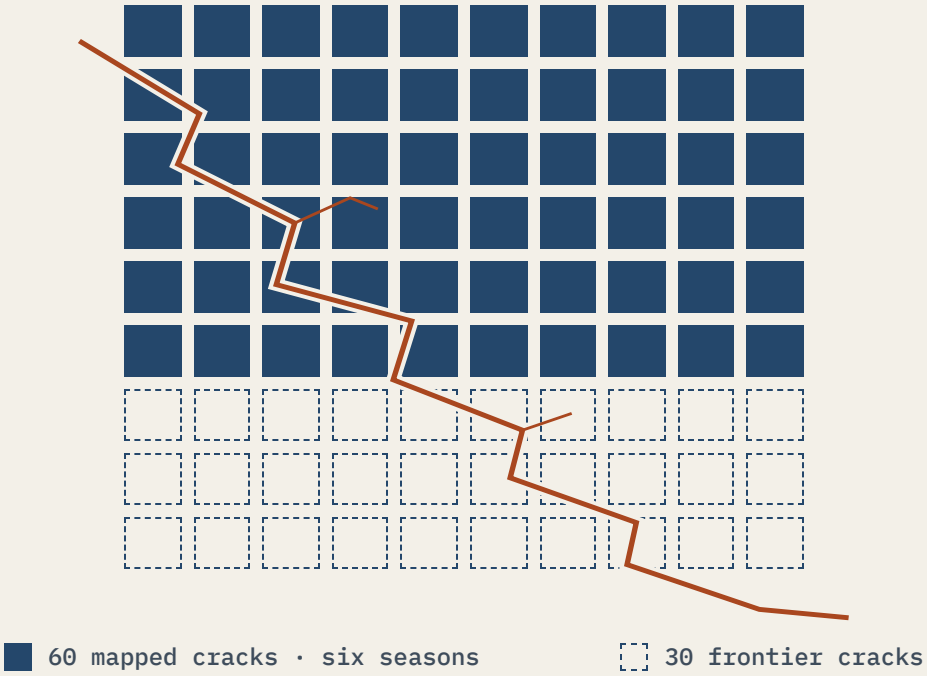
MOTORBLOOM

RE-ARCHITECTING U.S. EDUCATION

The 90 Cracks Atlas

Mapping where our schools are breaking—and who can fix each one.



See the crack.
What's breaking, in plain words and real numbers.

Ask the right person.
Who decides: the building, the board or the state.

Track the repair.
Worksheets to audit your school and follow up.

For parents, teachers and school board members—and the policymakers they hand it to.

CHRIS A. PIAZZA

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The 90 Cracks Atlas

Mapping where our schools are breaking, and who can fix each one.

Chris A. Piazza

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Data current as of November 2026. Figures change; each page names the year of its data and its source. Human snapshots are composites and do not describe real, identifiable people.

This book offers information for public discussion. It is not legal, financial or medical advice. If you or a student needs help, call or text 988.

ISBN: _____ First edition

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01 Why This Book Exists

Schools rarely collapse. They crack, in places we can name.

American public schools rarely fail all at once. They crack. A counselor job goes unfilled. A roof leaks for a third winter. A report card says a child is fine when she isn't. Each crack looks small and local, so each one gets patched, or ignored, on its own.

Put the cracks side by side and a pattern appears. The same ones show up in district after district, and they widen wherever no one is assigned to close them. The decline people feel in their schools is not a mystery. It is the sum of problems that were visible, solvable and left alone.

This book maps ninety of them. Sixty are mapped in full: what's breaking, the evidence, three ways to close it with honest costs, and who has the power to decide. Thirty more sit on the frontier, still being charted.

It is written for parents, teachers and school board members, the people closest to the cracks and the people policymakers answer to.

THREE CRACKS, IN NUMBERS

22%

Eighth graders Proficient in civics

NAEP 2022 · Crack 38

74.8¢

What teachers earn per dollar paid to similar graduates

EPI 2025 · Crack 01

3.5 million

School days lost to building failures in one year

GAO 2026 · Crack 07

THREE PROMISES

Visible

Every crack is named, with evidence you can check. Each page lists its sources, and says when a source has a stake in the answer.

Solvable

Every mapped crack comes with at least three ways to close it, each with what it gains and what it costs. None is free, and the pages don't pretend otherwise.

Shared

Every crack names who decides: the classroom, the principal, the board, the state or Congress. Pressure works only when it reaches someone who can say yes.

THIS BOOK IS	THIS BOOK IS NOT
A map you can carry into a board meeting	A party platform or a voter guide
Evidence first, with funders and biases labeled	A verdict on any person, union, company or party
Both sides of every disputed crack, at full strength	The last word: sources change, and the pages say when
Fixes judged by what they cost, not who proposed them	A reason to give up on public schools

HOW TO USE IT

Find a crack you can see at your own school. Read its two pages. Take the "Ask the board" question to the next meeting, and track the answer with the worksheets in Part IV.

02 The Blueprint We Inherited

Most of the design was sound for its day. The cracks are where old design meets new loads.

Today's schools run on a plan drawn over nearly two centuries, by many hands, for very different times. Free local schools paid for by local property. A high school day measured in hours of seat time. Federal promises made in one decade and funded, or not, in the next.

None of these choices was a mistake when it was made. But a building designed for one load will crack under another. Classrooms now serve more students with disabilities, more English learners, more children in poverty and more families who move, with expectations no nineteenth-century planner imagined.

You can't repair a building without knowing how it was framed. The timeline on the next page shows where the main beams came from, and which cracks in this book run along them.

> *A blueprint isn't a villain. It's a record of decisions, and decisions can be made again.*

WHERE THE MAIN BEAMS CAME FROM

WHEN	WHAT IT BUILT	WHERE IT CRACKS NOW
1830s–50s	**Common schools** Free, tax-funded schools run by local communities spread outward from Massachusetts.	Crack 76: School funding still leans on local property wealth.
1892–93	**The Committee of Ten** A national panel recommends one standard, college-prep course of study for high school.	Cracks 21, 22: One path still counts as success.
1906	**The Carnegie unit** A credit becomes a set number of hours in a seat.	Crack 19: Credit can be earned without learning.
1954	**Brown v. Board of Education** The Supreme Court rules segregated public schools unconstitutional.	Cracks 41, 42: Access gaps persist inside the same buildings.
1965	**ESEA and Title I** The first large federal aid program for schools serving poor children.	Crack 16: Federal money comes with strings and cliffs.
1975	**Education for All Handicapped Children Act** Now IDEA: a right to a free public education, with federal aid authorized up to 40% of average per-student spending for each student served.	Crack 09: The promise has never been funded as written.
1983	**A Nation at Risk** A federal report launches the standards and testing era.	Cracks 18, 60: What gets tested gets taught; the rest shrinks.
2002	**No Child Left Behind** Annual reading and math tests, with penalties tied to results.	Crack 60: Science, civics and the arts lose minutes.
2015	**Every Student Succeeds Act** Testing stays; most decisions on what to do about results move back to states.	Crack 58: Fifty states, fifty definitions of “working.”
2020–24	**Pandemic and relief** Schools close; about $190 billion in federal relief arrives, then ends.	Cracks 16, 17: Staff hired with one-time money; absences that never recovered.

A simplified history. Dates mark when each idea took hold nationally; states adopted many of them on their own schedules. Relief total: $190.3 billion in ESSER funds from three federal laws, 2020–2021 (Congressional Research Service). Other sources: Britannica; NEA Committee of Ten report (1893); Public Law 94-142.

Who Decides?

A map of school power, floor by floor.

Every crack in this book has an owner, and usually more than one. Pressure works only when it reaches someone who can say yes. Read the school system like a building: you walk in on the top floor, but the walls are set lower down.

TOP FLOOR **Your school's principal**	How the day runs: schedules, recess, phone rules, what staff spend their time on, and the climate around discipline.	CRACKS IT OWNS 02 · 26 · 40 · 41
THE WALLS **District & school board**	The budget, hiring the superintendent, staffing in each building, vendor contracts, meal and fee policies, and asking voters for levies and bonds.	CRACKS IT OWNS 02 · 03 · 05 · 07 · 08 · 30 · 33 · 98
THE FRAME **State legislature & board**	Most of the money and most of the rules: the funding formula, teacher licensing and pay floors, standards, tests and graduation requirements.	CRACKS IT OWNS 01 · 04 · 18 · 22 · 27 · 34 · 59 · 71
FOUNDATION **Federal government**	The civil rights floor no school can go below (disability, race, sex, privacy), plus targeted money for poverty, meals and connectivity.	CRACKS IT OWNS 05 · 09 · 10 · 30 · 41

WHO PAYS · PUBLIC SCHOOL REVENUE, 2022–23



Federal, inflated by pandemic relief now ended (Crack 16)

Mostly property taxes

Revenue: NCES, Digest of Education Statistics 2025, Table 235.20. Roles vary by state: some boards are appointed, some counties run schools, and union contracts set much of what happens inside a building.

HOW TO REACH EACH FLOOR

Principal	Ask for a short meeting and bring one number from your School Crack Audit. Most building fixes start here, and many end here.
School board	Speak during public comment (sign-up rules and time limits vary), email every member, attend budget hearings, and vote: board elections are often decided by very few voters.
State	Write or visit your state representative and senator. Testify when a bill reaches the education committee. Your state board of education also takes public comment.
Federal	Contact your U.S. representative and senators about funding and law. For discrimination against a student, file a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights.

ALSO IN THE ROOM

The teachers' contract 23 · 24 · 62
Where bargaining is allowed, it sets pay schedules, workload and hours.

Voters 07
Levies and bonds pay for buildings and much of the local budget.

Courts 09 · 82
School finance lawsuits and special education disputes reset the rules.

Vendors & lobbyists 33 · 34 · 57
They shape what gets bought, and sometimes what gets written into law.

YOUR MAP

WORKSHEET

Principal _____

Superintendent _____

Board members _____

Next board election _____

Board meets (when, where) _____

Public comment sign-up _____

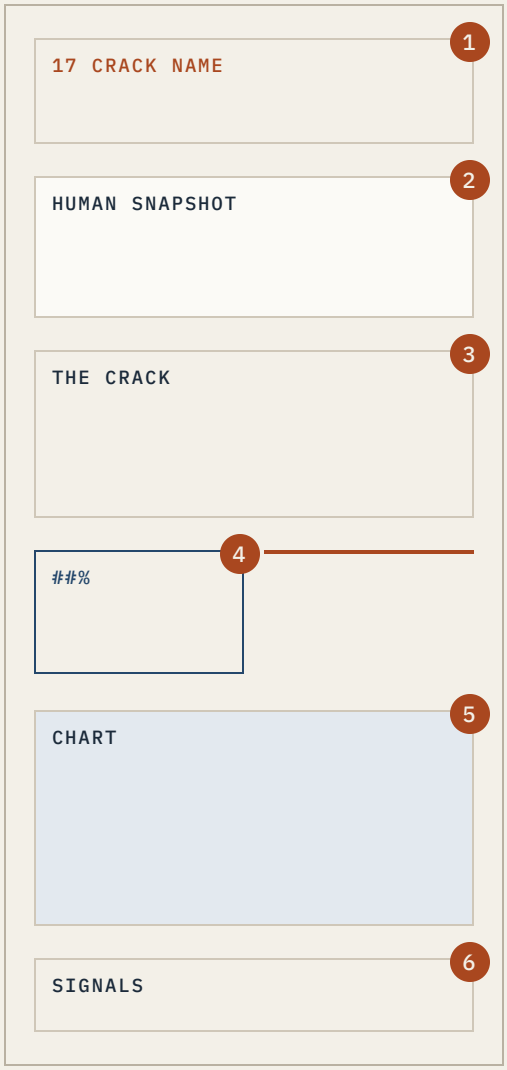
State representative _____

State senator _____

Pressure only works when it lands on someone who can say yes.

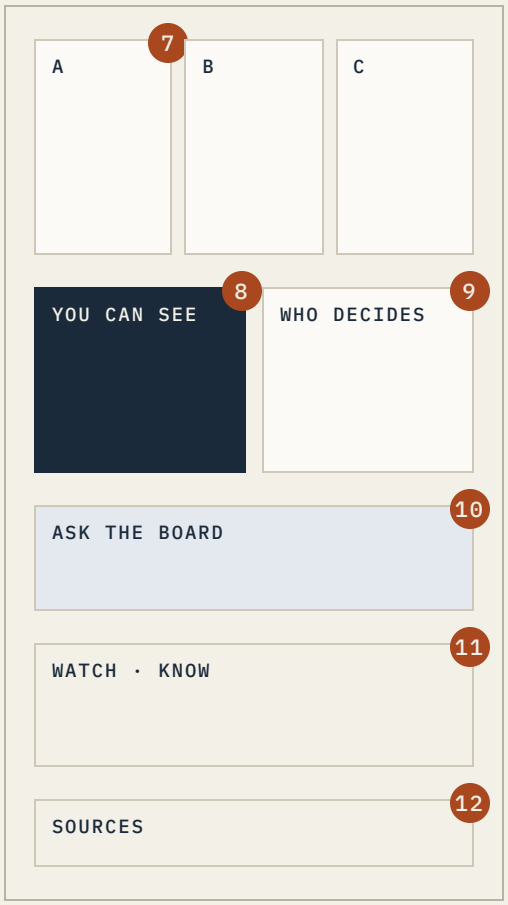
04 How to Read a Crack

Every mapped crack gets the same two pages, so you always know where to look.



THE LEFT PAGE: WHAT'S BREAKING

1. **Number and name.** Mapped cracks run 01–60 in six seasons; frontier cracks run 61–90.
2. **Human snapshot.** A short story that shows the crack in one life. Every snapshot is a composite, and is labeled as one.
3. **The crack.** What's breaking, in plain words, with the best current evidence.
4. **Two numbers.** The figures that size the crack, each with its year and source.
5. **The chart.** One picture of the pattern. The note under it names the source and any caveat.
6. **Signal dashboard.** What closing this crack gives back to students. See the next chapter.



THE RIGHT PAGE: CLOSING IT

7. **Three ways to close it.** Real options, each with what it gains and what it costs.
8. **What you can see at your school.** Questions any parent or teacher can answer by looking.
9. **Who decides.** The people with the power to say yes, from the classroom to Congress.
10. **Ask the board.** One question to take to a public meeting.
11. **Watch for, and how we'll know.** Warning signs, and the signs a crack is closing.
12. **Sources.** Where every number came from, with funders and leanings labeled.

THE RULES BEHIND EVERY PAGE

Disputed cracks show both sides.

Where research or values genuinely conflict, the page says so and gives each side its strongest case.

Sources with a stake are labeled.

Advocacy groups, unions, vendors and foundations are named as such, whichever way they lean.

Fixes are judged by process.

The ways to close a crack are about how decisions get made and paid for, not about any party.

Frontier cracks are shorter.

Part III gives thirty more cracks one entry each: one number, one question, who decides.

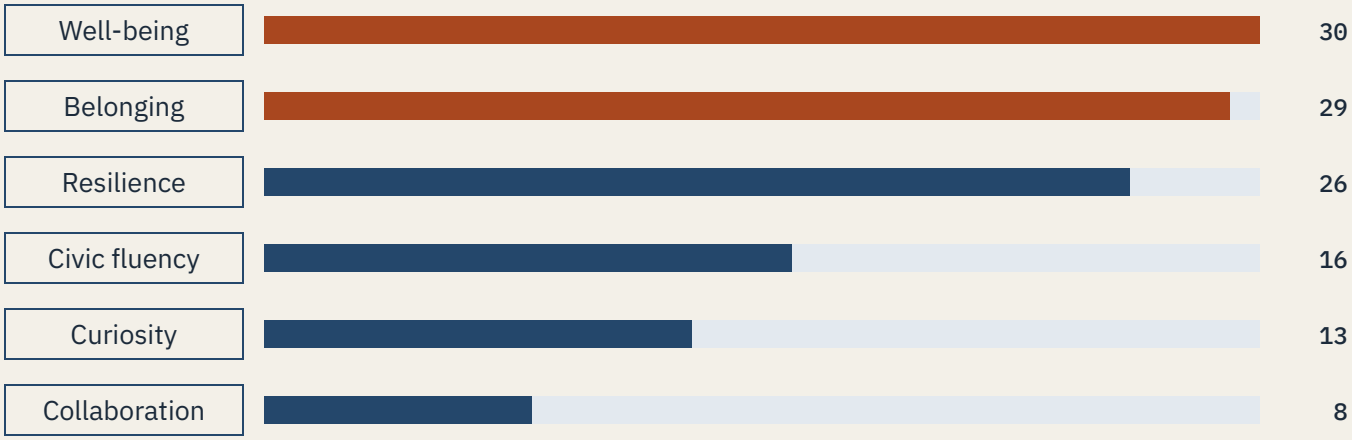
05 The Signal Dashboard

Test scores tell you part of the story. These six signals tell you the rest.

Each mapped crack ends its left page with two or three signals: what closing that crack would give back to students. They're not scores. They're reminders that a school exists to raise healthy, capable, curious people, and that many cracks threaten that before they ever show up on a test.

Use the dashboard to choose. A board that cares most about well-being can find every crack that touches it. A parent group focused on civic life can start with the sixteen cracks tagged civic fluency.

HOW OFTEN EACH SIGNAL APPEARS, CRACKS 01–60



Most cracks carry two or three signals, so the counts add up to more than 60.

THE SIX SIGNALS

Well-being

Students are healthy, fed, rested and safe enough to learn.

YOU'D SEE Nurses and counselors on site, meals without stigma, buildings that work.

Belonging

Every student is known by at least one adult and counted in, not sorted out.

YOU'D SEE Students who can name a trusted adult; fair discipline; open doors to advanced classes.

Resilience

Schools and students can absorb a shock without breaking.

YOU'D SEE Staff who stay, budgets that survive a bad year, students who recover from a setback.

Civic fluency

Students and families understand public decisions and can take part in them.

YOU'D SEE Civics taught, board meetings that work, data the public can read.

Curiosity

Students want to know more than the test asks.

YOU'D SEE Science, arts and projects on the schedule; questions welcomed.

Collaboration

Adults and students solve problems together.

YOU'D SEE Shared planning time, teams across classrooms, families as partners.

A SIGNAL IS NOT A SCORE

The tags are this book's judgment about what each crack touches, not a measurement. Argue with them. Add your own.

06 Using This Book with Your Board

One crack, one ask, one meeting at a time.

School boards hear plenty of anger and not much evidence. This book is built to change that ratio. Each crack gives you a number, a source, three fixes with their costs, and one question the board can answer.

You don't need to bring all ninety cracks. Bring one, bring it more than once, and bring someone with you.

If you're a parent	If you're a teacher	If you're on the board
Run the School Crack Audit with two other families.	Use "What you can see at your school" as a building check.	Put one crack on each work-session agenda.
Bring one crack and one ask to public comment.	Bring the crack to your faculty or union meeting.	Ask staff for the numbers on the crack's page, for your district.
Ask your PTA to adopt the Two-Cracks Tracker.	Offer the board the classroom view: one example, no names.	Weigh the three fixes and their costs out loud, in public.
Write to your state legislators when the crack is theirs.	Share the page with families who ask why something isn't working.	Report back: which cracks closed this year, and how you know.

A YEAR WITH THE ATLAS

August	Run the School Crack Audit before the year starts.	p. 158
September	Choose your two cracks: one mapped, one frontier.	p. 162
October	First public comment, with your two-minute statement.	p. 160
Budget season	Find your cracks in the numbers. Many districts build next year's budget in winter and adopt it in spring.	p. 159
Legislative session	Write to state lawmakers about cracks the state controls. Most sessions run in winter and spring.	p. 161
June	Check the adopted budget against your asks.	p. 159
July	Update the Tracker, mark each crack Open, Hairline or Solid, and pass it on.	p. 162

KEEP IT FAIR

- Talk about the crack, never the person.
- Bring the sources, and say who funded them.
- Name the other side's best argument before yours.
- Thank people in public when a crack closes.

PART II

The Mapped Cracks

Sixty cracks, in six seasons, in the order they can be built.

The seasons build on each other, the way a house goes up: foundation first, then the rooms people live in, then the frame that protects it all. A district can work on any crack at any time, but the order is a suggestion about what holds up what.

Each season opens with a two-page map and a “start here” pick for the board that has time for only one meeting.

S1	The Load-Bearing Basics	01–17	18
S2	The Cultural Resets	18–26	54
S3	Governance & Trust	27–36	74
S4	Civic, Climate & Belonging	37–45	96
S5	Safety & Mental Health	46–54	116
S6	The Democratic Architecture	55–60	136

ALL SIXTY, BY SEASON

S1

The Load-Bearing Basics

- 01 Teacher Pay Floor
- 02 Counselor Ratios
- 03 Nurse Ratios
- 04 Funding Whiplash
- 05 Universal Meals
- 06 Mental Health Hubs
- 07 Building Decay
- 08 Hidden Fees
- 09 Special Education Full Funding
- 10 Broadband Guarantee
- 11 Gun Violence Prevention
- 12 Paraeducator Wage & Pipeline
- 13 Literacy Crisis
- 14 The Math Slide
- 15 Teacher Pipeline & Debt
- 16 The Relief Cliff
- 17 Chronic Absenteeism

S2

The Cultural Resets

- 18 The Scoreboard Is a Lie
- 19 Grade Inflation
- 20 The Vanishing Arts
- 21 One Path to Pride
- 22 Many Futures School
- 23 The Last Teacher
- 24 Burnout & Overwork
- 25 Student Voice Void
- 26 The Attention Crack

S3

Governance & Trust

- 27 Curriculum & History Wars
- 28 When Meetings Become Battlefields
- 29 Board Capture
- 30 Surveillance & Data Privacy
- 31 Cyberattack Exposure
- 32 AI Without a Plan
- 33 Procurement Lock-In
- 34 The Revolving Door at the Top
- 35 Data Black Box
- 36 Audit Blindness

S4

Civic, Climate & Belonging

- 37 Information Literacy
- 38 Civics & Democracy
- 39 Climate Illiteracy
- 40 The Signal of Play
- 41 Discipline Disparities
- 42 The Advanced Access Gap
- 43 Immigrant Barriers
- 44 The Migrant Student Crisis
- 45 The Life Skills Void

S5

Safety & Mental Health

- 46 Suicide Prevention
- 47 Trauma
- 48 The School Psychologist Shortage
- 49 Bullying, On & Offline
- 50 Vaping
- 51 Restraint & Seclusion
- 52 The Safety Tech Rush
- 53 Educator Safety
- 54 Climate & Disaster Readiness

S6

The Democratic Architecture

- 55 Lobbyist Capture
- 56 Opaque Philanthropy
- 57 Choice Without a Map
- 58 The Evidence Void
- 59 Pay Compression
- 60 The Narrowed Curriculum

1

SEASON 1 · CRACKS 01–17 · 17 CRACKS

The Load-Bearing Basics

Pay, care, food, buildings, attendance.

Before anything else can hold, the basics have to bear weight: the adults in the building, the food on the tray, the roof overhead, the money that arrives on time, and the children who actually show up.

These seventeen cracks are the foundation. They are the least glamorous and the most often skipped, and every later season leans on them. If your district can work on only one season, start here.

ONE MEETING? START HERE

17 Chronic Absenteeism

Every other repair reaches a child only if the child is in the room.

THE CRACKS IN THIS SEASON

NO.	CRACK	PAGE
01	**Teacher Pay Floor** When the people who teach our children can't afford to live where they teach.	20
02	**Counselor Ratios** When the one adult meant to notice is shared by too many children.	22
03	**Nurse Ratios** When the person handling a child's asthma attack is the school secretary.	24
04	**Funding Whiplash** When the budget swings faster than a school can plan.	26
05	**Universal Meals** When a child's lunch depends on whether a form got filled out.	28
06	**Mental Health Hubs** When a child is struggling and there's no one down the hall to see.	30
07	**Building Decay** When the building itself is the reason school is canceled.	32
08	**Hidden Fees** When joining the team costs more than a family can spare.	34
09	**Special Education Full Funding** When the law makes a promise and the money never arrives.	36
10	**Broadband Guarantee** When homework is due online and home has no internet.	38
11	**Gun Violence Prevention** When lockdown drills are as routine as fire drills.	40
12	**Paraeducator Wage & Pipeline** When the adult who knows a child best earns the least.	42
13	**Literacy Crisis** When a child can sound out the words but can't find the meaning.	44
14	**The Math Slide** The average hides it: the top is climbing, the bottom is falling.	46
15	**Teacher Pipeline & Debt** When becoming a teacher means a debt the salary can't pay.	48
16	**The Relief Cliff** When the money that rescued schools runs out.	50
17	**Chronic Absenteeism** When a child misses a month of school and no one connects the dots.	52

CRACK

01 Teacher Pay Floor

When the people who teach our children can't afford to live where they teach.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Ms. Lopez has taught fourth grade in Arizona for ten years. After school she works a register at the grocery store. She still can't afford a house in the district where she teaches.

THE CRACK

Teachers earn far less than other workers with the same education, and the gap has grown for three decades. Better benefits narrow it but don't close it. When pay falls this far behind, fewer people choose teaching and more of them leave.

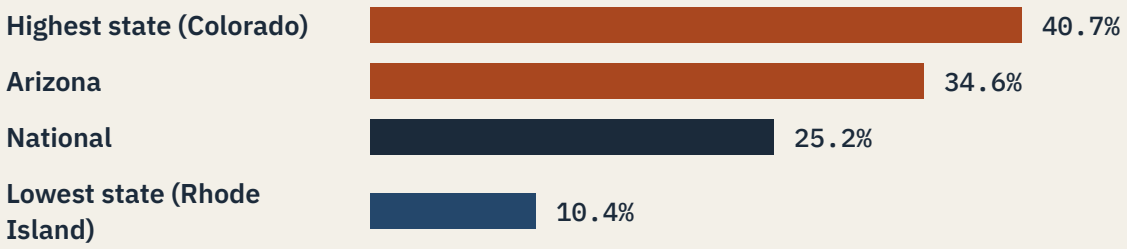
74.8¢

What teachers earned for every dollar paid to comparable college graduates in 2025

−6.2%

Change in teachers' inflation-adjusted weekly pay over 30 years; other graduates gained 28.8%

HOW MUCH LESS TEACHERS EARN, 2025



Compared with college graduates in other jobs, adjusted for education, experience and demographics. Source: Economic Policy Institute, a labor-aligned think tank.

