The Future of U.S. Education (and the Country): Thomas Sowell on Education

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Introduction

As one looks at U.S. education today, one cannot help but put it into the perspective of Thomas Sowell's forecasts of over three decades ago. When he reviewed schooling in America (Sowell (1993)), he pessimistically projected a system with rising costs, stagnant performance, and an uncompetitive international standing. He then outlined some necessary changes to deal with this unhappy future but more recently returned to illustrate how forces of resistance could stymy broad reform (Sowell (2020)). This chapter places the status of today's educational system into the tapestry that Sowell has woven through his many insightful works.

Concern about the state of U.S. schools has been expressed over a long period of time. Perhaps the largest attention-getter was the Reagan administration's release of A. Nation.at.Risk.(National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983)). That report was a call to action to do better in our schools. While the report's improvement imperative continues to resonate today, its diagnoses of the problems and the solutions were thin and based more on assertion than analysis.

Thomas Sowell's entries into educational reform stand in sharp contrast. The consistent arguments and analysis of Sowell provides a much clearer action plan – one that cumulatively aligns with the educational challenges of today. Sowell's work can be viewed in two ways – as a prediction of the outcomes of an unchanged system and as a prescription of how outcomes might be improved. The original broad critique of the education system in Sowell (1993) goes directly to fundamental institutional features of the US schooling system that need attention. And the devastating analysis of resistance to change in Sowell (2020) brings in the larger picture of the challenges of moving the system in a better direction.

To set the stage, we provide a picture of where U.S. education has wound up today. A central ingredient in the success of the U.S. economy has been the education of the population. But as we look to the future, there is reason for concern. The pandemic has absorbed all of the recent attention afforded to school policy, drawing attention away from

declining student performance that began earlier but less dramatically. Internationally, the United States ranks thirty-fourth among participants on the 2022 PISA math assessment. This places the US below the OECD average, edging out the Slovak Republic but falling behind Malta. The top five ranks went to Asian countries. These results are quite consistent with Sowell's projections for an unchanged system. Yet, even though it is likely to have dire consequences for the U.S. economy, the current situation of U.S. education unfortunately is not a priority of policy makers at the state or federal level.

Perhaps because of the continuing strength of the U.S. economy, concerns about the schools have not been at the forefront of policy. The performance of the US economy has given solace to those who wish to laud the schools despite the direct evidence on student outcomes (Berliner and Biddle (1995)). Unfortunately, the strong health of the U.S. economy reflects factors going beyond education. The basic structure of the US economy – free and open labor and capital markets, secure property rights, and limited governmental intrusion in the economy – has been very advantageous. The ability to attract and employ highly educated immigrants, particularly in the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, mathematics), has significantly strengthened our labor force. But it is unclear whether we will be able to count on these advantages in the future, leaving us dependent on the quality of the labor force that we produce through our system of public schools.

Schooling is a responsibility of the states, and a picture of the policy priorities of the states can be extracted from the public statements of the governors. In the state of the state addresses in 2025, 33 governors mentioned workforce development and career and technical education, and 32 mentioned K-12 funding (Bloomquist and Peisach (2025)). Increasing teacher pay was the subject of 26 addresses. Only 25 mentioned academic achievement even as we show below that recovery from the pandemic has not happened. This perspective on schools hardly indicates any sense of either urgency about the current state of the schools or strong policy leadership.

The data on performance trends in our schools make an undeniable case for change. The existing educational challenges suggest that we need to think more deeply

about institutional changes – something that Sowell pointed to three decades ago. There the history of inertia and resistance to change come to the forefront. We have concluded from existing research and from our own evidence that improving the performance of our educational system will require fundamental changes. A half century's collection of highly touted marginal changes – call them "fads in reform" – simply has not worked. We are now in a decade-long decline that, while exacerbated by the pandemic, has been driven by more systemic issues.

The introduction of charter schools is perhaps the largest change in US schooling since the movement to universal secondary school education. And the evidence suggests this has provided a successful route to improving the system – added parental choice combined with plentiful examples of consistent improvement in student outcomes. The charter school experiences also provide a case study in both the need for and the resistance to institutional change. We provide an in-depth case study of charter schools, building on the simple but elegant analysis of Sowell (2020) and providing the expanded national picture. This reinforces the case for schools being a national policy priority that can only be solved by some fundamental changes in how we operate the schools.

It is time that we took the institutional reform suggested by Tom Sowell seriously.

The Achievement Challenge

Everybody now knows that the pandemic led to considerable learning loss. A crude but common way to judge the impact of the pandemic has been to assume that a cohort—say, the eighth-graders in school during the pandemic—would have achieved what those in the same grade before the pandemic achieved. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) regularly provides information on student achievement over time, and this assessment covers the pandemic plus periods before and after the pandemic. Unfortunately, this estimation approach is both error prone and misleading.

