

EDUCATION

An Education That Delivers

Finish the recovery we abandoned, teach the way the evidence says, and build more than one path to a good life.

PILLAR 3 · THE FOUNDATIONS OF A DIGNIFIED LIFE

AT A GLANCE

The problem

40% of 4th graders below NAEP Basic in reading, the worst share since 2002.

The proposal

Science-of-reading instruction, a national tutoring corps, finishing the learning recovery.

Cost & funding

Moderate; the tutoring corps is the main line item.

Evidence strength

Strong on reading instruction (Mississippi, with caveats stated); tutoring strong at small scale, unproven at national scale.

Principal risk

Scale-up fade, the Alabama warning; retention harms if bundled wrong.

Success looks like

Below-Basic share falling; pandemic learning loss actually closed.

Summary

Education is a foundation of freedom for the same reason healthcare and housing are: without it, the other freedoms are theoretical. The country is living through an education disaster it has quietly decided to stop responding to: 40 percent of fourth graders below the Basic level in reading, the worst in two decades, with the lowest performers still falling while the recovery money expired on schedule. In emergency management there is a name for that: we declared the disaster over before the recovery was complete.

This brief proposes five things: finish the disaster recovery we abandoned, with high-dosage tutoring aimed at the students the first recovery missed; deliver the evidence on reading everywhere, the way Mississippi did; hold the floor and judge the system by its bottom, not its averages; staff and maintain the system like the infrastructure it is, because Alabama showed what happens when the coaches get cut; and build more than one path to a dignified life, because college is a door, not the only door.

The Principle

Education is a foundation of freedom for the same reason healthcare and housing are: without it, the other freedoms are theoretical. A child who cannot read at grade level by the end of third grade is carrying a disadvantage that compounds for the rest of their life, in graduation, in earnings, in health, in everything. And the promise a public school system makes is not that every child will reach the same height. It is that every child gets the floor: the reading, the math, and the habits of learning that everything else is built on.

Two commitments follow. First, the floor is non-negotiable, and the deepest barriers get the deepest investment, which means the measure of the system is what happens to its lowest-performing students, not its averages. Second, teaching is a delivery system, and rights require delivery systems. Where the evidence about how children learn is strong, the system is obligated to use it, because a child gets one third grade. Good intentions taught the wrong way are still a failure the child pays for.

The System Failure

The country is living through an education disaster it has quietly decided to stop responding to, and the numbers describe it plainly.

The 2024 national assessment found reading scores still falling, two years after the pandemic ended, with 40 percent of fourth graders below the Basic level, the worst in two decades, and the share of eighth graders below Basic at a historic high.¹ And the failure is not evenly distributed, which is the most damning part. Where recovery has happened, it is mostly in math and mostly among higher-performing students, while the lowest performers kept falling from 2022 to 2024. One member of the assessment's own governing board put it in six words: the bottom continued to fall out. The seniors of 2024, the first class to spend all of high school after the pandemic, still carry measurable learning loss, and the research projects that loss forward into lower lifetime earnings and lower college attainment. Meanwhile chronic absenteeism, the leading indicator that tracks achievement more closely than almost anything else, remains stuck near 28 percent, far above where it stood before 2020.

In emergency management there is a name for what happened next: we declared the disaster over before the recovery was complete. The federal recovery money expired on schedule, whether or not the students had recovered, and the assessment board's own verdict was that what the nation did was insufficient. No serious emergency response walks off the site with the damage half repaired because the funding window closed. That is what American education policy did to its lowest-performing students.

Underneath the acute disaster sits a chronic one, and it predates COVID: reading scores were already declining in 2019. Part of that story is a delivery failure the field has known about for decades. The evidence on how children learn to read, systematic instruction in the relationship between letters and sounds, early identification of struggling readers, and targeted help before the gap hardens, is among the most settled in education research, and for decades much of the system taught some other way. When Mississippi, a state ranked near the bottom in child poverty, passed its 2013 early literacy law and actually delivered the evidence, trained its teachers, put coaches in classrooms, screened early, and wrote an individual reading plan for every struggling reader, a rigorous causal study found gains of roughly a quarter of a standard deviation in fourth grade reading for the children who grew up under it, among the largest state-level gains ever measured. Be honest about the caveats, because credibility demands it: whether those gains fully persist into eighth grade is genuinely contested, and the retention component of the law raises real equity concerns in how struggling readers are identified. But the fourth-grade effect is real, the claims that it was a statistical trick have been examined and debunked, and the transferable lesson is not a miracle. It is a delivery-system lesson: the state did what the evidence said, sustained it for a decade, and it worked.

Alabama supplies the warning that completes the picture, and it is this platform's maintenance principle wearing a school uniform. Alabama invested in evidence-based reading in the early 2000s, and scores rose. Then the recession came, the literacy coaches were laid off, and the gains vanished. An education system, like every system in this platform, is not a monument you build once. It is infrastructure you maintain, and when the maintenance stops, the results stop.

