

Four Decades Walking in Place, If Not Backwards: An Outlook on American Public Education

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On behalf of CAEP President Chris Koch, thank you, Lynn, for your kind invitation for CAEP to participate in this discussion. While I lamented about being thrown under the bus by serving on this panel to substitute Chris as he has a prior engagement, I am tremendously honored that Lynn thinks that I am adequate enough to participate. In our preparatory conversation, Lynn made it very clear to me that we are not here to debate the merit of CAEP and AAQEP educator preparation standards. Rather, we are here to share our thoughts on the big picture of America's education and with that, we could get some sense of the implication it has on educator preparation. I, therefore, will share my thoughts on that principle. I wish to acknowledge the contribution to my remarks by my fellow CAEP board members, Professor Anne Tapp Jaska of Saginaw Valley State University, current Chair for the Board of Directors at AACTE, and Professor Stacey Edmonson Victor, Dean of Education at Sam Houston State University and the incoming Chair of the Board for AACTE.

The challenges facing our educator preparation are the results of how America organizes and delivers its education. The United States has the vast volume of research demonstrating what matter in education and the quality standards required for professional educators. I would like to argue that we have not made significant progress because, as a nation, there is not a coherent educational system that is supported by the society.

In 1983, a federal government commissioned and extremely controversial report *A Nation at Risk*² sounded the alarm that "Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purpose of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them" (p. 13-14). It further warned that "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war... We have squandered the gains in student achievement... Moreover, we have dismantled essential support systems which helped make those gains possible. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament" (p. 13).

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² Gardner, D. and Others (1983). *A Nation at Risk*. Washington, DC: National Commission on Excellence in Education. Retrieved on January 12, 2026 from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED226006.pdf>.

The report recommended that high school graduation requirements include contents in five areas: English, mathematics, science, social studies, and computer science; adopt high expectations and “rigorous and measurable” (p. 27) standards for academic performance and college admissions; use effectively time at school; improve teaching and “make teaching a more rewarding and respected profession” (p. 38); and hold educational leaders and citizens accountable for the operation and fiscal support of school.

This report, in my view, observed the symptoms of the weakness of our educational system. However, it failed to provide the diagnose that social, economic, and community factors influence every aspect of the quality of schooling and the learning outcomes of students by pinning on the improvement of education only on state and local education authorities.

Over the last 43 years since the publication of this report, we have seen all sorts of reform efforts such as the 1986 *Education Enhancement Act* of Connecticut, that raises teacher salaries, reviews and approves evaluation and incentive plans, raises teacher certification standards, establishes alternate route to certification; and mandates school districts minimum fiscal expenditures. States have also implemented standardized tests in reading, mathematics, and science at various grades. Since 1969, the United States has administered the *National Assessment of Educational Progress* (NAEP) to gauge what students know in subjects of reading, writing, mathematics, and science. In 1988, Congress established a board to oversee NAEP. The United States has also participated in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) created by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that test the knowledge of 15-year-old in reading, mathematics, and science. In 1999, the U. S. Department of Education established Teacher Quality Enhancement Grant Program to strengthen the preparation of and support for teachers. The 2002 federal law of *No Child Left Behind*, while deeply flawed in its implementation, was the first national attempt to mandate educational standards in testing and hold failing schools accountable—again an effort only focused on schools without the understanding that it takes a nation to provide quality education. There has been a proliferation of alternate route to teacher certification programs, some are funded by private equities, to address the worsening of teacher shortages.

Financially, in addition to state and local support, the federal government has invested through grants, including *Title II-A; Supporting Effective Instruction*, the largest in teacher quality, with around \$2.1 billion allocated annually to states and districts for professional development, reducing class sizes, and supporting new teachers; *Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP)*, a competitive program for teacher preparation, it has seen significant funding shifts; for instance, around \$70 million annually; and *Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED)*, another competitive grant for innovative teacher training, with approximately \$80 million annually. That grant program has now been discontinued prompting legal action by the AACTE.

The results?

The United States has never achieved top ranking in the PISA. While ranked between sixth and 10th in reading and science, it achieved the historically worst mathematic score in the latest

assessment in 2022 and kept its ranking in the low 20th. On the NAEP tests, among the nine-year-old students⁴, the average reading scores declined from 221 in 2012 to 215 in 2022; the average mathematics score declined from 244 in 2012 to 234 in 2022. Among the 13-year-old students⁵, the average reading scores declined from 263 in 2012 to 256 in 2023; and the average mathematics scores declined from 285 in 2012 to 271 in 2023. Among the eighth-grade students, their overall average science score between 2009 and 2024 remained the same at 150 out of the total score at 300 (141 is at basic level, 170 is proficient, and 215 is advanced)⁶.

