



DEMOCRATS *for*
EDUCATION REFORM

Kansas *Policy Memo*

A Note From **Our CEO**



Democrats face a critical juncture in education policy. Over the past decade, our party's historical advantage on education has eroded from lack of vision and loss of public trust. Voters' message is clear: They want something different, but Democrats have offered more of the same.

Kansas illustrates both the challenge and the opportunity. The state has low reading and math proficiency rates, an ineffective school accountability system, and low college enrollment. Without renewed urgency and a forward-looking vision, Kansas risks the futures of tens of thousands of its students. The state's concerning academic outcomes demand immediate action to avoid a generational loss of student potential, socioeconomic mobility, and economic productivity.

Across the country, several states are showing that reform can deliver real results for students—proving that progress is possible when leaders act boldly. While much of this progress is occurring in a few Republican-led states, we believe Democratic governors and gubernatorial candidates, including in Kansas, can claim the mantle of a results-driven education agenda that discovers and invests in what works, and allows families to choose what's best for them. This is both a political and a moral imperative: With the right leadership, Kansas can help lead the nation in education—preparing every student to succeed in college, career, and life—and show that Democrats are ready to deliver bold, lasting change for every child.



About **This Report**

This report outlines a policy framework for improving education in Kansas through innovation, accountability, and choice. It is intended to inform candidates, campaign staff, and policymakers about both the current state of Kansas' education system and the opportunity ahead.

It includes:

Executive Summary (pg. 3)

Overview of Kansas's education landscape and opportunities for progress.

**Kansas at a Glance (pg. 3) and
Recommendations at a Glance (pg. 4)**

Descriptive statistics providing a brief picture of Kansas's education demographics and outcomes and a summary of state policy recommendations.

Policy Recommendations

Organized around three pillars that, together, create a roadmap for measurable improvement.

- Innovation (pg. 5)
- Accountability (pg. 8)
- Choice (pg. 11)

Executive Summary

Nearly 500,000 Kansas students depend on the state’s schools to prepare them for college, career, and life — and the system is falling short. Fewer than one in three students demonstrated proficiency in 4th-grade reading on the [Nation’s Report Card](#), and only about one in four reached proficiency in 8th-grade reading and math, meaning the pipeline to college and career readiness is leaking at every stage. High graduation rates obscure rather than illuminate this reality: Kansas students are earning diplomas that don’t reflect what they know or can do. The state’s accountability system compounds the problem, built around compliance rather than outcomes, leaving families without honest information about how their schools are actually performing. And because charter school laws remain overly restrictive and alternative public school models remain scarce, families in the most under-resourced communities have nowhere else to turn.

The next governor inherits both a crisis and a mandate. Investments in the educator workforce, evidence-based literacy and math instruction, rigorous school performance tracking, and expanded high-quality public school options are not aspirational — they are the minimum conditions for a functional system.

Kansas is at a structural reform window. The state needs a leader willing to demonstrate that sustained commitment and smart policymaking can deliver high expectations and lasting success for every student — and DFER’s mission is to make sure that leader has the framework, the evidence, and the political will to act.

Kansas At a Glance

Public School Student Enrollment
498,063

Chronic Absenteeism Rate (2022-23)
24%

Students Eligible for Free or
Reduced-Price Lunch
47%

English Learner Students (2021)
8%

Students with Disabilities
17%

Students with College-Ready
ACT Scores:
27%

High School Graduation Rate
89%

Two- and Four-Year
College Enrollment (2021)
39%

NAEP Rankings

4th-Grade Reading	4th-Grade Math
32 nd	28 th
8th-Grade Reading	8th-Grade Math
31 st	24 th

Demographically Adjusted NAEP Rankings

4th-Grade Reading	4th-Grade Math
29 th	29 th
8th-Grade Reading	8th-Grade Math
38 th	26 th

Recommendations At A Glance



Innovation

1. **Incentivize Strategic Staffing Practices to Support and Reward Great Educators.** Encourage adoption of team teaching models and targeted pay incentives to attract and retain excellent teachers where they are most needed while laying the groundwork to permanently strengthen the educator workforce pipeline.
2. **Support the Creation of Public Microschools.** Consider legislation to establish a framework and funding for public microschools in order to address regional challenges and serve students with unique learning needs.



