



students**first**

A movement to transform public education

Policy Agenda

A Challenge to States and Districts: Policies That Put Students First

Our Challenge

In too many American schools, current laws, policies, and practices put adult interests ahead of student interests. The result is an increasingly broken education system that, if not corrected, will keep America from leading in an increasingly competitive global marketplace. We created StudentsFirst to push for immediate changes that put the success of children at the center of every conversation about education reform. This agenda is a call to action and a roadmap for state and local lawmakers who want to make the changes necessary to put American students back at the top of the international rankings.

We do not pretend that these changes will be easy or can be made overnight. To the contrary, we know that our priorities will upset vested adult interests and therefore trigger controversy. We do not pretend that we are the first to advocate the ideas in this agenda; many organizations, policymakers and individuals have made important strides that now lend proof to the need for full-scale reform. With our members, resources, partners, and the facts behind us, we will fight to shift the balance of power so that effective educators, parents, and, most importantly, students are the centerpiece of our education system.

In developing this agenda, StudentsFirst has assembled policies that will improve public education without regard to their point of origin on the political spectrum. Many of the initiatives below have been piloted at smaller scale or pushed through national efforts like the federal Race to the Top Program. Each policy initiative shares a common principle: a clear-cut answer when we ask the simple question, “What is in the best interest of children and their families?”

StudentsFirst will drive reforms proven to have the strongest results for students by supporting dramatic change in state and local education policies in three critical areas. We will support policies that:

- Elevate the teaching profession by valuing teachers’ impact on students;
- Empower parents with real choices and real information; and
- Spend taxpayers’ money wisely to get better results for students.



Policy Priority 1: Elevate the Teaching Profession by Valuing Teachers' Impact on Students

StudentsFirst believes that all students can achieve at high levels when they have effective teachers. We will work to ensure every child is guaranteed that right. Because excellent teachers are the backbone of public education, they must be recognized as professionals with whom we entrust the awesome responsibility of developing our nation's future.

StudentsFirst will work with states and districts to institute policies and practices that achieve these goals and treat teachers like true professionals. We will focus on the following policy objectives:

- Evaluate teachers based on evidence of student results.
- Evaluate principals based on student results, and on their ability to attract, retain, manage, and develop excellent teachers.
- Support the expansion of effective teacher training and certification programs and the elimination of ineffective programs.
- Pay teachers based on their impact on student results.
- Make all staffing decisions — including hiring, transfers, and firing — based on teacher impact on student results.
- Eliminate tenure as a protection for poor-performing teachers and principals.

Treating teachers as professionals means building an education system in which:

- Teachers will receive excellent training, professional development support, supervision, and leadership.
- Effective teaching will be encouraged and rewarded through an evaluation and compensation system based on teachers' impact on their students.
- The views and professional judgment of teachers will play a critical role in building effective schools. These views and judgments will not be limited to any one group or unit.

Great teachers make
a difference for
children of all
backgrounds.
All children deserve
great teachers.

Unfortunately, existing practice does not reflect this framework and in turn fails to recognize differences and excellence among teachers. The status quo devalues effective educators by treating all teachers as if they are interchangeable. Consequently, our nation's current education policies make almost no effort to measure the effectiveness of teachers — much less to connect effectiveness to teacher placement, training, or pay.

The current quality-blind approach harms students, families and teachers. When school systems cannot make crucial staffing decisions based on effectiveness, they default to making decisions the easiest way possible: hiring from the same sources, increasing pay in rigid lock step, and imposing seniority as the most important teacher attribute, regardless of quality. Less tenured teachers — even highly effective ones — are “bumped” from their classrooms to the detriment of their students.

Our goal is to shift this dynamic through pursuit of policies that prioritize students. Teaching must be the profession of choice for the most talented individuals seeking recognition, growth and fulfillment. In a new public education environment in America, appropriate compensation will reflect the value and rigor of teachers' work. More importantly, great teachers will be surrounded by highly effective colleagues and supported in a school environment that allows them to focus on teaching and providing excellent instruction for their students. Professional development will be meaningful and evaluations will offer real feedback for teachers to improve their craft. This environment will make teaching the attractive professional career it should be, which in turn will positively and dramatically change the learning environment for students.

Strategy 1.1: Evaluate teachers based on evidence of student results rather than arbitrary judgments, and separate teacher evaluation from the collective bargaining process.

Strong evaluation systems contribute to professions by helping managers determine where professionals sit along expectation scales, and ensuring that they understand how they can continually grow and improve in their practice. The systems are never perfect, but when thoughtfully implemented, they provide consistently important information about performance. The tools are also constantly revisited and improved. They often anchor how professionals talk about their craft and improve their practice.

In education, research shows that meaningful performance evaluations do promote teacher effectiveness. Real evaluations can offer teachers the relevant, specific feedback they need to improve and grow. Few districts, however, employ high-quality performance evaluation systems. In many failing schools with dismal student achievement rates, the vast majority of teachers receive the highest possible rating on their evaluations. If our evaluation systems put student interests first, this dissonance would be impossible.

Good evaluations are honest and transparent, are calculated in an understandable manner, accurately assess overall performance, and identify opportunities for teachers to improve.

Fair and robust evaluation systems are entirely possible in education — select districts across the country already use them. Evaluation systems in education have historically been one-dimensional (only using one data point or source of information) without integrating clear performance expectations and as a result have not been valuable for teachers or their managers. The new generation of evaluation systems use multiple inputs to assess how teachers actually perform relative to their students' achievement. These systems include student input, regular classroom observations by trained master teachers and administrators, meaningful feedback, and clear, consistent rubrics. And, when available, they include a rigorous analysis of the individual teacher's "value-add" to their students' academic progress.

A teacher's "value-add" can be the best objective measure of their performance. As Harvard professor Thomas Kane explained, positive "value-add" is accurately obtained not by a simplistic review of raw test scores, "but when the students in [a teacher's] class outperform other students who had similar starting points — similar prior achievement, program participation and demographics — and had similar peers." Simply put, fair evaluations compare apples to apples.