The drop in student performance over the pandemic period was dramatic, but it was also embedded in a longer period substantial change in performance. The schooling aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic significantly elevated policy and media attention to school policy, and ameliorating Covid-related learning losses became the focal point of virtually all educational policy discussions after March 2020. But this event largely obscured evidence on the need for broader system reform that came before the pandemic and has continued after the pandemic. Achievement changes outside of the pandemic are an important part of any policy interpretation.

Where We Are

The pandemic is bracketed by NAEP assessments in 2019 and 2022, and a variety of analyses have used these scores to estimate significant impacts that can be attributed to the closing of schools and the added disruptions of the pandemic.[1] Indeed, the national average scores for eighth graders show significant declines over this pandemic period: 0.20 standard deviations in math and 0.07 standard deviations in reading.[2] The relative complacency with the achievement results is perhaps a result of the difficulty in understanding the arbitrary scaling of scores, but these are important changes that have very large implications for the economic outcomes for students when they enter the labor

[1]See, for example, Carbonari et al. (2024), Guryan and Ludwig (2023), Hanushek and Strauss (2024), Lewis and Kuhfeld (2023).

[2] Throughout, standard deviation is a measure of the change in scores as reflected in variations across the individual distribution of achievement.

market. They also imply a lower quality of the nation's future labor force, something that has direct implications for economic growth and the well-being of society. We return to the economic implications after considering the full extent of achievement declines.

These observed pandemic-period learning losses are, nonetheless, likely to be very bad estimates of the impact of the pandemic itself. As seen in Figure 1, scores were not constant before the pandemic but had been declining in both reading and math after 2013.[3] This prior decline is most evident for reading but also clear for math. This declining performance path suggests that some portion of the fall in scores during the pandemic period might well have occurred even without a pandemic.

The same questions about interpretation of the pattern of student achievement are found when we look at the pandemic "recovery period" from 2022 to 2024. The federal government itself put $190 billion of funding into schools, most of which went directly to the schools themselves. Instead of scores holding constant or rising as increasing funds and programs were deployed to address pandemic learning losses, the average score declines continued. This further decay was particularly significant for reading performance.

While 72 percent of the decline in math performance since 2013 occurred during the pandemic period, only a quarter of reading decline is found during the pandemic (Table 1). In fact, the reading decline over the post-pandemic period is almost as large as that for the pandemic period.

[3] The NAEP testing occurs at two-year intervals, so the peak score may be later than the 2013 tests since they potentially occur sometime in the 2013–2015 interval.

	Test dates	Math	Reading	Composite
Pre-pandemic	2013–2019	–0.07	–0.13	–0.10
Pandemic	2019–2022	–0.21	–0.07	–0.14
Post-pandemic	2022–2024	–0.01	–0.06	–0.04
TOTAL	2013–2024	–0.29	–0.27	–0.28

Table 1. Change in NAEP Grade 8 performance (standard deviations)

Note: Composite equals math plus reading scores. Standard deviations reflect variations across the distribution of individual performance.

Source: Author calculations from NAEP data at https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/

The pattern of NAEP scores for grade four is qualitatively the same as for grade eight. Scores peak in 2013 and fall through the pandemic and the post-pandemic period. The relative drop in math scores during the pandemic period is larger than for reading, where the pre- and post-pandemic losses assume a relatively larger portion of the losses since 2013.

Recent NAEP data for grade twelve, while not separating the pandemic period from the recovery period, tell the same story. Both math and reading performance peaked in 2013 and fell continuously through 2024 with half of the decline occurring by 2019. These tests also show a widening of the range of scores since 2013. These declines in achievement are also not just artifacts of the NAEP testing. They appear consistently

across alternative assessments that permit longitudinal comparisons for representative samples of U.S. students including Long-Term Trends NAEP, TIMSS, and PISA.[4]

Changes in the distribution of scores are also important. The average score patterns hide where in the achievement distribution declines occurred. The story of Sowell's charter school analysis (discussed below) focuses on low performance and the impact of institutional features of schools on bringing up performance near the failure point of the system. Before going into these issues, it is useful to consider how the achievement distribution changed with the pandemic and its surrounding period.

The gap in achievement between high- and low-performers on NAEP expanded over the pandemic, but, like the mean performance, the gap began growing in 2013 (Figure 2). Those at the bottom of the distribution steadily declined before and during the pandemic period. This holds for both reading (displayed) and math (not displayed). While the very top of the distribution largely escaped achievement declines even during the pandemic period, the declines are consistently found for students at lower levels.