Accountability

1. **Expand Evidence-Based Literacy and Math Practices Across K–12.** Expand evidence-based literacy and math practices across K-12 through larger investments in and stronger requirements about teacher training and licensure, high-quality instructional materials, screening and intervention, and parental notification.
2. **Strengthen School Improvement Requirements by Recalibrating the School Accountability System.** Strengthen reporting requirements and accountability measures for all schools funded by public dollars—especially chronically underperforming schools—while continuing to empower local districts and communities to shape school turnaround efforts.



Choice

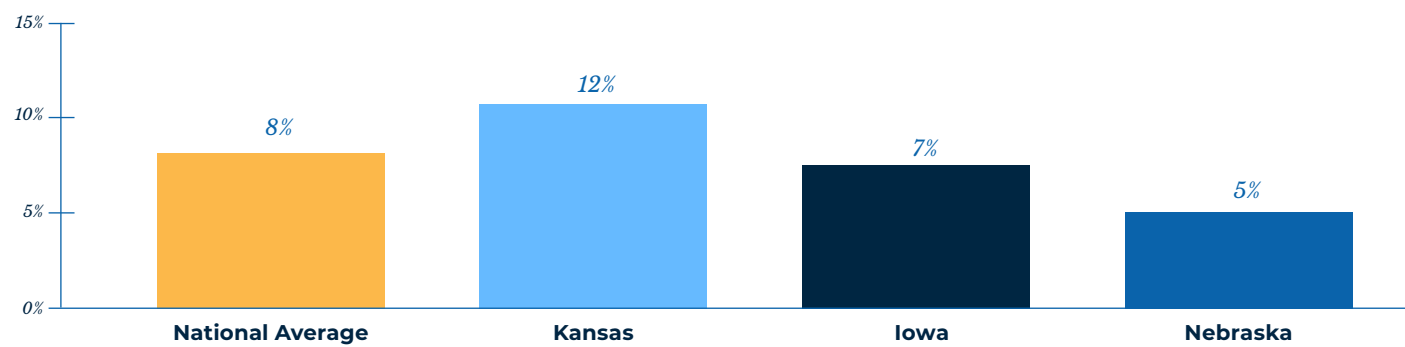
1. **Deepen Investments In Evidence-Based Nontraditional Public School Model.** Expand regulatory and financial support for charter schools, full-service community schools, early college programs, magnet programs, and other evidence-based models that accelerate learning outcomes and meet diverse student needs.
2. **Leverage the Federal Scholarship Tax Credit Program.** Use the new Federal Scholarship Tax Credit program to expand tutoring and out-of-school time learning opportunities, directing resources to under-resourced students and trusted community-based organizations that provide academic and enrichment support.

Kansas’ next governor has the opportunity to ensure that the state becomes the best place in the country for students to prepare for college, career, and life. In order to do so, they must embrace a spirit of innovation that allows all students to flourish. The next governor of Kansas should usher in a new era of education innovation informed by the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1:
Incentivize strategic staffing practices to support and reward great educators.

Kansas has an educator workforce crisis. As of the last national data collection in the 2021-22 school year, Kansas had the second-highest teacher attrition rate in the nation, with 1 in 8 teachers leaving the profession on an annual basis. With one of the lowest [Teacher Morale Index scores](#) in the country, Kansas is at risk of escalating this crisis in the coming years. To effectively sustain Kansas’ teacher workforce, evidence-based policy solutions are urgently needed.

