

No time to lose: How to build a world-class education system state by state ^[1]

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Full report PDF ^[2]

Executive summary

The bad news is most state education systems are falling dangerously behind the world in a number of international comparisons and on our own National Assessment of Educational Progress, leaving the United States overwhelmingly underprepared to succeed in the 21st century economy. The U.S. workforce, widely acknowledged to be the best educated in the world half a century ago, is now among the least well-educated in the world, according to recent studies. At this pace, we will struggle to compete economically against even developing nations, and our children will struggle to find jobs in the global economy.

States have found little success. Recent reforms have underperformed because of silver bullet strategies and piecemeal approaches. Meanwhile, high-performing countries implement policies and practices and build comprehensive systems that look drastically different from ours, leading them to the success that has eluded states. Pockets of improvement in a few districts or states is not enough to retain our country's global competitiveness.

The good news is, by studying these other high-performing systems, we are discovering what seems to work. Common elements are present in nearly every world-class education system, including a strong early education system, a reimagined and professionalized teacher workforce, robust career and technical education programs, and a comprehensive, aligned system of education. These elements are not found in the U.S. in a consistent, well-designed manner as they are found in high performers.

We have the ability to turn things around. Much higher-performing, yet less-developed countries—such as Poland and Singapore—have made significant progress developing their education systems in just a decade or two because they felt a strong sense of urgency. State policymakers, too, can get started right away to turn around our education system by taking immediate steps to:

- Build an Inclusive Team and Set Priorities.
- Study and Learn from Top Performers.
- Create a Shared Statewide Vision.
- Benchmark Policies.
- Get Started on One Piece.
- Work Through "Messiness."
- Invest the Time.

We must directly face these challenges and begin immediately to reimagine and re-engineer our own education system. We must implement meaningful and comprehensive changes that will produce real results for our students.

State legislators must lead this work. Education is first and foremost a state responsibility. Each state can develop its own strategies for building a modern education system that is globally competitive, similar to the approach taken by other high-performing countries.

But we must begin now. There's no time to lose.

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