Figure 1. Mean performance on PISA reading, mathematics and science tests: United States: 2000-2022.

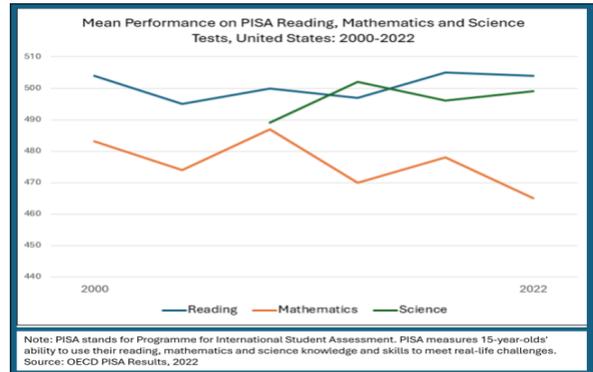


Figure 2. NAEP Trend 2012-2022 (Age 9)
Source: <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ltr/?age=9>

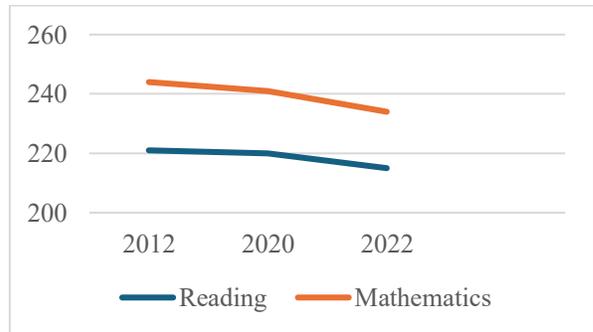
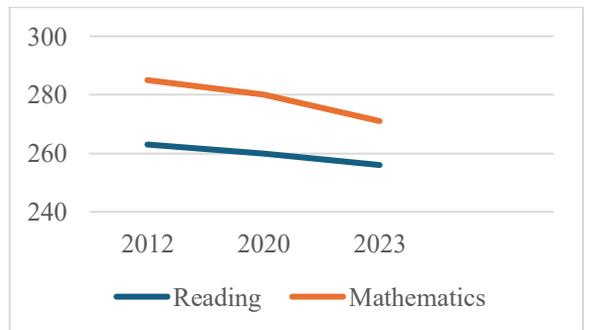


Figure 3. NAEP Trend (2012-2023) (Age 13)
Source: <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ltr/?age=13>



³ National Center for Education Statistics. *Program for International Student Assessment 2022 U.S. Results*. Retrieved on January 12, 2026 from <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pisa/pisa2022/index.asp#/>.

⁴ The Nation's Report Card. *NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessment Results: Reading and Mathematics*. Retrieved on January 12, 2026 from <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ltr/?age=9>.

⁵ *Ibid.* Retrieved on January 12, 2026 from <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ltr/?age=13>.

⁶ The Nation's Report Card. *Science: National Trends and Student Skills*. Retrieved on January 12, 2026 from <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reports/science/2024/national-trends/>.

David Scharfenberg from *The Boston Globe* cited a report from the University of California-San Diego that “the number of incoming freshmen with below-high-school-level math skills increased *nearly 30-fold* between 2020 and 2025... Fully 70 percent of those students fell *below middle school levels*,” causing him to claim that “young people are getting dumber.”⁷

Over the years, many at one point highly lauded initiatives to improve teacher quality and student learning outcomes have quietly phased out by schools, universities, and states. Among them, there are teacher induction programs such as the Connecticut Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST) requirements; EdTPA assessments for teacher competencies; and Teachers for the New Era grant sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York; The alternate route to teacher certification program completers have significantly lower retention rates than those who completed traditional programs.⁸ Many of them participated in such program as a resume building experience and have gone on to bigger pastures in law and politics. Despite a school age “demographic cliff” of 13% drop in high school graduates between 2026 and 2041⁹, there are still the same or even worse teacher shortages. Many initiatives from various grant programs were not institutionalized, causing them to end once the funding ended. Most recently, Massachusetts voters eliminated standardized test for high school graduation requirement.¹⁰ And there is certainly no mention of *No Child Left Behind* anywhere given its fundamental ignorance of how quality of education is affected by many other social factors as mentioned before. It seems to me that whenever the work gets harder, standards raised higher, or fiscal commitment intensifies, we back off from these efforts.