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Well-being Resilience

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Each one works. Each one costs something. Most states will need more than one.

A

Set a state pay floor

A minimum teacher salary tied to local median pay and cost of living.

Gains Clear and enforceable.

Costs A large, permanent state cost.

B

Raise starting pay first

Aim raises at early-career teachers, when most leave.

Gains Targets turnover.

Costs Can squeeze veterans (Crack 59).

C

Pay more for hard-to-fill jobs

Extra pay for shortage subjects and high-need schools.

Gains Cheaper and targeted.

Costs Can divide staff; needs good data.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

What does a new teacher earn here, next to local rents?

How many teachers left last year?

How many jobs were unfilled on the first day?

WHO DECIDES

District & school board
Salary schedules, bargained with unions where allowed.

State legislature
Minimum salaries and most of the money.

Voters
Local levies that pay for raises.

ASK THE BOARD

“What does a first-year teacher earn here, and how does that compare with the median income in our community?”

WATCH FOR

One-time bonuses sold as raises.

Raises paid for by cutting staff.

Floors that never adjust for inflation.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Teacher pay versus local median pay.

Turnover in years one to five.

Vacancies on the first day.

Sources: Economic Policy Institute and Center for Economic and Policy Research, teacher pay penalty report (2025 data). Ms. Lopez is a composite.

We can’t ask people to build children’s futures they can’t afford to live in.

CRACK

02 Counselor Ratios

When the one adult meant to notice is shared by too many children.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Ava is in fifth grade at a K–8 school of 640 students. Her counselor splits the week between two buildings and spends most of March coordinating state tests. When Ava stops eating lunch, the first adult to notice is the cafeteria monitor—three weeks in.

THE CRACK

The national average is better than it has ever been, and still far from the 250-to-1 school counselors' own association has recommended since 1965. The bigger problem is **where** the gap sits now: high schools have nearly closed it. Elementary and middle schools have not.

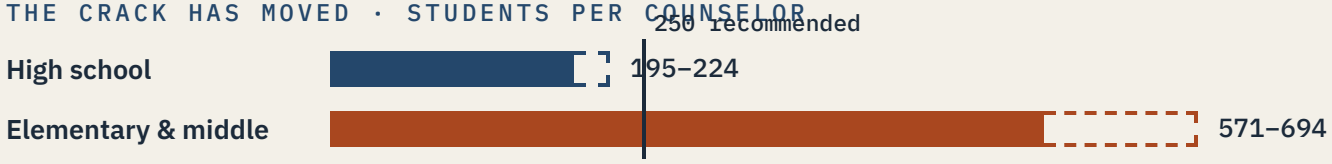
372 : 1

Students per school counselor, national average, 2024–25

250 : 1

Recommended maximum, so counselors can spend 80% of their time with students

THE CRACK HAS MOVED · STUDENTS PER COUNSELOR



Ranges from the 35 states that report school levels separately. Solid bar = low end of the range; dashed = high end. Drawn to scale.

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Belonging | Well-being | Resilience

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Each one works. Each one costs something. Most districts will need more than one.

A

Fund a ratio floor

The state caps caseloads and pays districts to meet the cap.

Gains Clear and measurable.

Costs Costliest; hard to staff where counselors are scarce.

B

Weight funding to younger grades

The formula sends more counseling money to K–8, where the gap is.

Gains Aims at the real crack.

Costs Slower, and easy to lose in budget fights.

C

Give counselors their time back

Move test coordination, scheduling and lunch duty to other staff.

Gains Cheap; a principal can start it.

Costs Adds no people to the caseload.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How many students does **this building's** counselor serve? Ask for the number, not the district average.

Does the counselor split the week with another school?

How much of the year goes to test coordination, scheduling or lunch duty?

WHO DECIDES

Principal
What the counselor's week is spent on.

District & school board
How many counselors, and in which buildings.

State legislature
The funding formula, and any ratio rule.

ASK THE BOARD

"What is the student-to-counselor ratio in each of our elementary and middle schools, and what would it cost to reach 250 to 1?"

WATCH FOR

Ratios met on paper with part-time staff.

Gains bought with one-time money.

Too few counselors to hire, often rural.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Ratio by building, published yearly.

Days to a first counselor meeting.

Share of time spent with students.

Sources: American School Counselor Association analysis of NCES data, 2024–25 (released Feb. 2026); ASCA, "School Counselor Roles & Ratios." Check your state at schoolcounselor.org. Ava is a composite.

A counselor your child can't reach is a counselor they don't have.

CRACK

03 Nurse Ratios

When the person handling a child's asthma attack is the school secretary.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Sophia, a first grader with asthma, goes to a school that shares its nurse with two others. On a Tuesday afternoon her inhaler isn't enough. The secretary calls 911 and stays on the line.

THE CRACK

About a third of U.S. schools have no full-time nurse, and rural schools and the West fare worst. The old goal of one nurse per 750 students has been dropped: pediatricians now call for at least one full-time registered nurse in every school.

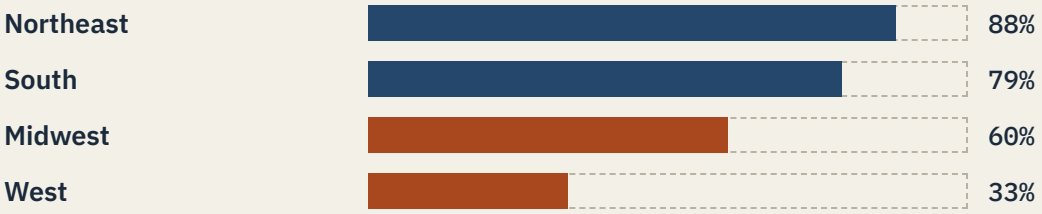
65%

Schools with a full-time nurse, about two in three

1 : 2,289

Oregon's nurse-to-student ratio in 2024–25, three times its own legal target

SCHOOLS WITH A FULL-TIME NURSE, BY REGION



Dashed box = all schools. Source: National Association of School Nurses, via Education Week (2023).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Well-being Belonging

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Each one works. Each one costs something. Most districts will need more than one.

A

A nurse in every building

At least one full-time registered nurse per school, as pediatricians recommend.

Gains Easy to check and to explain.

Costs Costly; nurses are scarce in rural areas.

B

Staff by student need

Assign nurses by how many students need daily care, not headcount alone.

Gains Puts nurses where they're needed.

Costs Needs health data; harder to explain.

C

Bill Medicaid for school care

Recover costs for eligible health services schools already provide.

Gains Brings in outside money.

Costs Billing is complex.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

Is a registered nurse here every day, all day?

Who gives medicine when the nurse is out?

Who is trained for an asthma or allergy emergency?

WHO DECIDES

Principal
Who covers health care when the nurse is out.

District & school board
How many nurses, and in which buildings.

State
Staffing rules, funding and Medicaid billing.

ASK THE BOARD

"How many of our schools have a registered nurse on site every day, all day?"

WATCH FOR

One nurse shared by too many schools.

Untrained staff giving medicine.

Health aides counted as nurses.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Schools with a full-time nurse.

Students sent home or to the ER.

Days missed for health reasons.

Sources: National Association of School Nurses; American Academy of Pediatrics; Education Week (2023); Oregon Health Authority (2025). Sophia is a composite.

A child's health comes to school with them every day.

CRACK

04 Funding Whiplash

When the budget swings faster than a school can plan.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Enrollment at Mr. Carter's elementary school dipped by forty students after 2020. The state formula cut his budget the next fall. The building, the buses and the heating bill stayed the same size. Two teaching jobs didn't.

THE CRACK

Most states pay schools by headcount, so when enrollment drops, money drops with it, often faster than costs can. Enrollment is expected to keep falling in most of the country. States have cushioned the blow, but some cushions are costly and never end.

40 states

Plus D.C., where public school enrollment is projected to keep falling through 2030–31

42 states

Passed protections against enrollment-driven cuts between 2020 and 2023

HOW STATES COUNT STUDENTS FOR FUNDING

Current year	Money follows students right away. Fair, but budgets lurch.
Prior year	A one-year cushion while districts adjust.
Multi-year average	Changes phased in over several years.
Hold harmless	No district loses money, sometimes with no end date.

Most states use one of these or a mix. Sources: Reason Foundation; Education Commission of the States.

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Resilience Well-being

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Each one works. Each one costs something. Most states will need more than one.

A

Average over several years

Count students on a three-year rolling average.

Gains Smooth, predictable budgets.

Costs Growing districts wait for money.

B

A cushion with an end date

A guarantee that tapers off over a set number of years.

Gains Time to adjust without permanent cost.

Costs Hard to end when the date arrives.

C

Fund fixed costs separately

Pay for buildings and buses apart from per-student money.

Gains Matches how costs really behave.

Costs Can keep half-empty buildings open.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How has our enrollment changed in five years?

How does our state count students for funding?

Does our budget rest on a guarantee that will end?

WHO DECIDES

District & school board
Budgets, staffing and closures.

State legislature
The funding formula and any guarantee.

Voters
Local levies that steady the budget.

ASK THE BOARD

“If our enrollment keeps falling, what happens to our budget in three years, and what is our plan?”

WATCH FOR

Guarantees with no end date.

Paying for students who have left.

Cuts that land on classrooms first.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Year-to-year budget swings.

Mid-year cuts.

Layoffs tied to funding changes.

Sources: Bellwether and WestEd via K-12 Dive (2025); Bellwether; Education Commission of the States; Reason Foundation. Mr. Carter is a composite. See Crack 89, The Enrollment Cliff.

A school can’t plan a child’s year on a budget that changes every spring.

CRACK

05 Universal Meals

When a child's lunch depends on whether a form got filled out.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Marcus is in fifth grade. His family earns just too much for free lunch and not enough to keep his account paid. When the balance goes negative, he starts skipping lunch rather than face the cashier.

THE CRACK

Nine states now give every student free breakfast and lunch. Elsewhere families must qualify, and those just over the line pile up debt. Federal SNAP cuts are now shrinking the number of children certified automatically, which threatens free meals for whole schools.

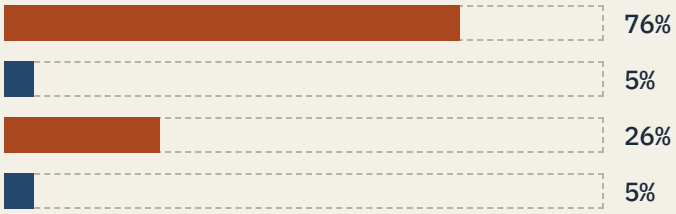
$6,900

Median unpaid meal debt per school district in 2024, up 26% in a year

9 states

With permanent free meals for every student

WHEN STATES ENDED FREE MEALS FOR ALL



Share of school food programs reporting each change. Dashed box = all programs. Source: Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior (2025).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Well-being Belonging

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Each one works. Each one costs something. Many states mix them.

A

Free meals for every student

The state pays so every child eats free.

Gains Ends debt and stigma.

Costs Costly; covers families who could pay.

B

Expand community eligibility

Help more high-poverty schools serve everyone free with federal money.

Gains Washington pays most of it.

Costs Relies on data that SNAP cuts shrink.

C

End lunch shaming

No singling out children; meal debt is an adult matter.

Gains Cheap and fast.

Costs Debt still grows.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

Does our school serve free meals to everyone?

What happens when a child's account goes negative?

How much meal debt does our district carry?

WHO DECIDES

Principal
How the lunch line treats a child with a balance.

District & school board
Debt policy and community eligibility.

State & federal
Universal meals laws, federal meal programs and SNAP.

ASK THE BOARD

"How much unpaid meal debt do we carry, and what happens to a student whose account is empty?"

WATCH FOR

Children singled out in the lunch line.

Schools losing eligibility as SNAP shrinks.

Meal debt sent to collections.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Students eating school meals.

Unpaid meal debt.

Schools serving everyone free.

Sources: NPR (September 2026); Food Research & Action Center (2026); School Nutrition Association via K-12 Dive; Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior (2025). Marcus is a composite.

No child should learn hungry, or be shamed in the lunch line.

CRACK

06 Mental Health Hubs

When a child is struggling and there's no one down the hall to see.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Kayla, 14, has panic attacks before school. The nearest therapist has a three-month waitlist. Her school has one counselor for 600 students and no one else trained to help.

THE CRACK

In 2022, after the Uvalde shooting, Congress put $1 billion into hiring school mental health staff. In 2025 the Education Department ended those grants partway through and re-competed the money with a narrower focus. Courts have ruled the cuts unlawful, and as of September 2026 a court order keeps the grants flowing in the states that sued while the case continues.

$1 billion

Federal school mental health grants from 2022, ended partway through in 2025

65

New grants awarded in December 2025 under the re-competed programs

WHO HELPS A STRUGGLING STUDENT

School counselor	First support, guidance and planning (Crack 02).
School psychologist	Evaluations, counseling and crisis response (Crack 48).
School social worker	Links to family, housing and outside services.
Community therapist	Ongoing treatment, often billed to Medicaid.

Many schools have only the first of these, and some have none.

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Well-being Resilience

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Each one works. Each one costs something. Most districts will need more than one.

A

School-based health hubs

Clinics in or near schools, staffed by therapists and billed to Medicaid.

Gains Sustained by outside money.

Costs Billing is complex; staff are scarce.

B

Partner with local providers

Community therapists come into schools on set days.

Gains Quick to start.

Costs Depends on local supply.

C

Fund staff for the long term

State money that outlasts any one federal grant.

Gains Stable jobs; people stay.

Costs A permanent state cost.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

Who can a student talk to today, and how long is the wait?

Is there a psychologist or social worker on site?

Which mental health jobs here depend on grants?

WHO DECIDES

Principal
How a struggling student gets referred.

District & school board
Staffing, partnerships and Medicaid billing.

State & federal
Grants, Medicaid rules and staffing money.

ASK THE BOARD

“How many of our mental health staff are paid by grants, and what happens when the grants end?”

WATCH FOR

Jobs funded by money that can vanish.

Waitlists longer than a semester.

Help that arrives only in a crisis.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Days from referral to first visit.

Mental health staff per student.

Crisis incidents over time.

Sources: Education Week (April 2025–March 2026); NPR (May 2025); K-12 Dive (2026); Courthouse News (2026); state attorneys general. Kayla is a composite.

Help that disappears every few years isn’t a system. It’s luck.

CRACK

07 Building Decay

When the building itself is the reason school is canceled.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Mr. Diaz's fifth graders wear their coats in class every January. In September the same room climbs past 90 degrees. The ceiling tile over the reading corner has been stained brown for two winters, and the work order is still open.

THE CRACK

In 2024–25, about one in five school districts canceled classes because of a problem with a building, and nearly half had chronic facility problems that disrupted learning. Leaking roofs, failing heat and cooling, poor ventilation and old plumbing top the list. Nobody keeps national data on the condition of school buildings.

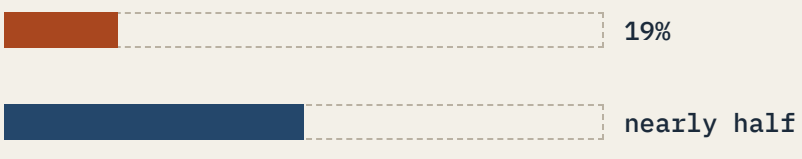
3.5 million

School days lost by an estimated 2 million students to facility closures, 2024–25

D+

Engineers' grade for U.S. school buildings in 2025, unchanged since 2021

SCHOOL DISTRICTS, 2024–25



Dashed box = all districts. "Nearly half" is the GAO's wording and is drawn at about 50%.

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Well-being Belonging

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Each one works. Each one costs something. Most districts will need more than one.

A

Maintain before you build

Set aside a fixed share of every capital budget for upkeep of the buildings already in use.

Gains Cheaper than emergency repair.

Costs Unglamorous; new buildings win ribbon-cuttings.

B

Publish every building's condition

The state assesses each school and posts the results, the data that doesn't exist today.

Gains Families can see the crack.

Costs Costs money to measure; fixes nothing alone.

C

Ask voters to rebuild

Bonds and levies pay for new roofs, systems or replacement schools.

Gains Big, lasting fixes.

Costs Voters must agree; adds long-term debt.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

When was the roof last replaced?

Does every room have working heat and cooling?

When was the water last tested for lead?

WHO DECIDES

Principal
Reports problems and pushes work orders.

District & school board
The maintenance budget, capital plans and bond proposals.

State & voters
Facility aid and condition data; voters approve bonds and levies.

ASK THE BOARD

"Do we have a current condition assessment for every building, and how many school days did we lose to facility problems last year?"

WATCH FOR

New buildings funded while old ones decay.

Roofs patched year after year.

No public data on building condition.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

School days lost to facility problems.

The deferred-maintenance backlog.

Buildings with a current assessment.

Sources: GAO-26-107970 (September 2026); ASCE 2025 Report Card for America's Infrastructure. Mr. Diaz is a composite.

A child can't learn in a building that is failing them.

CRACK

08 Hidden Fees

When joining the team costs more than a family can spare.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Tasha, 13, made the soccer team. The $150 participation fee came home in a sealed envelope. Her mother read it twice, then told her maybe next year.

THE CRACK

Many schools charge students to play sports, join clubs or take some classes. The fees fall hardest on families just above the line for help, and few families ever ask for the waivers that exist. Meanwhile, what families spend on youth sports keeps climbing.

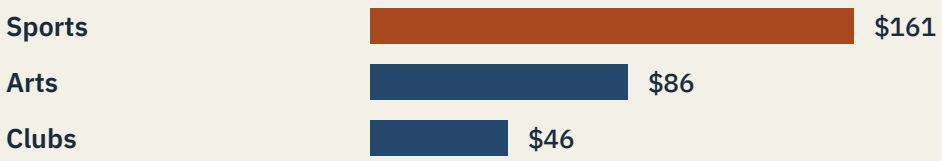
$1,016

Average family spending on a child's main sport in 2024, up 46% since 2019

7%

Parents who have ever asked for a school fee waiver or scholarship

AVERAGE REQUIRED SCHOOL FEES (2018 SURVEY)



Fees alone, before equipment and travel. Source: C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health (2019). No newer national survey of school fees exists.

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Belonging Collaboration

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Each one works. Each one costs something. Many districts mix them.

A

No fees for school activities

The state or district covers participation costs.

Gains Every student can join.

Costs The budget must find the money.

B

Automatic waivers

Waive fees for every student who qualifies for free meals, with no form.

Gains Reaches families who never ask.

Costs Families just over the line still pay.

C

A cap per family

One yearly maximum per household, however many children or activities.

Gains Predictable for big families.

Costs Still a barrier at the cap.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

What does it cost to join a team or club here?

Is there a waiver, and who has to ask for it?

Who plays, by family income?

WHO DECIDES

Principal & athletic director
Activity fees and how waivers are offered.

District & school board
Fee policy and the activities budget.

State
Whether public schools may charge fees at all.

ASK THE BOARD

“What do our students pay to take part in sports and activities, and how many fee waivers did we grant last year?”

WATCH FOR

Waivers that require a parent to ask.

Fees that creep up every year.

Equipment and travel on top of fees.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Participation by family income.

Waivers granted.

Total cost to join, per activity.

Sources: Aspen Institute Project Play (2025), via the National Federation of State High School Associations; C.S. Mott Children’s Hospital National Poll on Children’s Health (2019). Tasha is a composite.

The team should be open to every child who earns a spot.

CRACK

09 Special Education Full Funding

When the law makes a promise and the money never arrives.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Miguel, 9, has struggled with reading since kindergarten. His parents asked for an evaluation in September. The school psychologist is booked until spring. Until then, he waits.

THE CRACK

In 1975, Congress promised to pay up to 40% of the extra cost of educating students with disabilities. It has passed 20% only once. Today it pays about 10%, and states, local taxpayers and stretched staff cover the rest. The gap follows students out the door: young adults with disabilities enroll in college at lower rates than their peers.

40%

The federal share Congress promised in 1975

~10%

What it paid in 2025: $14.2 billion

FEDERAL SHARE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION COSTS



Share of the national average cost per student. Sources: NCSL; Education Week (2025).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Belonging Well-being

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

The first keeps the original promise. The others don’t wait for it.

A
Full funding on a schedule

Congress raises special education money step by step to 40% over ten years.

Gains Keeps the 1975 promise.

Costs Tens of billions more a year.

B
States fill the gap

State formulas add money for students with disabilities.

Gains Doesn’t wait on Congress.

Costs Varies widely by state.

C
Redesign the funding

Some reformers want to restructure special education funding, not just add to it.

Gains Could fix bad incentives.

Costs Contested; families fear losing protections.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How long does an evaluation take after a parent asks?

How many special education jobs are unfilled?

Who checks that every IEP is followed?

WHO DECIDES

District & school board
Staffing, evaluations and services.

State
Special education funding and complaints.

Federal government
Special education funding and civil rights enforcement.

ASK THE BOARD

“How many days, on average, does a family wait between asking for an evaluation and getting one?”

WATCH FOR

Evaluations past legal deadlines.

Services on paper, not in practice.

Aides stretched too thin (Crack 12).

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Days to evaluation.

Special education vacancies.

IEP services actually delivered.

Sources: National Conference of State Legislatures; Education Week (February 2025); Congressional Research Service figures via Sen. Hassan (2025); IES/NCSER (2011). Miguel is a composite.

A promise made to every child with a disability is still waiting to be kept.

CRACK

10 Broadband Guarantee

When homework is due online and home has no internet.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Amir lives in rural Kentucky. His school sends a laptop home, but there is no internet at the end of his road. Three nights a week his mother drives him to a fast-food parking lot to upload his assignments.

THE CRACK

Teachers assign homework that needs the internet, but not every home has it, and cost is a bigger reason than missing cables. In 2025 the federal government stopped paying for school hotspots and Wi-Fi on buses, ruling that its program covers classrooms and libraries only.

12%

Teens who at least sometimes can’t finish homework for lack of reliable internet or a computer (2022)

$57.7M

School requests for hotspots and bus Wi-Fi left unfunded in 2025

WHERE THE HOMEWORK GAP SHOWS UP

Phone only	22% of teens often or sometimes do homework on a phone.
Public Wi-Fi	6% at least sometimes use public Wi-Fi because home has none.
Can’t finish	12% at least sometimes can’t complete assignments.
Cost	About 23 million households lost a federal internet discount when it lapsed in 2024.

Sources: Pew Research Center survey of teens (2022), still the newest national count; AP (2024) on the lapsed discount.

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Curiosity Resilience

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

With federal help gone, the fixes move to states, districts and partners.

A

State broadband funds

States pay for home internet for students who need it. Only about a quarter of states had a plan in 2025.

Gains Doesn't depend on federal rules.

Costs Ongoing cost; uneven by state.

B

District hotspot lending

Schools lend hotspots, paid for locally or by partners.

Gains Quick to start.

Costs Local budgets now carry it.

C

Nonprofit partners

Low-cost plans and matched discounts from nonprofits.

Gains Fills the federal gap.

Costs Depends on goodwill and supply.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How many of our students lack internet at home?

Does our school lend hotspots, and who pays?

Is there an offline option for homework?

WHO DECIDES

Principal & teachers
How much homework needs the internet.

District & school board
Hotspot programs and partnerships.

State & federal
Broadband funds and the federal E-Rate program.

ASK THE BOARD

"How many of our students lack reliable internet at home, and what do we do for them now that federal hotspot funding has ended?"

WATCH FOR

Online homework with no offline option.

Hotspot programs that end with the money.

Counting devices, not connections.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Students without home internet.

Hotspots in use.

Assignments missed for lack of access.

Sources: FCC order (September 2025); Education Week (November 2025); Pew Research Center (2022); AP (2024); SETDA (2025); EducationSuperHighway (2021). Amir is a composite.

A laptop without a connection is a locked door.

CRACK

11 Gun Violence Prevention

When lockdown drills are as routine as fire drills.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Ethan, 12, has practiced hiding in a dark classroom more times than he has practiced a fire drill. He knows which cabinet he would squeeze behind. He doesn't talk about it at home.

THE CRACK

Firearms are the leading cause of death for Americans ages 1 to 19. Most of those deaths happen outside school, in homes and neighborhoods. But schools carry the fear, the drills and the grief, and they can own part of the prevention.

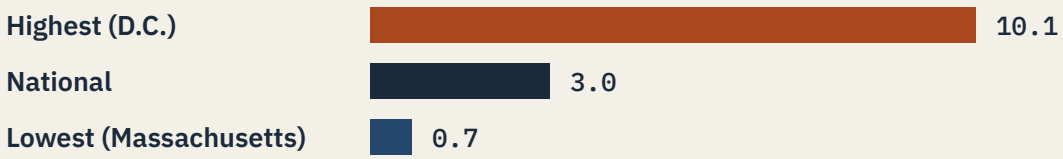
#1

Cause of death for children and teens 1–19, in CDC data through 2024

3.0

Firearm deaths per 100,000 children 17 and under in 2024, down from 3.5 but above pre-pandemic levels

FIREARM DEATHS PER 100,000 CHILDREN, 2024



Children 17 and under. Source: KFF analysis of CDC data.

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Well-being Belonging

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

The first two draw support across views. The third is a choice for each legislature.

A

Threat-assessment teams

Trained school teams act on warning signs before violence happens.

Gains Broad support across views.

Costs Needs training; can over-flag students.

B

Safe-storage information

Schools share how to lock up guns at home with every family.

Gains Most child gun deaths happen away from school.