Kansas has the second-highest teacher attrition rate in the nation



Source: [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (2021-22)

To help address educator workforce challenges, we recommend expanding the use of strategic staffing practices, including [team teaching models](#) to accelerate student learning and scaffold educator career ladders, and [differentiated pay](#) for teachers in hard-to-staff schools (e.g., high-poverty and rural schools) and in-demand specializations (e.g., special education, English Learner, and STEM classrooms). The U.S. Department of Education is currently [encouraging the implementation of strategic staffing](#) practices using Title II Part A funds, which creates a window of opportunity to scale team teaching and differentiated pay at the state level. We also advise creating a statewide task force charged with examining Kansas’ educator workforce pipeline and producing recommendations to permanently strengthen it.

An example of innovative policy directly affecting teaching and learning, North Carolina has adopted a [team teaching model](#) which has [significantly improved](#) student outcomes and teacher

experiences in participating schools. Students in schools with the model had an **additional 1 month of growth in math and science** compared to comparable schools without the model. Similarly, a team teaching model in Arizona—[Next Education Workforce](#)—has led to an **additional 1.4 months of reading growth** for students as well as higher educator effectiveness, lower turnover, and increased job satisfaction.

Kansas has already [begun adopting](#) Arizona's team teaching model, implementing the model in three Kansas City schools through [SchoolSmartKC](#). We strongly recommend dedicating state funding to scaling the team teaching model to expand its use across Kansas.

Teacher pay is also a critical area of improvement, with Kansas teachers earning just [83 cents on the dollar](#) compared to similarly educated professionals. In times of economic constraint, however, across-the-board pay increases can be infeasible, and they rarely solve teacher shortages because shortages [tend to be concentrated](#) in specific areas and specializations. Instead, several states and school districts across the country have implemented differentiated pay for teachers in hard-to-staff schools and specializations, [with promising results](#) showing that this can be an effective strategy to address teacher shortages where they are worst.

For instance, the [Talent Transfer Initiative \(TTI\)](#) was implemented in 10 school districts in 7 states to incentivize high-performing teachers to move into schools serving the most disadvantaged students. Teachers were offered up to \$20,000 paid in installments for a two-year commitment. The initiative was highly successful: Almost 9 out of 10 targeted vacancies were filled, student achievement increased, and retention rates were higher for teachers who received the incentive.

This pay strategy can be scaled through [grant programs](#) tailored to address chronic shortages, [pay scheme flexibilities](#) for qualifying districts, [scholarship programs](#) that cover full tuition costs for teacher preparation programs in exchange for a multi-year commitment to a hard-to-staff assignment or specialization, or even a [sliding scale tax credit](#) for teachers based on the poverty level of the school in which they teach.

Finally, efforts must be undertaken to strengthen the entirety of Kansas' educator workforce pipeline. This will require a coordinated effort by state stakeholders to examine and act on challenges compromising the pipeline's integrity. A roadmap already exists for this work: New America, in collaboration with 23 national education policy organizations, has published a comprehensive [Six-Strand Strategy for Educator Excellence](#) for strengthening the educator workforce. Kansas could utilize this roadmap in tandem with insights from the [Kansas Teacher Retention Initiative](#) to inform a statewide task force's investigation into the state's greatest areas of improvement and ensure the sustained integrity of the educator pipeline, from start to finish.

Recommendation 2: Support the creation of public microschools.

One emerging school type that is expanding across the country is the [microschool model](#). Building on homeschool-style learning pods formed during the COVID-19 pandemic and earlier small-school models, microschools emphasize individualized learning and targeted supports. Because of the nascent nature of the microschool model, data on their performance is currently limited. Currently, several districts across the country are opening and operating microschools to provide more public school options and create opportunities for students to have a different learning experience. Many microschools are designed specifically to support the learning and development of marginalized youth.

To help address the unique challenges of rural education, Indiana has [begun operating](#) microschools as public charter schools. Board members of the Indiana Microschool Collaborative describe the schools as a way to avoid unnecessary infrastructure investments and better personalize learning to [students' individual needs and interests](#). Similarly, in the state of Washington, the Issaquah School District has taken a district-led approach, opening microschools [housed within existing school facilities](#) that operate with distinct schedules, instructional models, and small enrollments while allowing students to participate in courses and activities in the larger school. Together, these examples show how public microschools can emerge through both charter and district pathways, expanding public school options while remaining integrated within broader public education systems.