If we look at racial achievement gaps, we find a slightly better overall picture. Racial gaps were first highlighted in the massive government report Equality.of.Educational. Opportunity, commonly referred to as the Coleman Report (Coleman et al. (1966)). Since publication of the Coleman Report in 1966, the black-white achievement gap has narrowed (Hanushek (2016)), but the change in achievement has been rather modest even as we have undertaken what is perhaps the most extensive social policy action of the last century – school desegregation as mandated by the 1954 Supreme Court decision in Brown. v¡.Board.of.Education. At the pace of the gap reductions over the past 50 years, it would take another two.and.a.half.centuries to close the black-white achievement gap in math that was seen in 1965. (Hanushek (2016), p. 24)

[4] For a description of the patterns in these different assessments, see Hanushek (2025).

Economic Issues

Past research makes it clear that on average individuals who know more earn more (Hanushek et al. (2015)). It also shows that nations with a more skilled workforce, what has been labeled the "knowledge capital" of nations, grow faster in the long run (Hanushek and Woessmann (2015)). The lower achievement identified previously means that earnings for students when they enter the labor force will be lower, and these lower earnings will follow them throughout their working life. It also means that the nation will grow more slowly than it would have if higher achievement levels had been sustained until now.

Students in school over the past decade will, according to historical evidence, suffer worse labor market outcomes than those attending school earlier in this century (Hanushek (2025)). Using the historical pattern of rewards to skills, expected future earnings of recent students will on average be lower by almost 8 percent compared to students in 2013. Importantly, the pandemic achievement declines represent just half of this. This average also understates the much larger costs for our most disadvantaged students, where achievement declines have been greater.

For the nation, the expected costs of learning declines make much of the current economic and budget discussions appear inconsequential.[5] We can use historical growth relationships to compare where the US economy would be had we stayed at the previous peak achievement levels in 2013 as opposed to staying at the 2024 levels. Using a discount rate of 3 percent, the present value of future lost growth would be approximately three times current GDP or something greater than $90 trillion. GDP on average would be 6 percent higher for all years in the remainder of the century if we were able to stay at the achievement levels of 2013. These losses are many multiples of the combined GDP losses due to the 2008 recession and the COVID recession.

Because achievement declines began well before the pandemic, simply returning to immediate pre-pandemic achievement levels would only halve these projected economic

[5] For an understanding of the methodology for estimating the losses, see Hanushek and Woessmann (2011)

losses. That would leave enormous losses that have dramatic implications for individual well-being, for government fiscal capacity, and for the world position of the United States. Interestingly, in the early months after the beginning of the pandemic, much of the discussion revolved around the need not just to return to the pre-pandemic schools but also to make them better. Indeed, if students just returned to their prior pace of learning, many would be unable to recover unless the length of schooling was dramatically extended (Raymond (2023)). But, as efforts for pandemic recovery proceeded, talk of improving the educational system was replaced with complacency and little enthusiasm for substantial reform.

The Policy Environment

There have been waves of calls for improvement, highlighted by the previously noted 1983 publication of A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform. This report, commissioned by the US Department of Education during the Reagan presidency and filled with hyperbolic language, was built on an observation that sounds remarkably apt for today:

> The time is long past when American's [sic] destiny was assured simply by an abundance of natural resources and inexhaustible human enthusiasm, and by our relative isolation from the malignant problems of older civilizations.(National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), p. 8)

Over the four decades since the report, we have seen a wide range of approaches to meet the achievement challenges. These efforts have taken a wide range of possible reform policies. They include expanded graduation requirements, increased pay for teachers, reduced class sizes, consequential school accountability, expanded preschool opportunities, new curricula and new technologies, smaller schools, alternative governance structures, charter schools and other choice options, wraparound services for students, and substantially increased funding. Most recently, efforts shifted to partial remediation of the lost time from the pandemic.

A broad review of these policy approaches since A Nation at Risk identified several commonalities of the reforms to date (Bowen and Raymond (2023)). First, most reforms are incremental and isolated, moving one part of the existing system with little concern about other parts or other reforms. Reforms have lacked sufficient weight to displace existing practice and successfully occupy the relevant territory. Second, even if a policy approach shows effectiveness, it fails to be implemented broadly, often due to misunderstanding that innovation and dissemination require different attitudes and resources. Third, many reforms were treated with unrealistic impatience — leading to rapid replacement with "the next thing" that engendered skepticism and indifference.

Fourth, and most importantly, the collection of reforms has simply failed to meet the challenges. If we look at student performance from the time of A Nation at Risk until 2020, math performance of thirteen-year-olds (using LTT NAEP data) increased by 0.3 sd—but this is almost entirely reversed by the decline since 2012. Comparable thirteen-year-old reading scores grew until 2012 by 0.2 sd but fell back to 1975 scores by 2023.[6] Four decades of broad reform efforts find us still confronting the challenges cited in 1983.

