Many state governments have further undermined public schooling with the expansion of school vouchers, especially universal vouchers and educational savings accounts (ESAs). By shifting taxpayer dollars away from public school students to subsidize education for students whose parents, in many cases, were already paying private school tuition, such policies simultaneously undermine public schools and inflate private school tuition.⁷³ Further, voucher policies can be particularly harmful in rural school districts that lack private school options.⁷⁴ Although the promotion of universal vouchers stalled for some years in favor of such public school choice programs as charter schools and open enrollment, recently such programs have gained significant momentum.⁷⁵ Texas recently became the sixteenth state to adopt a universal voucher program after rejecting vouchers in previous legislative sessions.⁷⁶

Sadly, the claim that public schools reproduce or exacerbate inequity is becoming increasingly true, with the rollback of equity initiatives and civil rights protections as the culture war against diversity continues. Indeed, efforts that sought to reduce the disparities in school discipline and other areas are being explicitly rolled back under President Trump’s executive orders. Federal executive orders and U.S. Department of Education guidance seek to curtail diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts

in schools.⁷⁷ The Administration aims to eliminate billions in funding to schools by framing all DEI practices as discriminatory. Ultimately, these orders misconstrue efforts to overcome racism or sexism as morally reprehensible, even illegal. Though the Department's guidance has since been ruled illegal by multiple judges, the executive orders continue to impact hundreds of millions in grants.⁷⁸ Further, these orders advance a trend in state legislation, with 19 states having enacted anti-DEI legislation affecting higher education institutions since 2023.⁷⁹

Critiques that parents lack choice have also broadened to include not only school choice, particularly in the form of vouchers as noted above, but also to more parental control over public schools' curricular choices, reflecting larger societal culture wars. And, the cries for more parental control have been exacerbated by the charge of indoctrination, further promoting book bans and other censorship efforts.⁸⁰ Right-wing policy actors and advocates have passed anti-critical race theory bills in 29 states, over 80 anti-LGBTQ bills in 23 states, over 1,000 book bans in 21 states, and many more bills are advancing in state legislatures.⁸¹ Again perverting the meaning of common terms, critics of the schools have framed charged diversity efforts in such terms as racist, or ideological indoctrination, or anti-American—all currently political dog whistles.⁸² Such anti-diversity policies can have direct impacts on practice as well as psychological impacts, and they can spill over into indirect impacts through a chilling effect.⁸³ The legal and political landscape is changing rapidly, leaving teachers with confusion about the scope of their rights and responsibilities in discussing “divisive topics” in and out of the classroom.

The consequences of the take-up of these manufactured crises are significant. The Trump Administration has threatened major cuts in federal funding, while restricting the flow of funding to public schools.⁸⁴ Layoffs in the U.S. Department of Education and cuts to critical education research programs further undermine public education.⁸⁵ With immigration enforcement and national security agents arriving at schools, the implicit message is that schools are sheltering criminals. These crackdowns have sparked fear in many communities and may wreak havoc on district finances.⁸⁶ Indeed, the immigration raids in California's Central Valley coincided with a 22% increase in student absences, which is directly tied to school funding.⁸⁷ These policy choices significantly weaken public education.

Related federal cuts in other areas will also impact education and exacerbate the needs in schools. While federal safety net policies have strengthened over the last five decades, reducing poverty levels across the country, these advances are under threat by the Trump administration's domestic policy agenda, which cuts food and medical aid for needy individuals and families, rolls back environmental protections, and separates families via aggressive immigration enforcement.⁸⁸

While it's possible that many promoting critiques may sincerely believe them and intend to improve the education students receive, it is clear that charges of fail-

ure, inefficiency, inequality, parents’ rights, and indoctrination are being deployed by choice advocates—many with financial interests—to expand school vouchers and privatization and cut funding to public schools. And, they contribute to a cycle of steady disinvestment in public schools.

