2026 ANNUAL REPORT

The State of K-12 Education in America

A flagship annual review of the forces reshaping American schooling — enrollment, achievement, family choice, the teacher workforce, funding, AI and technology, student wellness, and what comes next.

K12 Academics — helping families Find Your Community! since 2004

U.S. K–12 · Published 2026 · For leaders · educators · policymakers · companies · families

49.5M
Students in U.S. public schools

1 in 3
Not proficient in reading or math (NAEP)

$17.6k
Per-pupil spending — an all-time high

1 in 8
Teaching posts unfilled / under-certified

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

American education is being reorganized around choice, technology & trust

2026 is several trends converging at once. Public schools still educate the vast majority of children, yet nearly every arrow of growth points to the alternatives — while achievement stalls, AI rewrites practice, and a strained teacher workforce holds the system together.

~10%
Private share of K-12, steady

~3.4M
Homeschooled (~6%)

28%
Chronically absent (2022-23)

18
Universal-choice states

Biggest trends

- Publicly funded school choice went national — 18 states with near-universal eligibility.
- AI moved from novelty to routine for most teachers and students.
- Charters, homeschooling & microschools grow while district enrollment slips.
- A phone-policy wave swept 35 states + DC.

Key findings

- NAEP shows no rebound — 1 in 3 students below grade level, 12th-grade at record lows.
- Over 1.2M students use vouchers/ESAs; ~3.4M homeschool, ~4M in charters.
- 60% of teachers used AI in 2024-25; weekly users save ~5.9 hrs.
- Per-pupil spending hit an all-time high near $17.6k.

Major challenges

- Unreversed learning loss and a widening top-to-bottom gap.
- ~1 in 8 teaching posts unfilled or under-certified; pay lags inflation.
- AI adoption racing ahead of training and any federal standard.
- Falling birth rates shrinking the school-age pool (−5.3% by 2032).

Opportunities

- AI can return teacher hours and personalize learning.
- Choice dollars match children to the right environment.
- Phone-free classrooms may aid focus and wellbeing.
- Skills- and career-focused pathways gaining ground.

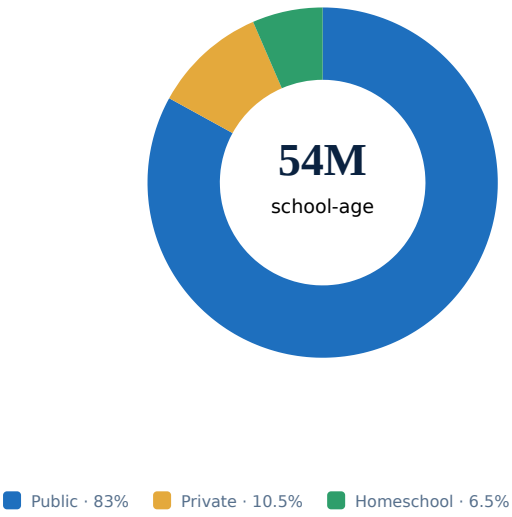
SECTION 01 — THE K-12 ENROLLMENT LANDSCAPE

Where America's children actually learn

About 54 million school-age children are spread across public, private, and home settings. Public schools hold roughly five in six — but they are the only sector shrinking, as charters, private choice, and homeschooling absorb the movement.

How school-age children are enrolled

Setting share (Census 2024-25)



The sector at a glance

Most recent data

~49.5M **public-school** students — ~90% of enrolled K-12.

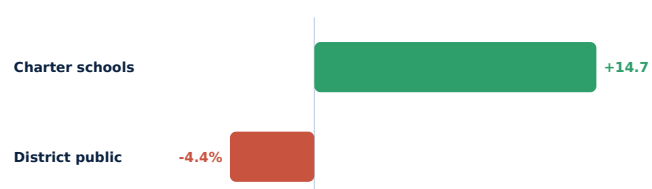
~4.7M **private-school** students, near 10%.

~3.4M **homeschooled** — roughly 6% and climbing.