Nor can it be argued that the policy efforts were successful at ameliorating the performance gaps of disadvantaged students. Even before A Nation at Risk, President Lyndon Johnson had launched his War on Poverty, where he had singled out education as the long-term solution—dealing with the underlying causes of poverty and not just symptoms. Achievement gaps by socioeconomic status, when traced from the War on Poverty to the beginning of the pandemic, show no closing (Hanushek et al. (2022)). We have also seen the post-pandemic widening of achievement gaps.

The response since 2020 is noteworthy because it has focused almost exclusively on the achievement declines during the pandemic with the implicit assumption that the real policy challenge is getting us back to the pre-pandemic achievement levels. Thus, much attention has focused on simply reversing the lost time during the pandemic and on

[6] Long-term scores for seventeen-year-olds are unavailable after 2012. Math scores for seventeen-year-olds from the time of A.Nation.at.Risk grew by 0.25 sd, but reading scores fell by 0.05 sd by 2012.

the disproportionate impacts on low-achieving and disadvantaged students. But the performance data indicate quite clearly that these efforts have been insufficient. The headline policies of added time (lengthened days and school years, summer school), tutoring, added technological support, and more have either been implemented ineffectively or, when effective, have not been broadly employed. Performance has declined since 2022 despite these efforts.

Are These Results Unexpected?

The recent analysis of the enemies of charter schools describes the current political roadblocks to reform involving student choice. Against the backdrop of successful educational outcomes of New York City charter schools, Sowell (2020, p. ix) argues "even the most successful charter schools have been bitterly attacked by teachers unions, by politicians, by the civil rights establishment and assorted others." These factors, described in detail before the pandemic, have continued and contributed to the patterns of achievement described above.

But these conclusions are not a new revelation. In 1993, Sowell wrote:

> The brutal reality is that the American system of education is bankrupt¡..Allowed to continue as it is? it will absorb ever more vast resources? without any appreciable improvement in the quality of its output? which is already falling behind world standards¡ Sowell (1993, p. 285)

Time has validated Sowell's conjecture. Inflation adjusted expenditures per pupil in 2023 were 1.5 times those in 1990 and 2.7 times those in 1970. With achievement holding constant, Sowell's observation is prescient. Internationally, U.S. 15-year-olds placed 34th in math among country participants in 2022.

The reality of increasing costs without commensurate gains in outcome is not a surprise when one considers the rigidities and resistance to change. But the policy discussions after the pandemic are more of a surprise, because they focus on just the disruptions of the pandemic and try to ameliorate them – while ignoring the equally as large

problems over the 21st century and the even larger problems dating back to A.Nation.at.Risk and thoroughly dissected by Sowell.

Even more disturbing is the myopia on the immediate fix that allows the success of the largest school reform effort in our nation's history to be ignored. We turn next to Sowell's perceptive but discouraging analysis of charter schools.

The Charter School Case Study

In his book Charter Schools and Their Enemies, Sowell presents the case that strong opposition to charter schools originates in organized labor in states that have at the same time allowed school districts to ignore poor academic performance in high minority and low-income communities (Sowell (2020)). Here, we examine in detail the case that Sowell makes and show how the cases he cites fit into a larger picture nationally. We also generalize from his conclusion to larger shortcomings in US education policy, in part picking up his broad critique of the education system in Sowell (1993).

The general approach of those trying to limit if not shut down charter schools has been to mount seemingly principled arguments about both charter school operations and results. We consider these arguments in the same way that Sowell has done – confronting assertions with data.

The Arguments Against

The opposition to charter schools over the years has proffered three general attacks. First, fairness in treatment focuses on differences in the requirements that charter schools face versus those for district schools; these are often cited as a source of injustice that advantages charter schools. Second, cream skimming, also called enrollment preferences, is the accusation that charter schools are gaming the student recruitment process. The first two claims can be quickly dispatched before a deeper examination of the chief critique — differences in performance — that Sowell correctly highlights as the root source of pain for charter school protesters.

Critics of charter schools allege that the difference in regulatory oversight faced by district and charter schools stacks the deck in favor of charter schools, implying there is no reason to support charter school expansion (or existence). As Sowell points out, this line of attack is both improperly placed and false on the merits. The state laws that enable charter schools create a different policy framework from traditional district schools. The legislation gives applicants who secure a "charter" to operate a school broad exemption from many of the process and operating regulations that district school must satisfy, but the exemptions are not unconstrained.