Costs Voluntary; reaches only some homes.

C

State storage laws

Legislatures decide whether to require locked storage where children live.

Gains Broad reach.

Costs Strongly contested.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

Does our school have a trained threat-assessment team?

Do families get safe-storage information?

How are drills run, and what do children hear?

WHO DECIDES

Principal
Drills, the threat-assessment team and school climate.

District & school board
Safety plans, training and spending.

State legislature
Gun laws and school safety requirements.

ASK THE BOARD

“Does every one of our schools have a trained threat-assessment team, and how often does it act?”

WATCH FOR

Drills that frighten more than prepare.

Unproven safety tech (Crack 52).

Teams that punish instead of help.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Threat reports acted on.

Students who say they feel safe.

Firearm incidents in and near schools.

Sources: Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions (2024 data); KFF analysis of CDC data. Ethan is a composite.

No child should know which cabinet they would hide behind.

CRACK

12 Paraeducator Wage & Pipeline

When the adult who knows a child best earns the least.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Mr. Torres spends every day beside two students with disabilities, in three different classrooms. He knows their triggers, their good days and their favorite books. At 3:15 he leaves for his second job.

THE CRACK

Paraeducators, also called teacher aides, do much of the one-on-one work in special education and the early grades. Their pay sits far below the typical U.S. worker's, and most aren't paid in summer. Many work second jobs, and districts struggle to keep them. In New York City, about 1,600 open aide jobs have left some students with disabilities stuck at home.

$36,780
Median pay for teaching assistants, May 2025

$14,200
Less than the median for all U.S. workers

MEDIAN ANNUAL PAY, MAY 2025



Most assistants are not paid over the summer. Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics.

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Belonging Well-being

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Each one works. Each one costs something. Most districts will need more than one.

A

A living-wage floor

Minimum pay tied to local living costs.

Gains Keeps experienced aides.

Costs Raises a large payroll line.

B

Grow your own teachers

Pay aides' way to a teaching license while they work.

Gains Builds the pipeline (Crack 15).

Costs Takes years; some leave after.

C

Pay through the summer

Spread pay over 12 months or add summer work.

Gains Steadier income.

Costs Costs more.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

What does a new aide earn per hour here?

How many aide jobs are open?

Are aides trained for the students they support?

WHO DECIDES

District & school board
Pay, hiring and training, bargained with unions where allowed.

State
Training standards and some funding.

Principal
How aides are assigned.

ASK THE BOARD

"What is the starting hourly pay for our paraeducators, and how many positions are unfilled?"

WATCH FOR

One aide stretched across too many students.

No training before day one.

Turnover that breaks children's routines.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Pay versus local living costs.

Open aide positions.

Aides still here after a year.

Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics (May 2025); National Education Association survey (2022) via Disability Scoop; Ideastream Public Media (October 2025); Chalkbeat New York (July 2026). Mr. Torres is a composite.

The person who knows a child best shouldn't need a second job.

CRACK

13 Literacy Crisis

When a child can sound out the words but can't find the meaning.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Jayden is in fourth grade. He reads aloud smoothly enough that no one worries. Asked what the passage was about, he guesses from the picture. His report card says he is "progressing."

THE CRACK

Reading scores fell again in 2024, in fourth and eighth grade, and no state improved in either. The decline is concentrated among students who were already struggling. One state shows it doesn't have to be this way: Mississippi rebuilt how it teaches reading and saw some of the largest gains in the country.

40%

Fourth graders below the most basic reading level on the national test, the most since 2002

1 in 3

Eighth graders below that level, more than ever before

BELOW NAEP BASIC IN READING, 2024



Dashed box = all students. NAEP is the National Assessment of Educational Progress, "the nation's report card."

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Curiosity | Civic fluency

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Mississippi did all three. Most states are trying one.

A

Teach reading by the evidence

Adopt a science-of-reading curriculum and train every K–3 teacher in it.

Gains Proven at state scale.

Costs Takes years; retraining costs money.

B

Screen early, help early

Check every child's reading in K–3 each year and act on what it shows.

Gains Catches trouble before fourth grade.

Costs Needs specialists to do the helping.

C

Coach teachers in class

Reading coaches work alongside teachers, not just in workshops.

Gains Training sticks.

Costs Coaching ends when the funding does.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

Which reading curriculum do K–3 classes use?

Is every young child screened each year?

What happens after a child is flagged?

WHO DECIDES

Principal
Intervention time in the school day.

District & school board
Which curriculum is bought and how teachers are trained.

State legislature
Reading laws, screening rules and money for coaches.

ASK THE BOARD

"Which reading curriculum do our K–3 classrooms use, and what share of our third graders read on grade level?"

WATCH FOR

Mandates passed with no training money.

Old programs relabeled, not replaced.

Gains lost when coaching funds end.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Share below Basic, by grade.

Share of K–3 students screened.

Share of teachers trained.

Sources: National Assessment Governing Board, 2024 NAEP results; Education Week (January 2025). Update with 2026 NAEP before print. Jayden is a composite.

Reading isn't one subject. It's the door to all the others.

CRACK

14 The Math Slide

The average hides it: the top is climbing, the bottom is falling.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Marisol never quite caught up on fractions after her remote-learning year. Her class average looks fine, so no one flags her. She starts algebra in the fall with a gap no one has named.

THE CRACK

Fourth graders have won back some ground in math. Eighth graders haven't: no state improved in eighth-grade math in 2024. Strong students are gaining while struggling ones fall further behind, so the average barely moves. The gap between them is the widest the national test has ever recorded.

−8 points

Eighth-grade math compared with 2019, flat since the record drop of 2022

Nearly 40%

Eighth graders below the most basic math level on the national test

POINTS BELOW 2019 ON THE NATIONAL TEST, 2024



Bars drawn to scale. Math in rust, reading in blue (Crack 13).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Curiosity Resilience

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Math has no Mississippi yet. These are the best-studied starting points.

A

Tutor in the school day

Small groups, several times a week, with the same tutor.

Gains Reaches students furthest behind.

Costs Costly; relief money paid for most of it (Crack 16).

B

More math time in grades 6–8

Double periods or support classes before algebra.

Gains Aims at the widest gap.

Costs Less time for other subjects.

C

Stronger K–5 math teaching

Better materials and math training for teachers.

Gains Prevents the next gap.

Costs Slow to show up in scores.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How many students are behind in math, by grade?

Is tutoring built into the school day?

What happens to a student not ready for algebra?

WHO DECIDES

Principal
The schedule and when tutoring happens.

District & school board
Curriculum, course placement and tutoring budgets.

State legislature
Standards, tests and money for tutoring.

ASK THE BOARD

“How many of our eighth graders are below grade level in math, and what is our plan for them now that relief money is gone?”

WATCH FOR

Averages that hide the bottom.

Tutoring that ends with the funding.

Placements that close off algebra early.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Share below Basic, by grade.

The gap between top and bottom scorers.

Tutoring hours per struggling student.

Sources: National Assessment Governing Board, 2024 NAEP; NPR, K-12 Dive, Hechinger Report (January 2025). Update with 2026 NAEP before print. Marisol is a composite.

An average can look like recovery while the students who need us most fall further.

CRACK

15 Teacher Pipeline & Debt

When becoming a teacher means a debt the salary can't pay.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Aisha always wanted to teach. She graduated with $60,000 in loans and a teaching license. The first salary she was offered wouldn't cover rent and payments, so she took an office job instead.

THE CRACK

Fewer people are training to teach, and more of those who do arrive through shorter alternative routes. Debt is part of the reason. The programs meant to ease it are hard to use: about half of the federal grants for future teachers are expected to turn into loans.

52%

Federal TEACH Grants expected to convert into loans for 2025 recipients

Over ⅓

Drop in teacher-prep enrollment after 2010, while overall college enrollment grew

FEDERAL HELP WITH TEACHERS' DEBT

TEACH Grant	Up to $4,000 a year in college. Becomes a loan if the teaching service isn't completed.
Public Service Loan Forgiveness	Forgives federal loans after ten years in public service. New employer rules took effect July 2026.
State programs	Scholarships and forgiveness vary by state.

Sources: Congressional Research Service (2024); U.S. Department of Education final rule (October 2025).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Resilience Well-being

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Each one works. Each one costs something. Most states will need more than one.

A

Paid residencies

Future teachers earn a salary while training in a classroom.

Gains No debt; real experience.

Costs Costly to set up.

B

Scholarships without the trap

Simple service rules and fair exceptions, so aid doesn't become debt.

Gains Keeps the promise.

Costs Some recipients still leave.

C

Grow your own

Districts pay local aides and graduates to become teachers (Crack 12).

Gains Teachers who stay local.

Costs Takes years.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How many of our teachers came through alternative routes?

Do we offer residencies or grow-your-own programs?

How many teaching jobs were filled late, or not at all?

WHO DECIDES

District & school board
Residencies, partnerships and hiring.

State
Licensing, scholarships and loan programs.

Federal government
TEACH Grants and loan forgiveness.

ASK THE BOARD

"How many of our new teachers this year came through a residency or grow-your-own program, and could we expand it?"

WATCH FOR

Aid that quietly turns into debt.

Standards lowered instead of pipelines built (Crack 69).

Forgiveness rules that change mid-career.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

New teachers each year, by route.

Teachers still here after three years.

Residency and scholarship enrollment.

Sources: Center for American Progress; Education Week on AACTE data (October 2025); Congressional Research Service (2024); NASFAA (November 2025). Aisha is a composite.

If teaching costs more than it pays, classrooms empty from the front.

CRACK

16 The Relief Cliff

When the money that rescued schools runs out.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Luis met his math tutor three times a week all through seventh grade. In eighth grade the tutor didn't come back. The program had been paid for with pandemic relief money, and the money was gone.

THE CRACK

Congress sent schools about $190 billion in pandemic relief in 2020 and 2021. Schools spent it on tutoring, summer school, after-school programs, mental health staff and building repairs. The last of it had to be spent by March 2026. Some districts found other money for what worked; many simply stopped.

$190 billion

Federal pandemic relief for schools, sent in three waves in 2020–21

Mar. 28, 2026

Final extended deadline to spend the last of it

WHAT THE MONEY PAID FOR

Learning recovery	Tutoring, summer school and after-school programs (Crack 14).
Mental health	Counselors, psychologists and social workers (Crack 06).
Buildings	Ventilation and other upgrades (Crack 07).
Staff	Extra teachers, aides and support staff, often on temporary contracts.

Common uses reported by districts. Sources: AASA district survey via The New Republic; Khan Academy summary of relief spending.

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Resilience Well-being

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

The first two are about this cliff. The third prevents the next one.

A

Keep what worked

Measure each relief-funded program and keep the ones with results.

Gains Saves the best programs.

Costs Needs data many districts didn't keep.

B

Shrink, don't end

Smaller tutoring or summer programs for the students furthest behind.

Gains Affordable and targeted.

Costs Fewer students served.

C

Plan for one-time money

No permanent jobs on temporary money without a plan to keep paying.

Gains No next cliff.

Costs Slower to help in a crisis.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

What did our district start with relief money?

Which programs ended, and were they measured first?

Which jobs did the money pay for?

WHO DECIDES

District & school board
Which programs survived the cliff.

State
Whether state money replaced any of it.

Federal government
Relief rules and deadlines.

ASK THE BOARD

"Which programs did we fund with pandemic relief, which ones worked, and which ones are we keeping?"

WATCH FOR

Good programs cut along with weak ones.

Results never measured.

Permanent jobs on temporary money.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Programs kept after relief ended.

Students still getting tutoring.

Positions cut since 2024.

Sources: Education Week (2024); K-12 Dive (2026); Stanford National Student Support Accelerator; AASA survey via The New Republic. Luis is a composite.

Rescue money should leave something standing when it's gone.

CRACK

17 Chronic Absenteeism

When a child misses a month of school and no one connects the dots.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Destiny missed two days in October with a cold, three when her little brother was sick, and a week when the car broke down. No single absence raised an alarm. By May she had missed 24 days and fallen behind in math.

THE CRACK

Nearly one in four students misses at least 10% of the school year, about 18 days. That's down from the pandemic peak, but far above where it was before 2020, and progress is slowing. A student who isn't in school gets none of the other fixes in this book.

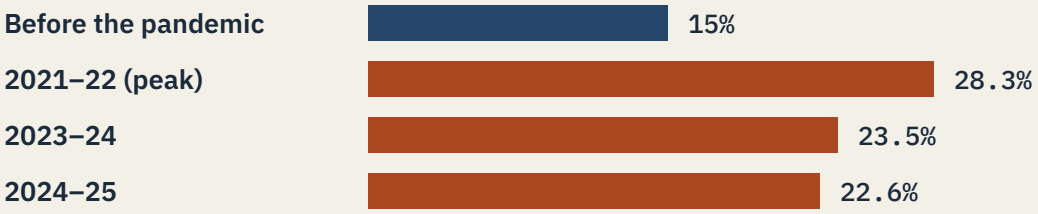
22.6%

Students chronically absent in 2024–25, across 44 states and D.C.

15%

The rate before the pandemic

STUDENTS CHRONICALLY ABSENT



Missing 10% or more of the school year. Source: American Enterprise Institute, Return to Learn Tracker (44–45 states).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Belonging Resilience

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

The first is a shared goal from groups on the right and the left. The others are how to reach it.

A

Cut it in half by 2027

Join the challenge from AEI, EdTrust and Attendance Works.

Gains A clear goal, backed across views.

Costs A goal alone changes nothing.

B

Reach out early, don't punish

Contact families after a few absences to learn why.

Gains Solves the real causes.

Costs Takes staff time.

C

Fix why kids miss

Buses, health care and housing help (Cracks 03, 82, 84).

Gains Lasting change.

Costs Many owners; slow.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

What share of our students are chronically absent?

Who calls a family after the third absence?

What are the most common reasons kids miss?

WHO DECIDES

Principal
Attendance outreach and the school's response.

District & school board
Data, transportation and family supports.

State
Attendance goals and public reporting.

ASK THE BOARD

"What is our chronic absence rate this year, and what happens when a student misses a third day?"

WATCH FOR

Punishing absences instead of solving them.

Counting only unexcused absences.

Data released a year too late.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Chronic absence rate, by school.

Students back on track after outreach.

Days missed per student.

Sources: American Enterprise Institute via Chalkbeat (June 2026) and K-12 Dive; AEI Return to Learn Tracker. Destiny is a composite.

Every other fix in this book needs the child in the room.

2

SEASON 2 · CRACKS 18–26 · 9 CRACKS

The Cultural Resets

What counts, and whose futures matter.

Some cracks aren't about money. They're about what we measure, what we praise, and which futures we treat as real.

These nine cracks ask whether a report card tells the truth, whether the arts and the trades count as success, whether teachers are allowed to stay, and whether students get a voice. Resets cost less than buildings, but they ask more of the adults: changing habits is harder than changing budgets.

ONE MEETING? START HERE

19 Grade Inflation

The crack families can see on the kitchen table.

THE CRACKS IN THIS SEASON

NO.	CRACK	PAGE
18	**The Scoreboard Is a Lie** When the only things that count are the things on the test.	56
19	**Grade Inflation** When the report card says fine and the child isn't.	58
20	**The Vanishing Arts** When the band room goes quiet because of the budget.	60
21	**One Path to Pride** When a school celebrates only one kind of future.	62
22	**Many Futures School** When one road to graduation doesn't fit every life.	64
23	**The Last Teacher** When new teachers leave before they ever get the chance to be great.	66
24	**Burnout & Overwork** When the job only works if teachers give it their evenings.	68
25	**Student Voice Void** When schools teach democracy but never practice it.	70
26	**The Attention Crack** When every lesson competes with a buzzing pocket.	72

CRACK

18 The Scoreboard Is a Lie

When the only things that count are the things on the test.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Maria spends the three weeks before the state test on review packets. She leads her lab group, asks the best questions in history class and organized the school food drive. None of it appears anywhere on her school's report card.

THE CRACK

Taking tests uses only about 2% of class time, though many students sit for redundant ones. The bigger problem is what the scoreboard leaves out. Curiosity, collaboration, resilience and belonging don't count, so schools stop measuring them, and then stop making time for them.

~1.6%

Average share of instructional time students spend taking standardized tests

112

Mandatory tests a student took from pre-K to 12th grade, in a study of 66 urban districts (2015)

WHAT THE SCOREBOARD COUNTS, AND WHAT IT MISSES

Counts	Test scores, graduation rates, attendance.
Misses	Curiosity, collaboration, resilience, belonging, civic fluency, well-being.
The fix	A Signal Dashboard beside the tests, not instead of them.
The catch	Without tests, grades can drift (Crack 19).

The Signal Dashboard is this book's proposal. See Part I.

SIGNAL DASHBOARD [Curiosity] [Collaboration]

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Each one works. Each one costs something. Most districts will need more than one.

A
Cut redundant tests

Audit every district test and drop the ones that repeat state tests.

Gains More time for teaching.

Costs Some tests teachers rely on may go.

B
Add a Signal Dashboard

Report curiosity, belonging and other signals beside test scores.

Gains Values what tests miss.

Costs Hard to measure well; can be gamed.

C
Limit test prep, not tests

Cap the weeks spent on practice tests and review packets.

Gains Keeps the check, frees the time.

Costs Hard to define and enforce.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How many tests does a student here take each year?

How many weeks go to test review?

What does our school report besides scores?

WHO DECIDES

Principal
Test-prep time and the school calendar.

District & school board
District tests and what the district reports.

State
State tests and school ratings.

ASK THE BOARD

“How many hours does a student in our district spend taking tests each year, and which of those tests could we drop?”

WATCH FOR

Dropping tests with no other check.

Dashboards that measure only compliance.

Test prep dressed up as teaching.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Hours spent testing, per student.

Weeks given to test review.

Signals reported beside scores.

Sources: Education Writers Association; Teach Plus (2021); Council of the Great City Schools via Education Week and the Portland Press Herald (2015). Maria is a composite.

Count what matters, or what matters will stop counting.

CRACK

19 Grade Inflation

When the report card says fine and the child isn't.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Caleb's report card says B-plus in algebra, and his parents are relieved. In the fall, his college placement test puts him in a remedial math class. No one can explain the gap.

THE CRACK

High school grades have climbed for years while test scores have fallen. When nearly everyone earns an A, a grade stops telling families, colleges or employers what a student actually knows. Math has inflated the most. It's the other side of Crack 18: tests shouldn't be the whole scoreboard, but without them, grades drift.

3.48 → 3.59

Average GPA of ACT test-takers, 2018 to 2021

22.51 → 21.90

Their average ACT score over the same years

NORTH DAKOTA GRADUATES, 2012 TO 2025

Average GPA	3.04 → 3.26: up.
Average ACT score	20.7 → 19.7: down.
What it means	Grades rose while measured learning fell.

Source: North Dakota Statewide Longitudinal Data System (April 2026).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Resilience Curiosity

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Each one works. Each one costs something. Most districts will need more than one.

A

Grade what students know

Base grades on mastery, not effort points or extra credit.

Gains Grades mean something again.

Costs A hard shift; families may push back.

B

Check grades against a test

Report how grades line up with state tests, school by school.

Gains Shows where grades drift.

Costs Leans on tests (Crack 18).

C

Shared exams in a course

Teachers of the same course share exams and grading standards.

Gains Fairer across classrooms.

Costs Takes teacher time to build.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

What share of students here earn A's?

Do our grades match state test results?

What does a B in algebra mean here?

WHO DECIDES

Teachers & principal
Grading in each classroom.

District & school board
Grading policies and shared exams.

State
What tests and transcripts report.

ASK THE BOARD

"How do our students' grades compare with their state test results, by course and by school?"

WATCH FOR

A's that don't match test scores.

Credit-recovery courses nobody checks for learning.

Grading reform without teacher training.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Gap between grades and test results.

Graduates placed in remedial classes.

Grades consistent across classrooms.

Sources: ACT research (2024, 2026) via Education Week and The Hechinger Report; North Dakota SLDS (2026); AIR (2024) and EdWeek (2022) on credit recovery. ACT sells tests; state and federal data confirm the trend. Caleb is a composite.

A grade is a promise to a family. It should be one we keep.

CRACK

20 The Vanishing Arts

When the band room goes quiet because of the budget.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Jamal, a sixth grader, had just learned his first song on the trumpet when the band program was cut. His school now has one art teacher for 900 students. He still hums the song.

THE CRACK

Arts classes are often the first cut when budgets shrink, and the cuts fall hardest on poor and rural schools. Millions of students go through school with no arts at all. National data is so thin that the federal government only recently began measuring access again.

2 million+

Public school students with no access to any arts education

~2×

How much more likely high-poverty schools were to offer no arts at all

WHO LOSES THE ARTS FIRST

High-poverty schools	Standalone music in 72%, vs. 87% of low-poverty schools (2024).
Very rural and big-city schools	Where most students without arts attend.
Schools with vacancies	35% found music or art jobs very hard or impossible to fill (2022–23).

Sources: Arts Education Data Project (2022) via the National Association for Music Education; NCES School Pulse Panel (November 2024), designed with the NEA.

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Curiosity Belonging

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Each one works. Each one costs something. Most states will need more than one.

A

An arts floor

A minimum number of arts teachers per student, with state funding.

Gains Protects arts from the first cut.

Costs A new state cost; hard to staff.

B

Count arts in school ratings

Report arts access for every school.

Gains Makes the gap visible.

Costs Doesn't pay for teachers.

C

Community partners

Local arts groups teach in schools on set schedules.

Gains Fast and low-cost.

Costs Uneven; depends on location.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

Which arts classes does our school offer?

How many arts teachers do we have?

Were any arts programs cut recently?

WHO DECIDES

Principal
The schedule and which electives run.

District & school board
Arts staffing and budgets.

State
Graduation requirements and arts reporting.

ASK THE BOARD

"How many arts teachers do we have per student in each school, and which of our schools have none?"

WATCH FOR

Arts cut first in every budget fight.

Arts in name only, once a month.

Gaps hidden by district averages.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Arts teachers per student.

Schools offering three or more arts.

Students in an arts class.

Sources: Arts Education Data Project via the National Association for Music Education (2026); National Endowment for the Arts and NCES School Pulse Panel (2024 survey, via the Arts Education Partnership). Jamal is a composite.

Creativity isn't extra. It's how children practice imagining something better.

CRACK

21 One Path to Pride

When a school celebrates only one kind of future.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Devon wants to be an electrician. At the senior assembly, the principal reads out every college acceptance. The two students headed into apprenticeships aren't mentioned.

THE CRACK

Schools still measure success mostly by college enrollment, but students and families are already choosing more paths. Trade programs and apprenticeships are growing fast, and half of college graduates work in jobs that don't need their degree. A school that celebrates only one route tells many students they have failed.

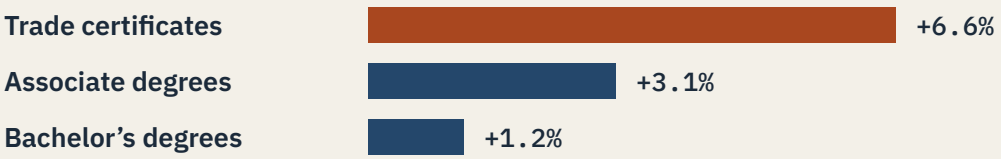
+6.6%

Growth in trade certificate enrollment in fall 2025, versus 1.2% for bachelor's degrees

+114%

Growth in Registered Apprenticeship participation since 2014

ENROLLMENT GROWTH, FALL 2025



Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, via The Washington Times (November 2025).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Belonging Resilience

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

The first costs almost nothing. The others take investment.

A

Celebrate every path

Honor apprenticeships, military and job offers at graduation, equal to college.

Gains Costs almost nothing.

Costs Culture changes slowly.

B

Count every good outcome

Rate schools on all strong next steps, not just college.

Gains Changes what schools aim for.

Costs Needs follow-up data.

C

Grow career teaching

Recruit tradespeople to teach career courses.

Gains Expands real options.

Costs Instructors are hard to find.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

Does our graduation celebrate every path?

Which career courses does our high school offer?

Do we know where graduates are a year later?

WHO DECIDES

Principal & counselors
What gets celebrated and how students are advised.

District & school board
Career programs and partnerships.

State
School ratings and career-education funding.

ASK THE BOARD

“Do we track where our graduates are a year later, including apprenticeships and jobs, not just college?”

WATCH FOR

Career classes treated as a lesser track.

Ratings that count only college.

Programs without qualified teachers.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Graduates in college, training or work.

Students earning industry credentials.

Apprenticeship placements.

Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics (April 2025); National Student Clearinghouse via The Washington Times (2025); New America; Burning Glass Institute via Education Week (2026). Devon is a composite.

Every honest path to a good life deserves a place on the stage.

CRACK

22 Many Futures School

When one road to graduation doesn't fit every life.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Lina, a sophomore, gets her three younger siblings to school every morning and misses first period twice a week. She is bright and behind, and the only road to a diploma assumes a life she doesn't have.

THE CRACK

Most diplomas still follow one route: the same courses, the same exams, the same seat time. States are starting to offer several routes to one diploma, where students show what they know through courses, tests or projects. Done badly, it creates a second-class diploma.

29 states

Offered multiple pathways to a diploma by 2021, many through confusing two-tier systems

2029

First New York class to graduate under its new Portrait of a Graduate

TWO STATES, TWO MODELS

New York	Replacing five required exams with multiple pathways to one diploma.
Washington	Students choose test-based, course-based or performance-based pathways.
The risk	Pathways that signal less readiness than others.

Sources: New York State Education Department; Washington RCW 28A.230.710; All4Ed (2021).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Resilience Belonging

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Each one works. Each one costs something. Most states will need more than one.

A

Many routes, one diploma

Students show mastery through courses, tests, projects or work.

Gains Fits more lives.

Costs Hard to keep every route rigorous.

B

A Portrait of a Graduate

Define the skills every graduate needs, then design routes to them.

Gains A shared goal for the community.

Costs Can stay a poster on the wall.

