

Blue States Used to Lead in Education. Not Anymore

Republican-led states are banning ineffective teaching methods, rapidly improving student outcomes.

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Not long ago, blue states typically outperformed red ones when it came to education. That is changing. Blue states like Oregon and Washington experienced significant drops in reading and math scores for both fourth- and eighth-graders [between 2015 and 2024](#), worse than the national declines during the same period. Mississippi, meantime, gained five points in fourth-grade reading and math and held steady in eighth-grade performance. Louisiana also maintained its scores, defying the negative national trends.

Whether you call it the “[Mississippi Miracle](#)” or the “[Southern Surge](#),” Republican-led states are rapidly improving student outcomes relative to blue states, thanks to a series of substantive reforms over the past decade.

Republican-led state governments have implemented evidence-based reading curricula, banned ineffective teaching methods, and improved school safety. In contrast, Democrat-led states have undermined school discipline, reduced academic standards, and embraced policies that deemphasize achievement in favor of ideological goals.

The most important factor driving this divide has been the progressive push for “equity.” In practice, equity has meant [eliminating honors classes](#), lowering grading standards, and loosening classroom [discipline](#). Avoiding this ideological approach, red states have taken the lead on evidence-based reforms.

The divide is particularly striking in reading instruction. For decades, American schools steered clear of phonics—the instructional method that teaches students to connect letters with sounds—which progressive educators derided as a [right-wing scheme](#) (and some still do now). They favored the “whole language” approach, whereby students supposedly learned through a “holistic” process of immersion in literature and “sight reading.” Even though this approach was exposed as a failure as early as [the 1950s](#), when Rudolf Flesch’s *Why Johnny Can’t Read* warned of its ineffectiveness and championed phonics, the educational establishment stuck with the whole-language approach throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

In recent decades, however, red states have returned to phonics. In 2013, [Mississippi](#), under unified Republican leadership in both the legislature and governor’s mansion, was an early adopter of requiring that teachers be [trained in evidence-based reading pedagogies](#). At the time, Mississippi rated [second to last](#)

in reading scores nationally. But since then, the Magnolia State has steadily climbed the rankings. In fact, [adjusted for demographics](#), it now stands among the top states in reading.

Red states have also led bans on the “three-cueing system” (or “MSV cueing”), another failed reading strategy that encourages students to guess unfamiliar words by using meaning, structure, or visual cues. [Arkansas](#) outlawed MSV cueing in 2021, followed by [Louisiana](#) in 2022. [More states](#) joined them after the release of *Sold a Story*, an influential podcast that exposed the harm done by these discredited methods.

Red states are also rejecting the equity agenda and the drive to lower academic standards. Schools in Alabama—the only state fully to recover from pandemic learning loss for math—are [using test scores](#) as a tool to identify and support struggling students. And in 2024, the [state legislature](#) passed a law giving teachers more power to exclude unruly students from classrooms.

Meantime, blue states and districts are lowering the bar for students in both academics and discipline. In 2021, [Oregon](#) eliminated high school graduation standards because they were allegedly harmful to minorities. [San Francisco](#) and other progressive districts have tried to implement “equitable grading” policies that deemphasize tests and deadlines. California has made it harder for teachers to maintain order in classrooms. [In 2014](#), it became the first state to ban suspensions and expulsions for “willful defiance” among K-3 students, citing the large racial disparities in infraction rates. A decade later, California expanded this policy to [middle and high school students](#). These kinds of policy decisions from blue states—shaped by a strong pressure to conform to rigid equity dogmas—have become a serious liability.

Republican-led states are leading on education reform by focusing on what works.. The lesson here for Democrats: any educational approach that prioritizes ideology over evidence will sacrifice student success.

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