

Funders & Friends Update

September 2026

BACK TO SCHOOL. BACK TO THE BASICS.



Dear friends,

My favorite band, U2, once sang that “nothing changes on New Year’s Day.” I find that generally true on January 1—but not for what counts as the New Year in our world: back to school time. This year in particular brings many changes, especially as educators and policymakers navigate the AI era and the techlash still cresting across America.

Yet for those of us at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute—who have been at this for almost 30 years!—it’s clear that history is rhyming, if not repeating itself. The challenge is to figure out how to bring new tools and ideas into schools without mistaking novelty for progress—or allowing the latest technology or fads to dictate what schools are ultimately trying to accomplish.

Whether it’s the science of reading, new commitments around math, efforts to curb grade inflation, or policies that ensure career pathways are more than just an escape valve for underperforming schools and students, we remain committed to evidence, time-tested fundamentals, and common sense. But that doesn’t mean ignoring what’s new. It means making sure new tools serve old wisdom, not replace it.

Please keep reading to learn more about what we’ve been up to and what’s to come, as we begin this New Year together.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mike Petrilli".

Michael J. Petrilli
President
Thomas B. Fordham Institute



The background of the top section features a collage of torn paper and snippets from various books. On the left, a snippet reads 'On Knowledge and Progress' and 'True understanding is not the accumulation of facts, but the ability to see connections, to ask better questions, and to remain open to what we do not yet know.' Below it, another snippet says 'curiosity drives discovery, and discovery shapes a better tomorrow.' On the right, several other snippets are visible, including 'The morning into the room and for a moment of possibility? It was to be', 'Books have a carry us beyond and into the live we might others. In their pages, both the world and ourselves.', 'There is a quiet kind of magic in real time, other places, other times, other places. A simple act, and yet it changes everything.', 'The best stories do not just tell us about the world — but as we see it', and 'Between of a book a place, we time slows, thoughts grow, and the ordinary feels a little more wonderful'.

BUILDING BETTER READERS.

This back-to-school season, let's get back to the most basic of basics: teaching children to read well. The [latest PISA results](#) offer another reminder of the challenge, with U.S. reading scores falling sharply since 2022. While many states have made remarkable progress on policies embracing the science of reading, the [hard work of implementation continues](#).

From the Teacher's Desk

In April, we released [From the Teacher's Desk: A Science of Reading Progress Report](#). This nationally representative survey of K–3 teachers revealed ongoing challenges in implementing science of reading reforms. For example, many teachers—particularly those in high-poverty settings—are not fully committed to the science of reading, and some continue to rely on questionable curricula. Still, there were bright spots: Teachers with in-service training demonstrate stronger knowledge of the science of reading than those who rely on preservice training, and states with aligned licensure exams are better preparing educators to teach reading. We presented findings from this work at the Association for Education Finance and Policy's 2026 Annual Conference and on a webinar co-hosted with the Policy Innovators in Education (PIE) Network. We will also present those findings at the National Association of State Boards of Education's annual conference next month. The report has also been featured in media outlets more than 40 times.

Ohio's Next Chapter

As Ohio continues implementing science-of-reading reforms, Fordham has worked to ensure that these changes lead to improvements in classrooms. [Over the past year, we've advocated](#) for curriculum-based professional learning and have [analyzed teacher licensure exams](#) to recommend ways to improve accountability and prepare future educators to build strong readers. Last month, we released [The Next Chapter: Ohio's implementation of the science of reading—and where to next](#), a report examining the current state of Ohio's literacy reforms. We found that the Buckeye State has moved toward stronger reading curriculum, that teachers are receiving professional supports, that teacher preparation programs are under strong oversight, and that the early identification process has been strengthened. Unfortunately, Ohio gutted the third-grade retention requirement.

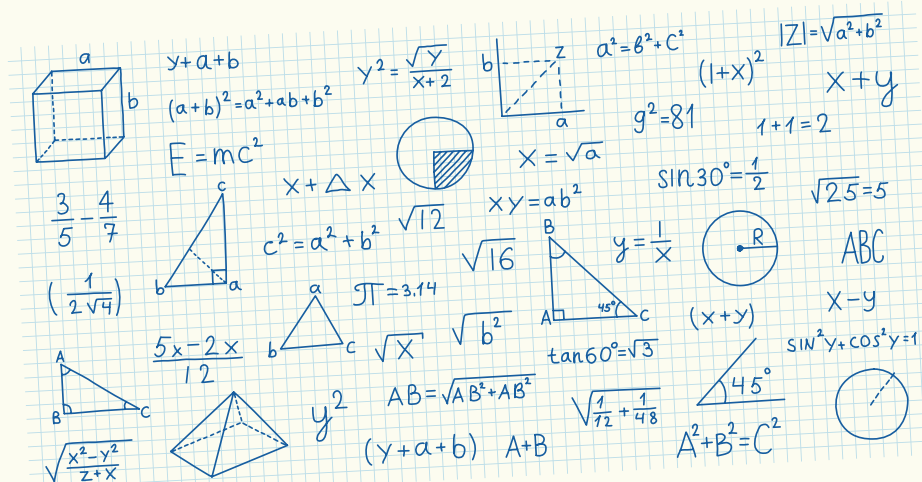
What's next: We have also taken a closer look at the “Southern Surge” reading reforms, [with particular attention to accountability](#). This fall and winter, we'll release a pair of reports that take a close look at science-of-reading reforms on the ground in two of these states, Alabama and Louisiana.