StudentsFirst will aggressively pursue reforms to teacher evaluation systems so that parents and school leaders can reliably distinguish among great, fair, and poor performers and so that teachers can better understand their strengths and areas for growth. Additionally, StudentsFirst will pursue laws and policies that give districts the autonomy to develop teacher evaluation systems apart from the collective bargaining process.

Developing and implementing strong evaluations in education is the appropriate approach for several reasons:

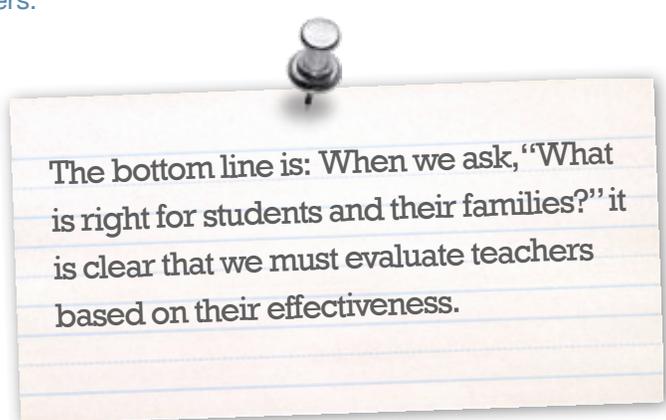
- To improve the quality of any profession, it is essential to be clear about what good (great) performance actually looks like and to give practitioners feedback on where they are in relation to that standard;
- The availability of new methodologies (value added, student work sampling, good student questionnaires, strong observation protocols) now make it possible for us to do that better than ever before;
- Failure to use these methodologies at scale degrades the profession and is unfair to individual professionals because it deprives them of the information they need to improve;
- Failure to use these methodologies is even more devastating to children — it deprives strong professionals of the incentives many need to stay in the profession and allows too many weak teachers to stay in the classroom. Many students will suffer for years over the course of their time in public schools, with many ineffective teachers substantially pulling down their overall achievement.

School districts should work with teachers to develop evaluation systems, rather than imposing systems on teachers. StudentsFirst knows that teacher input and involvement in their evaluation and development strengthens both the process and the outcomes. Accordingly, teachers must have a voice in ensuring their evaluation accurately ties to their stated goals and objectives (See Priority 1.1). However, embedding the systems in collective bargaining agreements or giving union leaders veto power over the final product does not actually have that effect. Utilizing a broad range of strategies — including open feedback sessions, surveys, and specific focus groups by subject matter and grade level — will offer teachers meaningful engagement that will contribute to improved evaluations.

The reality is that the structure of unions and the way they are organized makes them systematically inappropriate for driving the decision-making around evaluations.

Union leaders are legally obligated to represent the interests of all of their members, including ineffective members. Although union leaders express an interest in quality, they have a fiduciary responsibility to their organization to enhance unity and protect low performers. As a result, union leadership, or the vocal minority of teachers, disproportionately influences the evaluation process to skew toward interests that conflict with those of high-performing or promising teachers. The majority of rank-and-file teachers deeply value strong colleagues and a culture of excellence. The ethic of high standards becomes lost in the process when the union dedicates time, effort, and money fighting for the lowest performers. Simply put, labor leadership has a conflict of interest when it comes to evaluation of their members. Recognizing this conflict, steps should be taken to balance the mission of school districts against the collective interest of district employees. A school should not be impaired in its ability to serve families by an evaluation system negotiated to protect the jobs of poor performers.

In school districts across the country, superintendents have no choice but to accept the teacher evaluation system codified in local teacher union contracts. This practice has become the norm over the past 20 years, resulting in weak evaluation systems in district after district. Meanwhile, even the most forward-thinking superintendents rarely have the political backing to negotiate better systems, since school board elections can be easily influenced by highly motivated union organizers. In this way, unions often hold a controlling interest in both sides of the negotiating table. This conflict of interest creates a barrier to developing and implementing meaningful evaluations that are based on what practices will most benefit the students. By including teachers in the evaluation process and simultaneously taking it off the bargaining table, districts will have new opportunities to build on teachers' strengths, drive professionalism, and demand great results for their students.



The bottom line is: When we ask, “What is right for students and their families?” it is clear that we must evaluate teachers based on their effectiveness.

Strategy 1.2: Evaluate principals on their ability to drive student outcomes, and to attract, retain, manage, and develop excellent teachers.

StudentsFirst will push for meaningful evaluations of school leaders because absent strong leadership, teachers and schools cannot deliver for their students.

Just as teachers should be rated by the performance of their students, principals should be rated by the performance of their schools. Good school leaders can set high expectations for instruction and learning, they can help improve instruction, and they can build a climate where teachers trust and find value in their evaluations. In contrast, weak school leaders erode school quality by neither demanding nor supporting excellence.

While the largest single factor in principal evaluations should be school-level student outcomes, a principal's ability to attract, develop, and retain effective teachers must also factor highly. By using both student achievement and quality teacher recruitment and retention as primary measures, districts can ensure that school leaders are evaluated on what matters most: the level of teacher effectiveness in their school. The balance of principal evaluations must then focus on other critical responsibilities, including financial and space management and legal

compliance issues. Finally, principals should also be measured in part on how well parents are engaged in their schools. While this can present great challenges, parent involvement speaks volumes about a school culture. As a school leader, the principal has the unique ability to foster an environment that connects parents with their children's education.

Too many people in school systems experience a disconnect between their work and the success of the students their system serves. Clear expectations and accountability measures are critical for employees at all levels and these expectations must always acknowledge the core mission of the organization. Other administrator evaluations should align with those for principals, ensuring that the performance of every adult in the building ties to drivers of the academic growth of the students in their school. Holding all managers accountable through meaningful evaluation that places the focus on the students' interests will help raise student achievement. A good system will ensure that every adult feels responsible for the success of the students in his or her school.