C

Flexible time

Credit for what students master, not hours in a seat.

Gains Helps students with jobs or families.

Costs Hard to schedule and staff.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How many ways can a student earn a diploma here?

Does our district have a Portrait of a Graduate?

Do employers value every route equally?

WHO DECIDES

Principal & counselors
Which routes students are steered toward.

District & school board
Local requirements and course options.

State
Diploma requirements and graduation exams.

ASK THE BOARD

“How many routes to a diploma do we offer, and do colleges and employers value them equally?”

WATCH FOR

A second-class diploma.

Students steered by race or income.

Portraits that never change teaching.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Students using each route.

Outcomes a year out, by route.

Students who finish who wouldn’t have.

Sources: New York State Education Department (2025); Washington OSPI (2026); All4Ed, “Ready for What?” (2021); Vermont Agency of Education (2025). Lina is a composite.

The diploma should stay the same. The road to it doesn’t have to.

CRACK

23 The Last Teacher

When new teachers leave before they ever get the chance to be great.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Mr. Nguyen, 28, loves teaching. In three years he has had no mentor, the hardest classes and four different courses to prepare. The veterans who might have helped him have retired. He is updating his résumé.

THE CRACK

Teacher turnover has eased since the pandemic, but it hasn't healed. The leak is at the front door: new teachers leave at far higher rates than experienced ones, so schools keep hiring beginners into the hardest jobs, and the cycle repeats. Urban districts lose the most.

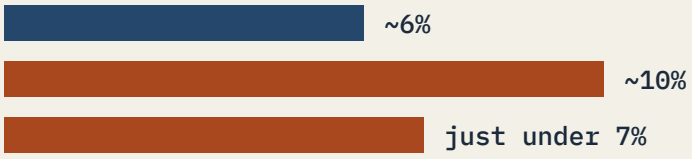
~7%

National teacher turnover in 2024–25, down from a 10% peak but above the 6% before the pandemic

14–18%

Yearly exit rate for North Carolina teachers in their first five years, against about 10% overall

NATIONAL TEACHER TURNOVER



Resignations and retirements, estimated by district leaders. Source: RAND (2025).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Resilience Collaboration

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

All three aim at the first five years, where the leak is.

A

Paid mentors

Every new teacher gets a trained, paid mentor for two years.

Gains Targets the biggest leak.

Costs Mentors need time and pay.

B

A lighter first year

Fewer courses to prepare and fewer of the hardest classes.

Gains Room to learn the job.

Costs Shifts load to veterans.

C

Principals who keep teachers

Train and judge principals on keeping their staff.

Gains Leaders matter most.

Costs Slow; hard to measure.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How many of last year's new teachers came back?

Does every new teacher have a mentor?

Who teaches the hardest classes here?

WHO DECIDES

Principal
Mentors, class assignments and school culture.

District & school board
Mentoring programs and pay.

State
Licensing support and retention funding.

ASK THE BOARD

"What share of the teachers we hired three years ago are still teaching here?"

WATCH FOR

Beginners given the hardest classes.

Mentoring that exists only on paper.

Turnover hidden by averages.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

New teachers returning for year two.

Teachers still here after five years.

Turnover by school.

Sources: RAND (2025); Education Resource Strategies via Education Week (September 2026); North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (March 2026). Mr. Nguyen is a composite.

Keep the teachers we have, and the next ones will stay too.

CRACK

24 Burnout & Overwork

When the job only works if teachers give it their evenings.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Ms. Carter grades until ten most nights and answers parent emails on Sundays. Twice this fall she used a sick day just to recover. She loves her students. She isn't sure how many more years she can do this.

THE CRACK

Teachers work about ten hours a week beyond their contracts and report far more stress than other college-educated workers. Things have improved since the pandemic, which shows workload can change. But nearly a third of teachers now hold second jobs, and many have become their students' informal counselors.

49 hours

Average weekly hours teachers worked in 2025, 10 more than their contracts

55%

Teachers reporting frequent job stress in 2026, against 34% of similar workers

REPORTING FREQUENT JOB STRESS



Source: RAND State of the American Teacher survey, supported by the national teachers' unions.

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Well-being Resilience

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Each one works. Each one costs something. Most districts will need more than one.

A

Audit the workload

List every teacher task; cut, automate or hand off what isn't teaching.

Gains Fast relief.

Costs Hard choices about what goes.

B

Protect planning time

Planning periods that aren't taken for covering other classes.

Gains Work moves back into the day.

Costs Needs staff to cover classes.

C

Staff the support roles

More counselors, aides and office help (Crack 06).

Gains Teachers get to teach.

Costs Adds to payroll.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How many hours do our teachers really work?

How often is planning time taken for coverage?

How many teachers hold second jobs?

WHO DECIDES

Principal
Duties, meetings and class coverage.

District & school board
Contracts, staffing and paperwork rules.

State
Mandates that add reporting and paperwork.

ASK THE BOARD

"Has our district ever audited what teachers spend their time on, and what could we take off their plates?"

WATCH FOR

Wellness programs instead of fewer tasks.

Planning time lost to coverage.

New mandates with nothing removed.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Hours worked beyond contract.

Teachers reporting frequent stress.

Planning periods lost each month.

Sources: RAND State of the American Teacher (2025, 2026); EdSource (2026). RAND's survey is supported by the national teachers' unions. Ms. Carter is a composite.

A job that runs on exhaustion will run out of people.

CRACK

25 Student Voice Void

When schools teach democracy but never practice it.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Priya, a junior, gathered 400 signatures to change her school's start time. She was given three minutes at public comment. The board thanked her and moved to the next item.

THE CRACK

Students are the people schools affect most, and they have the least say. Student seats on school boards are spreading, but most come without a vote or any training, and many sit empty. Most student board members say their role is symbolic.

~70%

Student board members who called their role symbolic or excluded (2025 survey)

1 state

Maryland, where some student board members have a full vote

THE LADDER OF STUDENT VOICE

Allowed	At least 31 states let local boards add student members.
Required	At least four states require one on every board, including New York.
Recorded vote	Students' votes are recorded but don't decide the outcome.
Full vote	Maryland, upheld in state and federal court.

Sources: National School Boards Association via Education Week; Vermont legislative testimony (2026).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Civic fluency Belonging

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

A ladder: each step builds on the one below it.

A
Fill the seat

Every board has a student member, elected by students.

Gains Simple; costs almost nothing.

Costs Can stay symbolic.

B
Train and include

Training, budget briefings and real agenda time for student members.

Gains Turns a seat into a voice.

Costs Takes adult time.

C
A recorded or full vote

Student votes are recorded, or count, as in Maryland.

Gains Real power.

Costs Contested; legal questions.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

Does our school board have a student member?

Who chooses them, and are they trained?

Have they ever had agenda time?

WHO DECIDES

District & school board
Whether to seat, train and empower a student member.

State legislature
Whether student seats are allowed, required or voting.

Principal
Student councils that make real decisions.

ASK THE BOARD

“Will this board add a trained student member, elected by students, and give them a recorded vote?”

WATCH FOR

Seats that stay empty.

Tokens instead of voices.

Students shut out of key discussions.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Boards with a student member.

Times student members spoke or voted.

Policies changed by student input.

Sources: Education Week (2023); New York State Senate (2025); Vermont legislative testimony (2026); AASA (2025); Teachers College, Columbia (2025). Priya is a composite.

Students will run this democracy one day. They should practice now.

CRACK

26 The Attention Crack

When every lesson competes with a buzzing pocket.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Aiden's phone lit up about 200 times during the school day last week: group chats, games, video alerts. He checked most of them. His algebra teacher keeps a basket by the door that no one uses.

THE CRACK

Nearly every state now restricts phones in school, one of the fastest and most bipartisan shifts in education policy. Early studies find fewer distractions and some test-score gains, but also more suspensions in the first year. The open questions are how to enforce bans fairly, and what to do about screens outside school.

40+ states

Plus D.C., requiring districts to ban or restrict student phones (2026)

74%

Schools with full-day bans in a national teacher survey, 2025–26, up from 60%

WHAT THE EARLY RESEARCH SAYS

A Florida district	Test scores rose; suspensions also rose in year one.
Lockable pouches	Fewer distractions; little change in test scores.
Teachers	Report more focused classrooms.
Parents and the public	67% back class-time bans; 36% back full-day bans.

Sources: NBER working paper via Chalkbeat (2025); The Washington Times (2026); Education Week (2025); Pew via The Washington Times.

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Curiosity Well-being

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Most states have chosen to act. These are the choices about how.

A

Bell to bell, stored away

Phones locked up all day, with set ways to reach families.

Gains Clearest rule; most studied.

Costs Costs money; some parents object.

B

Class time only

Phones away during lessons, allowed at lunch and between classes.

Gains More support from parents.

Costs Weaker effect; harder to enforce.

C

Teach attention, too

Lessons on screens, sleep and focus, with families involved.

Gains Reaches life outside school.

Costs Slow; hard to measure.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

What is our phone policy, and is it enforced?

How do parents reach students in an emergency?

Have suspensions risen since the ban?

WHO DECIDES

Principal
Day-to-day enforcement.

District & school board
Local policy and phone storage.

State legislature
Statewide ban or restriction laws.

ASK THE BOARD

“Since our phone policy started, what has happened to discipline referrals, and are they falling evenly on all students?”

WATCH FOR

Bans that raise suspensions.

Uneven enforcement.

No plan for emergencies.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Teacher reports of focus.

Discipline referrals for phones.

Student well-being surveys.

Sources: Education Week (2025, 2026); Ballotpedia (2025); Chalkbeat on NBER working paper (2025); The Washington Times (2026); GovTech (2025). State counts change often. Aiden is a composite.

Attention is where learning starts. It’s worth protecting.

3

SEASON 3 · CRACKS 27–36 · 10 CRACKS

Governance & Trust

Who decides, who profits, who sees the data.

Who decides, who profits, and who gets to see the numbers? These ten cracks cover the board meeting, the superintendent's office, the software contract and the data dashboard.

When governance works, nobody notices it. When it fails, every other crack gets harder to fix, because the public stops trusting the people who would fix it.

ONE MEETING? START HERE

35 Data Black Box

You can't fix what you aren't allowed to see.

THE CRACKS IN THIS SEASON

NO.	CRACK	PAGE
27	**Curriculum & History Wars** When teachers aren't sure what they're allowed to teach.	76
28	**When Meetings Become Battlefields** When the people elected to run schools spend their time under siege.	78
29	**Board Capture** When a few hundred voters decide for thousands of children.	80
30	**Surveillance & Data Privacy** When the software meant to protect students watches everything they do.	82
31	**Cyberattack Exposure** When hackers know more about your child than the school can protect.	84
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34	**The Revolving Door at the Top** When the district changes leaders faster than it can finish a plan.	90
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36	**Audit Blindness** When the books look clean until someone actually checks.	94

CRACK

27 Curriculum & History Wars

When teachers aren't sure what they're allowed to teach.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Ms. Harris has taught U.S. history for twelve years. A new state law, a district memo and one parent's email have left her unsure what she may say about a chapter she has taught a dozen times. This year she skips it.

THE CRACK

Two-thirds of teachers say they now limit discussion of political and social issues, and most aren't under any law requiring it: they're unsure what's allowed and whether their leaders would back them. Challenges to library books have surged, and families are deeply divided over where age-appropriate ends and censorship begins.

65%

Teachers who chose on their own to limit talk of political and social issues (2023)

20 states

With laws restricting how race, gender or sexuality is taught, as of late 2024

TWO VIEWS OF THE SAME SHELF

Removal supporters	Keep age-inappropriate material from children; parents decide.
Removal critics	Censorship that falls hardest on stories of race and LGBTQ+ lives.
Common ground	A clear, public process for any challenge.
The scale	6,870 to 11,982 removals a year in the last two years, by PEN America's count.

Counts vary by tracker and definition. Sources: PEN America and the American Library Association via Education Week (2026); NPR (2025).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Civic fluency Belonging

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

None of these picks a side. All of them make the rules clear.

A

A public review process

Clear steps to challenge a book or lesson: notice, review, appeal.

Gains Fair to every side.

Costs Takes time and staff.

B

Written guidance for teachers

Districts spell out what state law does and doesn't require.

Gains Ends guessing and self-censorship.

Costs Guidance can be contested too.

C

Choice for your own child

Parents can opt their child out without removing material for all.

Gains Respects every family.

Costs Harder to manage.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

Is there a written process to challenge a book?

Do teachers have written guidance on state law?

How many challenges came in last year, and from whom?

WHO DECIDES

Principal
Day-to-day support for teachers.

District & school board
Review policies, guidance and decisions on challenges.

State legislature
Laws on curriculum and library materials.

ASK THE BOARD

"What is our written process for reviewing a challenged book or lesson, and how many challenges did we decide last year?"

WATCH FOR

Removals with no review.

Teachers left to guess.

Decisions made by whoever is loudest.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Teachers clear on the rules.

Challenges decided by the process.

Appeals filed and resolved.

Sources: RAND (2024, 2025); PEN America and the American Library Association via Education Week (2026); NPR (2025). Ms. Harris is a composite.

Fair rules, made in public, are how a divided community shares one school.

CRACK

28 When Meetings Become Battlefields

When the people elected to run schools spend their time under siege.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

At the March board meeting, a sixth grader came to read her essay on recycling. She waited two hours while adults shouted over each other, then went home without reading it.

THE CRACK

Board meetings that were once quiet became flashpoints during the pandemic, and many haven't calmed. Threats against local school officials have nearly tripled, aimed at board members of every political view. When a board can't govern, students pay for it.

+170%

Rise in threats and harassment against local school officials over two years

28%

Students in districts where conflict has hurt the board's ability to govern (estimate)

WHAT BOARD MEMBERS REPORT

Protests, threats or disruptions	44% of board members, covering about 62% of students.
Conflict hurting governance	23% of board members.
Targeted most	Women, minority and younger members.
Calmer	Rural boards report fewer threats.

Sources: Brookings survey of 1,000 board members (2024–25); Princeton Bridging Divides Initiative; Ballotpedia (2026).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Civic fluency Collaboration

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Each one works. Each one costs something. Most boards will need more than one.

A
Clear meeting rules

Public comment stays open, with time limits and conduct rules applied evenly.

Gains Keeps voices, cuts chaos.

Costs Can be misused to silence critics.

B
Mediation for hot disputes

A neutral facilitator for the most divisive issues.

Gains Turns fights into problem-solving.

Costs Takes time and money.

C
Protect officials from threats

Clear reporting and legal protection for officials and staff.

Gains Keeps good people serving.

Costs Must not shield them from criticism.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

Are public comment rules written and posted?

Have meetings been cut short by disruption?

Has a board member quit over threats?

WHO DECIDES

District & school board
Meeting rules and how they're enforced.

State legislature
Open-meetings law and protection for officials.

Community members
How we show up and speak.

ASK THE BOARD

"Will the board adopt written public-comment rules that protect every speaker and apply equally to all views?"

WATCH FOR

Rules used to silence critics.

Threats treated as normal.

Good members quitting.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Meetings disrupted or ended early.

Threats reported.

Members seeking re-election.

Sources: Brookings via Education Week (June 2026); Princeton Bridging Divides Initiative via NPR (July 2025); CSBA; Ballotpedia (2026). The student is a composite.

Disagree as loudly as you like. Then let the meeting go on.

CRACK

29 Board Capture

When a few hundred voters decide for thousands of children.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Three of five board seats were decided this spring by about 4% of registered voters. Two candidates ran unopposed. Most parents at the elementary school couldn't name a single board member.

THE CRACK

School board elections draw some of the lowest turnout in American democracy, often on odd dates when few people vote. That lets any organized group decide the outcome: unions, parent groups, party organizations or big donors. And fewer people are running at all.

5–10%

Typical voter turnout in school board elections

1.8

Candidates per board seat in 2025, the lowest in four election cycles

WHO FILLS THE VACUUM

Teachers' unions	Long-time major players in board races.
Parent and advocacy groups	Increasingly organized, on many sides.
Party organizations	More involved in officially nonpartisan races.
Outside donors	More than $2.5 million in Colorado's 2025 board races alone.

Sources: EdSource (2026); BallotReady; Westword (2025).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Civic fluency Belonging

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

None of these favors a side. All of them put more voters in charge.

A

Vote on the big day

Hold board elections with state and national races.

Gains More voters; more accountability.

Costs Board races get lost on a long ballot.

B

Disclose all the money

Report every independent expenditure, from any source.

Gains Voters see who's paying.

Costs Doesn't limit spending.

C

Recruit candidates

Civic groups help ordinary parents and residents run.

Gains More choices on the ballot.

Costs Slow to build.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

When is our board election, and what was turnout?

How many seats went uncontested?

Who spent money on the last race?

WHO DECIDES

Voters
Whether we show up.

State legislature
Election dates and disclosure rules.

District & school board
Candidate information and outreach.

ASK THE BOARD

"Would this board support moving our elections to the November general election date?"

WATCH FOR

Uncontested seats.

Money nobody can trace.

Elections set when few will vote.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Turnout in board elections.

Candidates per seat.

Spending disclosed.

Sources: National School Boards Association via BallotReady; Ballotpedia (2025); Brookings; Chalkbeat (2026); Westword (2025); EdSource (2026). The opening scene is a composite.

The easiest way to take back a school board is to vote for it.

CRACK

30 Surveillance & Data Privacy

When the software meant to protect students watches everything they do.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Logan, a ninth grader, searched for information about depression on his school laptop at 11 p.m. By noon the next day he'd been called to the office, and his parents and a police officer had been notified. No one asked him first.

THE CRACK

Nearly every school now uses software that scans students' searches, messages and documents for warning signs. Many families welcome it as a safety net. But it flags the wrong things, reaches into homes after hours, and leads to discipline or police contact more often than to help.

9 in 10

Secondary teachers who say their school uses student activity monitoring

44%

Teachers who report a student was contacted by police because of monitoring

WHAT FAMILIES ARE TOLD, AND WHAT HAPPENS

Promised	Early warning for suicide and violence.
Supported	62% of parents say the benefits outweigh privacy concerns.
Reported harms	Students outed, disciplined or reported to police.
Missing	Training: few teachers handling alerts have any.

Sources: Center for Democracy & Technology surveys (2021–2024).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Well-being Belonging

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

These keep the safety net and fix the harms.

A

Tell families what's watched

Publish what is scanned, when, and who sees the alerts.

Gains Informed consent.

Costs Vendors may resist detail.

B

Counselors before police

Alerts go to trained staff whose first job is to help.

Gains Keeps the safety purpose.

Costs Needs staff (Crack 06).

C

Limit time and data

No scanning at home after hours; contracts limit data use.

Gains Protects privacy.

Costs May miss some warnings.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

What monitoring software does our school use?

Does it run at home, after hours?

Who gets alerts, and what happens next?

WHO DECIDES

Principal
Who responds to alerts.

District & school board
Which tools are bought and how they're used.

State & federal
Student privacy laws.

ASK THE BOARD

"What does our monitoring software scan, when does it run, and how many alerts last year led to police contact?"

WATCH FOR

Scanning in homes at night.

Alerts with no trained responder.

Vendors keeping data indefinitely.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Alerts that led to help.

Alerts that led to discipline or police.

Families informed in writing.

Sources: Center for Democracy & Technology (2021–2024); The 74; EdSurge (October 2025). Logan is a composite.

A student who is watched isn't the same as a student who is helped.

CRACK

31 Cyberattack Exposure

When hackers know more about your child than the school can protect.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Rosa got an email from the district in January: her eighth grader's name, birthday, address and medical notes had been stolen in a hack. Months later, she learned the criminals were demanding money from the district for the same data.

THE CRACK

Schools hold huge amounts of sensitive information about children, much of it in a few large vendors' systems. In one 2024 breach, hackers reached records on an estimated 62 million students. Neither schools nor their vendors are held to any national cybersecurity standard.

~62 million

Students whose records were exposed in the PowerSchool breach

None

National cybersecurity standard that schools and their vendors must meet

ANATOMY OF A BREACH

December 2024	Hackers enter PowerSchool's student information system.
January 2025	Districts learn of it and begin telling families.
Spring 2025	The company paid a ransom; districts still faced extortion.
September 2025	Texas sues the company.

Sources: TechTarget; Education Week; BleepingComputer (2025).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Well-being Resilience

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Each one works. Each one costs something. Most districts will need all three.

A

Security rules in every contract

Vendors meet set standards, report breaches fast and pay for harm.

Gains Duty falls on whoever holds the data.

Costs Raises prices for districts.

B

Collect less

Keep only the student data truly needed; delete it on schedule.

Gains Less to steal.

Costs Takes a data audit.

C

Join warning networks

Free state and national networks warn districts of threats.

Gains Cheap early warning.

Costs Needs staff to act.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

Which companies hold our students' data?

Has our district had a breach, and were families told?

Do our contracts require security standards?

WHO DECIDES

District & school board
Vendor contracts and IT security.

State
Breach-notification and data laws.

Federal government
Student privacy law and cybersecurity help.

ASK THE BOARD

"Which vendors hold our students' personal data, and does every contract require security standards and fast breach notice?"

WATCH FOR

Data kept forever.

Breaches disclosed late.

One vendor holding everything.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Contracts with security clauses.

Days from breach to family notice.

Data deleted on schedule.

Sources: BleepingComputer; TechCrunch; Education Week (2025); NBC News via Yahoo. Rosa is a composite.

If a school collects a child's data, it owes that child protection.

CRACK

32 AI Without a Plan

When every student has AI in their pocket and the school has no rules.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

In the same week, Mia's English teacher banned AI and her biology teacher required it. Her history teacher never mentioned it. She used it on all three assignments and isn't sure which counted as cheating.

THE CRACK

More than half of students and teachers now use AI for school, and teachers' use doubled in a single year. Rules haven't kept up: fewer than half of schools have an AI policy, and only about a third of teachers have rules on AI and cheating. Schools are also buying AI tools they struggle to judge.

54%

Students who used AI for schoolwork in 2024–25

Under half

Schools with an AI-use policy, according to principals

USING AI FOR SCHOOL, 2024–25



Source: RAND surveys (2025).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Curiosity | Civic fluency

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Each one works. Each one costs something. Most districts will need all three.

A

A policy written together

Teachers, parents and students set clear rules for AI use.

Gains Ends the guessing.

Costs Must be updated often.

B

Assignments AI can't finish

Build work around drafts, discussion and in-class writing.

Gains Keeps learning honest.

Costs Takes teacher time.

C

Check before buying

Require evidence before purchasing AI products.

Gains Saves money (Crack 33).

Costs Slows adoption.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

Does our school have an AI policy students know?

Are our teachers trained on AI?

Which AI tools has the district bought?

WHO DECIDES

Teachers & principal
Classroom rules and assignment design.

District & school board
Policy, training and purchases.

State
Guidance and data protection.

ASK THE BOARD

"Does our district have one clear AI policy that students, parents and teachers can all read?"

WATCH FOR

Different rules in every classroom.

AI tools bought without evidence.

Student data fed into AI products.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Teachers trained on AI.

Students who know the rules.

AI purchases checked for evidence.

Sources: RAND (2025) via Route Fifty and TNND; Education Week (May and August 2026). Mia is a composite.

AI is already in every classroom. The rules should be too.

CRACK

33 Procurement Lock-In

When schools pay for thousands of tools and students use a handful.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Mr. Patel's district pays for a reading app, two math platforms and a quiz tool that do almost the same thing. His students use one. A contract for another platform the district no longer wants runs three more years.

THE CRACK

The average district can now access about 3,000 digital tools, while students and teachers regularly use only a few. Licenses sit unused, contracts lock districts in, and every tool adds another company holding student data. A few big state testing contracts follow the same pattern.

~3,000

Digital tools the average district can access

~4

Tools students and teachers regularly use

WHERE THE MONEY LEAKS

Unused licenses	A median 30% of purchased licenses are never used.
Duplicates	Several tools doing the same job.
Lock-in	Long contracts with no exit or data return.
Big testing contracts	Six vendors took 89% of state testing money (2012).

Tool counts come from Instructure and BrightBytes, which sell edtech-management products. Testing: Brookings (2012).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Collaboration Resilience

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Each one works. Each one costs something. Most districts will need all three.

A

An annual tool audit

Track use, results and cost per active user for every product.

Gains Cuts waste fast.

Costs Needs staff or software.

B

Contracts with exits

Short terms, exit clauses and data returned at the end.

Gains No more lock-in.

Costs Vendors may charge more.

C

Evidence before purchase

Require proof a product works before buying.

Gains Better tools.

Costs Slower to adopt new ones.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How many digital tools does our district pay for?

Which ones do students actually use?

How long are our biggest contracts?

WHO DECIDES

District & school board
Purchases, contracts and audits.

State
Purchasing rules and testing contracts.

Teachers
Which tools actually help.

ASK THE BOARD

“What did we spend on software last year, and what share of those licenses were actually used?”

WATCH FOR

Automatic renewals.

Contracts with no exit.

Free tools that harvest data.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Cost per active user.

Licenses unused.

Tools cut after review.

Sources: Instructure EdTech Top 40 (2025) and 2026 analysis via Education Week; BrightBytes via EdWeek Market Brief; Brookings (2012). Mr. Patel is a composite.

Every unused license is money that never reached a classroom.

CRACK

34 The Revolving Door at the Top

When the district changes leaders faster than it can finish a plan.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Jordan is a high school senior. Since he started kindergarten, his district has had four superintendents and three five-year strategic plans. None of the plans reached year five.

THE CRACK

Superintendents of large districts left at record rates after the pandemic, and two-thirds of districts have changed leaders since 2019. Every change tends to bring new programs on top of old ones: one large district found more than 120 initiatives running at once. Repeated churn falls hardest on high-poverty districts, and students lose ground.