For me, the question is not whether young people are getting dumber. It should be whether, as a nation, the society has failed our young people. It seems that we have been walking in place in the last four decades. As a nation, all those education reform efforts have not moved us forward, and in student performance, we may even say we have moved backward. My observation in the field is that we, the Americans, simply cannot agree with each other on what is education and how to go about it. Further, all the arguments about standards fail to stress that standards are only supposed to be the floor, not the ceiling. They only mean the knowledge and competencies all students must have at a certain developmental stage in order to become a critically thinking, rights and community-conscientious and responsible participant in the democratic society. Beyond that, schools and students could pursue anything in their wildest dreams.

⁷ Scharfenberg, D. (2025). Young people are getting dumber: Here’s why: a precipitous drop in academic achievement demands an urgent response. *The Boston Globe*. December 7. Retrieved on January 12, 2026 from <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2025/12/07/opinion/mcas-standardized-tests-education-accountability/?event=event12>.

⁸ Knox, L. (2022). A market solution to teacher shortages raises alarms. *Inside Higher Education*. August 31. Retrieved on January 12, 2026 from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/09/01/profit-teacher-prep-programs-gain-popularity-and-critics>.

⁹ Vyse, G. (2025). What is the demographic cliff? *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 3. Retrieved on January 12, 2026 from <https://www.chronicle.com/special-projects/the-different-voices-of-student-success/becoming-a-student-centric-institution/what-is-the-demographic-cliff>.

¹⁰ Candal, C. (2025). A step backward for Massachusetts students. *Education Next*. Retrieved on January 12, 2026 from <https://www.educationnext.org/a-step-backward-for-massachusetts-students-mcas-graduation-requirement-accountability/>.

few messy years of “marriage” trying to achieve that goal, a decision was made some to “divorce” CAEP and formed AAQEP. This all took place before I served on the CAEP Board of Directors and I am not here to litigate the wisdom of the merger and the eventual separation. Rather, I just want to illustrate that as a field, we cannot agree on what takes to prepare educators and how we can ascertain if programs are doing their jobs of preparing educators. I don’t think there is another profession with such divergent views of what it means to be a professional.

The Trump administration’s dismantling of the U.S. Department of Education has been criticized by many. However, hardly anyone talks about the fact that the agency, which did not become a cabinet-level department, until 1980 under President Jimmy Carter, has never had any constitutional authority to regulate the nation’s system of education¹³. It has used grant funds, financial aid funds as carrots to persuade states, schools, and institutions of higher education to operate. It has investigated civil right violations. But in all, it has never had the “stick” to govern. I cannot think of another country in the world which operates education the same manner.

Professor David Labaree from Stanford University delivered two lectures in Japan in 2019. According to his diagnose, the American public education system is “radically decentralized, with some 14,000 school districts responsible for setting policy and running schools” and it is “hard to find any structure of public education in the world that is more independent of national control.” For him, “the American system of education is...radically unequal, organizationally fragmented and instructionally mediocre” leading to “the chronically mediocre academic performance of its students.”¹⁴

Do we really not know what needs to be done? The question is not that we don’t know. The issue is whether the voters and the law makers of the nation have the political will to do the right thing. Take Mississippi as an example. While many states are “backing off accountability and lowering proficiency standards,” “Mississippi has gone from 49th in the country on national tests in 2013, to a top 10 state for fourth graders learning to read — even as test scores have fallen almost everywhere else.”¹⁵ Mississippi succeeded so far by raising academic standards, ensuring instructions are based on the science of reading, and measuring “how student’s progress toward proficiency. Schools get credit if students show improvement—and double credit for the improvement of students in the bottom 25 percent.” The state took the leadership in telling schools what to do. So this begs the concluding question that I have: Do we have the will to do the hard work? For those who try to make the learning process “fun,” I would ask when are we going to point out the obvious: learning is also hard and challenging? If educator preparation

¹³ An Overview of the U.S. Department of Education: History and Purpose. Retrieved on January 12, 2026 from <https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-overview/an-overview-of-the-us-department-of-education--pg-1>.

¹⁴ Labaree, D. (2019). *From Citizens to Consumers: Evolution of Reform Rhetoric and Consumer Practice in the U.S.* Retrieved on January 12, 2026 from <https://davidlabaree.com/2019/12/02/from-citizens-to-consumers-evolution-of-reform-rhetoric-and-consumer-practice-in-the-u-s/>.

¹⁵ Mervosh, S. (2026). How Mississippi transformed its schools from worst to best. *The New York Times*, January 11. Retrieved on January 12, 2026 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/11/us/mississippi-schools-transformation.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

programs are not leading the nation to do so, then who else will? This is why coherent minimum standards, evidence-based instruction, and sustained societal commitment matter.