Currently, most microschools in Kansas operate as [non-accredited private schools \(NAPS\)](#). To boost access for underserved students who need a different education environment and integrate public accountability measures, Kansas can support the creation of public microschools in high-need areas by considering legislation similar to that proposed in Washington to establish a framework and funding for public microschools. This [legislation](#) could make specific provisions to ensure students with the greatest need are being served by these new schools.



Accountability

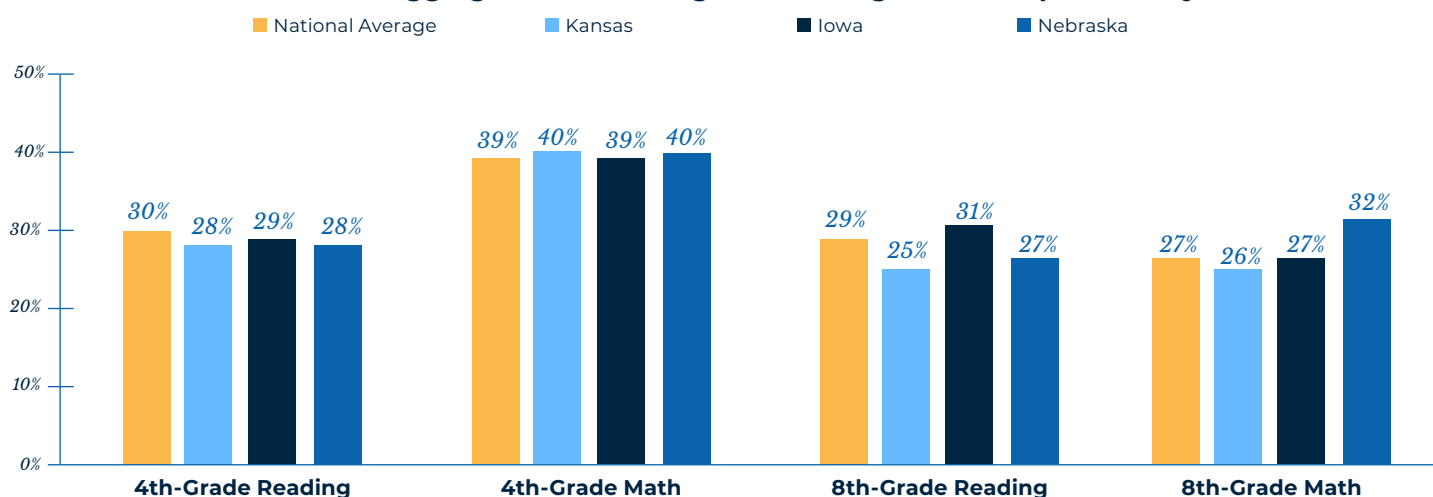
It is a well-known challenge that parents often believe their children are doing better than they actually are in school. This “[parent perception gap](#)” leads to inadequate accountability for chronically underperforming schools and the deprioritization of education as a voting issue. Kansas’ next governor must generate renewed urgency around creating a school system that achieves positive outcomes for all students, especially those from historically underserved groups.

There is a mismatch between Kansas’ graduation rates and vital indicators of academic proficiency. According to state data, the state’s graduation rate is [89%](#). Yet, 2025 state assessment data [show that](#) over half of students are Level 2 or below in both reading and math, which is [lower than](#) “an effective ability to understand and use the skills and knowledge needed for postsecondary success” (Level 3). Worse still, these disappointing results may be inflated, with [recent controversy](#) over the Kansas State Department of Education lowering standards for students and causing a jump in 2025 proficiency rates.

Federal data corroborates Kansas students’ limited proficiency: On the [2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress \(NAEP\)](#)—the only nationally representative test which can compare student achievement across all 50 states—**fewer than one in three Kansas students demonstrated proficiency in 4th-grade reading** while **about two in five** demonstrated proficiency in **4th-grade math**. Worse still, only about **one in four** students demonstrated proficiency in **8th-grade reading and 8th-grade math**.