V. Discussion and Analysis

A Framework to Understand the Cycle of Disinvestment in Public Schools

Crisis narrative strategies that paint a picture of schools as “failing” drives disinvestment in public schools, generating still further critiques and concerns. Figure 1 offers a simple depiction of this vicious cycle. First, the manufactured criticism and deceptive framing lead to policy mechanisms and approaches that undermine faith in public schools, leading to adoption of school voucher policies. Such mechanisms reduce resources, further reducing the quality of what public schools can offer to students—which is then weaponized as further criticism, repeating and deepening the cycle.

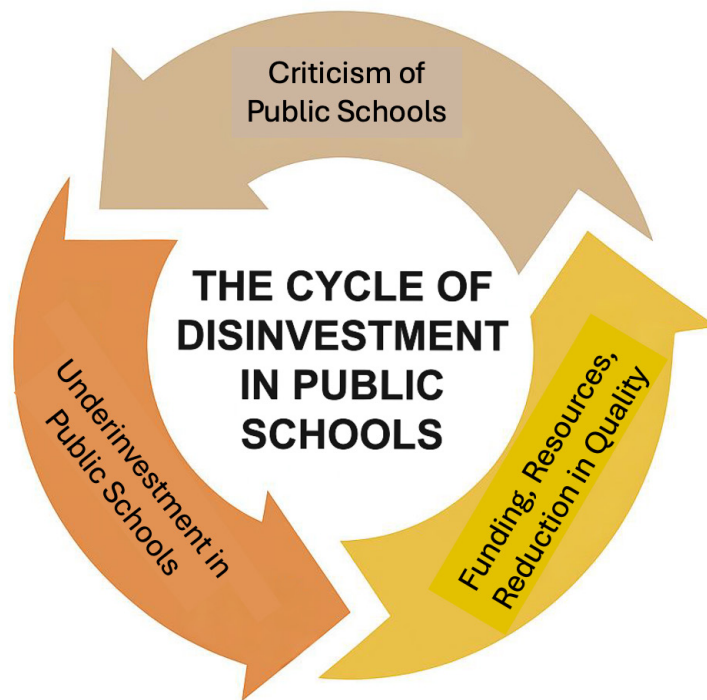


Figure 1. A Framework to Understand the Cycle of Disinvestment in Public Schools

The Nature of Disinvestment

Reductions in Education Funding

Research shows declining investments in public education. Longitudinal analyses document a steady decline in the percentage of state and local revenue directed to K-12 education, beginning with the Great Recession.⁸⁹ As state economies recovered, policymakers often neglected K-12 education. By one estimate, if states had maintained pre-recession funding levels for the following decade, districts and schools would have had over \$600 billion more to support student learning in 2018.⁹⁰ Instead, states and localities have continued funding education at lower levels relative to a growing economy. This reality is often obscured by state legislators who annually celebrate higher amounts of K-12 education funding, in terms of dollars. Absent from these narratives is that inflation rates have also risen, eating away or even reversing these increases, and that public school enrollment increased by 3.4% during this time,⁹¹ further reducing gains in terms of per-pupil funding. As a country, K-12 education spending adjusted for inflation has increased only 6% in the decade from 2008 to 2018.⁹²

In some states, this dynamic of anemic funding and rising enrollments has resulted in lower per-pupil funding over time. In Texas, for example, where public school spending between 2014 and 2023 barely kept pace with inflation, an increase of nearly 500,000 students over that time means that per-pupil funding *decreased* 6% (from \$9,797 to \$9,207).⁹³

This declining effort on the part of states is occurring amidst high, and growing, levels of need. While the percentage and number of children living in poverty have declined since the years following the Great Recession, national data still indicate that over 10 million children—some 15% of all children in the U.S.—are living in poverty.⁹⁴ In Texas, for example, nearly one in five children live in poverty.⁹⁵ Further, schools have been under constant and growing pressure to meet standards, increase test scores, and meet special education needs despite inadequate resources and funding. Concurrently, they are expected to respond to mental health crises, reduce social media and cell phone use while integrating other forms of technology, and adopt new initiatives targeting such areas as reading pedagogy and chronic absenteeism.⁹⁶ All this, even as dominant narratives focus on crises related to “indoctrination” and concerns about teaching related to race, gender, and sexuality in schools.⁹⁷