23%

Superintendent turnover in the 500 largest districts in 2024–25, a recent peak

~1 month

Less math learning in districts with repeated leadership changes

SUPERINTENDENT TURNOVER, 500 LARGEST DISTRICTS



Source: ILO Group Superintendent Research Project, via Education Week (2025, 2026).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Resilience Collaboration

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Each one works. Each one costs something. Most boards will need more than one.

A

Train the board and leader together

Joint training on roles and expectations.

Gains Fewer blowups.

Costs Needs buy-in from both.

B

Plan the succession

Grow leaders inside the district before anyone leaves.

Gains Smooth handoffs.

Costs Can look like favoritism.

C

Take an initiative inventory

List every program, keep what works, drop the rest.

Gains Teachers can focus.

Costs Someone's favorite gets cut.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How many superintendents have we had in ten years?

Does our district have a succession plan?

How many initiatives is the district running right now?

WHO DECIDES

School board
Hiring, evaluating and keeping the superintendent.

Voters
Who sits on the board (Crack 29).

State
Training and contract rules.

ASK THE BOARD

"How many superintendents and strategic plans has our district had in the last ten years?"

WATCH FOR

A new plan with every new leader.

Board–superintendent feuds.

No one ready to step in.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Superintendent tenure.

Fewer, finished initiatives.

Leaders promoted from within.

Sources: ILO Group via Education Week (2025, 2026); Annenberg Institute at Brown University via Education Week (September 2026); ASCD; K-12 Dive. Jordan is a composite.

Children need a plan that outlasts the person who wrote it.

CRACK

35 Data Black Box

When the numbers exist but no parent can find them.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Angela wanted to know why her daughter's school had bigger classes than the one across town. The answer was online, buried in a state spreadsheet she couldn't open on her phone. The district told her to file a records request.

THE CRACK

Federal law now requires every state to publish how much each school spends per student, and every state has posted something. But the data is often hard to find, hard to compare and sometimes wrong. A right to see the numbers means little if families can't use them.

Every state

Has published per-school spending, as federal law requires

2015

Year Congress first required spending data for every school

WHAT YOU HAVE A RIGHT TO SEE

Spending per student	For each school, not just the district average.
Where the money comes from	Federal, state and local sources.
Results	Test scores, graduation and more, on every school's report card.
A good example	Illinois lets families compare schools side by side.

Sources: Every Student Succeeds Act, via Education Week; EdTrust; The 74.

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Civic fluency Belonging

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

The law already requires the data. These make it usable.

A

Report cards built with parents

Design them with families, as federal law already requires.

Gains Data people can use.

Costs Takes redesign work.

B

Side-by-side comparisons

Let families compare schools, as Illinois does.

Gains Shows real gaps.

Costs Numbers without context mislead.

C

A one-page budget

A plain-language summary of where the money goes.

Gains Anyone can read it.

Costs Simplifies a complex picture.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

Can you find our school's spending per student?

Can you compare it with other schools?

Is there a plain-language budget summary?

WHO DECIDES

District & school board
Budget documents and local reporting.

State
School report cards and their design.

Federal government
What every report card must include.

ASK THE BOARD

"Where can a parent find our school's spending per student, and how does it compare with our other schools?"

WATCH FOR

Data posted but impossible to find.

Numbers with no explanation.

Errors nobody corrects.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Families who can find the data.

Report card visits.

Questions answered without records requests.

Sources: Education Week (2017–2019); EdTrust; The 74; Education Commission of the States. Angela is a composite. See the worksheet "Reading Your District Budget."

Public money should come with a public explanation.

CRACK

36 Audit Blindness

When the books look clean until someone actually checks.

A REAL CASE · TULSA, OKLAHOMA

For years, Tulsa Public Schools passed its routine annual audits. Then a state forensic audit looked closer and found more than 1,400 irregularities in eight years of spending, including an $824,503 embezzlement by a former district official.

THE CRACK

Most districts get a routine audit every year, but routine audits often check that paperwork is in order, not whether money went where it should. Fraud is rare next to the size of school budgets, but when it happens it can run for years. Simple controls, like itemized invoices, often aren't in place.

$225M+

Confirmed K-12 fraud across nearly 90 cases, 2019 to 2025

1,400+

Irregularities in one district's forensic audit, after years of clean routine audits

WHY ROUTINE AUDITS MISS THINGS

What they check	That accounts balance and rules are followed on paper.
What they can miss	Fake invoices, conflicts of interest, slow-building schemes.
Why it's hard	School money is spread across thousands of districts.
Proportion	Real, but small next to nearly $1 trillion a year in school revenue.

Sources: Oklahoma State Auditor via The Frontier; U.S. Department of Education Inspector General (2026); KOMO (2026).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Civic fluency | Resilience

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

A cause both parties support. Each step builds on the one before.

A
Simple controls

Itemized invoices, two-person approval and vendor checks.

Gains Cheap and effective.

Costs Slows payments a little.

B
Deeper audits, not just routine

Periodic forensic reviews of spending and vendors.

Gains Finds what paperwork hides.

Costs Costs more than routine audits.

C
Plain-language results

Post audit findings and the district's response online.

Gains The public can follow up.

Costs Findings can be misread.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

When was our last audit, and what did it find?

Has the district ever had a forensic audit?

Are audit results posted publicly?

WHO DECIDES

District & school board
Internal controls and audit follow-up.

State auditor
Forensic and performance audits.

Federal government
Oversight of federal funds.

ASK THE BOARD

"What did our last audit find, what did we change because of it, and when did anyone last review vendor payments in depth?"

WATCH FOR

Clean audits nobody reads.

One person approving payments.

Findings never followed up.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Audit findings resolved.

Payments with itemized invoices.

Audit reports posted publicly.

Sources: Oklahoma State Auditor and Inspector via The Frontier and Oklahoma Voice (2025); U.S. Department of Education OIG (2026); KOMO and the Daily Signal (2026).

Trust in public schools starts with knowing the money went where it should.

4

SEASON 4 · CRACKS 37–45 · 9 CRACKS

Civic, Climate & Belonging

Schools that practice democracy.

Schools don’t only prepare students for tests. They prepare them to live with other people: to weigh a claim, cast a vote, cope with a changing climate, and feel that they belong.

These nine cracks are where a school practices the democracy it hopes its graduates will keep. Several are contested, and each of those pages sets out both sides.

ONE MEETING? START HERE

38 Civics & Democracy

We ask every graduate to vote. Few are taught how it works.

THE CRACKS IN THIS SEASON

NO.	CRACK	PAGE
37	**Information Literacy** Half the states have a law. Most students still can't check a source.	98
38	**Civics & Democracy** We ask every graduate to vote. Few are taught how it works.	100
39	**Climate Illiteracy** The standards say it. Nobody trains the teacher.	102
40	**The Signal of Play** When recess shrinks, a school tells you what it values.	104
41	**Discipline Disparities** Who gets sent home, and how many days they lose.	106
42	**The Advanced Access Gap** Talent is everywhere. The course and the referral aren't.	108
43	**Immigrant Barriers** A child who can't follow the lesson, or is afraid to come.	110
44	**The Migrant Student Crisis** One school year, three states, no records that follow.	112
45	**The Life Skills Void** A crack being closed, if the course is real.	114

CRACK

37 Information Literacy

Half the states have a law. Most students still can't check a source.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Jayden, 15, shares a video of "ballot stuffing" with his group chat. It looks real. It was filmed in another country years ago. Nobody at school ever showed him how to check where a clip came from, so he never thought to.

THE CRACK

Across thousands of student responses, Stanford researchers found most students couldn't tell an ad from a news story or judge who was behind a website. Twenty-five states now have media literacy laws, eleven of them passed since 2024, but practice in classrooms lags far behind policy, and AI-made content is raising the stakes every month.

25 states

With media literacy laws on the books (January 2026)

7,804

Student responses in Stanford's study, most unable to judge a source

THE SKILLS THAT ACTUALLY WORK

Lateral reading	Leave the page and see what others say about the source.
Click restraint	Skip the first result; scan before you click.
Source vs. claim	Who made this, and what do they want?
AI check	Look for an original: date, place, first poster.

Methods from Stanford's civic online reasoning research. Sources: Stanford History Education Group (2016, 2019); Media Literacy Now (2026).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Civic fluency Curiosity

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Teach the method, not a list of approved outlets.

A
Built into every subject

Short source-checking routines in science, history and English.

Gains Reaches every student.

Costs Needs teacher training time.

B
A required course

A semester of digital and media literacy before graduation.

Gains Clear and measurable.

Costs One more course competes for time.

C
Libraries as the hub

Fund school librarians to lead the work.

Gains Experts already in the building.

Costs Many schools have no librarian.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

Does any class teach lateral reading by name?

Is there a school librarian, and what do they teach?

How does the school handle AI-generated content?

WHO DECIDES

Teachers & librarians
Daily practice.

District & school board
Curriculum and staffing.

State legislature
Media literacy laws and standards.

ASK THE BOARD

“Where in our curriculum do students learn to check a source, and how do we know it’s working?”

WATCH FOR

A law with no training.

Lists of “good” and “bad” outlets.

Librarian jobs cut.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Students checking sources unprompted.

Assessments of source evaluation.

Teachers trained in the method.

Sources: Stanford History Education Group (2016, 2019); Media Literacy Now (2026); NASBE. Jayden is a composite.

A democracy runs on citizens who can tell what’s true. That has to be taught.

CRACK

38 Civics & Democracy

We ask every graduate to vote. Few are taught how it works.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Maria turns 18 the week before an election. She wants to vote but can't say what the county commission does or how her state legislator got the job. She had one civics semester as a sophomore and never did anything in her community for it.

THE CRACK

Only 22% of eighth graders reach Proficient in civics, and in 2022 scores fell for the first time ever. Fewer than half of students have taken a class mainly about civics. Service connected to learning has faded too, and only one in five students studies another language, so most graduates know little about their own government and less about the world's.

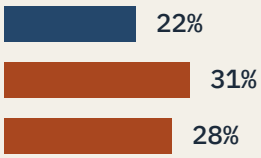
22%

Eighth graders Proficient in civics (NAEP 2022)

49%

Students who have taken a class mainly about civics

EIGHTH-GRADE CIVICS, NAEP 2022



NAEP Proficient is a demanding standard, not "grade level." 2022 is the latest civics test. Sources: NAGB (2023); iCivics on NAEP survey data; Pew Research (2018).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Civic fluency | Belonging | Collaboration

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Teach how it works, then let students use it.

A
More time for civics

A full course in middle school and in high school.

Gains Knowledge before the first vote.

Costs Takes time from other subjects.

B
Action civics

Students research a local problem and present fixes to real officials.

Gains Civics they remember.

Costs Needs a school that arranges it.

C
A window on the world

Language and global-studies options in every high school.

Gains Graduates ready for a connected world.

Costs Teachers are scarce.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

When do students take a full civics course?

Do students ever present to a real public body?

Which languages does the high school offer?

WHO DECIDES

Teachers
Classroom civics and projects.

District & school board
Course offerings and graduation rules.

State board & legislature
Standards and requirements.

ASK THE BOARD

“How many of our students graduate having worked on a real local issue with a real public official?”

WATCH FOR

Civics squeezed to one semester.

Service hours with no learning attached.

Language programs cut.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Civics scores rising.

Students at public meetings.

Young-voter turnout up locally.

Sources: NAGB (2023); iCivics (2023); Pew Research (2018); CNCS (2008). Maria is a composite.

Citizens aren’t born knowing how self-government works. Schools are where they learn it.

CRACK

39 Climate Illiteracy

The standards say it. Nobody trains the teacher.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Mr. Patel teaches eighth-grade science. The state standard mentions climate, but he had no training on it and worries about angry emails. He gives it one day in May. His students leave as unsure as they arrived.

THE CRACK

Nearly half of teens can’t identify what mainly causes climate change. Three in four teachers have had no training on teaching it, and a quarter don’t cover it at all. Students in states whose standards require human-caused climate change do somewhat better, which shows the standards help. The science is settled. What to do about it is debatable, and both can be taught.

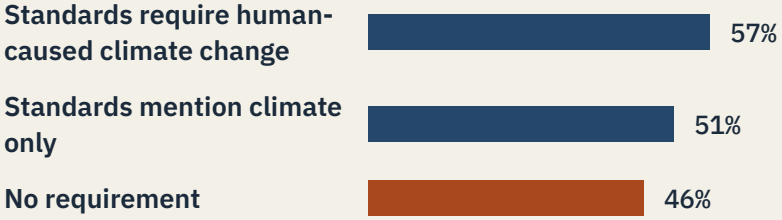
3 in 4

Teachers with no training on teaching climate change

57% vs 46%

Teens correct on the main cause, with vs. without a state requirement

TEENS WHO NAMED HUMAN EMISSIONS AS A MAIN CAUSE



Survey of 1,017 teens commissioned by This Is Planet Ed (Aspen Institute), an advocate. Sources: EdWeek Research Center (2022, 2025).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Curiosity | Civic fluency

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Teach the science, and teach students to weigh the choices.

A

Train the teachers

Short, paid training on the science and on handling hard questions.

Gains Confidence in the classroom.

Costs Costs time and money.

B

Clear standards

Name the science plainly; avoid “both sides” wording.

Gains Every student gets the basics.

Costs A political fight in some states.

C

Teach the trade-offs

Students compare policy options with costs and benefits.

Gains Respects every family’s views.

Costs Needs careful, balanced materials.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

Which grades cover climate science, and for how long?

Have science teachers had any training on it?

Are policy debates taught with more than one view?

WHO DECIDES

Science teachers
Lessons and labs.

District
Curriculum and training.

State board of education
Science standards.

ASK THE BOARD

“How many days do our students spend on climate science, and what training have their teachers had?”

WATCH FOR

One rushed day at year’s end.

Standards that blur the science.

Classes that push one policy answer.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Teachers trained.

Students explain the evidence.

Students argue both sides of a policy.

Sources: EdWeek Research Center (2022, 2025); NCSE; Penn State. Mr. Patel is a composite.

Students will live with these choices longest. They deserve the science, and the tools to argue.

CRACK

40 The Signal of Play

When recess shrinks, a school tells you what it values.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Leo is seven and full of energy. His school gives 20 minutes of recess, part of it in the lunch line, and he loses it when he talks out of turn. By 2 p.m. he can't sit still, which costs him tomorrow's recess too.

THE CRACK

Elementary playground time fell from almost 37 minutes a day in 2001 to roughly 20–30 today, usually to make room for more instruction. Only 12 states and D.C. require recess. Now the tide is turning: Tennessee and Oklahoma moved to 40 minutes, and Oklahoma banned taking recess away as punishment.

36.8 → ~25

Daily elementary playground minutes, 2001–02 vs. today

12 states

Plus D.C. that require daily recess (Dec. 2025)

DAILY RECESS, IN MINUTES



Sources: EdWeek Research Center (2025); CDC (2019); Johns Hopkins via Axios (2026); The 74; Education Week (2026).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD | Well-being | Collaboration | Belonging

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Protect the minutes, and stop using play as a punishment.

A

Set a daily minimum

At least 20 minutes, separate from lunch.

Gains Every child gets it.

Costs Takes minutes from instruction.

B

Ban withholding

No taking recess away as punishment.

Gains Keeps the most restless kids moving.

Costs Teachers need other tools.

C

Better recess

Equipment, trained supervisors, space to play.

Gains Fewer fights, more play.

Costs Costs staff and money.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How many minutes of recess, not counting lunch?

Is recess ever taken away as punishment?

What do kids have to play with?

WHO DECIDES

Principal
Schedule and supervision.

District & school board
Wellness policy.

State legislature
Recess laws.

ASK THE BOARD

“How many minutes of recess does each grade get, and do we ever take it away as punishment?”

WATCH FOR

Recess folded into lunch.

Indoor recess as the default.

Withholding as discipline.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Minutes protected in policy.

Fewer behavior referrals.

Kids who say recess is the best part of their day.

Sources: EdWeek Research Center (2025); CDC (2019); Brookings; Axios (2026). Leo is a composite.

Play isn’t a break from learning. For young children, it is learning.

CRACK

41 Discipline Disparities

Who gets sent home, and how many days they lose.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Darius, a sixth grader, has ADHD. After his third suspension this fall he has missed eleven days. He's now behind in math, and being behind makes him act out more. Nobody has added up the days.

THE CRACK

Federal data from 2023–24 show Black boys are 7% of students but 18% of those given in-school suspensions. Students with disabilities are 15% of students but 27% of those suspended out of school. Why is fiercely debated: bias, poverty and trauma, real behavior differences, or all of these. What everyone agrees on is that each day out of school is a day of lost learning.

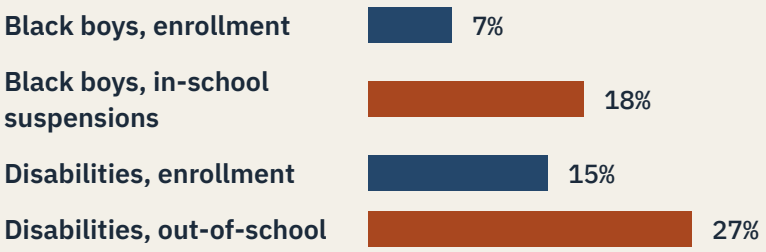
7% → 18%

Black boys: share of students vs. share of in-school suspensions

15% → 27%

Students with disabilities: share of students vs. out-of-school suspensions

SHARE OF STUDENTS VS. SHARE OF SUSPENSIONS, 2023–24



The 2023–24 release was delayed and omitted nonbinary students. Sources: Civil Rights Data Collection via K-12 Dive and NPR (2026).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Belonging Well-being

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Measure the days lost, and give teachers real help.

A

Publish the days lost

Report suspension days by group, every year.

Gains Everyone sees the same facts.

Costs Data can be misread.

B

Support before removal

Counselors and behavior specialists for repeat cases.

Gains Fixes causes, not symptoms.

Costs Costs staff.

C

Order with fidelity

Clear rules, consistently enforced, with restorative practice done well.

Gains Safe classrooms for all.

Costs Done badly, it fails both ways.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How many school days were lost to suspension last year?

Who gets suspended, by group?

What happens before a student is sent home?

WHO DECIDES

Principal
Day-to-day discipline.

District & school board
Code of conduct and staffing.

State & federal
Data reporting and civil rights.

ASK THE BOARD

“How many school days did our students lose to suspension last year, broken down by group?”

WATCH FOR

Quotas instead of support.

Teachers left alone with disruption.

Data kept private.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Fewer days lost.

Classrooms that feel safe.

Gaps narrowing, with order holding.

Sources: Civil Rights Data Collection 2023–24 via K-12 Dive and NPR (2026); Daniel Losen. Darius is a composite.

A child can’t learn from a lesson they weren’t there for.

CRACK

42 The Advanced Access Gap

Talent is everywhere. The course and the referral aren't.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Ana aced every math test in eighth grade. Nobody referred her for the advanced track, and her high school doesn't offer calculus anyway. A friend across town, with similar scores, is already earning college credit.

THE CRACK

Fewer than half of U.S. high schools offer calculus, and many middle schools don't offer Algebra I. Who gets into advanced classes often depends on a teacher or parent asking. When one large Florida district tested every second grader instead, the share identified as gifted rose from 3.3% to 5.5%, with the biggest gains for low-income, Black, Hispanic and English-learner students. Rural students, in more than 40% of districts, have the fewest options.

45%

U.S. high schools offering calculus (2023–24)

3.3% → 5.5%

Gifted identification after screening every second grader (Broward, FL)

HIGH SCHOOLS OFFERING EACH COURSE, 2023–24



Sources: Civil Rights Data Collection via K-12 Dive (2026); Card & Giuliano, PNAS (2016).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Curiosity Belonging

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Open the door wider instead of arguing over the room.

A

Screen everyone

Test every student instead of waiting for a referral.

Gains Finds the talent that gets missed.

Costs Costs money every year.

B

Auto-enroll

Students who qualify are placed in advanced classes; families can opt out.

Gains Ends gatekeeping.

Costs Some students need extra support.

C

Offer it everywhere

Every high school offers calculus and physics, online if needed.

Gains Zip code stops deciding.

Costs Teachers are scarce.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

Who gets tested for gifted programs, and how?

Which advanced courses does the high school offer?

Who is in AP classes compared with the whole school?

WHO DECIDES

Counselors & teachers
Referrals and placement.

District & school board
Screening and course offerings.

State legislature
Auto-enrollment laws.

ASK THE BOARD

“Do we test every student for advanced programs, or only those who are referred?”

WATCH FOR

Referral-only gifted programs.

Advanced tracks cut instead of opened.

Courses offered only at “good” schools.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Advanced classes that look like the school.

More students passing AP.

Calculus in every high school.

Sources: Civil Rights Data Collection via K-12 Dive and EdWeek; Card & Giuliano (2016); ECS (2025); Center for American Progress. Ana is a composite.

No child should miss their chance because nobody asked.

CRACK

43 Immigrant Barriers

A child who can't follow the lesson, or is afraid to come.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Sofía, 9, is learning English and loves her teacher. After raids in her town, her mother keeps her home for a week, then two. When she comes back, the class has moved on, and the words are harder than ever.

THE CRACK

About 5.3 million students are learning English, and their reading scores have barely moved in over a decade. Federal support has slipped to about $169 per student and has been proposed for elimination two years running. Since early 2025, studies have found absences rising sharply where immigration enforcement stepped up: 22% in California's Central Valley.

+22%

Student absences after raids began, Central Valley, CA (2025)

35 points

Fourth-grade reading gap, English learners vs. others (NAEP 2024)

TERMS TO KNOW

English learner (EL)	A student still building English skills for school.
Title III	The only federal funding stream just for ELs: $890M.
Plyler v. Doe	1982: every child has a right to public school.
Reclassification	When an EL is ready for classes without extra support.

Sources: Brookings; Stanford/Hoover (Dee, 2025); Brown Annenberg (2026); EdWeek (2025–26).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Belonging Well-being

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Not an immigration debate, just every child in class, learning.

A
Clear protocols

Written district rules for enforcement near schools.

Gains Families know what to expect.

Costs Must follow federal law.

B
Attendance outreach

Personal contact when students stop coming; no status questions.

Gains Brings kids back.

Costs Takes staff time.

C
Hold EL results to account

Track how fast ELs reach English and grade level; test in home languages where possible (35 states do).

Gains Focuses on what works.

Costs Needs good data.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How many ELs reached English proficiency last year?

Has attendance changed among immigrant families?

Is there a written protocol for enforcement near school?

WHO DECIDES

Principal & teachers
Classroom support and outreach.

District & school board
EL programs and protocols.

Congress
Title III funding.

ASK THE BOARD

"How many of our English learners reach proficiency each year, and how has their attendance changed since 2025?"

WATCH FOR

EL funding cut with no plan.

Status questions at enrollment.

Absences nobody follows up on.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Faster reclassification.

Attendance recovering.

Families who trust the school.

Sources: Brookings; ED; Stanford/SIEPR (2025); Brown Annenberg (2026); Journalist's Resource; Migration Policy Institute (2026). Sofía is a composite.

Every child in the building is ours to teach.

CRACK

44 The Migrant Student Crisis

One school year, three states, no records that follow.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Every spring, Mateo's family follows the harvest from Texas to Michigan and back. He starts fractions in one school, finishes them in another and misses the test in a third. His credits rarely add up to a grade.

THE CRACK

About 268,000 children move with families who do seasonal farm and fishing work. The federal Migrant Education Program, around since 1966, pays for summer school, credit recovery and transportation across state lines. It was proposed for elimination in 2025 and again in 2026. Programs that carry these students on to a GED or college have shrunk by more than half.

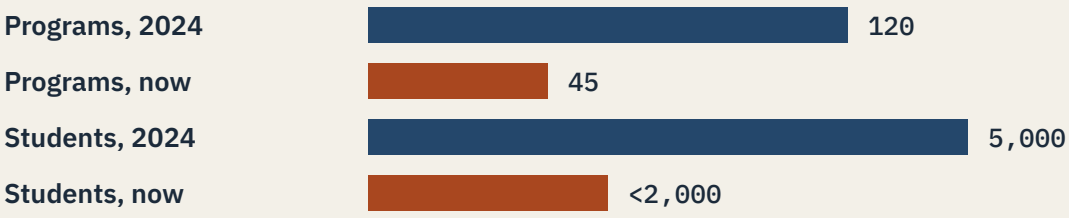
~268,000

Eligible migratory children, birth to age 21 (2021–22)

5,000 → <2,000

Students in migrant GED and college programs, 2024 vs. now

MIGRANT GED & COLLEGE PROGRAMS (HEP/CAMP)



Bars are scaled within each pair. Sources: ED MEP National Profile (2021–22); EdWeek (2025, 2026); NPR (2025).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Belonging Resilience

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Students who cross state lines need help that does too.

A

Keep the federal program

Fund Title I-C for students who move between states.

Gains Help that crosses borders.

Costs A federal cost every year.

B

Records that travel

Credits and test results shared quickly between states.

Gains No more starting over.

Costs Privacy and systems work.

C

Summer and credit recovery

Catch-up programs timed to the harvest.

Gains Students graduate on time.

Costs Staffing in peak season.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How many migratory students does the district serve?

How fast do records arrive when a student transfers?

Is there a summer program timed to the harvest?

WHO DECIDES

District migrant coordinator
Finding and serving students.

State education agency
Program and records.

Congress
Title I-C and HEP/CAMP funding.

ASK THE BOARD

“How many migratory students did we serve last year, and how many graduated on time?”

WATCH FOR

Funding cut without a state plan.

Credits lost between schools.

Students counted, then forgotten.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Records arriving in days.

Credits that transfer.

On-time graduation rising.

Sources: ED (2022, 2025, 2026); EdWeek (2025, 2026); NPR (2025); LPI. Mateo is a composite.

The families who feed the country deserve schools that keep up with them.

CRACK

45 The Life Skills Void

A crack being closed, if the course is real.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Kayla signed her first credit card offer at 18, in the student union. By graduation she owed more on it than on her loans. Nobody had ever explained interest to her. Her little brother takes a required finance class next fall.

