



Accelerating Learning:

How K-12 Systems Are Moving Forward and Making Gains

September 2023





Accelerating Learning:

How K-12 Systems Are Moving Forward and Making Gains

Introduction

By and large, America's K-12 students are far behind. The most recent Nation's Report Card, also known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, showed disastrous declines in student performance. In an October 2022 [article](#), The New York Times summarized the results in math and reading.

In math, the results were especially devastating, representing the steepest declines ever recorded on the National Assessment of Educational Progress . . . which tests a broad sampling of fourth and eighth graders and dates to the early 1990s.

In the test's first results since the pandemic began, math scores for eighth graders fell in nearly every state. A meager 26 percent of eighth graders were proficient, down from 34 percent in 2019.

Fourth graders fared only slightly better, with declines in 41 states. Just 36 percent of fourth graders were proficient in math, down from 41 percent.

Reading scores also declined in more than half the states, continuing a downward trend that had begun even before the pandemic. No state showed sizable improvement in reading. And only about one in three

students met proficiency standards, a designation that means students have demonstrated competency and are on track for future success.

And for the country's most vulnerable students, the pandemic has left them even further behind. The drops in their test scores were often more pronounced, and their climbs to proficiency are now that much more daunting.

Ensuring America's students catch up academically and gain the knowledge and skills they need to succeed is among the most important work of our time. Chiefs for Change, a bipartisan network of school superintendents and state education commissioners, is fully committed to this undertaking. The network supports members' efforts to accelerate learning by providing technical assistance and advancing policies and practices shown to make a difference.

In May 2020, Chiefs for Change and the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy issued [a report](#) that outlined relevant research and provided key recommendations for safely reopening schools and supporting student learning during the pandemic. Then, in early 2023, after years of Covid-related disruptions—

and given students' urgent academic needs—Chiefs for Change again engaged the Institute. Its team of experts reviewed published research studies and identified evidence-based approaches that significantly improve student learning. One promising approach, for instance, is small-group, high-dosage tutoring with qualified tutors who lead sessions that are at least 50 minutes long, are embedded in the regular school day, and that take place throughout the entire academic year. Another is the use of high-quality curricula with aligned assessments and professional learning.

At the Chiefs for Change Annual Meeting in March 2023, members discussed this body of research and described ways in which their systems were implementing evidence-based strategies.

“I am pleased to be a part of a network that bases its wisdom and knowledge and forward progress on sound research,” said Chiefs for Change board member and Ector County Independent School District Superintendent Scott Muri. “That gives me great confidence that when I hear something from Chiefs for Change, I know that what I hear is embedded in quality research and not just an idea that flowed through someone’s head.”

This report, prompted by conversations at the Annual Meeting, contains stories about various approaches that members say are leading to academic success in their systems. Some of their strategies reflect established research on what works; others seem to yield notable achievement gains, despite not yet having been studied. We include both categories to show how systems are implementing promising programs that could make a difference elsewhere.

Strategies detailed here are in addition to those highlighted in our June 2023 report, [*A Work in Progress: How Covid Aid Is Helping Schools Recover and the Need for Sustained Federal Support*](#). As a network, Chiefs for Change operates the largest community of practice for education system leaders in the nation. It will continue to work with respected partners to disseminate high-quality research and to share impactful programs from members' systems.

Spotlights in this report are:

- **“Bold Action for Kids”: High-Leverage Strategies for Statewide Improvement in Tennessee.**
- **“Fidelity Is Critically Important”: Evidence-Based Methods for Virtual Tutoring in Ector County.**
- **“We All Want the Same Thing”: Community Partnerships for Learning in Beaufort County.**
- **“Schools Can’t Do This Work Alone”: State Resources for Local Impact in Indiana.**
- **“It Can Be Done”: High-Quality Curricula for Boosting Achievement in Indianapolis.**

The recent learning declines in America are unprecedented, and it will take an unprecedented effort to get students to where they need to be in school. Members of Chiefs for Change are disseminating best practices, learning from colleagues, and pursuing solutions they believe will have the greatest effect, as quickly as possible.

The challenge is vast, but children can’t wait. We share these stories in that spirit of urgency and determination.



A teacher in Tennessee works with students.

“Bold Action for Kids” High-Leverage Strategies for Statewide Improvement in Tennessee

People are paying attention to student progress in Tennessee. State test results [released](#) in June 2023 show increases in academic proficiency across all subjects and grades, with an 8-percentage-point increase in student proficiency in English language arts (ELA) and math since 2020. The gains—which in ELA exceed pre-pandemic proficiency rates—reflect the state’s strong commitment to students and the hard work of teachers, principals, and children. Former Education Commissioner Penny Schwinn, who stepped down at the end of the 2022-2023 academic year, had a bold vision for Tennessee’s approximately one million students and 1,800 schools. She developed a comprehensive strategy that helped distinguish Tennessee as a leader in K-12 during and after the Covid pandemic and that continues to drive progress across the state. The strategy is focused on several key areas, including early literacy, high-dosage tutoring, and building the pipeline of talented teachers.