−1.9M **district public** loss since the pandemic.

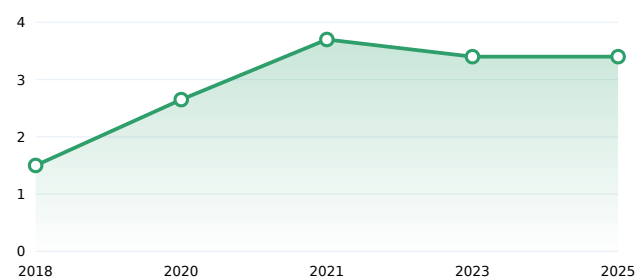
Charters grow while districts shrink

2019-20 → 2024-25



The rise of home-based learning

Homeschool students (millions)



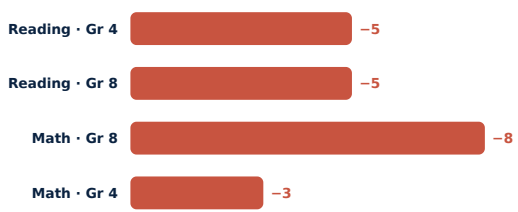
SECTION 02 — ACHIEVEMENT & RECOVERY

Five years on, the learning loss hasn't reversed

The 2024 Nation's Report Card (NAEP) confirmed what educators feared: no national rebound. Reading fell further, math stalled after a historic drop, and twelfth-grade scores hit record lows — with the widest gap between top and bottom students in decades.

NAEP score change since 2019

Avg scale-score point change, 2019→2024



What the report card shows

2024 NAEP — grades 4, 8 & 12

1 in 3 students **can\'t read or do math at grade level**; ~1 in 4 below NAEP Basic.

40% of 4th graders **below Basic in reading** — largest since 2002.

22% of 12th graders **proficient in math**; senior scores hit record lows.

Gap top students held steady while the **lowest fell further**.

Families are shopping for fit — and safety leads

The decision of where to enroll a child has become active and comparative. Parents weigh safety, outcomes, culture, and specialized programs — and a growing share would choose something other than their assigned school.

What\'s driving the choices

Recurring reasons families give

36% would **prefer a private placement** if cost were no barrier.

#1 **safety & environment** — top reason for homeschooling & choosing charters.

72% of homeschoolers cite **dissatisfaction with instruction**.

Fit rising demand for **specialized programs** — SPED, STEM, faith, career.

The parent\'s checklist, 2026

What families evaluate

① Is my child **safe** here?

② What are the **academic outcomes**?

③ Does the **culture & values** fit?

④ Is there **college & career** prep?

⑤ Are there **specialized programs**?

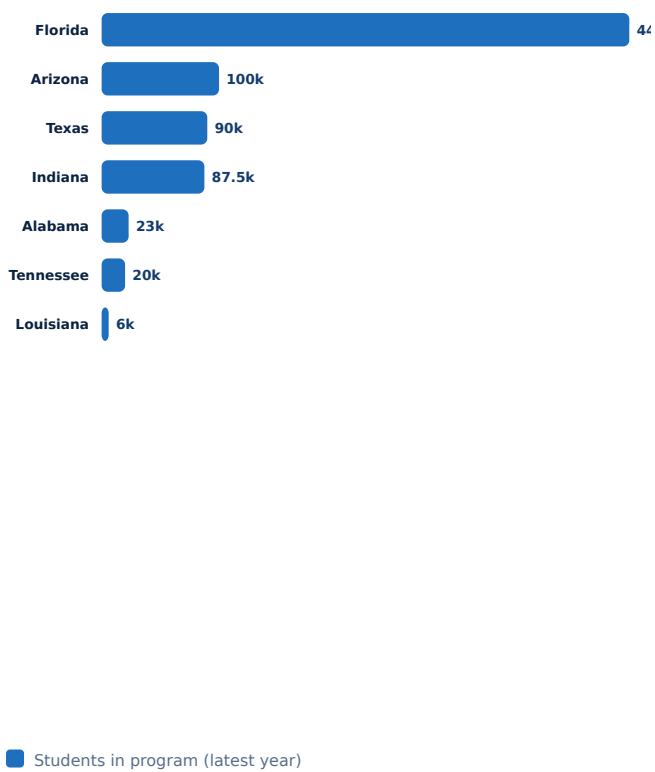
⑥ Can we **afford it** — does choice help?