Academic underperformance follows Kansas students into postsecondary preparation and matriculation. Just over one in four students [demonstrated](#) college readiness on the 2025 ACT, and the state’s college enrollment was far below its neighbors as of the last national data collection in 2021.

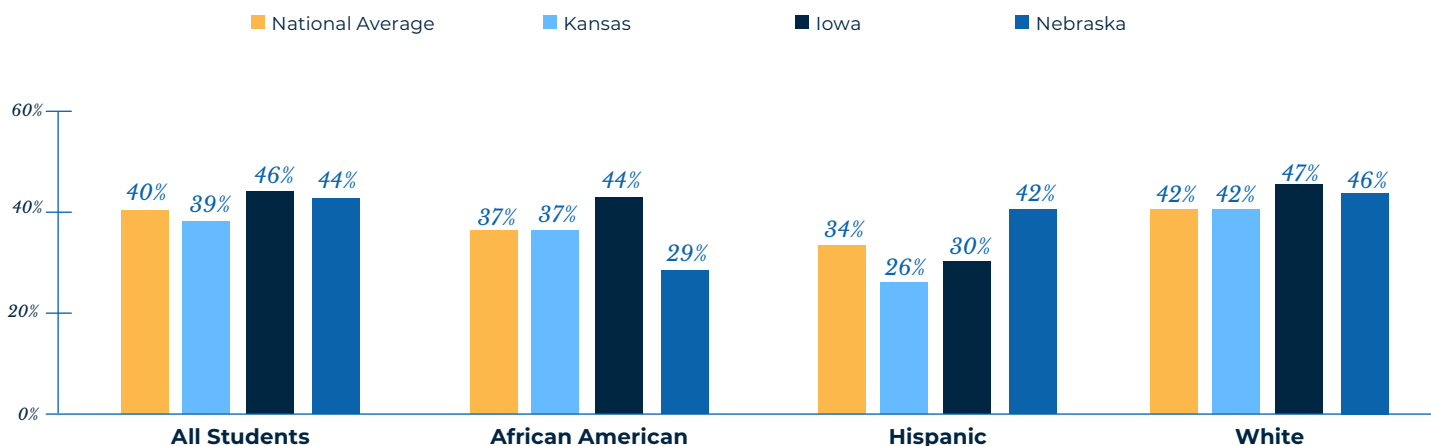
Kansas is lagging behind in 8th grade reading and math proficiency



Source: [The Nation's Report Card](#) (2024)

All of this paints a picture suggesting that Kansas' expectations for its high school graduates are not aligned to state or national standards of proficiency in core academic subjects. Reforms are immediately needed to ensure that schools deliver the results needed for students to succeed in their postsecondary goals and fulfill the state's workforce needs.

Kansas' college enrollment is far below its neighbors



Source: [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (2021)

Recommendation 1:

Expand evidence-based literacy and math practices across K-12.

In recent years, Kansas has made improving literacy a priority through the [Kansas Blueprint for Literacy](#). As a result, the state has [implemented](#) mandatory state-approved universal screeners three times per year, aligned teacher preparation with modern practices, and revised licensure renewal requirements to [align with the Science of Reading](#). With these and other changes, Kansas is [meeting 13 of 18](#) of ExcelinEd's metrics for comprehensive early literacy policies. To expand its approach, the state should consider requiring school districts to adopt high-quality instructional materials aligned to the science of reading from a vetted state list, funding elementary school literacy coaches to support effective implementation of evidence-based instruction, and retaining third grade students who do not demonstrate proficiency on the state assessment. Such accountability mechanisms were [essential](#) to Mississippi's renowned literacy gains. However, multiple interventions should precede retention so as to avoid it where possible; regular progress monitoring should trigger interventions such as parental notification and high-dosage tutoring well in advance of retention decisions so that students get back on track before retention is required.