Early Literacy

Literacy is fundamental to a person’s ability to succeed in life, and reading [on grade level by third grade](#), in particular, is critical: Students must be able to read by third grade in order to comprehend lessons and do their work across all subjects, in all of the grades that follow.

But not all methods for teaching children to read are equally effective. To ensure students develop strong foundational skills, educators must use curriculum and instructional methods grounded in what we know about how children best learn to read. That body of research—called the “science of reading”—shows that [effective literacy instruction](#) is focused on helping students develop content knowledge and an understanding of letter-sound and sound-spelling relationships. It also emphasizes word recognition and language comprehension and fluency. Multiple, rigorous studies

over 40 years prove these are the most effective ways to teach reading.

With the goal of dramatically improving early literacy, Tennessee launched a statewide initiative called Reading 360 that is leading to [historic gains](#) in third-grade reading scores. According to the state department of education, third-grade students showed significant improvement in ELA scores on the spring 2023 Tennessee Comprehensive Academic Program (TCAP). Notable highlights include:

- The largest increase in a single year of third graders whose ELA scores met or exceeded expectations since Tennessee updated its ELA academic standards in 2017.
- Forty percent of third-grade students scored proficient in ELA—a 4.3-percentage-point increase from the previous year.
- The largest percentage of third-grade students scoring in the top performance category in more than a decade, with overall proficiency growing by almost 8 percentage points from 2021 decreases related to the pandemic.

“Reading is the foundation to all learning, and third grade is a critical milestone for every student,” the department stated in a press release announcing the results. “Before the pandemic, only one-third of third graders in Tennessee had met expectations on the TCAP [in ELA], the best standardized proxy for reading achievement. The department’s Reading 360 initiative as well as other supports have created a comprehensive approach to ensure Tennessee can boost reading skills in kindergarten through third grade students.”

[Funded](#) with an initial \$60 million in federal Covid aid, \$40 million in federal grant funding, and additional state funding, Reading 360 provides districts with funding and other resources to help students develop strong phonics-based reading skills. As part of the initiative, every kindergarten through third-grade student participates in a screening test three times a year. If the screening shows a child has trouble reading on grade level, their school creates a personalized report so the child’s family can understand where more support is needed. The school also gives families optional activities they can do with their child at home. In addition, all teachers receive training in the science of reading. This helps ensure that instructional practices across the state are aligned with the research on how children best learn to read.

To learn more about Reading 360, see [this](#) 2022 Chiefs for Change video.



Penny Schwinn, then the commissioner of education in Tennessee, testifies before the U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor.

TN ALL Corps

High-dosage, low-ratio tutoring is another key component of the strategy that is driving academic progress in the state. [Research](#) shows this type of intensive and consistent support can help students catch up in their learning. To ensure all students have the assistance they need, the state launched the Tennessee Accelerating Literacy and Learning Corps, or [TN ALL Corps](#), the largest tutoring program in the nation. Since then, other places have looked to follow Tennessee’s lead. Schwinn was invited to [testify](#) before the U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor in September 2022. She gave an overview of how TN ALL Corps is structured and the difference it is making for students.

“We started Tennessee ALL Corps; that was part of legislation that was passed in January 2021,” Schwinn told policymakers. “It has several parts. The first are grants to school districts—it’s matching grants to provide high-dosage tutoring. That is one to three students, maximum for 30 to 45 minutes, two to three times per week. We funded enough for 150,000 [students]. That is now sustained in our new funding formula forevermore because we have seen such powerful impacts.”

Tennessee’s tutoring plan also provides community grants for K-12 systems to partner with local organizations delivering the same high-dosage, low-ratio tutoring. And



A tutor in Tennessee supports a student.

the plan allocates funding, in the form of microgrants, to families from low-income communities whose children were most negatively impacted by school closures in the early days of the pandemic. These microgrants allow children to receive tutoring and instruction specifically in early literacy. In addition, the state offers free, online, on-demand tutoring for high school students. That support is set up so students aren't pulled out of class, can participate in afterschool activities, and can still get the targeted academic help they need.

With widespread interest in Tennessee's approach and the need to ensure tutoring is done well, Chiefs for Change produced [a guidebook](#) modeled after TN ALL Corps. The guide is free and publicly available for any K-12 system to use. "I'm thrilled that Chiefs for Change is building on and sharing the learnings from our state, so that systems across the country can implement their own initiatives," Schwinn said at the time the guide was released.