Strategy 1.3: Support all paths that bring excellent teachers and instruction to students.

Students need the best possible instruction period. There is no one right way to become a teacher, but current law in many states assumes that there is only one pathway. Many people know they want to teach from an early age and follow a traditional path through college, earning their bachelors degree and obtaining a teaching certification or credential after some student teaching. Yet some people enter other professions first, perhaps practicing as an attorney or working as an engineer and coming to the teaching profession after other rich life experiences. Still others are not entirely sure they are ready to make a career decision right after college, but are drawn to the classroom and the rewards and challenges of teaching through alternative programs. Teach for America, for example, places recent college graduates in the classroom in hard-to-staff schools across the country after intensive training institutes. All of these pathways can produce highly effective teachers, a fact that has been proven and that can be observed in classrooms across America. The common thread among highly effective teachers, then, is not actually how they entered the profession, but how well their students perform.

StudentsFirst will insist that students have access to the most effective teachers possible by helping states remove barriers to bringing excellent instruction to all students. Currently, state laws around teacher certification, course credits, and mandatory “seat time” keep effective students from accessing the best possible instruction.

Twenty years ago, there was a crisis in American schools; there were simply not enough teachers coming out of the state’s traditional pathways to teaching (typically college plus at least a year-long certification program) to meet the demand of the growing school-age population. Some states took drastic measures and implemented “emergency credential” programs to get teachers into the classroom quickly. Some states even offered financial incentives. Not only did many people enter the teaching profession who otherwise may not have, but colleges and universities started to think outside the box and create new programs that would support hopeful teachers on alternate paths to the classroom. Today many quality pathway programs are producing teachers who are getting great results for kids. The best programs recruit candidates who are high academic achievers and have strong subject matter knowledge, and then intensively support new teachers through mentoring and observation. States must do everything possible to make entering the teaching profession as desirable as any other highly valued profession. Similar to the argument supporting changes to compensation structure, state laws dictating who can teach must place a greater emphasis on the desired outputs than on the inputs.

Another emerging practice promising to grant greater student access to effective teachers involves developing digital learning environments. When done right, these practices bring excellent teachers to students in hard-to-serve areas by personalizing education so that students can learn at their own pace and style. By taking advantage of existing technology, students can access multiple modes of instruction and greater access to highly effective teachers in a broader spectrum of subject matter than may be available at their local school. As schools struggle to bring a diversity of curricular materials to meet the needs of all students, this model offers a clear solution that cannot be ignored.

In today’s economy, adults must divorce themselves from outmoded notions of “the right way” to educate our students. Policy makers and school leadership must embrace emerging practices that will give students the best opportunities to succeed. Districts should be encouraged to explore innovative digital learning environments and to recruit teachers from any program able to prepare teachers to obtain great results with students.

Strategy 1.4: Pay teachers substantially more for effectiveness.

**StudentsFirst
will support
compensation
plans that reward
highly effective
teachers.**

In almost every other field, professionals are compensated for excellence or for successfully managing more difficult assignments. A demonstrable way to elevate the estimation of the teaching profession is to align compensation with the value of the job. The education of our children is not only honorable, but it is extraordinarily challenging and we demand great things from our teachers. Compensation must be commensurate with our high expectations.

Problematically, in today's classrooms, ineffective teachers are being paid as much as highly effective teachers. This results from the seniority-based lockstep salary schedules that enforce low starting salaries that do not permit raises or other bonuses for excellent performance. While evidence tells us that even the best rookie teacher will have ample room to develop into a strong master veteran teacher, it also tells us that years of service and additional degrees are not a direct proxy for effectiveness. Yet, these factors remain the primary drivers of salary schedules in today's professional education workplace.

The alternative is to pay teachers based on how well they perform. We must do everything possible to encourage teacher excellence, and implementing fair salary schedules based on performance, not strictly years of service, will allow this type of differentiation. When data confirms a teacher's effectiveness, he or she should be recognized and financially rewarded. A fair schedule will also take into account high-demand subject areas or hard-to-staff assignments and rewards should be significant enough to retain highly effective teachers. Financial rewards can recognize group effort, because evidence demonstrates that collaboration among instructors does benefit student learning, but a large portion of the financial reward should go to individual high performers.

Remarkably, some teacher contracts and state laws around the country expressly prohibit any kind of differentiated pay based on a teacher's performance. By removing any financial incentive for individual effort or excellence, these prohibitions only encourage mediocrity. Other professions do not actively prohibit their strongest performers from receiving individual financial rewards. A true performance-based pay system will reward teachers on an individual level for individual achievements in advancing student performance and not solely on seniority and additional degrees.



Strategy 1.5: Make all staffing decisions based on teachers' impact on students.

Students do not benefit from being assigned to a teacher who does not want to be there and whom the school leader has been forced to accept in spite of his or her best judgment. Yet, because of seniority rules, teachers are commonly “force placed” into positions without the consent of the teacher or the school leader, especially in urban districts. Even worse, seniority rules sometimes “bump” junior teachers out of positions for which they had specifically applied and been selected.

In other professions, placement is decided through mutual consent — candidates apply for positions and the person considered the best fit for the job is offered the position. If the offer is agreeable to the applicant, he or she accepts. Forced placements are yet another example of devaluing teachers as professionals and of privileging the interests of some adults over those of the students.

As mutual consent policies take hold in education, districts will need to address the contingency of a tenured teacher unable to obtain a mutually agreeable school placement. An adults-first approach would continue to compensate such teachers indefinitely until a new position is found. Of course, this approach does not benefit students. Consistent with their hiring needs, school districts must have flexibility to implement sustainable solutions, such as offering severance, defined grace periods, or other options for unplaced teachers who have earned effective ratings. Districts must also be able to remove ineffective teachers from the system.