Kansas has significantly more work to do in the realm of evidence-based math. Currently, the state is only [partially meeting 2 of 11 ExcelinEd metrics](#) for evidence-based math policies. The enactment of a comprehensive set of evidence-based math policies will require an ambitious policy agenda. This is a monumental area of opportunity for the next Kansas governor to lead. The

next administration should focus on a set of math policies that include rigorous requirements for teacher licensure and renewal, universal math screeners and progress monitoring, mandatory daily instructional minimums, high-quality instructional materials, state-funded math coaches, parental notification system for students identified for support, and other measures.

Alabama made [significant investments](#) in evidence-based math instruction and has seen notable improvements since then, making the [largest jump in the nation](#) on the 2024 NAEP results. Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Indiana [have also implemented](#) strong reforms with notable returns.

Recommendation 2: **Strengthen school improvement requirements by recalibrating the state's accountability system.**

Every child deserves to attend a school that is delivering strong results. However, the state's accountability system, the [Kansas Integrated Accountability System \(KIAS\)](#), largely precludes parents' ability to evaluate the quality of their children's school. It focuses on compliance-based school accreditation rather than whether students are actually learning, and does not provide meaningful information on individual school performance for families. It also [fails to hold schools accountable](#) for misuse of funds earmarked for supporting at-risk students. Ongoing controversy over the state's accountability system and the Kansas State Department of Education's oversight of it has resulted in [legislation being filed](#) to address the issue.

The next governor of Kansas should ensure that every school in the state is evaluated using rigorous state benchmarks and held accountable to improving student outcomes. They should strengthen reporting requirements and accountability measures for all schools funded by public dollars, especially chronically underperforming schools. Legislation and regulations should provide clearer, more stringent guidance aligned with the conditions for entering and exiting various levels of state support or intervention, including required academic growth and proficiency benchmarks and strict improvement timelines to prevent schools from remaining identified for years without escalation.

Intervention efforts must also center community voice; lasting improvements in education depend on centering the affected community, so that families who have too often been left out of decision-making can play a meaningful role in shaping the development of a better educational ecosystem.

Turnaround laws in states like [Massachusetts](#) and takeover efforts in cities like [New Orleans](#) tend to be more successful when paired with a broader reform agenda including funding reform, state longitudinal data systems that track outcomes beyond high school, and innovative approaches like New Orleans's creation of the nation's most intensive market-based school system.



Choice

The next governor of Kansas has several opportunities to expand the availability of high-quality education options for families across the state, giving every child access to an excellent education that meets their unique needs.

Recommendation 1:

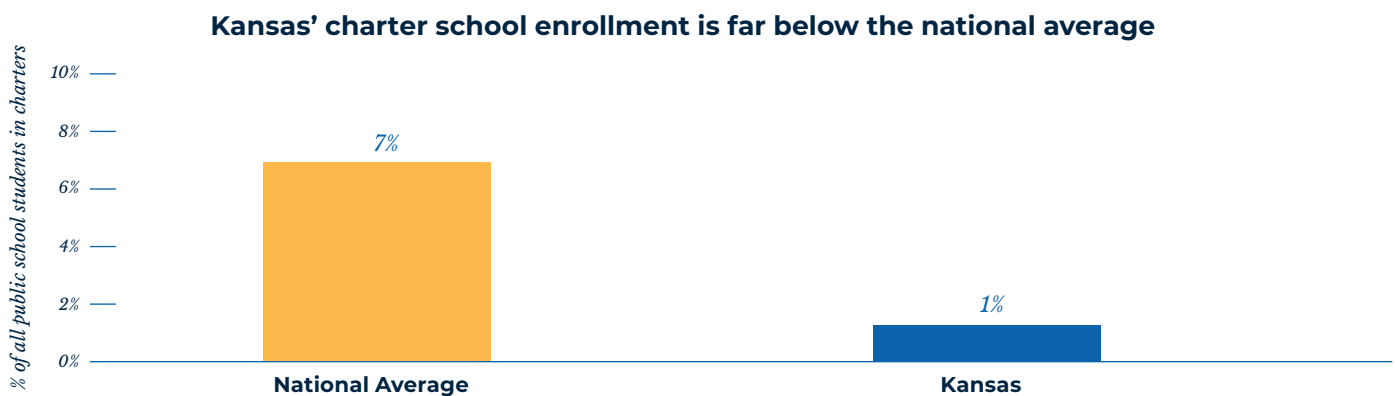
Deepen investments in evidence-based nontraditional public school models.