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We're also conducting a new national survey of math teachers to assess instructional practices in today's classrooms, measuring whether they align with rigorous standards and evidence-based guidance. The survey will explore support for low-achieving students and the use of high-quality instructional materials.





THE BUILDERS BEHIND THE BASICS.

As students head back to school, they're greeted by the people who matter most to their learning: teachers. Over the last year, we've tackled a wide range of issues related to educators—including the organizations that purport to represent them.

Teacher Union Strength in 2026

This spring, we published [A Crowded Table: Teacher Union Strength](#) in 2026, a new report that assessed teacher union strength in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. We found that teacher unions appear to be weakening overall as more advocacy groups join the fray; blue states still have the strongest unions; and some states experienced notable changes in union strength since our [2012 study](#), including Wisconsin and Virginia. With more than 60 media mentions and counting, this report was covered twice by [The Wall Street Journal](#), including most recently in Rachel Canter's "[Mississippi Fixed Its Schools. Here's How Other States Can Too](#)." It was also featured by [Education Week](#) and dozens of local outlets in states like [Wisconsin](#), [North Carolina](#), [New Jersey](#), [Oklahoma](#), [West Virginia](#), and more. It was also featured in nearly 20 TV, radio, or podcast outlets, including affiliates of [Fox](#), [NBC](#), [ABC](#), and [multiple NPR public radio stations](#).

Rethinking Teacher Diversity

[Mike has also argued](#) that, while increasing teacher diversity is a [worthwhile goal](#), many current approaches prioritize demographic representation over life experience and educator effectiveness. Schools, districts, and states should tear down the walls that keep great teachers out of the classroom and recruit teachers who embrace a culture of high expectations.

Teachers Keep Getting Better

Building on our 2025 [report](#) examining the research on teacher improvement and experience, Fordham's Meredith Coffey challenges, in [The 74](#), the long-standing belief that teachers largely stop improving after their first three to five years in the classroom. While teachers often experience their biggest gains early in their careers, newer research shows that many continue to develop their skills well into their second decade of teaching.



EXCELLENCE BY DESIGN.

Some ideas never lose salience. The importance of high expectations is one of them. Fordham has long argued that students rise to the challenge when schools expect more of them, not less.

Honest Grades, Higher Expectations

Ensuring that grades accurately reflect student learning is central to raising expectations and achievement. In Ohio, we've written about how grade inflation can [conceal academic struggles from families](#), create a false sense of progress, and obscure differences in school performance, making it harder to identify where improvement is needed and ensure students are prepared for future challenges. We've also [examined](#) the role [states](#) can play in [addressing](#) grade inflation and [discussed](#) the topic on our [podcast](#).

High Tech, Low Standards

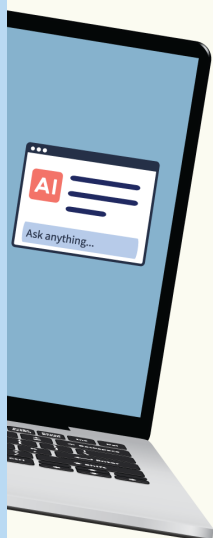
Earlier this month, we published findings from a new [nationally representative survey](#) of high school students and recent graduates. We examined how the rapid proliferation of technology—from smartphones to school-issued devices and AI tools—has reshaped, and in many cases undermined, traditional learning and grading standards. We found that, despite the growing prevalence of school phone bans, students reported widespread and frequent access to digital distractions during the school day, with majorities indicating they were able to use AI tools, social media, and streaming platforms either during or between classes. Sizable shares also reported artificial grade boosts from policies like receiving partial credit for missing work. We urged schools to get back to the basics when it comes to learning conditions: attention, effort, honest work, and adults willing to hold adolescents to high expectations.