If staffing decisions were based on the needs of students, districts would make every effort to keep the most effective teachers in place. Unfortunately, current laws and policies often force schools to make placements based on how long a teacher has been in the system. These policies take several forms, such as:

- “Seniority transfers”, which allow senior teachers to claim positions from other teachers regardless of their fitness for the position;
- “Excessing rules”, which dictate that the least senior teacher(s) will be displaced or transferred whenever a school reduces the number of teaching positions; and
- “Last In, First Out (LIFO) layoff rules”, which require districts to terminate the most recent hires when layoffs are required.

Put into practice, the combination of these rules often produces devastating results for students. When fiscal pressures require layoffs, these rules force layoffs among the most junior, lowest-cost teachers, requiring districts to terminate more total teachers to cope with the budget pressure. These teachers are often concentrated in the worst performing schools, maximizing disruption in those schools. And, because tenure does not correlate with effectiveness, these rules often result in ineffective teachers instructing children while higher performing, less senior teachers lose their jobs.

StudentsFirst will aggressively challenge policy makers to remove barriers to hiring and retaining the best teachers in all schools. StudentsFirst will fight against “forced placement,” ensuring that laws never coerce a district to place a teacher in a position against the will of the teacher or the school leader. Additionally StudentsFirst supports the elimination of “last in, first out” staffing policies.

Seniority-based staffing also deters promising candidates from choosing teaching as a profession. This is an especially serious problem as Baby Boomers in the current workforce approach the retirement age. Prospective teaching candidates might be confident that they will perform well in this extremely challenging and demanding profession, but they may also balk at becoming a teacher when they know they could arbitrarily lose their jobs at any point to someone more senior, regardless of their contributions or performance for students. For many school districts, attracting highly capable teachers now is critical to avoiding future teacher shortages caused by waves of retirement.

Districts and states should address these seniority rules urgently not only because of their attenuated relationship to student performance, but also because the prolonged economic downturn will likely force districts across the country to reduce teacher counts over the next couple of years. By making sure districts can keep their most effective teachers, changing these rules could allow districts to improve average teacher performance and increase student achievement in the face of financial pressure.

StudentsFirst will work to remove tenure provisions from state laws giving local districts the ability to effectively manage their teaching and leadership force and make decisions that are in the best interest of students.

Strategy 1.6: Eliminate tenure, and make teaching a profession based on respect and performance.

Tenure in K–12 education today means that teachers (and, in many cases, principals) are granted a “job for life” after a relatively short time in the classroom, usually without any serious attempt to evaluate the teacher’s effectiveness. In most states, tenure is essentially automatic after two or three years barring criminal or extreme misconduct. Once granted, the rules and regulations accompanying tenure or permanent contracts make removing even the most unmotivated and ineffective teachers nearly impossible. These policies serve only to protect adult jobs and do nothing to advance the interests of students.

If tenure merely protected teachers from being fired for arbitrary or capricious reasons, StudentsFirst would support it. Professionals should never be concerned they might lose their jobs because of their age, sex, religion, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation. Similarly, we support professionals’ rights to fight back if they are wrongfully terminated.

Fortunately, well-established federal and state policies allow teachers to challenge wrongful actions and prevent discriminatory firing in public education. Tenure is simply not needed to protect such rights.

To serve the interest of students, tenure must be eliminated so that teachers are best protected by the quality of their work and the role they play on the teaching team.

Policy Agenda: To elevate the teaching profession by valuing teachers' impact on students, StudentsFirst will pursue the following policy objectives:

- State law must require evaluation that is based substantially on student achievement. Evaluation tools should measure at least half of a teacher's performance based on student achievement, using a value-added growth model. The other aspects of a teacher's evaluations should derive from measures that align with student results, including high-quality observations and student evaluations of teacher practice.
- To avoid all teachers being ranked as effective without meaningful assessment, evaluations must anchor effectiveness around a year's worth of growth.
- State law must require principal evaluation that is based on student achievement and effective management of teachers. Districts should evaluate at least half of a school administrator's performance based on student achievement, and the remaining portion should mostly relate to their ability to attract, retain, manage, and develop excellent teachers.
- State law should give districts the autonomy to develop teacher evaluation systems apart from the collective bargaining process. Evaluations should be a matter of district policy.
- States must reduce legal barriers to entry in the teaching profession, including complicated credentialing or certification schemes that rely upon factors that do not clearly correlate with teacher effectiveness.
- State law should not be structured to penalize districts financially for recruiting teachers from alternate certification programs.
- States should adopt a clear process by which alternative certification programs are authorized, continually evaluated, and decommissioned if not producing high-quality educators.
- State law must facilitate digital learning by requiring online content to align with common core standards, allowing certification for online instruction, and modifying or eliminating mandatory "seat time" laws.
- State law must require pay structures based primarily on effectiveness. Teacher contracts must allow for individual performance-based pay.
- State law and district policy should not mandate higher salaries for master's degrees or additional education credits.
- State law should require staffing decisions (transfers, reductions, placements, etc.) be based on teacher effectiveness.
- State laws must prohibit forced placements and allow district control in staffing. Districts should ensure that teacher contracts require mutual consent placements. Districts should have the flexibility to offer defined grace periods, severance, or other options for teachers who have effective ratings, but do not find a mutually agreeable placement. Teachers rated ineffective should be exited from the system.
- State law should not grant, implicitly or directly, tenure or permanent contracts for PK-12 education professionals.

Policy Priority 2: Empowering Parents With Real Choices and Real Information

StudentsFirst believes that students and their parents need choice in order for America to have an excellent education system. Traditionally, we have taken a “one size fits all” approach to education that does not serve the learning needs of all of our children. Parents naturally put the interests of their children above the interests of the system. Therefore the more power parents can exercise over their children’s education, and the greater the number of high-quality options from which to choose, the more we will build a students-first system. It will take time, perhaps years, to shift to a full-functioning choice system, but with proper accountability and government oversight, parents should be able to decide which delivery method and which provider is best for each child.