The single biggest force reshaping enrollment

Between 2021 and 2026, states went from zero universal private-choice programs to 18. By 2025, 35 states plus D.C. and Puerto Rico ran 70 voucher or ESA programs serving more than 1.2 million students — and new programs are opening oversubscribed.

Students in state private-choice programs

Latest reported year, selected states



Choice is now a full menu

Every lane growing at once

18 states with **near-universal** eligibility; ~$13B+ committed.

4M **charter** students — only public segment growing (+15% in 6 yrs).

750k in **microschools** (~2%); typical size up from 16 to 22.

2027 a **national** tax-credit scholarship opens for state opt-in.

SECTION 05 — THE TEACHER WORKFORCE

The system's biggest constraint is staffing

Every enrollment and technology trend runs through the same bottleneck: enough qualified adults in classrooms. For a third straight year shortages held near peak — driven by a thin pipeline, steady attrition, and pay that trails inflation.

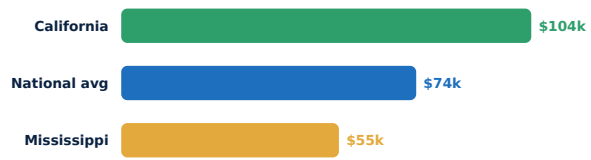
The 2025 shortage, by the numbers

Unfilled or under-certified positions



Average teacher pay, state extremes

2024-25 average salary



Why the gap persists

Recruitment & retention

411k+ positions **unfilled or under-certified** — ~1 in 8.

6M+ students in classrooms **affected**.

~26% estimated **pay gap** vs comparable professions.

Pay & the pipeline

Why compensation is central

$74.5k national **average** (2024-25); ~5% behind inflation over the decade.

~2× the spread — **CA ~$103.5k** vs **MS ~$55k**.

Lever **pay & conditions** — the top evidence-backed retention fix.

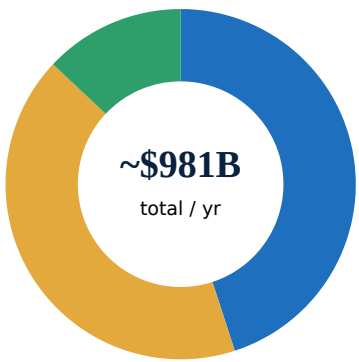
SECTION 06 — SCHOOL FUNDING

Record dollars in, record scrutiny on results

Public K-12 spending is nearing $1 trillion a year and per-pupil funding hit an all-time high — even as enrollment slips and achievement lags. Where the money comes from, and how far it stretches, varies enormously by state.

Where the money comes from

Share of K-12 revenue by source



State · 45% Local · 42% Federal · 13%

The funding picture

Most recent federal & state data

$17.6k — **per-pupil** (FY2024) — all-time high, +6.6% in a year.

~$981B — total **public K-12 spending**, nearing $1 trillion.

~3× — top-to-bottom gap — **NY ~$31.9k** vs **Idaho ~$11.1k**.

−5.3% — projected **enrollment decline** by 2032.

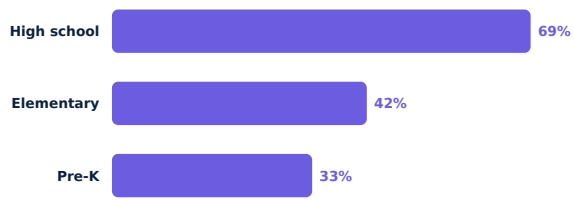
SECTION 07 — EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY & AI

AI became ordinary faster than any tool before it

In under three years, generative AI went from curiosity to daily habit for teachers and students — now core classroom infrastructure. Meanwhile a phone-policy wave swept the states as schools moved to reclaim student attention.