The quid pro quo of "flexibility for accountability" is a critical feature of charter schooling. Charters are only approved for a fixed time after which operators must submit to review and approval of renewal. The clamor of opponents only focuses on the flexibility, wiping the balancing force of regular accountability for performance offscreen. Claims of special treatment of charters even lead charter school opponents to insist that district schools receive the same discretion as a matter of fairness. Of course, refusal to close underperforming district schools clearly demonstrates a double betrayal of any fairness doctrine. Opponents not only wish to ensure their own protection from accountability but are willing to do so in spite of the obvious harms that arise from keeping failing schools operating year after year.

A related misleading charge against charter schools translates the lack of operating regulations (i.e., directives to do something) into a lack of oversight (i.e., nobody watching to make sure that something is done). Charter schools in all states are approved and reviewed by a legislated entity called the "authorizer" whose mandated duties include regular review of both their operations and results. The critics' argument asserts that, because charter school legislation removes charter schools from local school district control and by extension from local school board control, charter schools are likely to do all kinds of bad things. The charge is specious in two ways. The level of school oversight that school boards of traditional district schools provide is generally very limited (Shi and Singleton (2023)). The vast majority of board activity concerns labor grievances and vendor agreements as opposed to student outcomes. Additionally and ironically, the largest

share of authorizers is the local school district itself. Further, local district authorizers represent the fastest growing type of authorizer across the country.[7] These authorizers have both opportunity and motive to set whatever reporting requirements they choose.

The extremely low incidence of fraud and abuse of operating charter schools — lower than in district schools — invalidates the claim that the set-up for charter schools is conducive to bad acts. And, as we discuss below, the achievement results negate an argument that students are subjected to bad acts, again an argument implying that the performance of charter schools is overblown.

Even before charter schools have students in seats, they are accused of foul play in the way that students are enrolled in their schools. According to the critic's playbook, charter schools find ways to circumvent the legislated requirement that they enroll all applicants or, in cases of more applications than seats, select their students by lottery. Without a clear explanation of the mechanisms or any reliable proof, opponents assert that "better" students are enticed to charter schools.

Checking the claim of preferences in enrollment is important not only on its own but also because equivalence in starting points is vital to showing that any better progress that charter schools' students might gain is due to the influence of the school and not to advantages at the outset.

Sowell (2020) shows that NYC charter schools serve equivalent student populations as their district school counterparts in the large majority of school/grades he studied. His findings are also supported in larger national analyses. When CREDO examined the enrollment profiles of charter schools in 30 states and the District of Columbia, it discovered that not only were charter schools enrolling substantially larger shares of minority and low-income students than their local district schools but charter schools were also enrolling more academically challenged students (CREDO (2023)). Looking separately at starting scores in reading and math in each of the 31 jurisdictions

[7] NACSA, https://qualitycharters.org/authorizing-by-the-numbers/ retrieved July 10, 2025.

yielded 62 separate comparisons of the starting point of charter school students compared to the average student in their comparison schools. In only 3 of the 62 did students start their enrollment in charter schools with higher tested achievement than the students in the public schools they departed. Notably, the achievement difference in those three was two months of learning or less.

The findings support two possible conclusions. The first is that selective recruitment and/or admissions is not happening in charter schools. The second is that schools may be trying, but failing, to attract better students. There is no way practically to test these options scientifically, and both may be happening in different schools. Regardless, the result is the same: the students who enroll are not better prepared academically but in fact are less prepared.

The criticisms of unfair operating advantages and selective student admissions serve both offensive and defensive purposes. On the offensive they attempt to deflect focus away from the core issue: are students learning more in charter schools than in the district schools they would otherwise attend. They are defensive as well in building proactive explanations in case charter schools demonstrate better performance in student learning. The crux issue of better achievement in charter schools, as Sowell notes, poses an existential threat to district schools and the regimes that prop them up.

Charter School Results

The real issue that charter school opponents must confront is what happens to student learning for the students who attend charter schools. Evidence of better student academic gains is both embarrassing and inconvenient for the advocates of district public schools who rely on a narrative of broader social and economic deficits to explain poor schooling results and to justify increased education budgets. This is where Sowell correctly aims his most damaging attention:

> The educational achievements of charter schools may be little known to the general public, and either denied or downplayed by critics. But officials of the traditional

> public schools with whom they compete show by their actions that they see charter school achievements as a very real danger. So do teachers unions. And both actively make themselves dangers to charter schools.(Sowell (2020), p. 104)

Focusing on five charter management organizations in the metropolitan New York area, Sowell (2020) summarizes the dramatic academic gains these schools realize for their students compared to students enrolled in district public schools operating in the same buildings, a practice known as co-location. The use of co-located students in the same grade and subject for comparison is prudent when using aggregated achievement data since it approximates a fully-matched-pair research design. By comparing the shares of students meeting achievement benchmarks of "proficient" or better in the colocated schools, Sowell removes many of the potential sources of bias that typically plague aggregated performance comparisons.