Other Forms of Disinvestment

Beyond funding, there have been other types of disinvestment in schools. For example, the responsibility of running schools has shifted from local representatives to state-level government or private entities via such actions as school takeovers, privatization of core services, technology, and charter schools.⁹⁸ In some cases, as

in Louisiana and Tennessee, state takeovers and charter schools have turned the management of public schools over to private, nonprofit actors.⁹⁹ A possibly extreme example is New Orleans, where the narrative of failing schools plus the political use of the devastation from 2005's hurricane Katrina led to that city becoming an all-charter school district.¹⁰⁰ In other contexts, high proportions of charter schools are managed by for-profit education management companies, especially in Michigan and Arizona.¹⁰¹

Families, too, are encouraged to disinvest in public schools by exiting them. Negative perceptions in popular rhetoric can and do persuade parents to instead choose such options as homeschooling or private schools, even when those options are not any better—and may be worse.¹⁰²

Consequences of Disinvestment

Disinvestment has diverse consequences ranging from immediate effects, like lower funding and resources, affecting student outcomes, to more general effects like less public support for public schools.

Loss of Enrollment

As crisis narratives propagate and policymakers create more and more opportunities for parents to opt out of public schools, funding often exits along with students.¹⁰³ Competition for students can strain schools financially.¹⁰⁴ While state policy can and sometimes does help with this problem, for example by reimbursing the district for students leaving for charter schools, such help is often short-lived and inadequate.¹⁰⁵ Schools losing a handful of students across grades cannot respond by, say, cutting a full-time teacher, so they become less efficient or must do more with less. This framing of schooling as a private consumer good can also potentially drive criminalization of parents, as seen in cases of “district hopping,” where mothers have been charged with “grand theft” for sending their children to a school in a district outside their residential address.¹⁰⁶

Fewer Resources to Address Student Needs and Provide Opportunities

After decades of debate over whether “money matters,” recent high-quality research has convincingly demonstrated that money *does* matter for student outcomes,¹⁰⁷ especially for marginalized students, like students experiencing poverty and students of color, for whom societal forces have systematically limited their opportunities.¹⁰⁸ There is robust evidence of the positive impact of increased spending on a range of student outcomes, such as improved student test scores,¹⁰⁹ especially in districts serving the highest concentrations of students from low-income backgrounds¹¹⁰; reductions of the achievement gap¹¹¹; higher graduation rates¹¹²; elevated college en-

rollment and completion¹¹³; and increased lifetime earnings and less poverty.¹¹⁴ Increased education spending can even be a lever for increasing equality in society more broadly.¹¹⁵ And, the funding benefiting teachers that critics so resent also pays off: Reducing class sizes, increasing teacher salaries, and reducing teacher turnover are closely related to improved student performance.¹¹⁶ It is unrealistic to expect schools to do more for students with significantly inadequate revenue in the face of steadily increasing costs.

Increased Stratification and Segregation in Schools

Narratives of failing schools often drive middle-class White flight from urban centers, based largely on stigma and hearsay more than evidence, data, or in-person school visits.¹¹⁷ School choice research shows that families do not consider local public schools in their search because of negative stereotypes or reputation,¹¹⁸ furthering school and neighborhood segregation.¹¹⁹ And racial segregation exacerbates racial inequality, driven in part by inequitable school funding systems: Greater segregation interacting with systemic racism leads to greater disparities in district revenues.¹²⁰

Steady Decline in Public Support for Public Education

School choice expansion and crisis framing can lead to lower voter turnout¹²¹ and impact the passage of school bonds, deepening further disinvestment in schools, facilities, and basic infrastructure.¹²² When education is framed as a private rather than a public good—benefiting individuals and not society as a whole—an aging population may be less inclined to support public schools, especially when schools and teachers are vilified in public critiques.¹²³

As negative impressions compound, trust in schools declines. For example, research has shown that the debates about teaching “critical race theory” has had significant effect on perceptions of schools as trustworthy. A survey of 1,500 individuals in Michigan, for example, examined how exposure to micro-narratives about a particular policy (anti-CRT) could spill over to shape macro beliefs about the purpose of schooling and undermine trust in public schools and even public institutions more broadly.¹²⁴ Less trust can prompt increasing flight from the public system, which has both a financial and a societal cost. For example, research has shown that when middle-class parents in an urban area choose a racially and economically diverse public school as they live out their personal commitment to social justice, all students may benefit.¹²⁵ But, as trust and belief in public institutions declines, and as education is increasingly seen as a private rather than a public good, parents may increasingly avoid public schools, impacting not only their revenue but undermining the historic role of public schools to help to craft the country’s diverse populations into a unified citizenry.