Rigorous Career Pathways

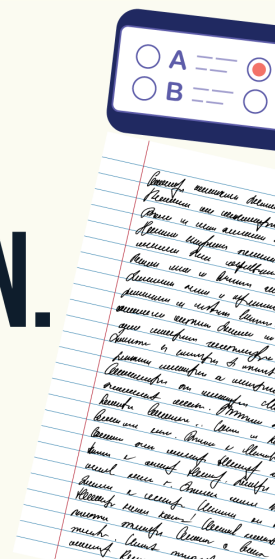
High expectations also mean ensuring students have access to rigorous career pathways, and we continue to advocate for high-quality industry-recognized credentials (IRCs) and career and technical education (CTE) programs. Mike's SCHOOLED newsletter led the charge on a [fascinating debate](#) about “college for all,” and in Ohio we were [strong proponents](#) of Senate Bill 328. The bill requires districts to provide high-quality advising, middle school career exploration, and career-connected learning. Ohio also recently [tightened its credential list](#), incentivizing schools to offer stronger career preparation to students joining the workforce directly after high school. We've also spoken out about the benefits of [residential trade schools](#) and successful [work-based learning programs](#).

When Credentials Pay Off

In March, we published [College or Career Readiness? Postsecondary and Labor Market Outcomes for Ohio High School Students Earning Industry-Recognized Credentials](#). The report found that high-quality credentials—especially when paired with rigorous CTE programs—can improve students' early workforce outcomes and earnings. We also authored a [companion op-ed](#) that expanded on the report's findings and their significance.



NEW TOOLS. THOUGHTFUL ADOPTION.



Unlike reading, math, and high expectations, artificial intelligence isn't a timeless pillar of education—it's the new kid in school, raising important questions about the role of these tools in classrooms. We're focused on helping schools move beyond the hype to identify where AI can strengthen teaching and learning while safeguarding the knowledge and skills students still need to learn and grow.

Technology With a Purpose

On our podcast, we've [discussed](#) the broader role of technology in classrooms, cautioning that more devices do not automatically translate into better learning. While technology can be a valuable tool when used purposefully, we've [stressed](#) that schools should avoid chasing the latest innovations without clear goals, strong implementation plans, and attention to whether digital tools are actually improving student outcomes. SCHOOLED also [took a closer look at](#) L.A.'s screen-time policy.

AI Without the Hype

We've [argued](#) that schools should double down on writing instruction while teaching students to use AI as a tool that enhances—not replaces—their thinking, judgment, and voice. At the same time, [we've cautioned](#) that while AI has the potential to support learning, the evidence does not support the widespread hype surrounding its transformative impact. We've continued this conversation on our podcast, discussing the [promise and pitfalls of AI in education](#) as well as [what AI's rapid evolution could mean for schools](#).

What's next: Keep an eye out for our forthcoming Wonkathon announcement later this month, which will focus on this critical topic.



BUILDING MOMENTUM.



Beyond the work highlighted above, we've continued to build momentum through our work authorizing charter schools in Ohio, appearances at major education conferences, and policy wins that are helping turn Fordham's work into action.

Strengthening Our Sponsorship Work

This summer, we welcomed [Morgan Leavitt](#) to our team as the Chief Learning Officer (CLO). Morgan is an accomplished education leader who brings more than a decade of experience in instructional leadership, literacy, strategic planning, and classroom instruction. She most recently served as Literacy Director at the KIPP Foundation. As Fordham's CLO, Morgan will bring her expertise and experience translating research and strategy into effective systems across schools to help drive our sponsorship work, with a particular focus on our new Instructional Excellence Framework. Expect more news about our work to overhaul our approach to charter school authorizing.

Taking Fordham's Work on the Road

Fordham staff have also shared our research and policy expertise at several conferences in recent months. Mike's plenary session at the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) Legislative Conference helped members make sense of the varying perspectives shaping K-12 education; we presented data on grading standards and practices at the National Charter Schools Conference, drawing on findings from our [teacher survey](#); and Amber Northern continues to speak with policymakers and advocates about [her report](#) that reimagines the Institute of Education Sciences (IES).

Building a Policy Agenda

Throughout the year, we convened a series of in-person meetings with center-right education policy scholars and advocates to develop a compelling policy agenda for improving student achievement and other outcomes in traditional public schools, particularly in red and purple states. So far, we've discussed and debated topics including teacher policy and career pathways, and we plan to take up governance at our final convening this fall.

None of this work would be possible without the generous support of our partners and the many others who share our belief that education's fundamentals matter. Building better basics and finding a positive path forward will require continued dedication, thoughtful debate, and hard work to ensure that students and their learning remain at the forefront of all we do. We look forward to a productive and strong year ahead!



THANK YOU!



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