

WEBINAR | SEPTEMBER 24, 2026

Improving Student Achievement: What Red, Blue, and Purple States Are Doing Right



Welcome



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Today's Agenda

- ▷ Research Presentation
- ▷ State Education Leader Panel
- ▷ Q&A with Governor Lamont
- ▷ Closing Remarks



Improving Student Achievement: What Red and Blue States Are Doing Right

What Really Works in Education?



And Who Is Doing It?



Schools in blue states ... are languishing, but schools in red states like Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee and Louisiana, traditional laggards, are suddenly doing remarkably well.

-- David Brooks, NY Times 10/9/25



“

“These Three Red States (MS, LA, AL)
Are the Best Hope in Schooling”

– Nicholas Kristof, NY Times 2/9/26

Why Were These Red States Flagged?

- After adjusting for demographics such as poverty and race, Mississippi ranked 1st in 2024 while Louisiana ranked 2nd in NAEP 4th grade reading, according to [calculations](#) by the Urban Institute.
- Louisiana had the largest gains in the country in recovery from its pandemic losses in reading, while Alabama had the strongest math recovery, returning to pre-pandemic levels.

Where Do These States Rank Overall?

READING

	<u>4th</u>	<u>8th</u>
Alabama	33	45
Louisiana	14	28
Mississippi	9	41

MATH

	<u>4th</u>	<u>8th</u>
Alabama	31	48
Louisiana	37	42
Mississippi	16	35

Interpreting the Scores

- ▶ NAEP scores are more comparable than state scores, because tests and cut points vary enormously
- ▶ “Unadjusted” scores communicate the actual performance of students
- ▶ “Adjusted” scores control for poverty levels across states
- ▶ 8th grade scores are more comparable than 4th grade scores, because
 - States have different policies about retaining 3rd graders
 - States have very different profiles of young English learners, who take 5-7 years to become fully fluent in English

Overall State of the States

▷ Steeply improving states

- Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama have had strong recent gains
- So have Colorado, Indiana, Iowa, and Minnesota

▷ Top achieving states

- Top 5 on 8th grade reading in 2024: Massachusetts, Colorado, Connecticut, New Jersey, and New Hampshire.
- Top 5 on 8th grade math in 2024: Massachusetts, New Jersey, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Utah.

Top Ten
States on
NAEP 8th
Grade
Reading

	State	2022 unadjusted	2024 unadjusted	2022 adjusted	2024 adjusted
1	Massachusetts	268.8	268	266.7	266
2	New Jersey	269.8	266	263.2	259.4
3	Colorado	263.5	264.5	258.6	259.7
4	New Hampshire	263.2	263.9	255.6	256.3
5	Connecticut	263.8	263.1	259.9	259.2
6	Indiana	260.5	261.7	260	261.2
7	Illinois	261.9	261.6	262.1	261.8
8	Utah	265.2	261.2	259.7	255.7
9	Idaho	263.5	260.7	258.4	255.6
10	Iowa	259.8	260.7	254.9	255.8
Ranking is based on unadjusted scores with adjusted scores added for these 10. NH, UT, ID, and IA fall out of the top 10 for adjusted scores. They are replaced by GA, LA, MS, and TX. Yellow designates improvement from 2022 to 2024					

**Top Ten
States in
NAEP 8th
Grade Math**

Ranking is based on unadjusted scores with adjusted scores added for those 10. MN, MT, ND, NH, SD, and UT drop out of the top 10 for adjusted scores. They are replaced by GA, LA, MS, OH, and TX.

Yellow designates improvement from 2022 to 2024



Key Takeaways

Which States Offer Strong Lessons?

Mississippi and Louisiana stand out on state rankings when scores are adjusted for poverty levels.

At the 8th grade level, 2 red states rank highly on both adjusted and unadjusted measures: Indiana (reading) & Nebraska (math).

Massachusetts is still #1 in the nation in 4th and 8th grade reading and math. Massachusetts and New Jersey are highly ranked in reading and math for both adjusted and unadjusted scores.

Four other blue states are in the top 10 on both adjusted and unadjusted measures, including Connecticut, Colorado, & Illinois (reading) and Wisconsin (math).



What Can We Learn?

Adequate and Equitable Funding as a Foundation

- ▶ When invested in evidence-based strategies, increased and equalized per-pupil dollars have positive effects on outcomes, especially for underserved students:
 - Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Connecticut adopted major school funding reforms in the 1990s that were found to drive strong gains in achievement.
 - Mississippi increased per pupil expenditures by 73% from 2016-17 to 2025-26 (even with enrollment declines) and raised teacher pay significantly.
 - Louisiana increased funding 34% over the last decade (also despite enrollment declines) and raised teacher pay.
- ▶ The investment story is part of the untold story of the “Mississippi Miracle” and “Southern Surge.”

Comprehensive Investments in Teacher Capacity and Instructional Quality

- ▶ **Mississippi:** multifaceted literacy policy including literacy block for K-early primary grades, a comprehensive approach to the science of reading, including attention to reading real books, teaching writing, comprehension, and vocabulary, smaller class sizes with trained assistant teachers, small group learning, and tutoring. Extensive training for teachers and required intervention for students in need.
- ▶ **Louisiana:** A literacy policy similar to Mississippi's. Reformed literacy and math instruction, new curriculum guidance and high-quality instructional materials, with engaged professional development and aligned innovative assessments.

Comprehensive Investments in Teacher Capacity and Instructional Quality

- ▶ **Connecticut:** The nation's 1st comprehensive literacy initiative in early 1990s, plus new standards, curriculum, and assessments across content areas, married to large increases in teacher salaries and strengthened preparation, induction, and professional development for teachers and leaders,
- ▶ **Massachusetts:** Along with new funding in early '90s, new standards, curriculum, and assessments focused on 21st-century learning goals, as well as statewide preschool and child health initiatives. Comprehensive literacy and math reforms.
- ▶ **New Jersey:** New curriculum linked to the state standards, whole-school reform, ECE for 3- and 4-year-olds, full-day kindergarten, class-size reductions, and alternative and summer school programs to help students catch up.

Common Themes Across States

- ▶ Made long-term, systemic investment in schools and in the people who work in them.
- ▶ Reformed school funding to direct more resources to schools based on student needs.
- ▶ Built coherent instructional systems rather than chasing singular reforms.
- ▶ Invested in the educator workforce, including teacher salaries, high-quality preparation and ongoing professional development and supports.

State Education Leader Panel



Dr. Susana Córdova
Commissioner of
Education, Colorado
Department of
Education



Dr. Sydnee Dickson
Department Chair at the
College of Education and
Special Advisor to the
Dean, University of Utah;
Former Utah State
Superintendent of Public
Instruction, Utah State
Board of Education



Dr. Carey M. Wright
State Superintendent
of Schools, Maryland
State Department of
Education

Q&A



Ned Lamont

Governor of Connecticut,
2019-present



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Sessions to take place in
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