StudentsFirst will work with states and districts to institute policies and practices that further this vision and empower parents. We will focus on the following policy objectives:

- Build a robust choice system that allows parents to choose from among multiple high-quality schools.
- Ensure that parents have access to meaningful data about schools and teachers.
- Empower parents to avoid low-performing teachers and schools.

Today, wealthy families have economic school choice; they can choose neighborhoods with good schools, supplement schools with extra instruction and activities, and even choose to send their children to private schools. Students enjoying these options tend to perform quite well nationally and internationally. In contrast, low-income families historically have had limited school options and their children have been forced to attend low-performing schools. While low-income families have been held captive in failing schools, adults in those schools could count on keeping their jobs while placing their own interests above those of students, often claiming that it’s simply not possible to raise the performance of low-income children to national standards. A true students-first system would give parents power to choose among several quality school options.

To fully empower parents, families must not only be provided choices, but also useful, meaningful information about those choices. Just as parents get report cards about their children’s performance, parents and the public should also get “report cards” about the comparative performance of local schools and teachers. If schools are transparent about school and teacher effectiveness, then they will have more incentives to keep improving constantly, and parents will be able both to demand better for their children and to determine which school is best for each child.

Every family should have the information and access to choose among quality schools. No student should be forced to attend a low-performing school or be taught by a low-performing teacher.

Strategy 2.1: Create more high-quality, publicly funded school choices.

StudentsFirst will fight to remove barriers to parental choice in education. More effective school options increase the ability of districts to meet the needs of all children, and the resulting competition encourages innovation and continuous improvement.

In spite of strong resistance, entrepreneurs have slowly built various forms of school choice in many ZIP codes over the past 30 years. Open enrollment policies allow some children to choose better-suited schools outside of their neighborhoods or even their school districts. Some school districts have opened magnet schools to create more school options and, in essence, compete with their own traditional schools. Most states have enacted charter school legislation, enabling independent educators to develop public schools and manage them outside of the district bureaucracy. A few places — notably Florida, Ohio, Louisiana, and Wisconsin — have even empowered low-income families to attend private schools with publicly funded scholarships.

That is not to say we have created enough parental choice—not by a long shot. Too many parents still suffer heartbreaking disappointment when they cannot get their children into a high-performing public school. “Choice” can be reduced to a lottery where hundreds of families compete for a handful of slots. Even many well-intentioned “open enrollment” policies do not actually

provide additional choices for parents as these are limited by a shortage of high quality schools.

There simply are not enough good options to meet demand, and there will not be until policy-makers take bold steps to expand access to high-quality schools. StudentsFirst will stand for parental choice, recognizing that we can only increase the scale of quality schools through a mix of strategies. Parents must be empowered to place their children in the learning environment that will work best for them — in a high-quality traditional public school, a district-run magnet, a charter school, a private school, or even a virtual school. StudentsFirst will be agnostic about school choice vehicles as long as the schools deliver results for students.

The biggest barriers to increasing school options are regulation and funding. While accountability is key to quality, new school providers must have a pathway to demonstrate their capabilities. To earn the privilege of educating our students, all providers (district, charter, and private) must agree to transparency of results and a process that ensures accountability and consequences for poor results that include school closure or discontinuation of funding. Additionally, there should be no limits on the number of schools that can compete with a district, and there should be no limits on their autonomy over school governance and management. To ensure that all students are valued equally, comparable students should take comparable funding with them to their school of choice. In the specific case of public charter schools, which are often authorized by districts, states must provide authorization processes that do not hold schools hostage to district politics.

Strategy 2.2: Empower parents with clear and useful data.

StudentsFirst will work to ensure parents have access to student, teacher, and school-level data without violating the privacy of individuals. Data is meaningless (and potentially misused or misapplied) if not properly explained and contextualized. We believe that parents and taxpayers not only have the right to access this data, but they also should be given the appropriate tools to understand it. Whether it is through school or teacher test score data, or through school or teacher scorecards, parents deserve to know what the data says about their children's performance.

There are a number of ways that data can be appropriately shared with parents to help inform decision-making and hold educators accountable. Some of the best practices in sharing data include:

- **Publicly available information:** State-provided school report cards that provide letter grades that can be used to compare performance with other schools. School-level data about teacher effectiveness should also be publicly disseminated so that parents and other stakeholders can identify inequities in teacher talent and problem areas in individual schools and regions.
- **A customized report for families:** Annual academic growth reports that show where a child is performing relative to the norm in his or her school, district, and state. Growth charts should also predict a student's college-readiness based on current indicators, much in the way that a pediatrician's growth chart predicts for parents how tall their child will be. The chart should include district-produced evidence demonstrating a teacher's success in moving his/her students along the growth curve for at least the past year but preferably over a teacher's entire career. For districts that have no growth model and teachers in untested grades and subjects, general evaluation data should be extracted from teacher evaluations to share with parents.

To have a truly robust data set that will move education reform forward, states must place a renewed emphasis on meaningful and accessible data. Consistent with the federal Race to the Top application, states must dedicate resources to develop a longitudinal data system that tracks individual student outcomes over time with:

- Data on each student as he or she changes schools from pre-kindergarten through graduate school that can be accessed in a timely fashion to inform teachers, school and district leaders, and parents; and
- Data that includes information about students, staff, educational institutions, financial aid, student employment, courses, facilities, finance, and educational credits.

Moreover, states should establish a public, state-level "growth model" to standardize student academic growth charts for parents. While these models may take time to develop, lack of a finished product must never be an excuse for why data cannot be used to drive decision-making in the interim.

Private schools participating in taxpayer-funded scholarship programs must also prove that they are operating with academic and fiscal accountability. No public dollars should go to private schools that cannot show results over time.

Parents deserve to understand the quality of their options when selecting schools for their children. StudentsFirst will advocate for policies that require all districts to share understandable information about the performance of their schools, teachers, and students with parents and the public.

Strategy 2.3: Empower parents to trigger the turnaround of a failing school.