We recommend examining Kansas' regulatory and financial support for charter schools, full-service community schools, early college programs, magnet programs, career academies, and other evidence-based public school models that accelerate learning outcomes and meet diverse student needs.

Charter Schools

After decades of iteration, charter schools now [consistently outperform](#) traditional district schools when it comes to academic performance. Their effectiveness is [particularly pronounced](#) for students of color in low-income urban communities. **Experts have [attributed this positive development to increased accountability, the tendency to adopt evidence-based practices, and staffing flexibilities](#).** States like [Rhode Island](#) are leading the way in building charter school sectors that deliver the strongest results for students.

In spite of this evidence, Kansas continues to underinvest in charter schools. Only 1% of the state's public school students are enrolled in seven charter schools, far below the national average of 7%. The expansion of charter schools in the state is hampered by a requirement of [local school board approval](#), which are the entities typically most reluctant to grant charters. Denial by local school boards cannot be appealed to a state-level board or independent commission. In addition, charters that do receive authorization are not given the typical operational autonomy afforded in other states; instead, Kansas charters must request each exemption individually from the local board. This restricts charter schools from enacting the kinds of innovations which [help lead](#) to improved student outcomes.



Source: [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (2022–2023)

The next governor of Kansas has the opportunity to expand the availability of high-performing charter schools for Kansas families by creating an independent state-level authorizer which may grant charters for charter operators seeking to open schools in chronically low-performing school districts or by incentivizing local school boards to approve high-quality charter operators, as is the case in [Georgia](#). To support startup operational costs, it would also be important to create a state grant for charter school facilities funding. Kansas could also pair these policies with [transitional aid](#) for traditional district schools so that enrollment losses do not adversely affect their budgets as the student population shifts.

Full-Service Community Schools

[Full-service community schools](#)—which serve as a center of their neighborhood by providing access to critical programs and services like health care, social services, expanded learning programs, mentoring, adult education, and other resources—have been [shown to](#) improve attendance, reduce disciplinary incidents, boost academic achievement, strengthen school climate, and increase high school graduation rates. They also have a significant ROI, with [studies](#) calculating that **for every \$1 spent on full-service community schools, they have up to \$15 return on investment.**

Local school leaders in Wichita have [begun piloting](#) the full-service community schools model. The next governor should consider statewide investments in this proven model through a dedicated state grant program, which could be structured similarly to and supplemented by the [federal program](#).