As shown in Table 2 that provides a synopsis of the results cited by Sowell (2020) , more charter school students in reading or math earned ratings on state-mandated achievement test of "proficient" or higher in a large majority of grades. Not only do the charter networks produce stronger academic gains for their students, but, as Sowell shows in his more detailed presentation of results, they do so with remarkable consistency across grades and schools. The ability to produce strong results throughout each network points to a strong management practice within the networks.

NETWORK NAME	Number of Reading Comparisons	Number (Percent) of reading comparisons with superior charter student performance[1]	Number of Math Comparisons	Number (Percent) of math comparisons with superior charter student performance[1]
Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP)	14	10 (71%)	14	12 86%)
Schools Collocated with KIPP	20	1 (5%)	20	1(5%)
Success Academy	30	30 (100%)	26	26 100%)
Schools Collocated with Success Academy	36	3 (8%)	30	4 (13%)
Explore Schools	20	4 (20%)	20	6 (30%)
Schools Collocated with Explore Schools	20	2 (10%)	20	0 (0%)
Uncommon Schools	22	15 (68%)	18	13 72%)
Schools Collocated with Uncommon Schools	25	0 (0%)	20	0 (0%)
Achievement First Schools	18	17 (94%)	18	17 94%)
Schools Collocated with Achievement First Schools	18	4 (22%)	18	1 (6%)

Table 2: New York City Charter School Results

Note: 1. Performance is designated as superior if the percent of tested charter school students scoring "Proficient" or better is larger than that reported for colocated district school students on the same grade-and-subject test for by 5 percentage points or more.

Source: Author calculations from Sowell (2020).

Using student-level longitudinal data, the CREDO National Charter School Study III goes beyond co-location to study charter schools in 29 states, New York City and the District of Columbia (CREDO (2023)). The results corroborate the aggregate results presented by Sowell. The CREDO study uses a multi-factor matching method to create pairs of students who are statistically identical except for where they are enrolled in school. Included as a match factor was a baseline measure of academic achievement to assure that the impact of the student's school can be isolated and measured, producing a true "apples-to-apples" analysis. CREDO looked at the additional learning a charter school student acquired in an academic year compared to his match from the local district school. To aid comprehension of results, the statistical results are converted into the number of additional (or fewer) "days of learning" the charter student acquired. For the five charter school networks in Sowell's primary analysis, we present the CREDO results in Table 3. Note that schools in all charter networks outperformed comparable co-located schools by grade.

	Reading			Math		
Network Name	Extra Days of Learning	Statistical Effect	Achievement Gap-Busting	Extra Days of Learning	Statistical Effect	Achievement Gap-Busting
Achievement First	66	0.114 **	Yes	146	0.253 **	Yes
KIPP	72	0.124 **	Yes	138	0.238 **	Yes
Success Academy	107	0.185 **	Yes	206	0.357 **	Yes

	Reading			Math		
Explore	21	0.037 *	Yes	79	0.136 **	Yes
Uncommon	98	0.169 **	Yes	127	0.22 **	Yes

Table 3: Charter School Network Results (Sowell sample of NYC schools)

Note: ** indicates statistically significant at the 0.05 level.
Source: Author calculations from CREDO (2023).

Source: CREDO (2023)

The impact of attending one of the five charter school networks is impressively large. In reading a student could add between 21 and 107 extra days of learning in a school year compared to the progress they would have made in a nearby district public school. If one considers the typical 180-day school year as the basis of comparison, the additional progress of 21 days, for example, equates to an extra month of schooling; 98 days is half of a school year extra. In math, the extra progress ranged from 79 to 206 days of learning, meaning an extra third of a year up to more than a year more progress.

The CREDO study took an additional step of studying the issue of consistency of results across students. Even if the results show positive values at the average, it is aways possible that the underlying distribution shows some strong results offsetting other poor results. Leaving any students under-schooled is concerning, but it is especially so if the students are routinely left out over time. Learning gaps between groups of students at the end of a school year are the building blocks of lifetime achievement gaps.

Sowell's results for the New York City charter networks are not just a New York phenomenon. In the CREDO study, we identified "gap-busting" schools using two criteria. First, the average student learning for a school in a year's time must exceed the state average. Second, the learning in the school must show no significant difference across different groups of students. We tested the differences for black vs. white, Hispanic

vs.white and poverty vs. non-poverty students. The combined criteria assured that all students were being fully prepared academically for their future endeavors.

We extended the analysis to each of the 165 networks of charter schools in the study. To earn a "Gap-Busting" rating as a network, all the schools in a given network had to meet the criteria, an exceptionally high bar.