During the congressional hearing, Schwinn was asked how tutoring sessions are implemented under TN ALL Corps.

"We have actually seen that the most strategic place is in school," she told the committee. "It is also a strategy for addressing the teacher shortage issue. Our districts are hiring full-time, credentialed teachers—sometimes retirees or career changers. They are then doing the tutoring during their intervention block and very, very small group instruction."

She continued, "I will call out, though, that we have a great example in Union County for afterschool programming, where there are retired or existing teachers tutoring their own students or their students from the prior year. They already have relationships with the families, and they actually schedule the tutoring sessions in partnership with families, so the trust is there. The tutor is very well trained; certainly is a certified teacher. They are compensated well above and beyond what they would normally get in terms of their salary, and they already have those strong relationships and knowledge base so there is consistency with the curriculum and the approach at that specific school site."

Schwinn emphasized that an important part of the state's strategy is making evidence-based investments with an eye toward sustaining those that are shown to work.

When asked how Tennessee is evaluating the impact of TN ALL Corps, she said that in ELA, the state looks at benchmark assessments and reading screeners. In math, it procured an online math acceleration platform through a competitive procurement process to support tutoring and progress monitoring. "We look at what practices are showing very strong acceleration at the school level, the district level, and then actually with individual students—and our team goes into districts and [partners] with them in our networks," Schwinn said.



A Grow Your Own program candidate reads to students.

She added that the state has tutoring networks to evaluate the data and make adjustments based on what is working and what is not working in order to accelerate learning in every tutoring program.

“We’ve heard talk of bold action, read papers of what is possible, and dreamed of what could be true for our students, our teachers, and our schools,” Schwinn said at the hearing. “The challenge I offer to all of us is that we turn the possibility into the reality: Make bold action for kids the expectation, not the exception.”

Grow Your Own

No other school-based factor matters more to student learning than the [teacher in the classroom](#). To address teacher shortages and ensure every child is taught by a qualified educator, Tennessee pioneered a new educator preparation model and became the first state in the nation to receive U.S. Department of Labor approval for its registered teacher apprenticeship. Known as [Grow Your Own](#), the Tennessee model leverages both federal and state workforce dollars, preserving locally designed programs while meeting national apprenticeship standards. The initiative has received national recognition as an innovative solution to the school staffing crisis.

“Grow Your Own is one of many initiatives we have launched in Tennessee since the onset of the pandemic to make sure our students don’t just catch up, don’t just keep up, but actually go on to speed ahead,” Schwinn told

Chiefs for Change in spring 2022. “Every child deserves a highly trained teacher. Our first-year teachers will now have two to three years of experience before they begin leading their own classroom. I am proud of how our program is helping to fill critical vacancies and is creating a teaching workforce that reflects our students.”

Tennessee launched its Grow Your Own program to recruit aspiring teachers and provide a path for them to work with veteran educators and earn their bachelor’s, master’s, or license only for free. Under the model, individuals participate in a multi-year residency while serving as a full-time paid paraprofessional with benefits. Once participants complete the Grow Your Own program, they have an opportunity to become a full-time teacher in the same district.

“This program has definitely been a game-changer because I don’t have to worry about having thousands of dollars in student loans,” Melanie Hammons, a candidate in the Clarksville-Montgomery County School System’s Grow Your Own program, told Chiefs for Change in spring 2022. “From the very beginning, I am in the classroom. I truly see what the job is. From day one, I am working with a mentor. From day one, I am an educational assistant. I don’t just come in to observe and write notes. I am a student teacher for all three years of the program and will graduate certified to be a middle school math teacher with a special education endorsement.”

To learn more about the Grow Your Own program, see [this video](#) and [this resource](#), both produced by Chiefs for Change.



Ector County ISD Superintendent Scott Muri talks with a student about virtual tutoring.

“Fidelity Is Critically Important” Evidence-Based Methods for Virtual Tutoring in Ector County

As was true in many places, children in Odessa, Texas, experienced serious academic setbacks during the pandemic. “Our students, especially our elementary students and fragile students, were really struggling,” said Ector County Independent School District Superintendent Scott Muri. “So we knew we needed to do something to accelerate their learning. When you scan the nation and look at education research, high-dosage, high-quality tutoring is one of the most effective forms of intervention. That’s what we wanted for our kids—not something that was moderately effective—but something that was highly effective.”

Sixty-seven percent of Ector County’s 33,500 students are economically disadvantaged. The district had long offered tutoring for some children, but Muri realized it would be impossible to hire the number of in-person tutors required to support all of the students who needed extra help—in his community, the tutors just were not there. Undaunted,

Muri and his team set about creating a virtual tutoring program that incorporated the same core elements as the evidence-based in-person models. That is: Students work with the same trained tutor, one on one or in small groups, for several hours each week. Sessions are part of the regular school day and are monitored by an adult on site. Content is aligned with what children are learning in the classroom, and tutors and teachers collaborate to help ensure students make progress.