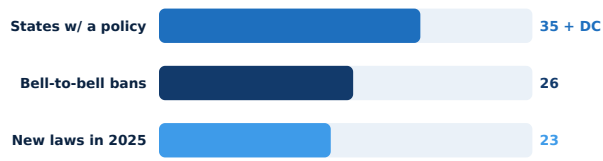
Teacher AI adoption by grade band

Share using generative AI



The phone-policy wave

State action (of 50 states)



What AI is doing in schools

Adoption, time & open questions

54% of MS/HS **students** use AI for school (up 15+ pts in two years).

5.9 hrs saved **weekly** by teachers using AI — ~six weeks a year.

0 **binding federal AI standards**; 68%+ urban teachers untrained.

Screens, focus & policy

The other 2025 tech story

35+DC states with **cellphone policies** in class.

26 full-day **bell-to-bell bans**; 23 new laws in 2025.

75% of adults **support** classroom phone bans.

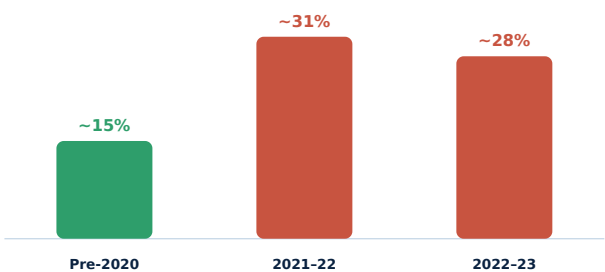
SECTION 08 — STUDENT WELLNESS

Attendance is the new front line for wellbeing

Mental health and school attendance have become inseparable. Chronic absenteeism surged during the pandemic and remains stubbornly elevated — with anxiety and depression now among the most-cited reasons students miss school.

Chronic absenteeism, over time

Share missing 10%+ of school days



The wellbeing picture

What the surveys show

48% — of students say **anxiety/depression/stress** makes school hard — up from 39% in 2020.

1 in 6 — youth have a **mental-health condition**; ~half get services.

>30% — chronic-absence rate in ~**half of urban districts**.

Works — districts with **proactive support** post lower absence.

Two forces, pulling in opposite directions

The near-term outlook is a tug-of-war: policy and technology open more doors than ever, while demographics quietly shrink the pool of children. The winners will be systems — and families — that navigate both deliberately.

↑ Tailwinds

AI-powered, personalized learning that frees teacher time.

Choice funding expanding — a national program opens in 2027.

Skills-based & career pathways gaining favor.

Nimble models — microschools, hybrids & online maturing.

↓ Headwinds

Falling birth rates shrinking kindergarten cohorts.

Teacher shortages constraining what any model delivers.

Guardrail gap — AI outrunning training & policy.

Unreversed learning loss and a widening achievement gap.

AI

Adaptive learning

Tutoring & pacing per student.

◗

Personalized paths

Mix-and-match across settings.

⚙

Skills-based

Mastery over seat time.

→

Career prep

Earlier links to real work.

Methodology & sources

This report synthesizes the most recent publicly available data from federal agencies, associations, and research organizations, current as of publication in 2026.

Data sources

- NCES / NAEP — the Nation's Report Card
- U.S. Census Bureau — enrollment & school finance
- NHERI — homeschooling
- Nat'l Alliance for Public Charter Schools
- EdChoice & FutureEd — choice programs
- Learning Policy Institute — teacher shortages
- NEA — teacher pay & per-pupil spending
- RAND & Gallup-Walton — AI adoption
- Ballotpedia / Pew — cellphone policy
- Attendance Works / Healthy Minds — wellness

Figures reflect the most recent data available at publication. Federal data can lag; choice, AI & policy figures move quickly. Percentages rounded; definitions vary by source.

Contact K12 Academics

Questions about this report, or about listing your school or program? We\'d love to hear from you.

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