One more failure frames the rest: the system still runs on a single default path, four-year college for everyone, even as undergraduate enrollment among young adults sits below its pre-pandemic level and millions of good careers in the trades, in care, in clean energy, and in public service go unfilled, with the Bureau of Labor Statistics projecting roughly 650,000 openings a year in the construction trades alone and some two million new health and care jobs this decade. A country with one sanctioned route to a dignified life has built a bottleneck and called it a meritocracy.

The Proposal

Five planks: finish the recovery, deliver the evidence, hold the floor, staff the system, and build more than one path.

1. **Finish the disaster recovery we abandoned.** Stand up a national learning recovery effort scaled to the actual damage and aimed where the damage is, at the lowest-performing students the first recovery missed. The centerpiece is high-dosage tutoring, small groups, several sessions a week, during the school day, because it is the single best-evidenced intervention education research has produced for accelerating students who are behind, and it is exactly what expired when the recovery money did. Pair it with a direct national campaign on chronic absenteeism, because no instruction works on a student who is not there, and the attendance number is the earliest warning light on the whole dashboard. Fund it for the duration of the recovery, not the duration of a budget window. A disaster response ends when the recovery is complete, not when the money runs out.
2. **Deliver the evidence on reading, everywhere.** Make evidence-based literacy the national standard of practice: teacher training and coaching in how reading actually works, universal early screening so no struggling reader goes unidentified past the point of easy repair, and an individual reading plan with real support for every child who is behind, the parts of the Mississippi approach the evidence most clearly supports. Where the evidence is contested, as with retention, let states weigh it honestly rather than mandating it. The federal role is to fund the training, the coaches, and the screening, and to stop funding instructional approaches the research has left behind. A child gets one third grade. The system does not get to keep relitigating settled evidence on the child's time.

3. **Hold the floor, and judge the system by its bottom.** Reorient accountability around the students below Basic, not around averages that let a system look fine while its most vulnerable students sink. Publish the floor numbers, reading and math below-Basic rates and chronic absenteeism, as named public signals in this platform's accountability architecture, tracked over time with someone answerable for the trend. Averages flatter systems. Floors tell the truth.
4. **Staff and maintain the system like the infrastructure it is.** The Alabama lesson is the plank: gains built on coaches and training die when the coaches and training are cut, so literacy coaching, tutoring corps, and teacher development get funded as permanent infrastructure, not initiatives. Address the real teacher shortages, which are concentrated in specific fields and specific schools rather than everywhere, with targeted pay, residency pathways, and loan relief aimed at the shortage areas, and connect the tutoring corps to the national service program in the civic pillar, which gives a generation a way to serve and gives the schools the people the recovery requires. Two pillars, one workforce.
5. **Build more than one path to a dignified life.** Make career and technical education, apprenticeships, and work-based learning a first-class track, not a consolation prize: funded like one, counted like one, and connected to the real labor demand in the trades, care, clean energy, and infrastructure that the rest of this platform is built to expand. Keep the college path affordable and honest, and stop pretending it is the only door. The measure of an education system is not how many students it sends to a four-year campus. It is how many it delivers to a stable, dignified working life, by whichever door fits.

Clear the Debt, Rebuild What Comes After High School

Americans owe about \$1.7 trillion in federal student loans across roughly 43 million borrowers,² debt taken on for an economy that automation is now rewriting underneath them. This platform's position is plain: forgive it broadly, and say why honestly. The standard objection is that forgiveness helps graduates who will out-earn non-graduates, and the honest answer is that this is transition policy, not ordinary policy: the country is entering a decade in which AI and automation will redraw what work looks like, and it cannot send a generation into that transition carrying a trillion-dollar anchor for degrees the old economy demanded. Forgiveness pairs with fixing the machine that created the debt: debt-free public college and genuinely free community college, and a rebuilt training system that treats a wind-turbine certification, an apprenticeship, or an AI-era reskilling program with the same respect and funding as a bachelor's degree, designed around what the next ten years will actually reward rather than what the last fifty did. And because no one honestly knows what work looks like in a generation, the platform prepares floors rather than predictions: the child allowance, universal healthcare, and portable benefits already proposed here, plus rigorous evaluation of guaranteed income, where the first American randomized trial, Stockton's SEED, found recipients of unconditional \$500 monthly payments moved into full-time work at more than twice the control group's rate while anxiety and depression fell.³ That is an evaluated option being kept honestly open, not yet a commitment, and the falsifiability rules apply to it like everything else.

Implementation Pathway

The recovery effort and tutoring corps are federal funding delivered through states and districts, the same pipes the pandemic money used, this time with the duration tied to recovery benchmarks instead of a calendar. The literacy standard moves through the federal education law's funding conditions and through the states, more than forty of which have already passed some version of evidence-based reading policy, meaning the wave exists and the federal job is to fund its weakest links, the training and the coaches, so it does not become another unfunded mandate that produces paperwork instead of readers. The accountability signals run through existing assessment and reporting systems. The career-pathway build runs through federal workforce and education funding, state systems, and the employer partnerships that make apprenticeships real. The service-corps connection runs through the civic pillar's machinery. Nothing here waits on an invention. Most of it waits on a decision to finish what was started.