StudentsFirst will promote the right of parents to organize and demand the transformation of chronically failing schools.

Community organizers in California have introduced a policy innovation that radically shifts power to the parents whose children are fated to attend chronically failing schools. If a majority of parents in a school attendance zone sign a petition, they gain the legal authority to transform their school. They can choose any of the four school turnaround options currently available in federal law — including bringing in a new school leader or putting the school under the management of a high-performing charter school operator.

This type of radical community empowerment must translate to improved outcomes for students. Any new solution will be held to the same high accountability standards of student achievement. If a school fails to produce the right results in terms of student performance, it will not survive.

StudentsFirst will promote the rights of parents to organize on behalf of good schools for their children through similar laws around the country.

More than anyone else, parents understand the urgency and importance of fixing their local failing schools. By putting more power into parents' hands, children will be less likely to languish in failing schools while the bureaucracy weighs options and gets buy-in from affected adults.

Strategy 2.4: Require parent consent for students placed with ineffective teachers.

Every day, school systems quietly place into classrooms a number of teachers whom they already have identified as ineffective. Districts claim they have no choice, and they are relieved that they can do so without embarrassing any adults. The only people who suffer are the children and their families.

To address this injustice, StudentsFirst will help enact laws that compel districts to get the written consent of parents before their children are placed with ineffective teachers. Parents must be given the option of an alternative assignment in the classroom of an effective teacher. This level of transparency serves the public's interest, as well as the children's. No family should be forced to accept a poor teacher because of a tenure law, aggressive union protection, or district inaction.

StudentsFirst will compel districts to reveal publicly when they are putting ineffective teachers in the classroom.

Policy Agenda: To empower parents with real choices and real information, StudentsFirst will pursue the following policy objectives:

- State law must ensure that parents receive meaningful information about their schools and teachers.
- States should require that all PK–12 schools receive a letter grade each year, with a majority of the grade based on academic achievement.
- State law should dedicate resources to developing and implementing a public, state-level “growth model” to standardize a student academic growth chart for parents.
- State law should mandate and dedicate resources toward the implementation of a longitudinal data system that tracks individual student outcomes over time.
- Private schools accepting taxpayer-funded students must submit to meaningful academic and fiscal accountability and transparency measures.
- State law and district policy should promote parental choice through the following:
 - Remove arbitrary caps on the number of public charter schools.
 - Structure alternative authorizing authorities and appeals processes for high-performing public charter schools seeking to expand.
 - Support publicly funded scholarship programs for lower-income students so they can access high-quality private schools.
 - Provide equal funding for all public school students, regardless of the school they attend, as long as the schools prove results over time.
 - Enact laws and policies that give public charter schools necessary facility support through a combination of access to taxpayer-funded facilities, an equivalent per-pupil supplement for facilities, and capital financing structures that leverage public/private partnerships and funding.
 - Districts should not be permitted to “skim” public funding that is allocated to school options chosen by parents. If choice providers want services from districts, those contracts should be optional.
 - Provide a clear mechanism to close low-performing schools — regardless of whether those schools are traditional public schools, charter schools, or private schools receiving public scholarship students.
 - Create district open enrollment systems that genuinely give families more options to attend high-quality schools.
- State law should allow a majority of parents living in a school’s attendance zone to trigger a school turnaround or conversion to a public charter by organizing and demanding change. When more than half of parents whose children are or will be assigned to a school sign a “trigger” petition, the local school board or other governing authority must act to transform the school. State law must be constructed to ensure eligible federal dollars can be used to help fund the turnaround.
- States or districts should implement a disclosure rule granting parents knowledge of a teacher’s track record regarding student achievement and allow parents to access an alternative, effective classroom.

Policy Priority 3: Spend Taxpayer Resources Wisely to Get Better Results for Students

StudentsFirst believes that district governance and funding decisions must be made through the prism of student learning and family empowerment rather than adult political and parochial interests. For too long schools have suffered as the result of misdirected accountability. All spending should tie to student achievement and the structures in place should be directly accountable for the results.

Districts should use resources efficiently to ensure sustainable spending that puts students first. Districts should be managed through structures that ensure a focus on student results rather than adult interests.

StudentsFirst will support laws and policies that support smarter resource allocation and governance designed to consistently prioritize students and student learning above all other choices. We will focus on the following policy objectives:

- Ensure that strong accountability systems are in place.
- Support transparent budgeting at all levels and ensure that public resource expenditures maximize student benefit.
- Ensure that the government exercises discipline in pension and benefit programs.

While per-pupil funding for public education in the United States has more than doubled over the past 40 years (accounting for inflation), the most recent international data shows that U.S. students are lagging far behind students in other industrialized nations. U.S. students scored “below average” in math on the PISA examination, placing the U.S. 25th out of the 34 OECD participant nations. Despite this significant increase in spending, student achievement in the U.S. has remained relatively flat.

In today’s challenging fiscal climate, states must consider the possibility that school districts long accustomed to budget growth must now learn to reallocate the resources they already have — in particular toward uses that effectively promote student learning and raise the standards of the teaching profession. But first, we need to examine the governmental structure in place to make these important decisions.

Outdated governance structures have long been exploited to serve the interests of adults above those of children. Far from providing expert guidance, local school boards are often obstacles to real reform and properly aligned spending priorities. Communities with failing schools deserve governance structures and budgeting policies that put students first.



Strategy 3.1: Promote governance structures that prioritize accountability and put students' interests first.

StudentsFirst will support the implementation of governance structures that promise to align decision-making with student interests and hold schools accountable to high academic performance.

We know we have to shake things up if we are going to achieve real change in our public education system in America. It is impolitic to say it, but current rules surrounding urban school board elections often ensure that the elected members will work to implement adult agendas. These adult agendas thrive in the system of parochial politics that allocates scarce resources and favors: which schools to fix first, which athletic programs get new equipment, or which employees get promotions. Meanwhile, students languish in failing schools. Public employee unions invest in friendly school board candidates and expect handsome returns. The problem is exacerbated by consistently low voter turnout and interest, as three-quarters of voters do not have children in school and many low-income parents, whose children are most harmed by the current system, are less likely than many other groups to vote.

