

CHAPTER
7

AMERICA'S
YOUTH

IDEA II

As a matter of decency, dignity, and morality, no child in America should go to bed or go to school hungry.

In America, no child should worry about missing their next meal. But that was the case for children in 2.5 million households at some point in 2021—that's one in every 16 families. In another 2.5 million households, children ate while their parents went hungry. That includes nearly a quarter of all single-mother families.

This is a travesty for these kids and for our country, because when you don't give a young child enough food, it harms their body and brain both in the short term and the long term.

Even though Washington must reduce spending in many areas, there are a few essential areas where it needs to invest more. This is one of those areas, and the next president and Congress should significantly expand funding or tax incentives to ensure young children receive the proper nutrition they need to grow and thrive.

UNDERNOURISHED CHILDREN

- *Make smaller gains in math and reading, repeat grades more, and are less likely to graduate from high school, which means they're more likely to end up in prison.*
- *Become more prone to heart disease, respiratory issues, autoimmune disease, and cancer.*
- *Disrupt classrooms more, hurting their own and other students' education.*

IDEA 12

Every child in America should have the right to a high-quality education. No child should be forced to go to a failing school.

Access to high-quality education has long been a foundational promise from the US government to our citizens. When the school system works, America is stronger: workers are more productive, companies are more innovative, and all of us are healthier, wealthier, and safer.

But this promise is not being kept in too many communities, especially urban ones. Take New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles, which spend the first, fifth, and sixth most per pupil on their public-school students, but 37, 39, and 33 percent of their eighth graders respectively can't even read at the basic level. Overall, America spends more on education per school-aged child than any country in the world, with worse results.

Because public schools are funded mostly by local property taxes, wealthier areas tend to have better schools. In fact, houses near schools with an A+ rating are four times more expensive than houses near schools rated D or worse. Meanwhile, average private school tuition is \$15,650 per year for high school and \$11,200 for elementary school, and voucher programs are often not enough to make these schools accessible for all families.

Prices this high give too many low-income families no choice but to send their children to a failing or underresourced local school. That's why more governors—both Democrats and Republicans—have recently supported the expansion of education savings accounts, vouchers, and tax credit scholarships that provide parents with more choice about where to send their kids to school.

Public charter schools can also offer an alternative. Not long ago, leading Democrats and Republicans supported them, including the chancellors of big school districts in New York and Washington, DC, as well as former presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush. It's time to rebuild this bipartisan consensus, because students in well-run charter schools—especially Black, Hispanic, and low-income students—learn more than their peers. And traditional public schools perform better when there's a charter school nearby—the closer the charter, the bigger the benefit.

But America's charter schools don't have enough room. In Texas, there are 77,000 names on wait lists for enrolling in charter schools (although some students might be listed twice). Massachusetts has 21,000, and Washington, DC, has nearly 8,000.

Despite the success of charter schools, and the clear demand for them, only 13 percent of school districts across the US have at least one charter school. On balance, America's commonsense majority supports public schools, but we like competition too. That's why the next president should extend a lifeline to students trapped in failing traditional public schools and commit America to the ambitious goal of opening 10,000 public charter schools across the country in the next 10 years—more than doubling the current amount.

IDEA 13

America should make a national commitment that our students will be number one in reading and math globally within a decade.

COVID-19 set American students back a generation. Test scores for K–12 math and reading are the worst in over two decades. But even before COVID-19, our kids were falling behind.

Compared to students in 78 other countries, US students are thirty-first in math, thirteenth in reading, and eighteenth in science. Chinese students are number one in all three subjects.

If America wants to maintain our lead in the technologies of tomorrow, we'd better spend less time on waging culture wars in our schools and more time focusing on promoting, rewarding, and reaching for excellence.

Even though most K–12 education is funded and controlled locally, a president can have a galvanizing and organizing effect on the country when they set a big goal. Think of President John F. Kennedy announcing in 1962 that America would send a person to the moon by the end of the decade.

Our next president should send a signal to us and the world that America is embarking on a national goal to make our students number one in math and reading within a decade.

IDEA 14

Financial literacy is essential for all Americans striving to get ahead.

Almost six in 10 Americans say they are living paycheck to paycheck. Inflation is arguably the biggest driver of this insecurity, but far too many Americans also lack the knowledge and tools to become financially independent and get ahead.

Financial literacy is a big problem in the US. Over 40 percent of people failed a 2022 financial literacy test on concepts like credit, interest rates, and risk management. The costs add up: a lack of financial literacy can cost someone hundreds or thousands of dollars each year as they access financial products they don't understand and are hit with late fees and interest charges they don't expect. The problem starts early for many people, as only 14 states require personal finance classes in high school.

Even when Americans are equipped with the right financial knowledge, they may lack the tools to build up their finances, namely a credit score. Your credit score is a number that tells lenders how reliable you are, but there's a catch: you (generally) need a credit card to build up the score.

That's why credit scores solidify disparities. Black and Hispanic communities, on average, have worse credit scores than white communities, and younger Americans have worse scores than older ones. Over half—54 percent—of Black adults have a bad score or no score at all.

The implications are enormous: if you have a low credit score, it's harder or sometimes impossible to get a loan to buy a car or a home, finance an education, or start a business.

To improve access to financial literacy, states could require the completion of a personal finance course as a condition of high school graduation. The US Department of Education could provide grants or incentives to help make the course available. To make it easier to build up credit scores, Washington could mandate or incentivize things like counting rent payments toward your score, limiting the inclusion of medical debt, and prohibiting the use of credit scores in many hiring decisions.