“Simply giving a tutoring session and hoping for the best was not going to be a strategy for us,” Muri said. “Implementing the program with fidelity was critically important. Our students needed to accelerate at a rapid pace, so we established a rigorous framework. Our tutors need to communicate with teachers, our tutors need to be trained tutors—not just individuals who may be mathematicians but don’t know how to support student learning.



Ector County ISD High-Impact Tutoring Coordinator Carina Escajeda says highly structured virtual tutoring is making a difference for students.

“Tutoring needs to be embedded during the school day,” Muri continued. “Either tied to the beginning of the day, included during the day, or tied to the end of the day. Just offering students a few hours of tutoring and doing it on a whim is not an effective practice. We identified a series of best practices and then designed a program around those practices.”

Ector County established a position for a coordinator to oversee the tutoring program across the district. Carina Escajeda works with principals to find safe and productive environments for on-campus tutoring sessions, sets training standards for tutoring providers, and monitors and analyzes student performance. She likes that she is playing a role in giving students the extra support they need.

“My own daughter was participating in tutoring, and she was able to advance a whole grade level afterwards,” Escajeda said. “Of course, as a parent, that means a lot to me. But we see students grow exponentially across the district once they get this high-impact tutoring.”

“What some campuses do is they have an intervention block during the school day where all students receive personalized instruction,” Escajeda continued. “These students log in to their computer, they access their tutor through an app on their Chromebook. And the tutors already know what their scores are, they know the

curriculum, they know the skill deficits that our students have—and they work toward mastering those skills.”

Ector County began with a pilot, funded by philanthropic support, for 40 middle school students. After the pilot produced positive outcomes, the district used its federal Covid aid—resources from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund—to expand tutoring to 6,000 students in ELA and math at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Children participate in tutoring if they are in third through twelfth grade and did not pass the state exam or if they are chosen by their principal to receive extra help.

“The investment that we have made in those kids is paying dividends,” Muri said. “We have evidence that virtual tutoring works for us. So when ESSER is complete, our opportunity will be to figure out how we embed those costs into our existing budget because it is a strategy that makes sense for kids.” Muri, however, said that he does not expect that the tutoring program will need to serve as many students going forward since it has been effective and has helped students catch up.

The way that Ector County structured the program has been key to its success. Another important element of the district’s approach is the use of outcomes-based contracts.



A student in Ector County ISD meets with their virtual tutor.

“We hold the companies accountable for the success of students,” Muri said. “If students demonstrate growth at the levels we set on the NWEA MAP assessment, we compensate the companies for that growth.”

The district currently partners with two virtual tutoring providers, with the providers agreeing to a set base pay. In addition, at the beginning of each school year, the district establishes goals for students’ academic growth and agrees to pay the tutoring companies amounts above the base pay if children achieve those goals by the end of the year.

“I think it’s very important to pay based on outcomes,” said Escajeda. “It is a smart way for us to spend our taxpayer money, to be sure that we are holding the providers responsible for the results that we are expecting. Because it has worked well, Dr. Muri is thinking about expanding where we use outcomes-based contracting.”

At the elementary level, the district has live virtual tutors, so students can see their tutor’s face and engage with them through the screen in real time. “Our secondary students, at the middle school and high school level, aren’t as keen on seeing their tutor, so they prefer a text-based application,” Muri said.

In this kind of online-chat environment, the tutor often provides an opening quiz focused on a specific skill set,

and students use a virtual white board to solve problems. The tutor points to things a student missed or lets them know how they could approach a problem differently.

“The secondary students like that they are able to ask the tutor a question via the chat platform, things they may feel embarrassed to ask a teacher in front of the entire class,” said Escajeda. “If it’s just one on one, they’re able to say to the tutor, for example: *I really don’t know how to do this, can you remind me?* At both the elementary and the secondary level, students work on skills until they master them and then they move on to the next skill they need.”

Muri says high-impact, high-dosage tutoring is the district’s number one strategy for accelerating student learning—and it’s making a difference. Students who participated in virtual tutoring demonstrated up to a year and a half’s worth of growth on test scores. “I am incredibly pleased with the progress that we have made,” Muri said. “Through adversity—and this community has had a lot of adversity in just the last four years—they have risen. For the first time ever, our school system is rated a B in the state of Texas.”

Learn more about Ector County’s virtual tutoring initiative in [this](#) video from Chiefs for Change.



Beaufort County School District Superintendent Frank Rodriguez speaks with students at an extended learning site.