Funding and Public-Value Logic

Learning loss is a liability already on the country's books; the only question is who pays it and when. The research is blunt that the unrepaired loss shows up as lower lifetime earnings, lower attainment, and lower tax revenue for decades, which makes tutoring and literacy investment now among the cheapest debt service available. High-dosage tutoring costs real money per student and returns multiples of it in recovered learning, which is why it kept being the answer every time the evidence was consulted. Evidence-based reading instruction costs little more than the ineffective instruction it replaces; the spending is training and coaches, and Alabama already demonstrated what cutting them costs. And the career-pathway investment pays back in filled jobs the economy is already short of. The expensive option, as everywhere in this platform, is the quiet one we are currently choosing: a generation carrying unrepaired damage into the workforce.

Risks and Guardrails

The first risk is that the reading standard hardens into a rigid script that deprofessionalizes teachers, so the standard is the evidence and the training, delivered with coaching and judgment, not a mandated minute-by-minute curriculum; the goal is teachers equipped by the science, not replaced by it. The second is that the contested pieces get mandated along with the settled ones, so retention stays a state judgment made in the open, with equity guardrails on how struggling readers are identified. The third is that floor-based accountability curdles into punishment for the schools serving the hardest-hit students, so the floor numbers trigger investment first, the deepest barriers get the deepest investment, and takeover-style sanctions stay the last resort, not the first. The fourth is that career tracks re-create the old tracking that sorted poor kids away from college, so every pathway keeps the door back to further education open, and the choice belongs to the student, not to the system's expectations about them. And the honest constraint is duration: recoveries and reading reforms show results in years, not news cycles, so the funding and the political patience have to be built for the marathon Mississippi actually ran.

Metrics for Success

Judge the agenda by the floor, the recovery, and the paths.

- The share of fourth and eighth graders below Basic in reading and math, tracked down from the current historic highs, with the lowest performers weighted most.
- Chronic absenteeism, tracked back below pre-pandemic levels, as the leading signal it is.
- Recovery benchmarks against the measured learning loss, with the effort funded until they are met.
- Early reading: the share of students screened, the share of flagged readers with active plans, and third-grade reading proficiency.
- Teacher and coach staffing in shortage fields and schools, and tutoring corps placements.

- Apprenticeship and career-pathway completions, and the employment and earnings of graduates by path, so every door is measured by where it leads.
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Opposition and Responses

Some will say the pandemic is over, stop relitigating it. The damage is not over, and the data says so: reading fell further after the pandemic ended, and the students hit hardest are the ones still falling. Walking away from an unfinished recovery does not close the disaster. It just transfers the cost to the kids.

Some will say this is just more money for a failing system. It is money aimed by evidence at the two interventions with the strongest records in the field, high-dosage tutoring and evidence-based reading instruction, with the results published as floor numbers anyone can check. Funding what works and measuring the floor is the opposite of a blank check.

Some will say the science of reading is a fad, and Mississippi is hype. The reading evidence is among the most settled in education research, and Mississippi's fourth-grade gains survived rigorous causal study and the debunking of the statistical attacks on them. The honest caveats, about persistence and about retention, are in this brief because credibility requires them. What is not honest is defending instructional approaches the evidence left behind while forty percent of fourth graders sit below Basic.

Some will say career tracks give up on poor kids going to college. The current system gives up on the millions for whom the single college path never fit, and hands them debt or a dead end. Multiple funded paths with the door back to college always open is more opportunity, not less, and the student holds the choice.

Some will say education is a local matter. It is, and most of this runs through states and districts. The federal role is what it has always been at its best: fund the recovery, fund the training, protect the floor, and publish the truth. No local district caused a national disaster, and none can finance the recovery from one alone.

What Would Change Our Position

The brief already carries its own warnings, and they are commitments: if the Mississippi-style reading package fails to replicate in the next cohort of adopting states, as parts of it did in Alabama, the platform treats that as data about implementation conditions, not noise to be explained away. If third-grade retention shows harms that outweigh the instructional gains it is bundled with, retention goes and the instruction stays. If high-dosage tutoring effects collapse at national scale, the tutoring corps shrinks to the populations and formats where effects persist. Every education plank ships with its evaluation attached, because the field's history is full of interventions that died at scale.

Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. The pandemic hit our kids like a disaster, and we walked off the recovery site with the job half done. The students who were already behind are still falling, four in ten fourth graders cannot read at a basic level, and the money to fix it expired on a schedule that had nothing to do with whether the kids had recovered. So finish the job: tutors in every school that needs them, for as long as the recovery takes. Teach reading the way the evidence says it works, the way Mississippi did when it climbed from the bottom of the country, and keep the coaches funded, because Alabama showed us what happens when you stop. Judge every school by its floor, not its average. And build more than one path to a good life, because college is a door, not the only door. Every child gets the floor. That is the promise, and it is time to keep it.

SOURCES

1. The Nation's Report Card, 2024 NAEP reading, grades 4 and 8 ↩
2. Congressional Research Service, "Student Loan Debt" (IF10158) ↩
3. Stockton Economic Empowerment Demonstration (SEED), randomized evaluation results ↩

The American Mainspring Project · This printout reflects the live site at the time of printing, and updates whenever the site is updated.