In the CREDO study, each of the networks in New York City identified by Sowell were gap-busting (see Table 3). More generally, over 1000 schools nationally were found to be gap-busters. Over 60 charter school networks took that accomplishment one step further and scaled the gap-busting results across all their schools. The grade-by-grade consistency that he identified is paralleled by group-by-group consistency in the national data. These examples of moving all students forward in equal measure is the true form of equity, based not on preconditions or labels but on concrete results.

Conclusions and Inferences

Anyone concerned with the future of American prosperity will find the charter school results here to be compelling for three reasons. First, the strong academic results provide critical evidence proof that schools can support strong, even outstanding, academic results for all students. This set of results is a huge blow to prevailing justifications for persistently low-performing traditional public schools.

Second, Sowell's demonstration of consistency across grades and schools (bolstered by the CREDO results) shows clearly that strong academic performance is neither fluke nor a one-off occurrence. In fact, the five charter networks in New York City join dozens of others who have earned the same designation. These networks add another vital insight: it is possible for strong and equitable learning to occur at scale. Charter schools and networks are independent from district and state control of curriculum or instructional approaches. They choose their programs autonomously not just from local districts but also from each other. So many success stories happening organically adds to the reliability of the findings.

Third, the entire set of evidence about excellence at scale suggests that alternate public school policies — the bane of traditional district school supporters — deserve greater consideration than they have received to date. The "flexibility for accountability" example of charter schooling show that education policies create different "operating systems" that have different incentives. Carefully constructed, new education policies can be a potent force in shaping better results for US public schools and the students they serve.

A Way Forward?

The underlying theme of reform efforts over the past half century has been to enhance particular features of the educational system but to retain the essence of the institutional structure. Thus, there are add-ons of various types, regulatory constraints designed to prevent poor outcomes, and expansions of existing operations that, even though viewed as very promising, have failed to yield the expected or hoped-for results.

While the specifics of each new reform differ, the repeated failure of the broad set of reforms to deal with the achievement challenges of the nation is remarkably consistent and indicates that we need to look at the problem differently. Instead of enhancing the current structure, it is likely time to rethink how we operate our schools.

Perhaps the most critical observation comes from the dynamics of school policy development. Even when there is a successful school policy put into place at scale with validated performance outcomes, there is not a rush by other schools to adopt it. Good examples are the incentive-based personnel changes in Washington, DC, and Dallas, Texas.[8] When teachers are evaluated and paid based on their classroom effectiveness, student scores respond significantly. Yet, because these districts use incentive systems

[8] For Washington, DC, see Dee and Wyckoff (2015); for Dallas, Texas, see Hanushek et al. (2025).

that are alien to most current district contracts and operations, these systems have been largely ignored and not copied.

The general lack of incentives aligned to higher student achievement leads to a system that may or may not adopt programs, policies, and operations that support better performance. It is not that current school personnel do not want higher achievement, but that other things are also valued and appear to take priority over any quest for higher achievement, and these other priorities sometimes conflict with higher achievement.

Introducing significant incentives into schools is clearly difficult, a task that faces strong headwinds but that can be done. The attempt to do so under the US Department of Education's Race to the Top program led to strong backlash and was explicitly prohibited under subsequent congressional legislation.[9] But change is possible. The fight to introduce performance pay in Washington, DC, was intense but it succeeded, leading to strong student achievement gains and a program that has remained in effect across new superintendents.[10] The introduction of altered evaluation and pay systems in Dallas took years of planning and preparation but has also survived multiple new superintendents.[11] Dallas-like systems have in fact expanded in Texas because of grants enabled by the Texas legislature that can go to districts willing to change their systems; 809 districts were receiving funds in 2025 (Texas Education Agency (2025)). Following state takeover, Houston is moving rapidly to follow (Edison (2025)).

The introduction of charter schools, beginning in Minnesota in 1991, is another salient example of how institutional change in education is possible. Currently, all but two states permit charter schools, although they are subject to varying degrees of limitations, regulations, and impediments (Sowell (2020)). Against this backdrop, charter schools have shown that improved achievement is possible (CREDO (2023)).

[9] Bleiberg et al. (2023); Duncan (2018); and McGuinn (2016).
[10] Rhee (2013); Dee and Wyckoff (2017).
[11] Hanushek et al. (2025)

Putting together a structure that promotes higher achievement takes educational policy into new realms and almost certainly requires different roles for both state and federal policymakers. Interestingly, in critiquing the problems of U.S. schools in 1993, Sowell did not pursue the popular call for more resources. Instead, he went to the heart of institutional arrangements that needed to be addressed. His list of priorities included addressing restrictions on entry into teaching, teacher tenure, the many regulations and mandates constraining schools, and the focus on adult employment in schools rather that student achievement (Sowell (1993), p. 288-293).