“We All Want the Same Thing” Community Partnerships for Learning in Beaufort County

In 2019, when Frank Rodriguez began his job as superintendent of Beaufort County School District in South Carolina’s lowcountry, there were segments of the community where people said they felt disconnected from the school system.

“We have 21,000 students, with tremendous diversity here. A lot of people think of Hilton Head, in the far southeastern part of our county, and they think of affluence and wealth. And there are pockets of affluence and wealth, but 54 percent of the students we serve are students in poverty; about 35 percent of our students are Hispanic; about 28 percent are African American; and about 20 percent of the students we serve are multilingual learners.”

Rodriguez was concerned about long-standing opportunity gaps and academic outcomes that differed by geographic location. He found, however, that people

in neighborhoods across the district—like James E. Moore, the pastor of Mount Carmel Baptist Church in Seabrook—were eager to work with him.

“I’ve always believed that you might be poor where finances are concerned, but we don’t have to be poor where intelligence and education are concerned,” said Pastor Moore. “We must realize there is a difference. We have different needs than some other communities, and we have to work on those and be intentional about the decisions we make. There is not a one-fits-all approach. It is a blessing that the superintendent recognizes that and will work toward actually doing whatever is necessary for our kids.”

Rodriguez says the district’s close collaboration with ecumenical partners has been very important, particularly after pandemic disruptions caused some students to fall behind in their learning.



A retired teacher works with students at an extended learning site at Mount Carmel Baptist Church.

“Our partners said: *We want to be part of this academic recovery.* I think it really helped people see and understand that the school district is committed to these neighborhood relationships that benefit our students, especially in those parts of our community that previously felt disconnected.”

A major element of Beaufort County’s recovery work is a formal partnership in which the district established extended learning sites at area churches, including Mount Carmel, and other community organizations. [Research](#) indicates that increased learning time—whether in the form of a longer school day or year—can positively impact student achievement. In Beaufort County, roughly 25 to 50 students participate in the learning program at each site four days a week. Students arrive after school and get to play and have free time for 30 to 45 minutes and then go to their classrooms, where they receive support from a trained educator. The district provides transportation from schools to the sites, and from the sites to students’ homes at 6 p.m.

“We hire retired educators, and even some of our own educators who want to work additional time,” Rodriguez said. “We train them and look very closely at what our data is telling us about student needs in reading and math, and then we provide that information about what the general and collective needs are to the individual sites, so they can plan and be purposeful about the

work that takes place through the program. That’s really important because if it’s a comprehension-related issue, if it’s a vocabulary related issue, we can work on those things through these sites. The other advantage, too, is that children get to do any homework they have while they are here, while they are getting individualized support from an educator.”

The district recruits and pays staff and organizes all aspects of the learning program, and the churches provide the space and manage the other components.

“We have a site director—our associate pastor—and he coordinates the food for snacks and the volunteers,” Pastor Moore said. “The volunteers serve the food, so the teachers are not pulled out of the classroom when they are working with the children, because we know that is where learning actually takes place. It is indeed a team effort.”

Early indications show the partnerships are accelerating student learning. Beaufort County surpassed pre-pandemic results in ELA on the 2022 state assessment, with children earning the highest ELA scores in the district’s history. In addition, the district projects—based on its analysis of spring 2023 state tests—that there will be significant gains when the official results are released.

“Our projected data right now are showing us double-digit gains in literacy for many of our schools that are

serviced by these extended learning sites,” Rodriguez said. “We are seeing 12, 15—in one case, 20—percentage-point gains in proficiency. That is the projection that we are seeing from one year to the next. In math, we were heavily affected by the pandemic, but we are seeing gains in that area as well, with some schools showing 19 and 20 percentage-point increases in proficiency. I knew the learning sites would have an impact. I knew they would have a positive impact—but these types of gains exceed my expectations.”

More than just numbers, Pastor Moore knows what the data represent.

“It is the realization of a dream,” he said. “I believe that the intelligence of people is not limited by their environment but their opportunities. So when we see children making these kinds of gains, it reinforces my belief that our children are as smart as any group of children, anywhere. What we have to do is put them in the right environment. We have to use every tool we possibly can to ensure they reach their destiny.

“We are blessed to have a school system that I believe has the potential to help make this community one of the premier learning environments in South Carolina and in America. The superintendent partnering with us on an afterschool program that is in our community—I believe this will transform the community and the learning process.”

Beaufort County used federal Covid relief aid to cover the \$32,000 per site that it costs to operate the program

and has a waiting list of students who want to sign up. Given the initiative’s early success, the district is now looking for new sources of funding to sustain and expand the extended learning partnerships and serve more students after the federal support runs out.