School Closures

Sustained underinvestment, through a lack of enrollment or attendance and inadequate funding, also leads to school closures.¹²⁶ These closures disproportionately affect Black and Latine communities, furthering inequity¹²⁷ through the loss of beloved and essential community landmarks and institutions.¹²⁸ Indeed, although school closures have slowed down in recent years¹²⁹ (in part due to research on its impacts), declining enrollment and increased school choice threaten to expand the number of school closures in years ahead.¹³⁰ Nationally, enrollment has declined by almost 1.3 million students since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (2.5%).¹³¹ Under-resourced schools also have higher rates of turnover, making implementing and sustaining reforms harder,¹³² which further impacts student outcomes and opportunities,¹³³ again creating a vicious cycle. With less and less support, schools are then unfairly held to the same standards under high-stakes accountability and testing policies.¹³⁴

Undermining Evidence-Based Programs

Manufactured narratives can also lead to ill-advised instructional policies. For example, advocates in the 1990s in California schools leveraged anti-immigrant sentiment and critiques that the bilingual education programs of the time were ineffective and “wasting financial resources” to push for English-only education for English language learners through Proposition 227.¹³⁵ The result was a significant reduction in students accessing content in their dominant language (an effort to keep them on track with the curriculum), from 29% before the ban to 12% after it.¹³⁶

In effect, this policy made an already bad—and misrepresented—situation worse. An initial lack of investment in multilingual education meant that before the ban, the vast majority of emerging multilingual students were taught by teachers with no special training to teach English to non-native speakers.¹³⁷ The passage of the proposition made it “virtually impossible to provide effective instruction for English Language Learners.”¹³⁸ Evaluations of the policy found a negligible impact on the achievement gap for multilingual learners, while their largest achievement occurred in schools with multilingual instruction before or after the ban.¹³⁹ While this policy was later reversed, this case illustrates clearly how policies born of manufactured narratives can undermine student learning, particularly for the most marginalized students.

Reducing Teacher Diversity

Student learning is hardly the only victim of unfair and overstated critiques. After Hurricane Katrina, for example, the New Orleans public school district fired all its educators, who were mostly Black. The racialized depiction of a failing and corrupt

school system called for complete overhaul of schools and the staff within them. Decades later, the same advocates who called for these changes lamented the low numbers of Black teachers relative to the student body, a new critique of public schools. Teacher diversity is a legitimate concern; the point here is that advocates constructed narratives about public schools in New Orleans to push through policies that removed and reduced investment in Black teachers with longer tenures, and then later critiqued the system for its lack of teacher diversity.¹⁴⁰ Today's policy can be fodder for tomorrow's new apocalyptic critique, without any consistency or logic. What's important in all cases seems to be to make public schools look bad so that they can be weakened still further.

Countering the Cycle of Disinvestment

The cycle of manufactured criticisms and disinvestment in public schools threatens students, schools, and communities. Unless it is disrupted, manufactured crises will continue to be leveraged to underinvest in schools, exacerbate inequalities, and roll back hard-won gains in equity and student outcomes.