The overlap of these reform issues with the recent thinking of the Education Futures Council (2024) is striking. The EFC report provides a thoughtful example of how the system might change. This report picks up on some of the prior observations—maintaining a focus on student outcomes, incorporating incentives for the desired outcomes, and recognizing that local capacity and local demands vary so much that broad-based mandates and regulations thwart progress. Because schooling is local, federal roles should be confined to support, not control, including efforts such as national assessments, consistent data collection, knowledge development and distribution, and using incentive-based approaches instead of mandates and regulations. States are central to enabling local implementation without treating all districts the same. For example, districts that perform well should be given wide operational latitude in actions, while districts that do not perform well should be more closely constrained and guided to more successful outcomes.

There are, of course, many alternatives to the current structure of our educational system, but history suggests that we should look more to an outcome-based design than to small tweaks of our current stagnant system. And, as the economist Thomas Sowell emphasizes, we should consider incentives more than mandates and regulations.

If the kind of performance change described above occurred in other fields such as health or public safety, society would be up in arms. In sharp contrast, even when the

evidence and implications of underperformance on social and economic well-being have been clearly presented, the call to action has failed to ignite the fires of public discourse.

A Final Word

Among the many accolades that apply to Thomas Sowell, the ability to remain clear-eyed in the face of social and rhetorical haze must rank highly. Years before education experts dialed in their focus on the desperately thin ice of contemporary US student learning, he held a straight line of sight on the extent of the problem, the sources of challenge, and the betting odds on any reasonable solution arising from the public sector. This paper has taken the form of "What do we know now that he knew far earlier?" It is a humbling exercise to pitch decades of data and high-powered analytics against the writings of a single person and come up short!

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Figure 1. Student Performance, Math and Reading grade 8, 2003-2024

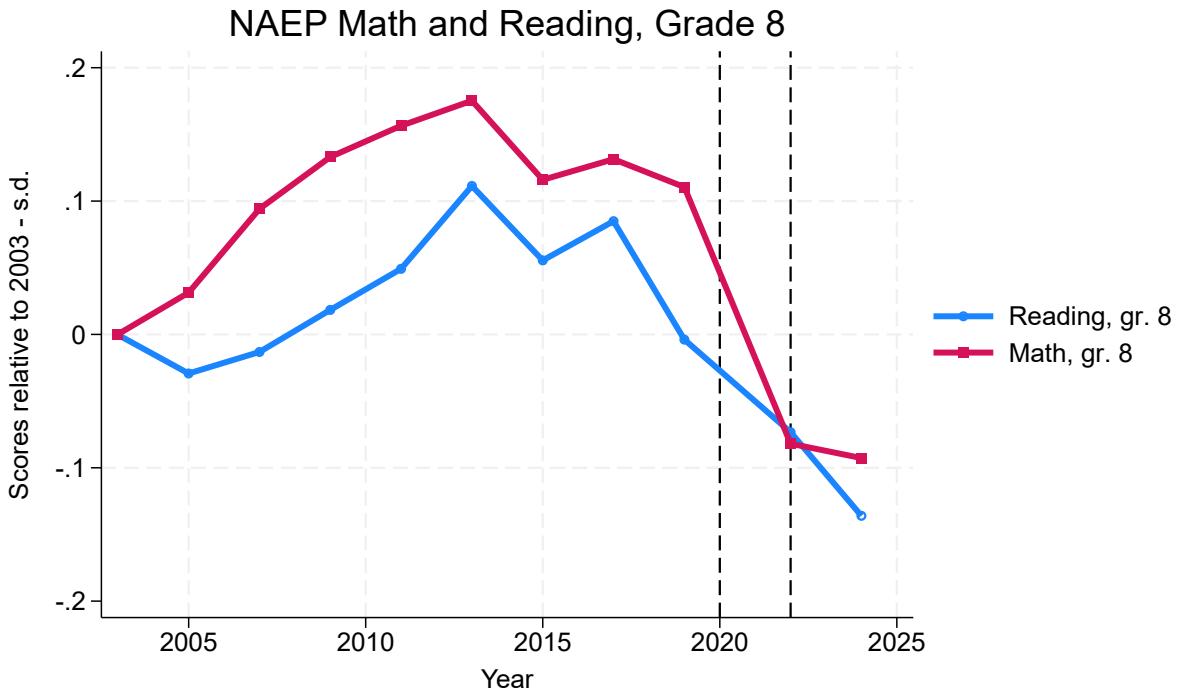

Figure 2. Performance on NAEP Eighth Grade Reading at Various Points in the Distribution