THE CRACK

Thirty states now require a stand-alone personal finance course to graduate, up from eight in 2020. The evidence is good when the course is real: rigorous state requirements raised young adults' credit scores by 15 to 19 points and cut serious delinquencies. Where finance is just folded into another class, studies find no effect. In states with no requirement, only one student in ten takes the course.

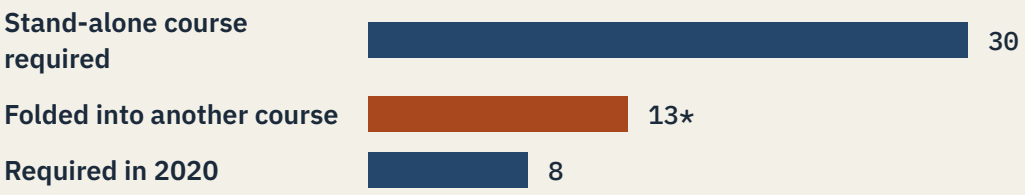
8 → 30

States requiring a stand-alone finance course, 2020 → 2025

+15–19

Credit-score points for young adults after rigorous state requirements

STATES BY TYPE OF REQUIREMENT



*Council for Economic Education count. NGPF, which tracks the stand-alone states, also lobbies for them. Sources: NGPF (2025–26); Urban et al.; EdWeek (2026).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Resilience Well-being

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Make the course real, or don’t count it.

A
A stand-alone semester

A full course, not a unit inside economics.

Gains The version with results.

Costs Costs a schedule slot.

B
Train the teachers

Certified, trained teachers for the course.

Gains Quality across schools.

Costs Teachers are hard to find.

C
No easy test-outs

Limit loopholes that let students skip the content.

Gains Every student learns it.

Costs Less flexibility.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

Is personal finance a stand-alone course here?

Who teaches it, and are they trained?

Can students test out?

WHO DECIDES

Teachers
Delivering the course.

District & school board
Scheduling and staffing.

State legislature
Graduation requirements.

ASK THE BOARD

“Do all our graduates take a full semester of personal finance taught by a trained teacher?”

WATCH FOR

Finance folded into another class.

Untrained teachers.

Test-outs that skip the learning.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Every graduate takes the course.

Teachers trained.

Fewer young adults in serious debt.

Sources: NGPF (2025, 2026); Urban, Schmeiser, Collins & Brown; Stoddard & Urban; EdWeek (2026); NEFE. Kayla is a composite.

Proof a crack can close: when states make the course real, graduates do better.

5

SEASON 5 · CRACKS 46–54 · 9 CRACKS

Safety & Mental Health

Places a child can learn in.

A child who doesn't feel safe can't learn. These nine cracks run from the counselor's office to the boiler room: suicide prevention, trauma, bullying, vaping, restraint, the rush to buy safety technology, and buildings that can't stand up to heat and storms.

Some of this season is good news, and the pages say so. Several of these cracks are already narrowing, which is proof that the work pays off.

ONE MEETING? START HERE

48 The School Psychologist Shortage

Most of the other cracks in this season need someone trained to respond.

THE CRACKS IN THIS SEASON

NO.	CRACK	PAGE
46	**Suicide Prevention** The numbers finally improved. Now keep what worked.	118
47	**Trauma** Many kids carry heavy loads. The slogan isn't the help.	120
48	**The School Psychologist Shortage** One psychologist for a thousand kids, and the fix is stuck in court.	122
49	**Bullying, On & Offline** The hallway now follows them home.	124
50	**Vaping** A crack that's closing, with a hooked few and a new product.	126
51	**Restraint & Seclusion** Rising, undercounted, and hardest on kids who can't speak up.	128
52	**The Safety Tech Rush** Buying the feeling of safety instead of evidence of it.	130
53	**Educator Safety** The person teaching your child may have been threatened this year.	132
54	**Climate & Disaster Readiness** The building itself is cancelling school.	134

CRACK

46 Suicide Prevention

The numbers finally improved. Now keep what worked.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Ava, 16, told a teacher she "didn't see the point anymore." The teacher had just finished a two-hour training. She walked Ava to the counselor that afternoon, and Ava's parents got a call before dinner. Ava is doing well now.

THE CRACK

In 2025, 14% of high schoolers seriously considered suicide, down from 22% in 2021: the best figure in a decade. Youth suicide deaths have fallen too. But suicide is still the second leading cause of death for ages 10–24, girls report far more distress than boys, and the counselors and grants that helped are now being cut.

22% → 14%

High schoolers who seriously considered suicide, 2021 → 2025

27 states

That require suicide prevention training for school staff

SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED SUICIDE, HIGH SCHOOL



The 2025 report omitted race and LGBTQ+ breakdowns. Sources: CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey (2015–2025); ECS.

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Well-being Belonging

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Every adult knows the signs, and every student knows where to go.

A

Train every adult

Short yearly training for all staff, not just counselors.

Gains Someone always notices.

Costs Takes training time.

B

A clear path to help

Written steps: who calls whom, same day, with families.

Gains No child left waiting.

Costs Needs counselors to receive them.

C

988 on every ID

Crisis line printed on student IDs and planners.

Gains Help in every pocket.

Costs Only a first step.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

Has every staff member had suicide prevention training?

What happens the same day a student is at risk?

Is 988 printed on student IDs?

WHO DECIDES

Counselors & psychologists
Assessment and follow-up.

District & school board
Policy, training and staffing.

State legislature
Training mandates and funding.

ASK THE BOARD

“What is our written plan when a student is at risk, and has every staff member been trained on it this year?”

WATCH FOR

Training as a one-time video.

Counselor jobs cut as the numbers improve.

No follow-up after a crisis.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Every adult trained.

Same-day response, every time.

Rates keep falling.

Sources: CDC YRBS (2025) and NCHS (2026); Jed Foundation; ECS; ASTHO. Ava is a composite. If you or a student needs help, call or text 988.

Progress is real. Keeping it means keeping the people who made it.

CRACK

47 Trauma

Many kids carry heavy loads. The slogan isn't the help.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Marcus, 12, watched his father's arrest last spring. Now he flinches at loud noises and can't focus. His school held a "trauma-informed" assembly in August. What Marcus needs is ten weeks with a trained counselor, and the waitlist is long.

THE CRACK

About 39% of children have lived through at least one serious adverse experience, and about 17% through two or more. Schools have embraced "trauma-informed" training, but reviews find little proof that whole-school versions work. The stronger evidence is for targeted help, such as small-group therapy in school for the students who need it, and too few students get it.

~39%

Children with at least one adverse childhood experience

~17%

Children with two or more

TERMS TO KNOW

ACEs	Adverse childhood experiences: abuse, neglect, household crises.
Tier 1	Calm, predictable classrooms for everyone.
Tier 2–3	Small-group and individual therapy for those who need it.
"Trauma-informed"	A label, not a program. Ask what's behind it.

Sources: National Survey of Children's Health via state health departments; Maynard et al. (2019); Watson & Astor (2025).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Well-being | Resilience | Belonging

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Fund what's proven, and measure it.

A

Targeted therapy in school

Proven small-group programs run by trained clinicians.

Gains The strongest evidence.

Costs Needs clinicians.

B

Steady classrooms for all

Predictable routines and calm de-escalation.

Gains Good teaching for everyone.

Costs Not a substitute for therapy.

C

Prove it or drop it

Track outcomes for any trauma program you buy.

Gains Money goes to what works.

Costs Takes data work.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

What does "trauma-informed" mean here, specifically?

Is there small-group therapy in school?

How long is the wait to see a counselor?

WHO DECIDES

Counselors & clinicians
Therapy and referrals.

Principal
Classroom climate.

District & school board
Programs, contracts and staffing.

ASK THE BOARD

"Which trauma programs do we pay for, and what results have they shown for students?"

WATCH FOR

Training with no follow-through.

Every struggle labeled trauma.

Long waits for real help.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Short waitlists.

Programs with measured results.

Students back on track.

Sources: NSCH; CDC MMWR (2024); Campbell Collaboration (2019); Watson & Astor (2025); Switchboard (2025). Marcus is a composite.

Kids carrying the most need more than a slogan. They need help that works.

CRACK

48 The School Psychologist Shortage

One psychologist for a thousand kids, and the fix is stuck in court.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Dr. Lee covers three schools and 3,100 students. Most of her week goes to special education paperwork. A seventh grader who needs counseling gets 20 minutes, twice a month, if nothing else comes up.

THE CRACK

There is one school psychologist for every 1,071 students, double the recommended 1 for 500, and the ratio has barely moved in five years. After Uvalde, a bipartisan Congress spent $1 billion to add about 14,000 school mental health workers. In 2025 the Education Department cancelled those grants; courts have repeatedly ordered them restored, and the fight continues.

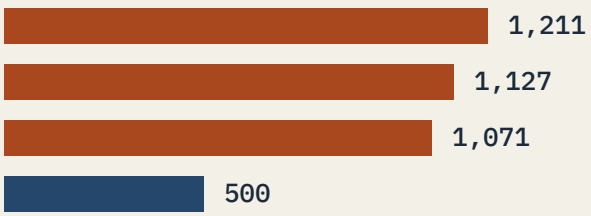
1 : 1,071

Students per school psychologist (target 1 : 500)

$1 billion

Bipartisan funding, cancelled in 2025 and still in court

STUDENTS PER SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST



The 1:500 target is the National Association of School Psychologists' standard. Sources: NASP; APA; EdWeek (2026).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Well-being Resilience

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

More people, and let them do the work they trained for.

A

Fund the positions

Steady state and local funding, not just grants.

Gains Help that lasts.

Costs A recurring cost.

B

Grow your own

Paid internships and loan help for new psychologists.

Gains A local pipeline.

Costs Takes years.

C

Free their time

Shift paperwork so psychologists can counsel.

Gains More care with the same staff.

Costs Needs other staff.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How many students per psychologist and counselor here?

How long is the wait for an evaluation or counseling?

Did any positions depend on federal grants?

WHO DECIDES

District & school board
Staffing and budgets.

State legislature
Funding and licensing.

Congress & courts
Federal mental health grants.

ASK THE BOARD

“How many students does each of our psychologists and counselors serve, and which positions depend on federal grants?”

WATCH FOR

Grant-funded jobs with no backup plan.

Psychologists buried in paperwork.

Vacancies left open.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Ratios falling.

Shorter waits.

Positions in the regular budget.

Sources: NASP; APA Monitor; EdWeek (2026); KFF; state attorneys general; K-12 Dive (2026). Dr. Lee is a composite.

Students got better while these people were hired. Don’t let the gains go with them.

CRACK

49 Bullying, On & Offline

The hallway now follows them home.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Zoe, 12, was called names in the cafeteria in September. By October, the same kids were posting about her in a group chat at midnight. She stopped going to lunch, then asked to stay home. Nobody at school knew about the chat.

THE CRACK

About one in five students aged 12–18 say they were bullied at school, down from more than one in four a decade earlier. But middle school is the peak, at 26%, and bullying now follows kids home: more than a quarter of bullied girls are bullied online or by text. LGBTQ+ students are bullied at nearly twice the rate of their peers (29% vs. 16%). Most bullying happens more than once, and much of it is never reported.

1 in 5

Students aged 12–18 bullied at school (2021–22)

26%

Middle schoolers bullied, vs. 16% in high school

STUDENTS BULLIED AT SCHOOL, 2021–22



Newer national data is pending. Sources: NCES School Crime Supplement via IES and the Condition of Education; Pew Research (2022).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Belonging Well-being

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Adults who notice, easy ways to report, consequences that fit.

A
Easy, safe reporting

Anonymous reports that adults actually follow up.

Gains Problems surface early.

Costs Needs staff to respond.

B
Focus on middle school

Supervision and advisory time where bullying peaks.

Gains Hits the worst years.

Costs Staffing time.

C
Work with families

Clear steps when online bullying spills into school.

Gains Parents and school aligned.

Costs Limits of school authority.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How do students report bullying, and who follows up?

How many reports came in last year, and how were they resolved?

Are hallways and lunch supervised?

WHO DECIDES

Teachers & counselors
Noticing and responding.

Principal
Supervision and consequences.

District & state
Anti-bullying policy.

ASK THE BOARD

“How many bullying reports did we get last year, and how many were resolved with the student feeling safe?”

WATCH FOR

Reports with no follow-up.

Unsupervised spaces.

“Kids will be kids.”

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

More reports, resolved faster.

Students who say an adult would help.

Fewer repeat cases.

Sources: NCES (2024); IES; StopBullying.gov; Pew Research (2023); CDC YRBS (2023). Zoe is a composite.

Every child deserves one place where they feel safe. School should be it.

CRACK

50 Vaping

A crack that's closing, with a hooked few and a new product.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Ethan started vaping in eighth grade with a mango-flavored disposable. Now a junior, he vapes before first period and in the bathroom between classes. He's been suspended twice. Nobody has offered him help quitting.

THE CRACK

Youth vaping has fallen for several years: e-cigarette use among middle and high schoolers dropped from 7.7% in 2023 to 5.9% in 2024, and teen cigarette smoking is at a historic low. What's left is harder: more than 1 in 4 young vapers use every day, nearly 9 in 10 use flavors, and nicotine pouches are now the second most common product.

7.7% → 5.9%

Middle and high schoolers who vape, 2023 → 2024

1 in 4

Young vapers who vape every day

HOW SCHOOLS RESPOND

Suspension	Removes the student; doesn't treat the addiction.
Cessation program	Help quitting, offered alongside or instead of punishment.
Detectors	Find vaping in bathrooms; don't stop it.
Flavor rules	A federal and state issue, not a school one.

Sources: FDA and CDC National Youth Tobacco Survey (2024, 2025); NBC News on 2025 NYTS.

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Well-being Resilience

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Treat the addiction, not just the rule-breaking.

A

Help quitting

Free cessation programs offered at school.

Gains Treats the cause.

Costs Needs staff or partners.

B

Support before suspension

A first offense leads to help, not removal.

Gains Keeps students in class.

Costs Some see it as soft.

C

Watch the next product

Teach about pouches before they spread.

Gains Gets ahead of it.

Costs Another lesson to fit in.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

What happens the first time a student is caught vaping?

Is there a quitting program at school?

Do health classes cover nicotine pouches?

WHO DECIDES

Principal & counselors
Discipline and support.

District & school board
Policy and programs.

FDA & state legislature
Flavors and sales.

ASK THE BOARD

“When a student is caught vaping, do we offer help quitting, or only punishment?”

WATCH FOR

Suspension as the only answer.

Detectors instead of help.

Pouches ignored.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Students quitting.

Fewer repeat offenses.

Use still falling.

Sources: CDC MMWR (2024); FDA (2025); NBC News (2025); CIDRAP/PHA (2025). Ethan is a composite.

This one is closing. Finish the job for the kids already hooked.

CRACK

51 Restraint & Seclusion

Rising, undercounted, and hardest on kids who can't speak up.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Noah, 8, is autistic and doesn't speak much. One afternoon he came home with bruises on his arms. His mother learned he had been held face-down on the floor. There was no report. She found out from another parent.

THE CRACK

In 2023–24, schools restrained or secluded 129,700 students, up from 105,700 two years earlier. Students with disabilities, boys and Black students are far overrepresented. The true number is higher: federal auditors found at least 2,000 districts reporting zero incidents, including some known to use these practices. There is still no federal law.

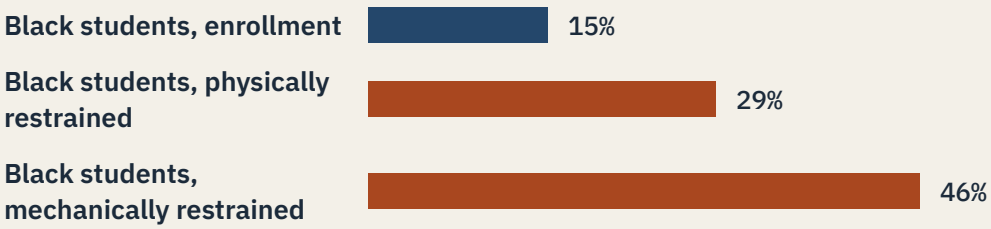
105,700 → 129,700

Students restrained or secluded, 2021–22 → 2023–24

2,000+

Districts reporting zero, some inaccurately (GAO)

SHARE OF STUDENTS VS. SHARE RESTRAINED, 2023–24



Students with disabilities and boys are also overrepresented. Sources: Civil Rights Data Collection via K-12 Dive (2026); GAO (2020); Brookings.

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Well-being Belonging

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Ban the dangerous forms, train for the rest, tell parents.

A
Ban the dangerous forms

No face-down restraint and no seclusion rooms.

Gains Removes the deadliest risks.

Costs Staff need alternatives.

B
Train in de-escalation

Every staff member who works with high-need students.

Gains Fewer crises.

Costs Training costs.

C
Same-day notice

Parents told the same day; every incident reported.

Gains Honest data, informed families.

Costs More paperwork.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How many restraints and seclusions were reported here last year?

Are parents told the same day?

Is staff trained in de-escalation?

WHO DECIDES

Principal & special education staff
Daily practice.

District & school board
Policy and reporting.

State & Congress
Laws and federal standards.

ASK THE BOARD

“How many times were students restrained or secluded here last year, and were parents told the same day every time?”

WATCH FOR

A report of zero.

Seclusion rooms by another name.

Parents finding out secondhand.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Incidents falling.

Accurate reports.

Staff trained and backed.

Sources: Civil Rights Data Collection via K-12 Dive (2026); GAO (2020); Brookings; New America. Noah is a composite.

The children with the fewest words need the strongest protections.

CRACK

52 The Safety Tech Rush

Buying the feeling of safety instead of evidence of it.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

After a shooting two counties away, a school board approved $1 million for AI weapons scanners in one evening. Lines at the doors now stretch past the first bell. The same district has one psychologist for 1,400 students.

THE CRACK

Districts are spending millions on AI weapons scanners and gun-detecting cameras. These are sold by companies with little independent testing behind them. In January 2025, one such system missed the gun in a fatal Nashville shooting. In October 2025, another mistook a bag of chips for a gun, and police handcuffed a student. Experts say there's no proof these systems prevent shootings.

400+

School buildings using one AI weapons scanner brand since 2021

$3.7M

Spent by one New York district that regretted it within a year

QUESTIONS BEFORE YOU BUY

Independent testing	Has anyone but the vendor tested it?
False-alarm rate	How often does it flag the wrong thing?
Catch rate	What does it miss?
Opportunity cost	How many counselors would the same money hire?

Sources: EdWeek (2023, 2026); Undark (2026); CNN; 7News; Fast Company.

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Well-being Belonging

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Demand the evidence before the purchase.

A
Independent testing

No contract without third-party results.

Gains Spend on what works.

Costs Fewer products qualify.

B
Publish the numbers

Report false alarms, finds and costs every year.

Gains Honest accounting.

Costs Vendors may object.

C
Compare with people

Weigh each purchase against staffing it could buy.

Gains Prevention, not just detection.

Costs Harder to show off.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

What security technology have we bought, and for how much?

What are its false-alarm and catch rates?

Was it tested by anyone but the seller?

WHO DECIDES

Superintendent & safety director
Recommendations.

School board
Contracts and budgets.

State legislature
Safety grants and mandates.

ASK THE BOARD

“What has our security technology caught, how often has it raised false alarms, and what did it cost?”

WATCH FOR

Contracts signed after a scare.

Vendor-only evidence.

Police called on false alarms.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Published results.

Money tied to evidence.

Staff funded alongside tech.

Sources: EdWeek (2023, 2026); Undark (2026); CNN; 7News/KOMO; Fast Company. The board is a composite.

Safety comes from people who know students, not just from machines at the door.

CRACK

53 Educator Safety

The person teaching your child may have been threatened this year.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Ms. Ortiz, a fourth-grade teacher, was kicked and bitten by a student in October. She filed a report. Nothing changed, and the student was back the next day. In March she told her principal she won't return next year.

THE CRACK

In a national survey of educators, 80% of teachers reported verbal threats or harassment from students after the pandemic, and more than half reported physical violence. Psychologists, administrators and other staff report the same. Many educators say it is why they plan to leave, feeding the teacher shortage.

80%

Teachers threatened or harassed by students (2021–22)

53%

Teachers physically attacked at least once

TEACHERS REPORTING THREATS FROM STUDENTS



From a large national survey recruited through education groups, not a random sample. Sources: APA Task Force (2022, 2024); APA/NEA brief (2025).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Well-being Resilience

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Back the adults, and help the students behind the incidents.

A
Track every incident

Reports logged, followed up and shared with staff.

Gains Nothing disappears.

Costs Takes admin time.

B
Behavior specialists

Experts for students with repeated violent incidents.

Gains Fixes causes.

Costs Hiring costs.

C
Leaders who back staff

Clear consequences and support after an incident.

Gains Teachers stay.

Costs Must stay fair to students.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How many incidents against staff were reported last year?

What happens after a teacher is hurt?

Is there a behavior specialist?

WHO DECIDES

Principal
Response and consequences.

District & school board
Policy, staffing and data.

State
Reporting and workplace rules.

ASK THE BOARD

“How many incidents of violence against staff did we have last year, and what changed after each one?”

WATCH FOR

Reports that go nowhere.

Staff told to “handle it.”

Exit surveys ignored.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Incidents tracked and falling.

Staff who feel backed.

Teachers staying.

Sources: APA Task Force (2022, 2024); APA/NEA (2025); EdWeek (2022, 2024). Ms. Ortiz is a composite.

Students can’t be safe in a building where their teachers aren’t.

CRACK

54 Climate & Disaster Readiness

The building itself is cancelling school.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

In September, Lincoln Elementary hit 94 degrees by noon. The building, built in 1968, has no air conditioning. The district sent everyone home early three days in a row. In spring, a burst pipe closed the school for two more.

THE CRACK

In 2024–25, nearly 1 in 5 districts cancelled school because of a building problem, costing about 2 million students an estimated 3.5 million days of learning. The top causes were plumbing failures and extreme classroom temperatures. The average school building is nearly 50 years old, and many districts have no plan to fix major systems.

3.5 million

Days of learning lost to building failures (2024–25)

1 in 5

Districts that cancelled school over facilities

WHAT GAO FOUND, 2024–25

19%	Districts that cancelled school over a facility issue.
47%	Districts with chronic facility problems.
16%	Districts needing major system replacements with no plan yet.
~1%	Learning lost per 1°F hotter year without air conditioning.

Sources: GAO-26-107970 (2026); EdWeek (2026); Goodman et al. via CBS News.

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Well-being Resilience

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

A plan for every building, and money to carry it out.

A
A public facilities plan

Every building assessed and the fixes scheduled.

Gains No more surprises.

Costs Assessments cost money.

B
Maintain, don’t wait

Preventive maintenance budgets protected.

Gains Fewer emergencies.

Costs Competes with other needs.

C
Heat and disaster plans

Rules for hot days and emergencies, with backup space.

Gains Fewer lost days.

Costs Planning time.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How many school days were cancelled for building problems last year?

Which buildings lack air conditioning?

Is there a written plan for extreme heat?

WHO DECIDES

Facilities director
Assessments and repairs.

School board & voters
Budgets and bonds.

State
Facility aid and standards.

ASK THE BOARD

“Which of our buildings lack working air conditioning or have chronic problems, and when is each scheduled to be fixed?”

WATCH FOR

Maintenance cut first.

No facilities plan.

Same building, same closures.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Fewer closure days.

A public repair schedule.

Every building cooled.

Sources: GAO (2020, 2026); EdWeek (2021, 2026); FAS; The 74; CBS News; NCES (2023) on building age. Lincoln Elementary is a composite.

Children can’t learn in a building that keeps closing on them.

6

SEASON 6 · CRACKS 55–60 · 6 CRACKS

The Democratic Architecture

Guarding the system from capture.

The last season looks at the frame around everything else: who lobbies, who funds, who chooses, what counts as evidence, how pay is set, and what gets taught when only two subjects are tested.

These six cracks guard the system against capture by any single interest, from any direction. They come last because they protect the repairs made in the five seasons before.

ONE MEETING? START HERE

58 The Evidence Void

Before a district buys a fix, someone should ask whether it works.

THE CRACKS IN THIS SEASON

NO.	CRACK	PAGE
55	**Lobbyist Capture** Everyone at the table has a lobbyist, except the children.	138
56	**Opaque Philanthropy** A gift with a steering wheel attached.	140
57	**Choice Without a Map** Public money moves fast. The map for parents doesn’t exist.	142
58	**The Evidence Void** Cutting the instruments while flying through a storm.	144
59	**Pay Compression** A 24-year staircase to a fair salary.	146
60	**The Narrowed Curriculum** What gets tested gets taught, and the rest gets squeezed.	148

CRACK

55 Lobbyist Capture

Everyone at the table has a lobbyist, except the children.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

A state budget bill reaches the floor with a line item for one company's reading software. Down the hall, a union and a school choice group each have six lobbyists working the same committee. The parents in the gallery have none.

THE CRACK

Organized money shapes school policy from every side. Teachers' unions spend tens of millions a year on politics and lobbying. School choice donors spend on the same scale: one has given more than $209 million in a decade. Edtech vendors lobby statehouses for budget lines written around their products. All of it is legal, and most voters never see who paid for what.

$209M+

Given by one school choice donor over ten years

~$52M

Spent by the largest teachers' union on politics and lobbying in one year

WHO LOBBIES, AND FOR WHAT

Teachers' unions	Pay, staffing, working conditions, public school funding.
School choice donors	Vouchers, ESAs and charter growth.
Vendors	Budget lines and mandates for their products.
Districts themselves	Public money spent lobbying for more public money.

Sources: NEA LM-2 filing (2025); The 74 on OpenSecrets; Hechinger Report; Texas Tribune; Bridge Michigan; Chalkbeat/Colorado Sun.

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Civic fluency

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Not less advocacy, just more daylight.

A
Real-time disclosure

Lobbying and spending reported within days, online.

Gains Voters see who pays.