Educators and supportive policymakers can do as critics do: Use frames strategically to shape public opinion and promote policy solutions. Narratives are powerful. Where crisis narratives are false, policymakers, advocates, and scholars can expose them with evidence. For example, given the disconnect between the failing schools narratives and parent polling data, state education agencies and school districts can partner with researchers to poll parents regularly, and disseminating results widely can help reveal what most parents truly desire and what their critiques are of public schools. Such evidence could guide decision making, instead of the crisis narratives from a small minority (e.g., Moms For Liberty), and would ultimately help to counter extremist voices and prevent them from dominating policy debates. For example, a district facing critiques of indoctrination from far-right extremist groups could use systematic parent polling to reveal whether this claim is from a small minority or if there are more widespread concerns. If the former, district leaders (superintendents and school board members) can use these data to push back against these claims and distractions to advance other educational priorities. State agencies can use systematic polling to show, for example, if state trends reflect national ones, that most parents are satisfied with their child's public school to counter arguments for broadly expanding school choice. Further, to counter myths about public schools, evidence-based messaging by state agencies could help to share the truth about claims such as critical race theory being taught in schools, and draw on tested strategies, such as those from the Frameworks Institute (which supports organizations in crafting strategic messaging based on systematic research), when engaging the general public and policymakers about policy ideas.¹⁴¹

States can directly disrupt the disinvestment cycle by providing more adequate and

equitable funding and resources for public schools. Evidence-based policies such as raising school funding levels, equitably funding schools by providing more funds for greater needs (known as progressive funding), improving facilities, and investing in strong teacher pathways and retention programs could help to counteract prior waves of disinvestment. Investments in basic infrastructure and maintenance for aging school buildings has declined, even though adequate facilities are important for student learning and well-being.¹⁴² Research clearly demonstrates a wide range of benefits when investment increases. Studies show the benefits of increasing instructional support to allow for such improvements as reducing class sizes, adopting instructional materials and programs that have a sound research base, including ethnic studies programs and other types of culturally relevant pedagogy, raising teacher salaries, or targeting investments to students from low-income backgrounds.¹⁴³ Research showing that poverty is a key driver of student and school outcomes suggests that investments by states and the federal government can play an important role in fostering and supporting collaborative approaches between school districts and other agencies (city and county governments, housing agencies, health and human services) working to improve housing, food, and other social supports.¹⁴⁴ For example, community schools offer a variety of programs that address not only students' academic needs, but also the mental and physical health needs of students and their families.¹⁴⁵ Programs that expand access to early childhood educational opportunities boost student learning and provide essential care for working families with young children.¹⁴⁶ The more that the public and policymakers understand that research has repeatedly confirmed the benefits of increased investment in schools, and what those benefits are, the more likely they are to approve of such investment.

These approaches can offer a positive perception of public schools, countering corrosive myths and promoting reinvestment. Despite ongoing attacks, public schools remain the most promising institutions to counter societal extremism and polarization. Schools allow children to interact with people beyond their family networks, providing them the opportunity to encounter diverse views and learn how to react to them with critical thinking and civil discourse.¹⁴⁷ They are, in fact, a keystone of democracy. Their eventual loss if things continue to deteriorate poses a largely unrecognized but deeply significant loss to the public at large.

VI. Recommendations

Policymakers can do much to disrupt this ruinous cycle and to renew and strengthen a collective commitment to thriving public schools. We do not include specific recommendations here focused on federal policy, which would necessarily involve reversing recent damage. But federal policy could also facilitate the following recommendations for state lawmakers, district leaders, and school leaders:

- Reject policies that privatize or otherwise undermine public education;
- Invest in public education by addressing the daunting resource needs facing public schools, through increases in school funding using progressive school finance formulas and dedicated money for aging facilities and deferred maintenance;
- Target these resources to support students from low-income backgrounds;
- Prioritize spending on effective instructional programs and strategies, including small class sizes and salaries that recruit and retain great teachers;
- Adopt instructional materials and programs that have a sound research base, including ethnic studies programs and other types of culturally relevant pedagogy;
- Close opportunity gaps and improve educational outcomes by counteracting the effects of poverty through alignment of education policy initiatives with housing, health and economic policies, such as community schools and expanded access to childcare and early education;
- Conduct systematic regular polling of parents to help understand what parents truly desire and what their critiques are of public schools, rather than relying on advocacy group narratives, and use this information to guide key decisions and counter extremist voices; and
- Adopt tested messaging strategies, such as those from the Frameworks Institute, when engaging the general public and policymakers about policy ideas.

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