New governance models have emerged to allow real reform to take place. In several districts, mayors have been given control of the schools to the great benefit of students. “Mayoral control” helps

reformers because responsibility and therefore accountability is clearly vested in a single public official. Further, a mayor’s interests are generally more aligned with the overall community because mayors must earn votes from an entire city and because higher-profile mayoral elections typically experience higher turnout. Mayors are also more visible than school board members, making it easier to hold them accountable for the performance of a city’s schools. Cities that have adopted mayoral control have experienced strong progress. New York City, Boston, and Washington, D.C., all provide examples of cities in which there have been significant gains in student achievement after the mayor took control of the school district.

State-level turnaround innovations offer another promising example of improved governance. Louisiana has the most developed model, but other states are now considering managing turnaround efforts for low-performing schools. In 2003, Louisiana passed legislation that created a new statewide authority, the “Recovery School District.” When most schools ceased operations after Hurricane Katrina, the Recovery School District began recruiting charter schools to fill the capacity void. Now more than 60 percent of the K–12 schools in New Orleans are public charter schools, and New Orleans may become the nation’s first “all-charter” city. The state legislature has continued to authorize the Recovery District because of the dramatic results in student achievement. In 2005, 66 percent of Orleans Parish schools were failing; by 2010, the portion of failing schools had dropped to 26 percent — certainly not good enough, but significantly better than before.

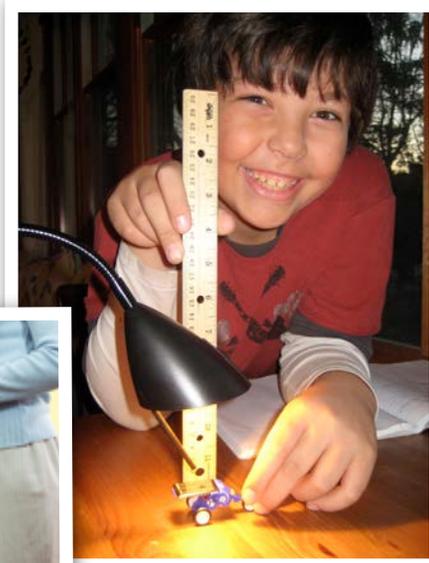
StudentsFirst supports state or mayoral control where a failing district needs courageous leadership to execute reforms, as in the examples above, and StudentsFirst believes other innovative governance models could emerge to let communities act urgently in the best interests of students.

Strategy 3.2: Require budget transparency.

At the core of the challenge in driving good budgetary decision-making is obtaining a clear understanding of where districts and schools spend their money now. Currently, it is nearly impossible for a parent or taxpayer to understand how the funding going to schools affects students.

A school district's budget should give the public a clear sense of where the money goes and what the district's priorities are. To that end, budget documents shared with the public should show how individual schools receive and allocate resources. This measure of transparency will enable parents and the public to monitor, question, and comment intelligently on budget proposals.

School budgets should be shared with the public in a transparent and intelligible manner. To optimize resources, states and districts should drive budgetary prioritization and decision-making through the prism of student achievement, providing maximum transparency for taxpayers and parents.



Strategy 3.3: Deploy resources to maximize student learning.

StudentsFirst will work to eliminate the laws and regulations that hamper school districts' ability to optimize limited resources to improve student achievement.

Smart spending has long been a challenge for school districts across the country. A myriad of federal, state and district rules conspire to severely restrict how superintendents and school leaders deploy staff and other resources. As noted in Section 2, they have little control over whom to hire, how many to hire, whom to let go, or what compensation their employees will receive. Discretionary funds are relatively rare and usually not sufficient to achieve much reform. Despite complicated schemes to distribute funds and limit spending on non-essential areas, it is difficult to tell what money is spent on students and student supports as opposed to bureaucratic overhead. As a result, districts and schools make many non-optimal decisions every day, every month, and every year with the precious resources available.

Central management focused on students. One place where education misdirects resources is in the central bureaucracy. The central office should exist to make sure that teachers can focus on teaching and students can focus on learning. Central offices should provide strong

support for accountability measures and state and federal requirements and should be organized to maximize support at the school level. In order to make sense of central budgets, they first need to be organized so leaders, policy makers, and the public can see how money actually affects students. A good first step is to break out anything from a central office budget that is a true “student support.” This category would include things like food service, transportation, and instructional coaches. Once true “student supports” have been separated from the overall bureaucracy, districts can begin the process of identifying inefficiencies.

Over time, central offices that are not focused on how every position serves the schools increase layers of bureaucracy to serve adult interests. When systems do a real analysis of all positions, they will likely identify many redundancies. As it is, students are not well served by the inefficiencies of the bureaucracy.

Bloated central offices should be pared down to eliminate redundancies in a way that connects every member of the central team with the goal of driving student outcomes. By requiring an overall reduction, districts will have the ability to direct precious resources in ways that benefit students most.

Spending Restrictions. Additionally, some things that “feel good” have not systemically produced the results that matter for students. For example, small class sizes and required higher pay for higher degrees may have marginal benefits, but the evidence of their effect on student achievement is weak.

Many states have legislatively mandated spending on class-size reduction at the cost of billions of dollars. The evidence, while allowing that smaller class sizes contribute to positive learning environments in grades PK–2, does not bear out in higher grades. State law that caps a student-teacher ratio may seem impactful, but the lack of evidence supporting its impact on student achievement should prevail when crafting policy.