Lynn graciously shared with me some of the questions we are to discuss today. They made me realize that they are the exact same questions raised by *A Nation at Risk* 43 years ago, and the exact same questions raised when I began my career in state K-12 education policies 25 years ago. How can we avoid being same song, next verse? Only through difficult conversations and the hard work needed, we can forge real solutions. Without fundamental changes in our nation's education system with the leaderships of educator preparation programs and the standard boards, in 40 years from now, perhaps, our future educational leaders will be asking the same questions while the system continues to fail our future generations.

Sample Questions and Answers:

How do each of you envision the landscape of teacher preparation evolving over the next five to ten years?

More apprenticeships/residency models used, more AI, more non-traditional enrollees into teacher preparation and more alternative providers. More de-professionalizing.

• What opportunities do you see for innovation in traditional and non-traditional preparation models?

Certainly the utilization of AI and residency and apprenticeship models. More hybrid programs (traditional and online).

• How do you anticipate evidence and data expectations evolving, especially in a competency-based future?

CAEP has already seen Competency based models utilized among our accredited providers. As with any assessment model there are good implementations and terrible ones. Data and Assessments plans need to be modeled for appropriate data collection. Just saying 100% are proficient at the end is not acceptable. Assessments need to be placed to measure growth and progress to proficiency but not just at the end.

• How do you see technology, including AI, shaping teacher preparation in the next decade?

It will continue to be an expansive tool for providers used with clinical experiences, data simulations and ways in which we haven't even been able to envision. The use of smart Avatars in simulation, reduction of time to create instructional resources, Adaptive environments for tutoring and support.

• What trends are you observing in effective and sustainable clinical partnerships?

Residency and apprenticeship models are increasing since the pandemic. co-teaching and teaching pods

• How can accrediting bodies balance national consistency with local and state-specific needs?

We do this through every aspect of the accreditation process. Our standards allow for both consistency and flexibility. CAEP partners with a majority of states to ensure that state and local needs are addressed. In a number of those partnerships state personnel sit on CAEP reviews. (we refer to those as joint reviews). Further, our multi-tiered review process ensures that consistency among providers is maintained.

• What practices have you seen nationally that signal where high-quality preparation is headed?

A concerning trend continues to be efforts to fill vacancies are, in some cases, putting inadequately prepared individuals in front of K-12 students. Flexibility with apprenticeships and residency is a more promising trend which offers flexibility in obtaining critical clinical experience.

• As more states adopt teacher apprenticeship pathways, how do you see accreditation frameworks adapting to evaluate competency-based progress rather than traditional credit-based structures?

If designed appropriately, competency based frameworks can be quite effective. The Scope and Sequence of curriculum and the corresponding assessment framework need to be thoughtfully planned. We have had the idea of computer-adaptive testing for a long time, this is the same mindset used in designing the clinical experiences. CAEP accreditation is agile enough to include these types of assessments. We have a partnership with the Competency based group CBEN and AACTE to create tools and resources for EPP to design high quality competency based programs and provide robust data for Accreditation.

• What role should accrediting bodies play in defining or validating quality standards for non-IHE entities that become state approved EPP while serving simultaneously as an instruction provider under the US Department of Labor?

Having high standards and holding all providers to those standards. Pressuring states to require alt cert providers meet accreditation standards. Collecting data on pathways (fed or states) so there is clear evidence of what pathways are successful. Holding Alt certs accountable for candidate outcomes.

• How can accreditation systems support partnerships between LEAs, nonprofits, and institutions of higher education within apprenticeship pathways?

CAEP has an entire component about partnerships (R2.1). Many of our EPPs are working in a new space for partnership. The look and feel of those partnerships has evolved (since COVID) and the traditional LEA/EPP partnerships have expanded and grown to include others, but the core idea is still there. There must be communication and a unified approach to the path forward. All the voices have to be part of the approach.

• Do you see apprenticeships influencing long-term redesigns of clinical practice expectations?

Continuous Improvement is part of the mission of accreditation. EPPS and accreditors have to review and discuss expectations and new ways of approaching teacher prep. We have to keep up with the times. That does not mean lowering standards but rather defining and clarifying high expectations for Clinical experience and creating opportunities to meet high standards in new ways. We have clear high expectations for the outcomes, we have to be open about the inputs to get there.

• How might accreditation review teams evaluate programs where candidates are employees first and students second, with learning occurring on the job?

At least for CAEP, All candidates are CANDIDATES regardless of if they are in residency or apprenticeship models. The EPP is still responsible for providing support and resources to all. They are not considered completers for us. Apprenticeships are not teacher of record. Many states do allow TOR status and emergency licenses, but generally they are different types of models. Again, the EPP is responsible for those candidates enrolled in their programs. There is still an assessment and support plan for those candidates.