

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For nearly a decade, the Network for Public Education has issued statehouse-by-statehouse report cards holding legislators accountable for how they treat public schools and the children who depend on them. This 2026 Report Card is our most expansive to date, evaluating all 50 states and the District of Columbia across four categories: privatization of public education, protections for homeschooled students, school funding, and conditions for teaching and learning.

What the data reveal is a troubling and consistent pattern. The states most aggressively redirecting public funds toward private alternatives — charter schools, voucher programs, and education savings accounts — are the same states most neglectful of their public schools, their teachers, and their students. Our analysis found a strong, statistically significant negative relationship between the expansion of privatization and public school support ($p < 0.0001$). Privatization and disinvestment, it turns out, go hand in hand.

The stakes have never been higher. At the federal level, the One Big Beautiful Bill embedded the first-ever national tax credit voucher program into law, while \$500 million in federal funding was directed toward charter schools — much of it drawn from terminated teacher-training grants. The U.S. Department of Education is being dismembered piece by piece.

This report is an accounting of how far the same destructive agenda has already advanced, statehouse by statehouse.

The Grades: A Nation Divided

Each statehouse was scored out of 102 possible points and assigned a letter grade. No state achieved a perfect score. Only two states — Nebraska and Vermont — earned an A, each scoring 80 points or above.

Thirteen states earned a B and 13 earned a C, reflecting varying degrees of commitment to public education. At the other end of the scale, six states earned a D, and seventeen states received an F — meaning they failed to meet even 40 percent of our standards for responsible stewardship of public education. Florida ranked last for the third consecutive report card, scoring just 14 out of 102 points. Arizona followed close behind at 18. These are not states struggling against limited resources; they are states that have made active, sustained choices to abandon their public schools while directing public money toward private alternatives with documented records of fraud, discrimination, and academic failure.

Privatization: A Flood of Public Money with Little Oversight

The privatization of K-12 education has accelerated rapidly. Thirty-four states and the District of Columbia now fund one or more private school voucher programs, and nineteen states operate Education Savings Account (ESA) programs — the most expansive and least accountable voucher — allowing families to spend public funds on a wide range of private educational expenses through a dedicated debit card. Ten states have made them available to virtually every family regardless of income or need.

The oversight failures are not hypothetical. Arizona's ESA program flagged nearly 84,000 cases of misspending in less than a year, with public dollars spent on diamond necklaces, gaming consoles, and

international travel. Despite this, Arizona’s legislature has declined to enact a single reform. In Florida, close to four billion dollars in state education funding now flows annually to voucher programs — nearly one in four state education dollars diverted away from public schools, including to families whose children were never in public schools to begin with.

The charter school sector presents parallel concerns. Forty-seven states have charter school laws, and in the majority of them, private unelected boards govern schools with no term limits and no formal accountability to the communities they serve. For-profit companies manage more than 30 percent of all charter schools in six states. Across 26 states, more than a third of all charter schools that ever opened have since closed, leaving students and families to navigate the disruption. The promised benefits of competition and innovation have, in too many cases, yielded fraud, instability, and the quiet erosion of the public school systems left behind.

Protections for Homeschooled Students: Growth Without Guardrails

Homeschooling is the fastest-growing sector of American education, yet children educated at home remain among the least protected. In most states, the law provides near-absolute freedom to parents with virtually no checks on whether children are learning or safe. Eleven states do not even require parents to notify authorities that they are homeschooling. Most states impose no meaningful assessment of student progress, and only a handful require teachers — including parents — to hold any educational qualification at all.

Documented cases of severe abuse and neglect — some fatal — have occurred when children were removed from school and shielded from mandated reporters under the cover of homeschooling. Reasonable legislation to address these risks has repeatedly stalled under pressure from homeschool advocacy groups. Meanwhile, 19 states now subsidize homeschooling through ESAs or tax credits, providing public money with little to no accountability for how it is spent or whether children are thriving.

School Funding: Who Gets Left Behind

Research firmly establishes that per-pupil spending is linked to student outcomes. Yet in state after state, the choice to fund privatization has come at the direct expense of public school investment. Florida lost every possible point in our school funding category, ranking in the bottom decile for funding level, distribution, and effort, while also paying among the lowest teacher salaries in the country when adjusted for cost of living. Arizona, Idaho, North Carolina, and Tennessee each earned just two of sixteen possible funding points.

By contrast, Wyoming, Illinois, Michigan, New Mexico, and New York lead the nation in school funding — demonstrating that equitable, adequate investment in public education is a choice, not merely a function of wealth. The gaps between the top and bottom states are not marginal. They represent fundamentally different visions of what public education is for and who it is meant to serve.

Conditions for Teaching and Learning: A Profession Under Stress

The teacher shortage is real, but it is not uniform. It is worst in the states that have made teaching least attractive — through low pay, the erosion of collective bargaining rights, hostile political climates, and deteriorating working conditions. Our analysis found a strong, statistically significant relationship between teacher attractiveness ratings and the proportion of qualified teachers in a state's classrooms ($p < .001$). States that invest in the profession get more and better teachers; states that do not are increasingly filling classrooms with uncertified instructors.

Student well-being is equally at stake. Nearly half of all states still permit corporal punishment in schools. Many states lack comprehensive protections against bullying and discrimination for LGBTQ students, and two states — Missouri and South Dakota — actively prevent schools from adding such protections to their own policies. New York and Vermont stand out as national leaders, with strong anti-discrimination laws, bans on corporal punishment, favorable student-to-teacher and counselor ratios, and some of the most attractive environments for teachers in the country.

Conclusion

This 2026 NPE Report Card documents a deliberate, well-funded campaign to transform American education — one that is operating simultaneously at the federal level and in statehouses across the country. The consequences fall hardest on the children least able to seek alternatives: those in poverty, those with disabilities, those in rural communities, and those whose families lack the time or resources to navigate a fragmented marketplace of educational options.

Public schools remain the only institutions in American life constitutionally obligated to welcome every child, regardless of circumstance. They are governed by elected boards, funded by public taxes, and accountable to the communities they serve in ways no private alternative is required to be. That is not a weakness — it is their defining strength, and it is worth defending.