The same rationale applies to mandatory and upward salary adjustments for teachers gaining master's degrees in education. There is some evidence that content-specific degrees in math or science can help develop more effective teachers, but master's degrees do not categorically create more effective teachers. Meanwhile, districts have to spend millions of dollars on these practices in favor of practices proven to enrich a student's education. In fact, it is currently estimated that school districts nationwide spend \$9 billion on supplementary pay for additional degrees that have no correlation to student achievement. A redirection of these dollars to support higher salaries for highly effective teachers is a more responsible use of public funds.

Human Capital. Throughout this agenda we have underscored the need to ensure every child receives instruction from an excellent teacher. Over time, many good district and school leaders who recognize this imperative, but are hamstrung by arcane personnel laws, have struggled to find creative ways to deal with ineffective teachers. In the absence of meaningful legislative reform, some districts have determined that it is in the best interest of students to have these ineffective teachers out of the classroom even if it means they have to keep paying them until they can "exit" them under their district's rules, regulations, and state laws. (See Strategy 1.5, 1.6.) Unfortunately, some of these efforts have cost districts and states enormous amounts of money as they have paid salaries of teachers removed to "rubber rooms." Districts and school leaders are often forced to keep an ineffective teacher on payroll rather than redirecting these resources to support improved outcomes for students. The result is that taxpayer dollars often go to ensure that adult needs are met rather than to increase student learning.

Facility Management. Finally, while new facilities are usually financed through non-district bond authorities, the planning, development, and maintenance of facilities is often out of step with the needs of students and saddles districts with hefty ongoing maintenance costs. Identifying areas that are not part of the core competency of education and recognizing viable, affordable solutions can have multiple benefits. Outsourcing facilities construction and management to competitive sources has helped many charter school operators, for example, cut facilities costs in half compared to their neighboring traditional districts. A few districts, such as the Los Angeles Unified School District, have begun "outsourcing" new buildings and failing schools to school providers with proven student achievement track records. This type of solution can maximize resources while allowing educators to focus on what they do best: creating better environments for student learning.

StudentsFirst will pursue a path that empowers superintendents and school leaders to allocate resources to optimize results for children. This approach not only benefits students, but it also benefits taxpayers by helping assure that precious taxpayer funds are used as productively as possible.

Strategy 3.4: Create pension and benefit programs responsibly.

The first step in addressing the problems surrounding pensions and benefits is to acknowledge that when constructed as defined benefit plans with no (or insignificant) employee contribution, these plans place enormous fiscal strain on states and school districts. Pension and benefits for public service employees are pushing states across the country toward extreme fiscal hardship. States have not been responsible with their spending and have failed to exercise discipline in meeting budget obligations. Conservative estimates of unfunded pension liabilities today top \$500 billion, with individual states like California and Illinois facing at least \$100 billion and \$50 billion plus in unfunded obligations, respectively. One study estimated the unfunded pension liability for public school teachers across the country to be a trillion dollars. Without question, the systems in place today are not sustainable and need to be revamped.

The second step is to realize that the current pension structures actually discourage an effective teacher corps. Teachers entering the workplace today have little expectation that the defined-benefit pension and benefit plans in place now will survive their tenure in the profession. They know the system is broken, but would like the opportunity to contribute to a retirement plan together with their employer in a way that does not tie them to one school district for their entire career. As such, pension reform in the education sector must allow for employee portability. Typically, teacher pensions are not portable, so teachers who leave one school district for another before retirement end up forfeiting significant pension wealth. This just simply does not reflect current trends in the job market where people desire the freedom of employment mobility.

The current approach to teacher compensation and pensions also ends up excessively rewarding longevity. A common scenario has teachers more than doubling their pensions by staying in the classroom an additional three to five years. These policies encourage some teachers to stay in the classroom, regardless of professional motivation, so they can max out their pensions — producing a negative impact on students.

Fulfilling our promise to educate our children and prepare them for the world they will inherit requires responsibly managing our promises to public employees and retirees. States must honor their existing obligations to defined-benefit pension plans and should make every effort to fully fund liabilities on an actuarial basis. At the same time, states must avoid making promises they cannot afford to keep. For this reason, states should move from defined benefits to retirement plans that are more sustainable and can be immediately accessed by all teachers. This movement reflects current economic best practice and is better aligned with what new teachers actually want.

Recognizing that today's district pensions and other benefits are not sustainable and contribute to a looming fiscal crisis that could compromise instruction, StudentsFirst is committed to pension and benefits reform.

Policy Agenda: To ensure that taxpayer resources are spent wisely and are focused on improving outcomes for children and families, StudentsFirst will pursue the following policy objectives:

- State law must permit mayoral and state control where failing districts demand accountability and reform. State law should expressly provide a “trigger” that a mayor or governor can activate to take over failing schools or districts.
- States must require districts to produce public budgets that clearly track central office, programmatic, and curriculum spending against student achievement.
- Hard and fast caps on budget categories are counterproductive and should not be legislated, as they hinder management’s ability to implement smart fiscal priorities. Where such restrictions exist in state law, StudentsFirst will seek to remove them.
- State law should prohibit districts from establishing a salary schedule that guarantees increases based on additional degrees. (See corresponding imperative 1.4: salary schedules must be based on effectiveness.)
- State laws should not prescribe maximum class size above the 3rd grade.
- State law should permit districts to identify management alternatives to realize efficiencies in secondary school supports such as facility construction and management and food service and allow districts to keep and reallocate the resulting savings.
- States and districts must shift new employees from defined-benefit pension programs to defined-contribution plans with full portability of these benefits across districts and states; employees must contribute a proportional share.

Conclusion

StudentsFirst will pursue its policy agenda with one very simple question in mind: For each policy that impacts our schools, what solution is best for students and their families? We will pursue this agenda without regard to partisan politics and without regard to the status quo. We anticipate that this agenda will change and evolve, particularly as entrepreneurial leaders in states and districts develop new ideas worthy of replication, and as new data about current policies becomes available.

It is our belief that if and when policymakers in America begin making decisions about public schools solely through the prism of the impact on students, we will unleash the power and potential of our young people and once more build the finest education system in the world.