“If you’re open to connecting with your partners in the community, you can have tremendous success,” Rodriguez said. “You bring something to the table as a school district. Others bring something to the table—as parents, community members, retired educators—that they want to contribute. We all want the same thing: We all want to improve outcomes for children and help them reach their highest potential.”

Pastor Moore agreed. “This is personal for me,” he said. “I get emotional, really. I am a former Marine. Marines don’t cry, they tell you. I say to you, that’s not true. Whatever is closest to our heart moves us. I am absolutely delighted that we are making the gains. I realize, though, that this is a beginning. We have to keep our fingers on the pulse, and we must do that continually. These changes have happened because the superintendent’s finger is on the pulse, and he really does listen well. We are investing in our children. With this program, we are investing in their future.”

To learn more about extended learning sites in Beaufort County School District, see the Chiefs for Change video [here](#).



Indiana Secretary of Education Katie Jenner visits a student in math class.

“Schools Can’t Do This Work Alone” State Resources for Local Impact in Indiana

Katie Jenner stepped into her role as Indiana Secretary of Education knowing her state had work to do. It ranks 43rd in the nation for postsecondary educational attainment—indicating there is great opportunity to strengthen pathways for Hoosiers from K-12 to college and good careers. That’s why, when Jenner began leading the education department in 2021, she first studied where change was most needed. She drew on sound research and compelling examples of places that have succeeded in significantly boosting academic achievement as part of her work to develop a multi-pronged strategy. With local expertise and partners across the state, Jenner is deploying that strategy to accelerate learning for Indiana’s 1.1 million students.

“We have to acknowledge that schools can’t do this work alone,” Jenner said. “I often ask myself how I can take the state’s resources and strategically deploy them locally, understanding that the greatest impact always happens at the local level.”

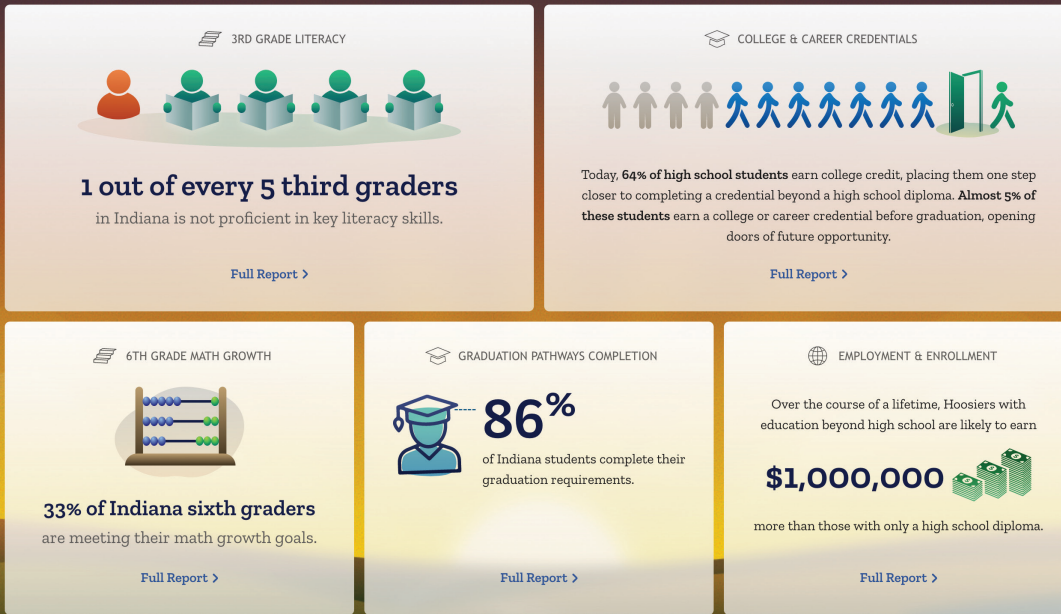
Indiana’s plan involves building a profile of a graduate and tracking data on longitudinal outcomes after high

school. It is also focused on ensuring districts use curriculum grounded in the science of reading and that teachers are trained in evidence-based instructional methods. In addition, the state’s plan gives families who qualify money to pay for academic tutoring. It supports intensive summer learning and enrichment and includes an effort to, as the state says, “rethink” high schools, so they meet the needs of today’s students and employers and prepare all young people to succeed in the future.

Indiana GPS

In order to improve, you have to know where you are. As secretary, Jenner quickly realized the state had limited data on what happens to students after they graduate from high school: Do they go to college, enter the workforce, enlist in the military, or do something else? Local leaders and others said they wanted a better picture of the postsecondary outcomes for the young people in their communities.

Where is Indiana today?