Costs Paperwork for everyone.

B
Plain-language labels

Who funded every education ad, in large print.

Gains Easier to judge claims.

Costs Free-speech challenges.

C
Recusal rules

Board members step aside on votes involving donors.

Gains Cleaner decisions.

Costs Small boards lose votes.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

Who gave to our school board members' campaigns?

Does our district pay lobbyists?

Which contracts came from a budget line?

WHO DECIDES

Voters
Who sits on the board and in the legislature.

School board
Contracts and recusal rules.

State legislature
Lobbying and campaign disclosure.

ASK THE BOARD

"Which of our largest contracts or programs came from a state budget line written for a specific product or group?"

WATCH FOR

Budget lines naming one product.

Donors voting by proxy.

Disclosure months late.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Donations visible before elections.

Recusals on the record.

Open bids for contracts.

Sources: NEA LM-2 (2025); OpenSecrets via The 74; Hechinger Report; Texas Tribune; Bridge Michigan; Chalkbeat/Colorado Sun. The scene is a composite.

Kids don't have a lobby. Daylight is the next best thing.

CRACK

56 Opaque Philanthropy

A gift with a steering wheel attached.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

A foundation offers the district $8 million for a new teacher evaluation system. The board approves it in one meeting. Five years later the money is gone, the system is half-built, and no one has published whether students benefited.

THE CRACK

Foundation money is tiny next to public spending, but it steers policy. The Gates Foundation's $575 million push to rate teachers spread nationwide, and its own commissioned evaluation found it didn't meet its goals for students. Funders on every side shape what schools adopt. Foundations also fund some real wins. The problem is private money setting public direction without public evaluation.

$575M

Teacher-evaluation initiative that missed its student goals

~0.1%

Foundation share of yearly public K–12 spending

ASK BEFORE YOU ACCEPT

Strings	What must the district do or buy?
Sunset	Who pays when the grant ends?
Evaluation	Who measures results, and is it public?
Choice	Who picked this program: the funder or the district?

Sources: RAND/AIR via Education Week (2018); Chalkbeat; Education Week (2013, 2016).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Civic fluency

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Welcome the money, keep the steering wheel public.

A

Publish every big gift

Amount, strings and goals posted online.

Gains The public sees the deal.

Costs Some donors may walk.

B

Vote in public

Policy-shaping gifts approved at an open meeting.

Gains Accountable decisions.

Costs Slower approvals.

C

Plan the exit

A sunset plan and independent evaluation up front.

Gains No orphaned programs.

Costs More upfront work.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

Which programs here are paid for by private grants?

What strings came with them?

Who evaluates them?

WHO DECIDES

Superintendent
Negotiating gifts.

School board
Approving and overseeing them.

State
Disclosure rules.

ASK THE BOARD

“Which programs in our district are funded by private foundations, what strings came with them, and who measures the results?”

WATCH FOR

Gifts approved without discussion.

Programs dropped when the money ends.

Evaluations never published.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

A public gift register.

Independent evaluations.

Programs that outlast the grant.

Sources: RAND/AIR via Education Week (2018); Chalkbeat (2018); Education Week (2013, 2016); Walton Family Foundation (2026). The district is a composite.

Generosity is welcome. Public schools still need public steering.

CRACK

57 Choice Without a Map

Public money moves fast. The map for parents doesn't exist.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

The Garcias get a $7,000 education savings account for their son. Three private schools are nearby. None report the state test, two won't share graduation rates, and one raised tuition by $2,000 the same year the accounts began.

THE CRACK

About 1.5 million students use private school choice programs in 30 states, and most states now make nearly every child eligible. Spending is rising fast. Yet in many programs most early users were already in private school, and only 2 of the first 8 universal states require the same test as public schools. A federal tax-credit program begins in 2027. Families and taxpayers lack a common map.

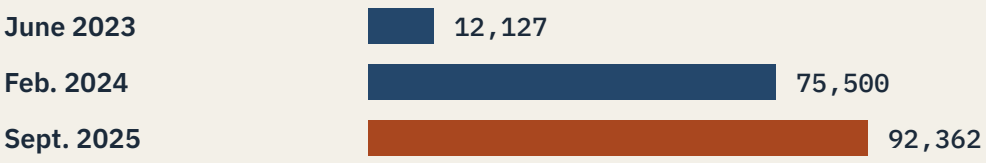
1.5M

Students in private school choice programs (2025–26)

2 of 8

Early universal-choice states requiring the state test

ARIZONA ESA ENROLLMENT



Supporters (EdChoice, Cato) and critics (NEPC) both publish analyses; figures here are state counts. Sources: EdWeek (2026); NEPC review of Common Sense Institute; IRS (2026).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Civic fluency Belonging

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Whatever you think of choice, everyone deserves the map.

A

One public report card

Cost, enrollment and prior school for every program.

Gains Honest budgeting.

Costs New reporting duties.

B

A comparable measure

One shared test or outcome for publicly funded students.

Gains Families can compare.

Costs Private schools resist.

C

Clear rules on spending

Published audits of what the money buys.

Gains Trust in the program.

Costs Administrative cost.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How many local students use state choice funds?

Where were they enrolled before?

What results do those schools report?

WHO DECIDES

Families
Choosing schools.

State legislature
Program rules and reporting.

Governor
Opting into the federal program.

ASK THE BOARD

“How many students in our area use state choice funds, where were they enrolled before, and what results can families compare?”

WATCH FOR

Costs that outrun estimates.

No shared outcome measure.

Tuition rising with the subsidy.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Public, comparable results.

Costs tracked by prior school.

Families who say they chose with good information.

Sources: EdWeek (Jan. & Feb. 2026); EdChoice (2026); FutureEd; NEPC; Stateline; IRS (2026). The Garcias are a composite.

A choice is only as good as the information behind it.

CRACK

58 The Evidence Void

Cutting the instruments while flying through a storm.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

A curriculum director wants to know which reading program works for her district's English learners. The federal clearinghouse she used to check was taken offline for months, and the national data she relies on is two years old.

THE CRACK

The country spends about $800 billion a year on public schools and very little on learning what works. In 2025, the federal education research arm cancelled dozens of contracts, the statistics agency went from 102 staff to 4, and planned national tests were cut. Some services were later restored. But school data is going stale, and many of the numbers in this book are getting harder to update.

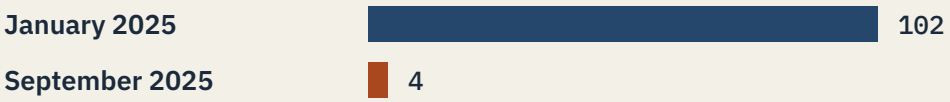
102 → 4

Federal education statistics agency staff, Jan. → Sept. 2025

1.7%

Average share of public research budgets spent on education (OECD)

NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS STAFF



Sources: American Statistical Association (2025); EdWeek (2025); NPR (2025); Chalkbeat (2026); OECD (2023).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Civic fluency Curiosity

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Faster, closer-to-classrooms research, not none at all.

A

Protect the basics

Keep core national data and tests funded by law.

Gains Everyone keeps the map.

Costs A federal cost.

B

Research teachers can use

Faster studies built with districts.

Gains Answers in time to matter.

Costs Needs new structures.

C

States share data

Regional partnerships fill federal gaps.

Gains Resilient evidence.

Costs Uneven across states.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

Which programs here have evidence they work?

How old is the data our district uses?

Does the district evaluate what it buys?

WHO DECIDES

District leaders
Using and producing evidence.

State education agency
Data systems.

Congress
Research and statistics funding.

ASK THE BOARD

“For our three biggest programs, what evidence did we use to choose them, and what have we measured since?”

WATCH FOR

Programs chosen by sales pitch.

Data years out of date.

No one evaluating anything.

HOW WE’LL KNOW IT’S CLOSING

Current, public data.

Programs with evidence.

Districts that measure results.

Sources: American Statistical Association (2025); EdWeek (2025); NPR (2025); Hechinger Report; Chalkbeat (2026); FutureEd; OECD (2023). The director is a composite.

You can’t fix what you refuse to measure.

CRACK

59 Pay Compression

A 24-year staircase to a fair salary.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Mr. Brooks has taught chemistry for 11 years, mentors new teachers and runs the science fair. He earns $9,000 more than a first-year teacher down the hall. A pharmaceutical lab offered him half again his salary. He's thinking about it.

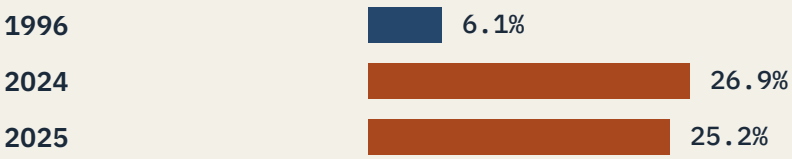
THE CRACK

Teacher pay climbs slowly and tops out late. On average it takes 24 years to reach the top of the salary schedule, and in some districts teachers never reach $75,000. By age 42, teachers typically earn about half their eventual top salary, while doctors and lawyers earn about 80% of theirs. Overall, teachers earn about 25% less than similar college graduates.

24 years
Average time to reach top teacher pay

25.2%
Pay gap with comparable college graduates (2025)

TEACHER PAY GAP VS. SIMILAR GRADUATES



EPI is labor-aligned; NCTQ favors redesigning salary schedules. With benefits counted, the 2025 gap is 14.5%. Sources: EPI/CEPR (2026); NCTQ.

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Resilience Well-being

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Pay the middle of a career like it matters.

A
Shorten the climb

Reach top pay in 10–15 years, not 25.

Gains Keeps mid-career teachers.

Costs Costs more early.

B
Pay for hard roles

Extra pay for scarce subjects and hard-to-staff schools.

Gains Fills the gaps.

Costs Unions often resist.

C
Paid leadership roles

Mentor and lead-teacher posts with real raises.

Gains Growth without leaving class.

Costs Fewer slots than takers.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How many years to reach top pay here?

What does a 10-year teacher earn vs. a first-year?

Is there extra pay for hard-to-fill roles?

WHO DECIDES

School board
Salary schedules and contracts.

Teachers' union
Bargaining.

State legislature
State salary floors and funding.

ASK THE BOARD

"How many years does it take a teacher here to reach top pay, and how many leave before they get there?"

WATCH FOR

Raises only at the bottom.

Mid-career exits.

No pay for hard roles.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Shorter climb.

Mid-career teachers staying.

Hard-to-staff roles filled.

Sources: EPI/CEPR (2025, 2026); NCTQ (2014, 2021); NC Department of Public Instruction (2025). Mr. Brooks is a composite.

Experience is what we want in classrooms. Pay should say so.

CRACK

60 The Narrowed Curriculum

What gets tested gets taught, and the rest gets squeezed.

HUMAN SNAPSHOT · A COMPOSITE STORY

Second graders at Oak Park spend 90 minutes on reading every morning and an hour on math. Science happens on Fridays, if there's time. History is a poster in the hallway. A boy asks his teacher why there are seasons. There isn't time to find out.

THE CRACK

Reading and math matter, and the scores show they need attention. But the push to raise test scores has crowded out much of the rest. K–3 students average 16 minutes a day of social studies and 18 of science. Cuts fall hardest in high-minority schools. Yet knowledge builds reading, and employers say graduates fall short on communication and critical thinking.

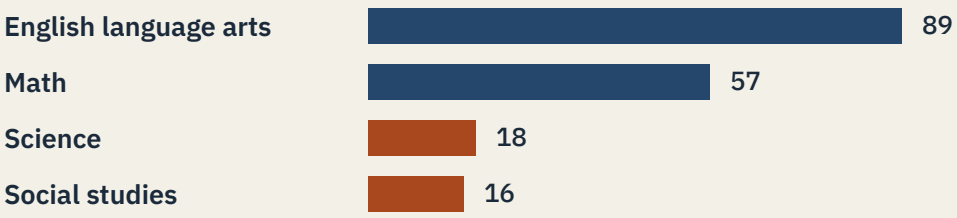
16 min.

Daily K–3 social studies, vs. 89 for English language arts

+30 min.

Extra daily social studies linked to higher reading scores

DAILY MINUTES IN K–3 CLASSROOMS



From a 2018 national teacher survey. Sources: Horizon Research/NSF via Education Week (2019, 2024); Center on Education Policy; NACE (2025).

SIGNAL DASHBOARD Curiosity | Civic fluency

THREE WAYS TO CLOSE IT

Teach reading through knowledge, not instead of it.

A
Knowledge-rich curricula

Reading lessons built on science and history content.

Gains Better readers who know things.

Costs New materials and training.

B
Protect the minutes

Daily time set aside for science and social studies.

Gains Every subject gets taught.

Costs Less flexibility.

C
Measure more than two subjects

School reports that show science, civics and the arts.

Gains What's counted gets kept.

Costs More testing or reporting.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE AT YOUR SCHOOL

How many minutes a day go to science and social studies?

Does the reading curriculum build knowledge?

Is there art and music every week?

WHO DECIDES

Principal & teachers
The daily schedule.

District & school board
Curriculum choices.

State
Standards and accountability.

ASK THE BOARD

"How many minutes a week do our elementary students spend on science, social studies and the arts?"

WATCH FOR

Science only "if there's time."

Test prep crowding out content.

Arts cut first.

HOW WE'LL KNOW IT'S CLOSING

Protected minutes.

Knowledge-rich curriculum.

Reading scores rising anyway.

Sources: Education Week (2008, 2019, 2024); Center on Education Policy; Council for Basic Education; NACE (2025, 2026); AAA&S via Inside Higher Ed. Oak Park is a composite.

A child who knows more reads better. Teach the whole world, not just the test.

III

THE CONTINUOUS ATLAS · CRACKS 61–90 · 30 CRACKS

The Frontier Cracks

Thirty cracks still being mapped.

The map is never finished. These thirty frontier cracks, in four themes, are still being charted: shorter entries, newer evidence, and in several cases open disputes that are labeled as such.

The rule for this part of the book is simple. Pick two cracks a year, follow them to repair, and add what you learn. A frontier crack that gets fixed is a page someone else can copy.

THE FRONTIER, BY THEME

WORKFORCE · 61–70

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62 Teacher Evaluation Distortions
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65 Teacher Professional Growth Void
66 Principals Without Preparation
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88 School Start Time Misalignment
89 The Enrollment Cliff
90 The Four-Day Week

TWO CRACKS A YEAR

Choose one mapped crack and one frontier crack. Ask the board question on each page. Track the answer for a year with the worksheet in Part IV.

Frontier Cracks 61–65

Shorter entries for cracks still being mapped: what's breaking, one number, one question to ask, and who decides.

61 Substitute Teacher Collapse

WORKFORCE

Before the pandemic, about 80% of teacher absences got a substitute. By 2021, many districts filled only 50–60%. In Illinois, 91% of districts still struggle to fill openings, and sub pay is often near minimum wage.

ASK What share of teacher absences got a substitute last year?

Sources: EdWeek (2020, 2021); ISBE (2025). No current national count exists.

91%

Illinois districts struggling to fill sub jobs (2024–25)

WHO DECIDES
District & board · State

62 Teacher Evaluation Distortions

WORKFORCE

After a decade of evaluation reform, about 97% of teachers were still rated effective or better. Evaluators expected about 24% of low performers to get a low rating; only 6.6% did.

ASK How many teachers here got a growth plan last year, and did it help?

Sources: Kraft & Gilmour (2017); Brookings; Brown University.

97%

Teachers rated effective or better after reforms

WHO DECIDES
Principal · District & union contract · State

63 Rural Teacher Housing Crisis

WORKFORCE

From 2019 to 2025, housing costs rose about 47–51% while starting teacher pay rose 24%. Districts from rural New Mexico to California are building teacher housing; one California district with 122 units has started two school years with zero vacancies.

ASK Can a new teacher afford rent within 20 minutes of this school?

Sources: NCTQ via Multifamily Dive; Next City; CalMatters; The 74. A community-wide problem, not only a school one.

~50% vs 24%

Housing costs vs. starting teacher pay, 2019–2025

WHO DECIDES
District & board · City & county zoning · State

64 Teacher Preparation Disconnect

WORKFORCE

In 2026, slightly more than half of teacher-prep programs taught the science of reading, up from about a quarter three years earlier. Many still teach discredited methods, and few prepare teachers for struggling readers or English learners.

ASK Where do our new teachers train, and how were they taught to teach reading?

Sources: NCTQ via Chalkbeat and EdWeek (June 2026). NCTQ is a reform group; programs dispute its grading.

~1 in 2

Prep programs aligned with the science of reading (2026)

WHO DECIDES
State program approval · Colleges · District hiring

65 Teacher Professional Growth Void

WORKFORCE

One study found districts spent about $18,000 per teacher per year on development, yet only 3 in 10 teachers improved substantially. In 2026, federal auditors found the evidence mixed, though teachers value learning together.

ASK What do we spend on teacher training, and how do we know it works?

Sources: TNTP (2015, four systems; a reform group); Fordham; GAO-26-107874 (2026).

3 in 10

Teachers who improved substantially

WHO DECIDES
District & board · Principal · State

Frontier Cracks 66–70

Shorter entries for cracks still being mapped: what's breaking, one number, one question to ask, and who decides.

66 Principals Without Preparation

WORKFORCE

About 1 in 5 principals leave their school each year, and half are gone by year three. In a national survey, 42% were considering leaving, and 75% cited lack of time.

ASK How long has our principal been here, and who supports them?

1 in 5

Principals who leave their school each year

WHO DECIDES
District & board · State licensing

Sources: NASSP (2026); LPI/NASSP survey. NASSP is the principals' association.

67 Teacher Workforce Diversity Gap

WORKFORCE

About 22% of U.S. teachers are people of color, compared with 55% of students, a gap found in 97% of districts. Race-based recruiting is now legally contested; widening the pipeline, such as helping aides become teachers, is not.

ASK Do we offer aides a paid path to a teaching license?

22% vs 55%

Teachers vs. students of color

WHO DECIDES
District & board · State · Colleges

Sources: TNTP (2024); The 74 on NCTQ; EdWeek; Rutgers/Proctor (2026) on the February 2025 federal guidance.

68 License Portability

WORKFORCE

BEING FIXED

The Interstate Teacher Mobility Compact took effect in 2023, letting teachers carry a license between member states. It had 13 members by April 2026, and Minnesota, South Carolina and Wyoming had bills pending. States trade some control for mobility.

ASK Has our state joined the Interstate Teacher Mobility Compact?

13

States in the teacher mobility compact (April 2026)

WHO DECIDES
State legislature · State education board

Sources: EdWeek (2023); Nebraska Department of Education; Pennsylvania Department of Education.

69 Uncertified Classrooms

WORKFORCE

In Texas, uncertified teachers grew from 3.8% of the workforce to 12% in five years. More than half of new hires lacked certification, and they leave at nearly twice the rate. A 2025 state law now pays for certification and mentoring.

ASK How many of our teachers are uncertified, and who mentors them?

3.8% → 12%

Uncertified share of Texas teachers, 2019–20 to 2024–25

WHO DECIDES
State certification · District hiring

Sources: TEA data via The Center Square; UT Austin ERC (2025); EdWeek; LPI. Career changers with classroom time often do well.

70 Early Educator Wages

WORKFORCE

Early educators earn a median $13.07 an hour, less than 97% of other occupations, and about 43% of their families rely on public assistance. Raising wages raises prices for families unless public money fills the gap.

ASK What do child care teachers in our community earn?

$13.07

Median hourly wage for early educators

WHO DECIDES
State subsidies · Congress · Providers

Sources: CSCCE, UC Berkeley (2024; an advocacy research center); BLS; The Hechinger Report.

Frontier Cracks 71–75

Shorter entries for cracks still being mapped: what's breaking, one number, one question to ask, and who decides.

71 Early Childhood Access Gaps

ACCESS

MIXED EVIDENCE

State preschool reached a record 1.8 million children in 2024–25, but only six states meet all ten quality benchmarks. Long-term results split: in Tennessee's lottery study, pre-K children were behind by sixth grade; in Boston's, more of them went to college.

ASK Which quality standards does our pre-K meet?

37% • 9%

4- and 3-year-olds in state preschool (2024–25)

WHO DECIDES
State · District · Congress (Head Start)

Sources: NIEER (2025; partly Gates-funded); Vanderbilt study via NPR (2022); Gray-Lobe, Pathak & Walters, QJE (2023).

72 Homework Inequity

ACCESS

About 23 million families lost a monthly internet discount when Congress let the Affordable Connectivity Program lapse in 2024. In 2025 the FCC stopped E-Rate funding for school hotspot lending, saying the program was never meant for use off campus.

ASK How many of our students can't get online at home?

23 million

Families who lost an internet discount (2024)

WHO DECIDES
Congress · FCC · District

Sources: FCC data via Verizon; AP; ALA; EdWeek (Nov. 2025); FCC statement (2025). See Crack 10.

73 The Hours Outside School

ACCESS

Parents of nearly 30 million children want afterschool programs, and more than 3 in 4 of those children aren't in one. About half miss the summer programs their parents want; cost is the main barrier. Summer school raised learning even when imperfectly run.

ASK How many students are on our afterschool waitlist?

30 million

Children whose parents want afterschool

WHO DECIDES
District & board · City & county · State grants

Sources: Afterschool Alliance (2025, 2026; an advocacy group); Wallace Foundation; NWEA/CALDER via EdWeek (2026).

74 STEM Gender Divide

ACCESS

In 2024, girls were about 26% of AP Computer Science A test-takers. In one study, offering the newer AP CS Principles course quadrupled female, Black and Hispanic test-takers. It's the mirror image of Crack 77: each gender faces gaps in different places.

ASK Does our high school offer AP Computer Science Principles?

26%

Girls among AP Computer Science A test-takers (2024)

WHO DECIDES
District & board · Counselors · State

Sources: College Board; EdWeek (April 2025); CalMatters/PPIC.

75 Indigenous Education Marginalization

ACCESS

American Indian and Alaska Native students have the lowest graduation rate of any group. Bureau of Indian Education schools hit a record 75% in 2024, but most Native students attend regular public schools. Tribal nations should help design the fixes.

ASK How does our district consult tribal nations about Native students?

74% vs 87%

Native graduation rate vs. national (2021–22)

WHO DECIDES
District & board · Tribal nations · State · BIE

Sources: NCES via EdReform Now; Bureau of Indian Education; U.S. Department of the Interior (Jan. 2026).

Frontier Cracks 76–80

Shorter entries for cracks still being mapped: what's breaking, one number, one question to ask, and who decides.

76 Equal Isn't Enough

ACCESS

CONTESTED · BOTH SIDES

EdTrust finds districts serving the most students of color get about 16% less state and local revenue. Brookings finds high-poverty districts have spent more per student for decades. Both can be true: the measures differ, and need is greater where poverty is.

ASK Does our state formula give more where needs are greater, and is it enough?

–16%
State & local revenue gap (EdTrust)

More
Spending per student, high-poverty districts (Brookings)

WHO DECIDES
State legislature · Courts · Congress (Title I)

Sources: EdTrust (2022); Brookings/Reber (2026); EdWeek (Sept. 2025).

77 The Boys Gap

ACCESS

By eighth grade, girls are almost a full grade ahead in reading and writing. Girls are twice as likely to be in the top 10% by GPA, boys are about 65% of special education students, and women are now 58% of undergraduates.

ASK How do boys and girls here compare in reading?

~1 grade
Girls' lead in reading and writing by 8th grade

WHO DECIDES
District & board · Teachers · State

Sources: Stanford CEPA via EdWeek (2025); AIBM (an advocacy institute; data are federal); Education Next. Pair with Crack 74.

78 Inaccessible Buildings

ACCESS

Two-thirds of districts have schools with physical barriers for people with disabilities. An estimated 17% of districts, serving 16 million students, have at least one school that may be inaccessible. Some new security upgrades add barriers.

ASK When was our building last checked for accessibility?

16 million
Students in districts with a possibly inaccessible school

WHO DECIDES
District & board · State · Federal ADA enforcement

Sources: GAO-20-448 (2020, the latest national data); GAO WatchBlog. See Crack 07.

79 Foster Care Student Instability

TRANSITIONS

About 65% of foster youth finish high school by 21, against 86% of all young people, and they are about three times as likely to be expelled. New York City shows it can be fixed: its foster-youth graduation rate rose from 25% for the class of 2011 to 46% for the class of 2020.

ASK Who at our school is the point person for students in foster care?

65% vs 86%
Finish high school by 21: foster youth vs. all

WHO DECIDES
District liaison · Child welfare agency · Courts

Sources: Legal Center for Foster Care & Education (national data is old); NYC CIDI (2026).

80 Juvenile Justice Education Void

TRANSITIONS

About 29,300 young people were held in juvenile facilities on one day in 2023. Only 9% of professionals surveyed said youth always earn credit for coursework in detention, often because records are lost. 2025 reports in New York City and Los Angeles found the same gaps.

ASK When a student returns from detention, who makes sure their credits count?

9%
Say youth always get credit for detention coursework

WHO DECIDES
State juvenile justice agency · District · Courts

Sources: OJJDP (2025); SPLC and Juvenile Law Center survey (2020; advocacy groups); Chalkbeat (Nov. 2025); EdSource (2025).

Frontier Cracks 81–85

Shorter entries for cracks still being mapped: what's breaking, one number, one question to ask, and who decides.

81 Transition to Postsecondary Gap

TRANSITIONS

About 54% of the class of 2025 completed the FAFSA, recovering from the botched 2024 rollout, but low-income high schools trailed. Students who took dual-enrollment courses went on to college at 81%, against 63%. College isn't the only good path (Crack 22).

50% vs 56%

FAFSA completion: low- vs. higher-income high schools

ASK What share of our seniors finished the FAFSA?

WHO DECIDES
Counselors · District · State · U.S. Dept. of Education

Sources: NCAN; National Student Clearinghouse via NCAN; Gates Foundation (2011 cohort).