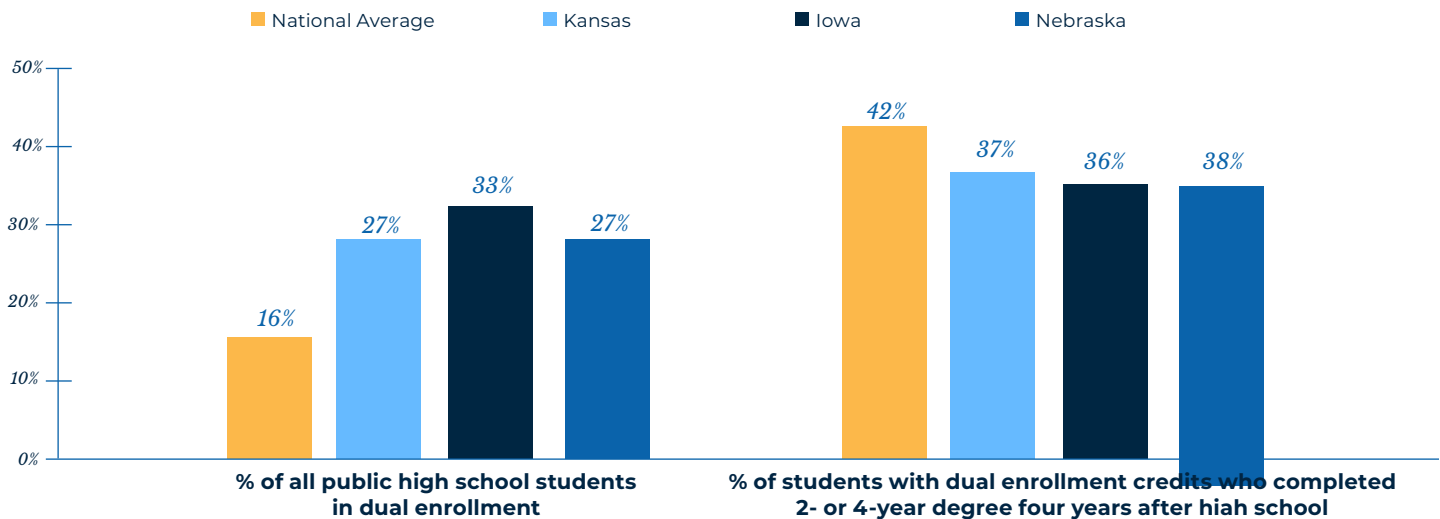
Dual Enrollment and Early College Programs

Graduates of Early College High Schools (ECHS) are [considerably more likely](#) to earn some form of college degree over the next ten years than non-participants and do so faster, allowing them to begin earning wages earlier than they otherwise would. In Massachusetts, ECHS graduates are **[14 percentage points more likely](#)** (68% versus 54%) **to go on to college** compared to control-matched peers, and **[14 percentage points more likely](#)** (58% versus 44%) **to persist into a second year of college**—a strong predictor of eventual graduation. Dual enrollment has [also been shown](#) to provide similar benefits.

Kansas has a relatively high participation rate in dual enrollment programs, but a lower-than-average return on that investment in terms of subsequent degree completion. This suggests that earned credits are not translating into faster completion of a degree or savings in college costs.

Identifying and mitigating the causes of low attainment rates should be a priority for the next administration. The state should implement an annual evaluation of dual enrollment programs, participation, and outcomes, disaggregated by race, socioeconomic status, and school district, and make the findings easily accessible. This analysis should consider whether dual enrollment credits are transferring for both general education and major courses as well as whether dual enrollment courses are providing the rigor and quality needed to prepare students to succeed in college.

Kansas' strong dual enrollment participation does not translate to strong ROI



Sources: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Survey (2022-23); Community College Research Center (2024)

Recommendation 2: Leverage the Federal Scholarship Tax Credit (FSTC) program.

The new [Federal Scholarship Tax Credit \(FSTC\) program](#) represents an opportunity to accelerate learning through evidence-based tutoring for students who need it the most and expand access to high-quality out-of-school time programs. The Kansas Legislature [recently overrode a veto](#) from Governor Kelly, ensuring the state's participation in the program. The program will begin in January 2027, and the next governor should support the state's participation. We recommend embracing the FSTC program and equipping it with guardrails so that it serves under-resourced students and families by providing free services through scholarship-granting organizations and identifying trusted community-based organizations that provide academic and non-academic support to K-12 students. [Out-of-school time](#) programming provides [academic enrichment and innovative learning opportunities](#) for young people to build academic and durable skills. It also provides working class families with additional child care support, ensuring their children are in safe, supportive environments after school and on weekends.

Moving Forward

The next governor has a chance to continue driving education reform in Kansas, from the first day a child enters school to the day they graduate with the knowledge, skills, and mindsets needed to succeed in college, career, and life. By embracing innovation that maximizes the potential of every student, ensuring schools deliver strong results, and expanding high-quality school options for families, the next governor can build a brighter future for all. This is how children, families, educators, and communities across Kansas will thrive for generations to come.