Source: IndianaGPS.com

Acting on that request, Jenner led the state in developing a Profile of a Graduate that identifies key characteristics that are important for young people after they earn their high school diploma. Educators, families, community members, and employers consistently said the characteristics that matter are academic mastery and career and postsecondary readiness: credentials and experiences; communication skills; an ability to collaborate with others; a strong work ethic; and civic, financial, and digital literacy.

The state is now working with partners to determine how to measure these skills and characteristics. The goal is to provide information that can be used to shape schools and programs in ways that enhance student learning and give young people strong pathways to college and careers. Known as Indiana Graduates Prepared to Succeed—or [IndianaGPS](#)—the initiative tracks what is happening with students in communities from early learning, through K-12, and beyond. It includes data about individual schools and explains how, for example, low reading scores at an elementary school might affect high school graduation rates and future college enrollment or employment rates in that community.

“It all connects,” Jenner said. “We have to begin to put that story together for our parents, families, communities—so that we can work together to make the greatest impact for young people.”

In a related effort, the state is also rethinking the high school experience so these years put kids on a concrete path to success in life. The work involves ensuring all students have access to high-quality work-based learning as well as opportunities to earn free college credit and industry credentials of value. In addition, the state is refining high school graduation so students can personalize their diploma requirements according to their future goals. Ultimately, these requirements will seek to encompass academic measures, employability skills, project-based and service learning experiences, and a range of other competencies.

Science of Reading

One in five Indiana third graders is not proficient in key literacy skills. Understanding that reading is critical to a child’s long-term ability to navigate life and succeed in their endeavors, the state is pursuing an ambitious effort to ensure all students have the instruction they need to become strong readers.

“When we were considering how to embed the science of reading in schools across the state and do it at a pace that would impact students as quickly as possible, we looked to other models throughout our country that had been successful,” Jenner said. “Mississippi was the obvious exemplar.” There, fourth graders [improved](#) from 49th in the nation for reading proficiency to 29th in just six years.

“Mississippi installed instructional coaches in all of their schools to support teachers day in and day out,” Jenner said. “So that is the model that we are leaning into. We want that instructional coach there, working with our teachers on the science of reading, looking at the data, looking at the instructional practices in real time, so we can make the most meaningful difference for kids.”

In August 2022, Indiana made its largest-ever literacy investment, supported in part by \$85 million from the Lilly Endowment, headquartered in Indianapolis. A portion of the funding has been used to train teachers in the science of reading. Once educators finish the training, they get a \$1,200 stipend and receive ongoing support.

In addition, a state law approved with bipartisan support in May 2023 requires all districts to adopt curriculum aligned to the science of reading, prevents districts from using materials that rely on disproven instructional methods, and requires newly licensed teachers in certain content areas to earn a literacy endorsement showing they are proficient in science of reading standards.

Indiana Learns Tutoring Grants

Indiana saw alarming decreases in student performance after the disruptions of the pandemic. “More than ever, many of our students are struggling in their learning, and they need targeted and intensive support to get on track in school,” Jenner told Chiefs for Change in summer 2023.

To help kids who were already having trouble in ELA and math—as well as those who got behind during Covid—the state is giving families who qualify money to hire tutors for their children. Families can receive up to \$1,000 for tutoring through funding partnerships between the state and participating local school districts. Tutoring must take place one-on-one or in a small group

setting with an approved provider. Grants are structured to incentivize families and schools to collaborate. Together, they can ensure that children work with high-quality tutors, that sessions are aligned to learning in the classroom, and that everyone understands how students are progressing over time.

Summer Learning Labs

The state distributed more than \$150 million to community partners for programs that promote student learning. One such initiative is Indy Summer Learning Labs, a five-week learning experience focused on helping incoming first through ninth-grade students in the greater Indianapolis area get stronger in ELA and math. Indy Summer Learning Labs, available for free or at a low cost to families, began as a partnership among the Indiana Department of Education, the United Way of Central Indiana, and the Mind Trust.

Students who participated in 2022 showed statistically significant academic growth, exceeding pre-pandemic learning rates and outperforming children who did not take part. Based on program-specific pre- and post-assessments, after one summer, kids in the program saw an average score increase of:

- 25 percentage points in ELA.
- 24 percentage points in math.

Seventy-nine percent of participants were children of color, and 68 percent were from low-income families. Directors say the program’s rigorous curriculum is tied to standards. In addition to academics, children go on field trips and do art projects and outdoor activities to ensure they also have fun over the break.

For more on Indy Summer Learning Labs, see [this](#) video produced by Chiefs for Change.



Indianapolis Public Schools Superintendent Aleesia Johnson asks students about their math lesson.

“It Can Be Done” High-Quality Curricula for Boosting Achievement in Indianapolis

With a week left in the school year, students at William McKinley School 39 in Indianapolis were excited—but not for summer break.