82 Invisible Homelessness

TRANSITIONS

Schools identified about 1.55 million homeless students in 2023–24, up 12.6% in a year, and those are undercounts. About three in four are doubled up with other families, not in shelters. In 2022–23, 69% graduated on time, against 87% of all students.

1.55 million

Homeless students identified (2023–24)

ASK How many of our students are identified as homeless, and who checks?

WHO DECIDES
District liaison · State · Congress

Sources: National Center for Homeless Education, federal data (Feb. 2026); UCLA (2026).

83 Adult Learning Neglect

TRANSITIONS

U.S. adults at the lowest literacy level rose from 19% to 28% in six years. Among 16- to 24-year-olds the share reached 25%, many of them with diplomas. Federal adult-education funding was proposed for elimination in 2025.

19% → 28%

Adults at the lowest literacy level, 2017 to 2023

ASK Where can a parent in our district take a free reading class?

WHO DECIDES
State adult education · Congress · Colleges & libraries

Sources: NCES/PIAAC; The 74; EdSource (2025).

84 School Transportation Fragility

SYSTEMS

In a 2025 survey, 81% of administrators called bus driver shortages a problem, and 26% had cut or shortened routes. Fort Wayne, Indiana, ended 2025–26 with rotating virtual days. The survey's sponsor sells transportation services; one fleet survey says the shortage is easing.

26%

Districts that cut or shortened bus routes (2025)

ASK How many bus routes ran late or were cut this year?

WHO DECIDES
District & board · State

Sources: AP-NORC/HopSkipDrive (2025); K-12 Dive; EdWeek (May 2026); School Bus Fleet. See Crack 17.

85 Families in the Dark

SYSTEMS

About 90% of parents believe their child is at or above grade level, while about 30% of eighth graders are proficient. Schools with the strongest family engagement saw a 39% smaller rise in absenteeism. Only 2 in 3 parents say their school offered a conference.

90% vs 30%

Parents who think their child is on grade level vs. 8th graders proficient

ASK How do my child's grades compare with state test results?

WHO DECIDES
Teachers & principal · District · State report cards

Sources: Learning Heroes/Gallup (2023; an advocacy group); Learning Heroes/TNTP (2025); EdTrust. See Crack 19.

Frontier Cracks 86–90

Shorter entries for cracks still being mapped: what's breaking, one number, one question to ask, and who decides.

86 SYSTEMS

The Police Trade-Off

CONTESTED · BOTH SIDES

Rigorous studies find school officers reduce some violence, though not shootings, and increase suspensions and arrests, with effects more than twice as large for Black students. Many districts that removed officers in 2020 have brought them back. Both the safety concerns and the costs are real.

ASK What is our school officer's written role, and how many students were arrested last year?

Less
Some fights and violence

More
Suspensions and arrests

WHO DECIDES
District & board · Police agreement · State

Sources: Journal of Policy Analysis and Management via EdWeek (2023); Brown Annenberg via The 74; Brookings. See Cracks 41 and 52.

87 SYSTEMS

The Curriculum Patchwork

Most teachers mix and match materials, and 40–50% start using a new one each year, often adding to high-quality curricula. Teachers spend about seven hours a week finding or making materials. The goal is a strong default, not a script.

ASK What core curriculum do we use, and how many teachers actually use it?

~7 hours
Per week teachers spend finding or making materials

WHO DECIDES
District & board · State lists · Teachers

Sources: RAND (2025); EdWeek (July 2025); EdSource.

88 SYSTEMS

School Start Time Misalignment

BEING FIXED

California's 2022 law moved high school start times to 8:30 a.m. or later. The share of students sleeping eight hours rose 13%, and proficiency rose about 1.7–1.8 points where schools had started earliest. The costs: later sports, harder commutes, new bus routes.

ASK What time does our high school start, and what would a later start cost?

+24 min
More sleep per night after later starts

WHO DECIDES
District & board · State legislature

Sources: NBER w35184; JAMA via RAND (Nov. 2026); EdSource (Sept. 2026).

89 SYSTEMS

The Enrollment Cliff

U.S. public school enrollment peaked at 50.8 million in 2019 and is projected to fall to 46.9 million by 2031. Only nine states are projected to grow. Closures hit some neighborhoods harder, but half-empty buildings drain money from classrooms.

ASK What is our 10-year enrollment forecast, and what is the plan?

−7.6%
Projected public enrollment, 2019 to 2031

WHO DECIDES
District & board · State formula · City planning

Sources: NCES via Stateline (2025); Reason Foundation; PPIC. See Cracks 04 and 07.

90 SYSTEMS

The Four-Day Week

CONTESTED · BOTH SIDES

Nearly two-thirds of Colorado districts and more than a quarter of Missouri's run four-day weeks. A 12-state study found lower math and English achievement; Missouri's own study found no significant difference. Rural districts say it keeps teachers.

ASK If we moved to four days, what would students do on the fifth?

Lower
Achievement in a 12-state study

No change
Missouri's state study

WHO DECIDES
District & board · State · Voters (Missouri)

Sources: EdWeek (2024, April 2026); Oregon State/RAND via Axios (2023); K-12 Dive.

WORKSHEET

The School Crack Audit

Season 1: the load-bearing basics, checked at one school.

School _____ Date _____ Checked by _____

CRACK	WHAT TO CHECK	WHAT WE FOUND	STATUS	WHO
01 **Teacher pay**	Starting salary vs. the local median income.		☐ Solid ☐ Hairline ☐ Open	B · S
02 **Counselor ratio**	Students per counselor in this building.		☐ Solid ☐ Hairline ☐ Open	P · B
03 **Nurse coverage**	Is a nurse on site every school day?		☐ Solid ☐ Hairline ☐ Open	B
05 **Meals**	Lunch-debt policy. Is any child singled out?		☐ Solid ☐ Hairline ☐ Open	B · S
07 **Buildings**	Heat, cooling, water and lead testing dates.		☐ Solid ☐ Hairline ☐ Open	B
08 **Hidden fees**	Fees for sports, labs, clubs or trips.		☐ Solid ☐ Hairline ☐ Open	P · B
09 **Special education**	Weeks from request to evaluation.		☐ Solid ☐ Hairline ☐ Open	B · S
10 **Broadband**	Can every student get online at home?		☐ Solid ☐ Hairline ☐ Open	B · S

Who decides: P principal · B district and school board · S state. Most cracks have more than one owner; this is where to start.

OUR FIRST CRACK THIS YEAR

Bring it to: _____ By: _____

OUR SECOND CRACK THIS YEAR

Bring it to: _____ By: _____

You can’t fix a crack nobody has written down.

BLANK COPY IN THE APPENDIX

Reading Your District Budget

Find where a crack shows up in the numbers.

District _____ Budget year _____ Adopted on _____

LINE TO FIND	WHERE TO LOOK	THIS YEAR	LAST YEAR	CRACK
Total operating budget	Budget summary, first pages			–
Spending per student: district	State school report card			04
Spending per student: our school	State report card, school page			76
Share spent on salaries and benefits	Expenditures by object			01, 12
One-time money ending this year or next	Federal and grant funds			16
Fund balance (reserves)	Fund summary or annual audit			04
Repairs and building projects	Capital or facilities fund			07
Special education: total and federal share	Special education or IDEA line			09

Federal law requires state report cards to show spending per student for each school. Budget books, the annual audit and state finance websites have the rest. Names vary by state.

ASK ABOUT ANY LINE

- ☐ Is this money recurring, or one-time?
- ☐ What changed from last year, and why?
- ☐ What did it buy, and how do we know it worked? (Crack 58)
- ☐ Who approved it, and when?

WORDS TO KNOW

General fund. The main account that pays for day-to-day schooling.

Fund balance. Money held in reserve. Too little is risky; too much may be unspent help.

Recurring vs. one-time. Salaries need recurring money. Grants and relief funds end.

Per-student spending. Total spending divided by enrollment. Compare schools, not just districts.

A budget is a list of priorities with numbers attached.

WORKSHEET

Before the Board Meeting

Public comment, questions and follow-up.

Meeting date _____ Body (board, committee) _____ Comment sign-up deadline _____

BEFORE

- ☐ Find the agenda; most states require it be posted in advance
- ☐ Check the public comment rules and sign-up deadline
- ☐ Pick one crack and one ask
- ☐ Fill in the statement below and time it
- ☐ Bring the crack's sources and one printed copy
- ☐ Invite two people to come with you

AT THE MEETING

- ☐ Sign up to speak, then sit where you can see the board
- ☐ Speak to the board, not the room
- ☐ Name, school, crack, number, ask
- ☐ Stay within the time limit
- ☐ Hand the clerk your copy for the record
- ☐ Write down who responds, and what they say

AFTER

- ☐ Email the board within two days: thanks, and your ask again
- ☐ Ask for the crack on a future agenda
- ☐ Check the minutes for what was recorded
- ☐ Log it in the Two-Cracks Tracker
- ☐ Come back next month
- ☐ Thank them in public when they act

YOUR TWO-MINUTE STATEMENT

ABOUT 250–300 WORDS FILLS TWO MINUTES

My name is _____ and I'm a parent / teacher / student / neighbor at

I'm here about _____ (Crack ___ in The 90 Cracks Atlas).

At our school, _____

The number that matters: _____

I'm asking the board to _____

by _____ . Thank you.

_____

Ground rule: stick to the crack, not the person. Boards act on evidence and steady pressure, not on anger.

Two minutes, once a month, adds up.

WORKSHEET

Writing to a Policymaker

One crack, one ask, one page.

To (name and office) _____ Level: city / state / federal _____ Sent on _____

ONE PAGE, SIX PARTS

1. **Who you are**
   A constituent: say where you live and your tie to the school.
2. **The crack**
   One sentence. Use the crack's name and number.
3. **What you've seen**
   Local and specific: one fact from your school.
4. **The number**
   One figure from the crack's page, with its source.
5. **One ask**
   A vote, a bill, a budget line or a hearing. Name it.
6. **A reply**
   Ask for an answer by a date, and offer to meet.

Dear _____

I live in _____ , and I am a parent / teacher / board member at

I'm writing about _____ (Crack ___).

At our school, _____

_____

According to _____ ,

_____

I'm asking you to _____

_____

Could you reply by _____ ? I would welcome a meeting.

Sincerely, _____

TIPS

- Find the right office first: see Who Decides? on page 8.
- Constituents count most. Write to the people who represent you.
- One crack per letter. A second crack is a second letter.
- If a bill number exists, use it.
- Phone calls and visits add weight; letters create a record.

REPLY LOG

Reply received on _____

Who replied _____

What they committed to _____

Our next step _____

A letter is a record. Make it one they have to answer.

WORKSHEET

The Two-Cracks Tracker

Pick two a year. Follow them to repair.

School or group _____ School year _____ Kept by _____

CRACK 1 · NO. ____ STATUS NOW: ☐ OPEN ☐ HAIRLINE ☐ SOLID

Crack name _____ Why we chose it _____

Who decides _____ Our ask _____

	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL
Asked at a meeting	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Letter sent	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Reply received	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
On an agenda	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Decision made	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

HOW WE'LL KNOW (FROM THE CRACK'S PAGE)	AT THE START	NOW

CRACK 2 · NO. ____ STATUS NOW: ☐ OPEN ☐ HAIRLINE ☐ SOLID

Crack name _____ Why we chose it _____

Who decides _____ Our ask _____

	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL
Asked at a meeting	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Letter sent	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
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HOW WE'LL KNOW (FROM THE CRACK'S PAGE)	AT THE START	NOW

Choose one mapped crack (01–60) and one frontier crack (61–90). Status uses the same scale as the School Crack Audit. At year's end, pass this page to whoever picks next year's two.

Cracks close when someone keeps checking.

The School Crack Audit

Any eight cracks, checked at one school.

School _____ Date _____ Checked by _____

CRACK	WHAT TO CHECK	WHAT WE FOUND	STATUS	WHO
			☐ Solid ☐ Hairline ☐ Open	
			☐ Solid ☐ Hairline ☐ Open	
			☐ Solid ☐ Hairline ☐ Open	
			☐ Solid ☐ Hairline ☐ Open	
			☐ Solid ☐ Hairline ☐ Open	
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Asked at a meeting	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Letter sent	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Reply received	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
On an agenda	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Decision made	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

HOW WE'LL KNOW (FROM THE CRACK'S PAGE)	AT THE START	NOW

CRACK 2 · NO. ____ STATUS NOW: ☐ OPEN ☐ HAIRLINE ☐ SOLID

Crack name _____ Why we chose it _____

Who decides _____ Our ask _____

	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL
Asked at a meeting	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
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On an agenda	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
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Sources and Data Notes

HOW TO READ THESE NOTES

- Every figure in this book was checked against its source in 2026. Numbers change; each page names the year of its data.
- Human snapshots are composites, written to show a crack in one life. No snapshot describes a real, identifiable person.
- Sources with a stake are labeled where they appear: advocacy groups, unions, vendors and foundations, whichever way they lean.
- NAEP "Proficient" is a demanding benchmark, not grade level. Where a page uses it, the chart note says so.
- Full links for every source are kept in the Atlas evidence files and will be posted with the book.

01 Teacher Pay Floor. Economic Policy Institute and Center for Economic and Policy Research, teacher pay penalty report (2025 data).

02 Counselor Ratios. American School Counselor Association analysis of NCES data, 2024–25 (released Feb. 2026); ASCA, "School Counselor Roles & Ratios." Check your state at schoolcounselor.org.

03 Nurse Ratios. National Association of School Nurses; American Academy of Pediatrics; Education Week (2023); Oregon Health Authority (2025).

04 Funding Whiplash. Bellwether and WestEd via K-12 Dive (2025); Bellwether; Education Commission of the States; Reason Foundation. See Crack 89, The Enrollment Cliff.

05 Universal Meals. NPR (September 2026); Food Research & Action Center (2026); School Nutrition Association via K-12 Dive; Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior (2025).

06 Mental Health Hubs. Education Week (April 2025–March 2026); NPR (May 2025); K-12 Dive (2026); Courthouse News (2026); state attorneys general.

07 Building Decay. GAO-26-107970 (September 2026); ASCE 2025 Report Card for America's Infrastructure.

08 Hidden Fees. Aspen Institute Project Play (2025), via the National Federation of State High School Associations; C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health (2019).

09 Special Education Full Funding. National Conference of State Legislatures; Education Week (February 2025); Congressional Research Service figures via Sen. Hassan (2025); IES/NCSER (2011).

10 Broadband Guarantee. FCC order (September 2025); Education Week (November 2025); Pew Research Center (2022); AP (2024); SETDA (2025); EducationSuperHighway (2021).

11 Gun Violence Prevention. Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions (2024 data); KFF analysis of CDC data.

12 Paraeducator Wage & Pipeline. Bureau of Labor Statistics (May 2025); National Education Association survey (2022) via Disability Scoop; Ideastream Public Media (October 2025); Chalkbeat New York (July 2026).

13 Literacy Crisis. National Assessment Governing Board, 2024 NAEP results; Education Week (January 2025). Update with 2026 NAEP before print.

14 The Math Slide. National Assessment Governing Board, 2024 NAEP; NPR, K-12 Dive, Hechinger Report (January 2025). Update with 2026 NAEP before print.

15 Teacher Pipeline & Debt. Center for American Progress; Education Week on AACTE data (October 2025); Congressional Research Service (2024); NASFAA (November 2025).

16 The Relief Cliff. Education Week (2024); K-12 Dive (2026); Stanford National Student Support Accelerator; AASA survey via The New Republic.

17 Chronic Absenteeism. American Enterprise Institute via Chalkbeat (June 2026) and K-12 Dive; AEI Return to Learn Tracker.

18 The Scoreboard Is a Lie. Education Writers Association; Teach Plus (2021); Council of the Great City Schools via Education Week and the Portland Press Herald (2015).

19 Grade Inflation. ACT research (2024, 2026) via Education Week and The Hechinger Report; North Dakota SLDS (2026); AIR (2024) and EdWeek (2022) on credit recovery. ACT sells tests; state and federal data confirm the trend.

20 The Vanishing Arts. Arts Education Data Project via the National Association for Music Education (2026); National Endowment for the Arts and NCES School Pulse Panel (2024 survey, via the Arts Education Partnership).

21 One Path to Pride. Bureau of Labor Statistics (April 2025); National Student Clearinghouse via The Washington Times (2025); New America; Burning Glass Institute via Education Week (2026).

22 **Many Futures School.** New York State Education Department (2025); Washington OSPI (2026); All4Ed, "Ready for What?" (2021); Vermont Agency of Education (2025).

23 **The Last Teacher.** RAND (2025); Education Resource Strategies via Education Week (September 2026); North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (March 2026).

24 **Burnout & Overwork.** RAND State of the American Teacher (2025, 2026); EdSource (2026). RAND's survey is supported by the national teachers' unions.

25 **Student Voice Void.** Education Week (2023); New York State Senate (2025); Vermont legislative testimony (2026); AASA (2025); Teachers College, Columbia (2025).

26 **The Attention Crack.** Education Week (2025, 2026); Ballotpedia (2025); Chalkbeat on NBER working paper (2025); The Washington Times (2026); GovTech (2025). State counts change often.

27 **Curriculum & History Wars.** RAND (2024, 2025); PEN America and the American Library Association via Education Week (2026); NPR (2025).

28 **When Meetings Become Battlefields.** Brookings via Education Week (June 2026); Princeton Bridging Divides Initiative via NPR (July 2025); CSBA; Ballotpedia (2026).

29 **Board Capture.** National School Boards Association via BallotReady; Ballotpedia (2025); Brookings; Chalkbeat (2026); Westword (2025); EdSource (2026).

30 **Surveillance & Data Privacy.** Center for Democracy & Technology (2021–2024); The 74; EdSurge (October 2025).

31 **Cyberattack Exposure.** BleepingComputer; TechCrunch; Education Week (2025); NBC News via Yahoo.

32 **AI Without a Plan.** RAND (2025) via Route Fifty and TNND; Education Week (May and August 2026).

33 **Procurement Lock-In.** Instructure EdTech Top 40 (2025) and 2026 analysis via Education Week; BrightBytes via EdWeek Market Brief; Brookings (2012).

34 **The Revolving Door at the Top.** ILO Group via Education Week (2025, 2026); Annenberg Institute at Brown University via Education Week (September 2026); ASCD; K-12 Dive.

35 **Data Black Box.** Education Week (2017–2019); EdTrust; The 74; Education Commission of the States. See the worksheet "Reading Your District Budget."

36 **Audit Blindness.** Oklahoma State Auditor and Inspector via The Frontier and Oklahoma Voice (2025); U.S. Department of Education OIG (2026); KOMO and the Daily Signal (2026).

37 **Information Literacy.** Stanford History Education Group (2016, 2019); Media Literacy Now (2026); NASBE.

38 **Civics & Democracy.** NAGB (2023); iCivics (2023); Pew Research (2018); CNCS (2008).

39 **Climate Illiteracy.** EdWeek Research Center (2022, 2025); NCSE; Penn State.

40 **The Signal of Play.** EdWeek Research Center (2025); CDC (2019); Brookings; Axios (2026).

41 **Discipline Disparities.** Civil Rights Data Collection 2023–24 via K-12 Dive and NPR (2026); Daniel Losen.

42 **The Advanced Access Gap.** Civil Rights Data Collection via K-12 Dive and EdWeek; Card & Giuliano (2016); ECS (2025); Center for American Progress.

43 **Immigrant Barriers.** Brookings; ED; Stanford/SIEPR (2025); Brown Annenberg (2026); Journalist's Resource; Migration Policy Institute (2026).

44 **The Migrant Student Crisis.** ED (2022, 2025, 2026); EdWeek (2025, 2026); NPR (2025); LPI.

45 **The Life Skills Void.** NGPF (2025, 2026); Urban, Schmeiser, Collins & Brown; Stoddard & Urban; EdWeek (2026); NEFE.

46 **Suicide Prevention.** CDC YRBS (2025) and NCHS (2026); Jed Foundation; ECS; ASTHO.

47 **Trauma.** NSCH; CDC MMWR (2024); Campbell Collaboration (2019); Watson & Astor (2025); Switchboard (2025).

48 **The School Psychologist Shortage.** NASP; APA Monitor; EdWeek (2026); KFF; state attorneys general; K-12 Dive (2026).

49 **Bullying, On & Offline.** NCES (2024); IES; StopBullying.gov; Pew Research (2023); CDC YRBS (2023).

50 **Vaping.** CDC MMWR (2024); FDA (2025); NBC News (2025); CIDRAP/PHA (2025).

51 **Restraint & Seclusion.** Civil Rights Data Collection via K-12 Dive (2026); GAO (2020); Brookings; New America.

52 **The Safety Tech Rush.** EdWeek (2023, 2026); Undark (2026); CNN; 7News/KOMO; Fast Company.

53 **Educator Safety.** APA Task Force (2022, 2024); APA/NEA (2025); EdWeek (2022, 2024).

54 **Climate & Disaster Readiness.** GAO (2020, 2026); EdWeek (2021, 2026); FAS; The 74; CBS News; NCES (2023) on building age.

55 **Lobbyist Capture.** NEA LM-2 (2025); OpenSecrets via The 74; Hechinger Report; Texas Tribune; Bridge Michigan; Chalkbeat/Colorado Sun.

56 **Opaque Philanthropy.** RAND/AIR via Education Week (2018); Chalkbeat (2018); Education Week (2013, 2016); Walton Family Foundation (2026).

57 **Choice Without a Map.** EdWeek (Jan. & Feb. 2026); EdChoice (2026); FutureEd; NEPC; Stateline; IRS (2026).

58 **The Evidence Void.** American Statistical Association (2025); EdWeek (2025); NPR (2025); Hechinger Report; Chalkbeat (2026); FutureEd; OECD (2023).

59 **Pay Compression.** EPI/CEPR (2025, 2026); NCTQ (2014, 2021); NC Department of Public Instruction (2025).

60 **The Narrowed Curriculum.** Education Week (2008, 2019, 2024); Center on Education Policy; Council for Basic Education; NACE (2025, 2026); AAA&S via Inside Higher Ed.

61 Substitute Teacher Collapse. EdWeek (2020, 2021); ISBE (2025). No current national count exists.

62 Teacher Evaluation Distortions. Kraft & Gilmour (2017); Brookings; Brown University.

63 Rural Teacher Housing Crisis. NCTQ via Multifamily Dive; Next City; CalMatters; The 74. A community-wide problem, not only a school one.

64 Teacher Preparation Disconnect. NCTQ via Chalkbeat and EdWeek (June 2026). NCTQ is a reform group; programs dispute its grading.

65 Teacher Professional Growth Void. TNTP (2015, four systems; a reform group); Fordham; GAO-26-107874 (2026).

66 Principals Without Preparation. NASSP (2026); LPI/NASSP survey. NASSP is the principals' association.

67 Teacher Workforce Diversity Gap. TNTP (2024); The 74 on NCTQ; EdWeek; Rutgers/Proctor (2026) on the February 2025 federal guidance.

68 License Portability. EdWeek (2023); Nebraska Department of Education; Pennsylvania Department of Education.

69 Uncertified Classrooms. TEA data via The Center Square; UT Austin ERC (2025); EdWeek; LPI. Career changers with classroom time often do well.

70 Early Educator Wages. CSCCE, UC Berkeley (2024; an advocacy research center); BLS; The Hechinger Report.

71 Early Childhood Access Gaps. NIEER (2025; partly Gates-funded); Vanderbilt study via NPR (2022); Gray-Lobe, Pathak & Walters, QJE (2023).

72 Homework Inequity. FCC data via Verizon; AP; ALA; EdWeek (Nov. 2025); FCC statement (2025). See Crack 10.

73 The Hours Outside School. Afterschool Alliance (2025, 2026; an advocacy group); Wallace Foundation; NWEA/CALDER via EdWeek (2026).

74 STEM Gender Divide. College Board; EdWeek (April 2025); CalMatters/PPIC.

75 Indigenous Education Marginalization. NCES via EdReform Now; Bureau of Indian Education; U.S. Department of the Interior (Jan. 2026).

76 Equal Isn't Enough. EdTrust (2022); Brookings/Reber (2026); EdWeek (Sept. 2025).

77 The Boys Gap. Stanford CEPA via EdWeek (2025); AIBM (an advocacy institute; data are federal); Education Next. Pair with Crack 74.

78 Inaccessible Buildings. GAO-20-448 (2020, the latest national data); GAO WatchBlog. See Crack 07.

79 Foster Care Student Instability. Legal Center for Foster Care & Education (national data is old); NYC CIDI (2026).

80 Juvenile Justice Education Void. OJJDP (2025); SPLC and Juvenile Law Center survey (2020; advocacy groups); Chalkbeat (Nov. 2025); EdSource (2025).

81 Transition to Postsecondary Gap. NCAN; National Student Clearinghouse via NCAN; Gates Foundation (2011 cohort).

82 Invisible Homelessness. National Center for Homeless Education, federal data (Feb. 2026); UCLA (2026).

83 Adult Learning Neglect. NCES/PIAAC; The 74; EdSource (2025).

84 School Transportation Fragility. AP-NORC/HopSkipDrive (2025); K-12 Dive; EdWeek (May 2026); School Bus Fleet. See Crack 17.

85 Families in the Dark. Learning Heroes/Gallup (2023; an advocacy group); Learning Heroes/TNTP (2025); EdTrust. See Crack 19.

86 The Police Trade-Off. Journal of Policy Analysis and Management via EdWeek (2023); Brown Annenberg via The 74; Brookings. See Cracks 41 and 52.

87 The Curriculum Patchwork. RAND (2025); EdWeek (July 2025); EdSource.

88 School Start Time Misalignment. NBER w35184; JAMA via RAND (Nov. 2026); EdSource (Sept. 2026).

89 The Enrollment Cliff. NCES via Stateline (2025); Reason Foundation; PPIC. See Cracks 04 and 07.

90 The Four-Day Week. EdWeek (2024, April 2026); Oregon State/RAND via Axios (2023); K-12 Dive.

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