“We’ve got kids from different grade levels running up to us and telling us their scores. They’re so happy and proud,” fifth-grade math teacher Jacob Gregory said at the time. In math and ELA, children at McKinley and across Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) performed higher on state tests than before the pandemic. Among large districts in the state, IPS had the highest growth on ELA.

The gains, while modest, reflect the district’s steadfast commitment to students despite the challenges in a city where 54 percent of families are economically disadvantaged. Many of those challenges existed before the pandemic and have been exacerbated as a result of the disruptions. To improve academic achievement overall and address persistent gaps, IPS Superintendent

Aleesia Johnson is working with her community to implement a highly intentional and evidence-based K-12 strategy.

“I am proud of the hard work that our teachers and leaders have been doing—and we are seeing that work start to show up in the outcomes of our kids,” said Johnson. “We still have a lot to do to make sure our students are achieving at the levels we know they are capable of. But I am encouraged by our progress, and it fuels my determination to keep going until we get there.”

Under Johnson’s leadership, the district is doubling down on high-quality curriculum. [Research](#) has shown that one of the best ways to improve student learning is to give teachers high-quality instructional materials and the support they need to use those resources well. In Indianapolis, Johnson’s team describes the district’s curriculum as the anchor that supports instruction in the



Michelle Jackson, executive director of teaching and learning, says progress in Indianapolis is tied to high-quality instructional materials.

classroom, with a clear scope of content, sequence for lessons, and alignment from one grade level to the next. It is designed so students master the standards—with multiple ways to learn and apply concepts, plus extra reinforcement for students who need more support.

“The progress we are seeing is tied to putting excellent instructional materials in front of our students every single day,” said IPS Executive Director of Teaching and Learning Michelle Jackson. “We are ensuring our teachers follow the pacing that we lay out at the district level, so they hit those high-quality standards.”

IPS has been selective in using “very few curricula,” all highly rated by [EdReports](#) for all subjects and grade levels. Jackson says the approach supports aligned practices across the district and provides a strong foundation for effective professional development.

Funded in large part by federal Covid relief aid, IPS’ professional development helps teachers look at both the big picture and the details: *Where do students begin in their comprehension of a particular lesson? Where should they end up? What are the objectives of that lesson and the essential questions a student must be able to answer? If one way of teaching the lesson isn’t working, is there another approach? And what questions should the teacher anticipate the student will ask?*

“I am the instructional leader of the building,” said McKinley Principal Deana Perry, who leads her campus’ professional learning communities (PLCs) for teachers. “I get right in the trenches with them. I am at every PLC. I know how to move kids. It’s not rocket science. But it’s a lot of hard work. You have to do it with fidelity. You have to hold yourself and your students accountable. We just do that together.”

Mindy Smock, a fourth-grade teacher at McKinley, says the PLCs really help. They include not only Principal Perry but the school’s assistant principal and reading coach.

“We look at what I’m teaching,” Smock said. “Where we want to be and how we’re going to get there. My principal asks me questions, like: *Is this going to reach the students? We dive deep into the curriculum. I have to really study it and know: Where are my kids right now? What do I have to re-teach before I begin this lesson? Is there something I need to review? We show our test scores. We’re always talking data. What did our kids get on this test? What do they need to improve on? What do I need to improve on?*

“I think that’s important. We don’t wing it. When it’s a consistent curriculum, it’s easier. It’s valuable to have the materials behind me so that when I teach, those materials really support what I’m teaching. They show different ways to learn. We *can* reach all students.”



Children in Indianapolis Public Schools participate in a reading lesson.

The district has also implemented frequent classroom walk-throughs to verify a culture of learning for students. During these observations, trained staff check to see if students are taking ownership of their learning and are explaining things to each other as opposed to passively listening. The observers also want to see students' joy for learning, thoughtful questions—and answers to those questions that indicate the teacher's thorough training and preparation.

“With Covid, what we showed ourselves is that we can be dynamic, and responsive, and flexible. And we can move quickly and make decisions when we know they are the right things to do for kids,” said Johnson, the superintendent. “We proved that to ourselves and saw what happened when we all focused on a common goal. At that time, it was keeping our kids safe. In the same

way, we have a common goal now: to ensure kids are learning at the highest level. We are working really hard, relentlessly, to align ourselves—what's happening in the classroom, at the school, across the district. And I think we're beginning to see that in our students' data.

“So certainly, it's hard,” Johnson continued. “It requires the maneuvering of a large organization and takes time. But it can be done. This is what we have to stay focused on, to prove what is possible for our students, prove what is possible to our teachers when they have really strong instructional practices combined with the grade-level, content-rich curriculum our kids deserve.”

To learn more about the difference that high-quality curricula is making in Indianapolis, see the Chiefs for Change video [here](#).