

News From The States

EVENING WRAP

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By [Kate Queram](#)

I once fell asleep in math class, and rather than poke me with a ruler or, I don't know, move on with his day, my teacher pretended to give everyone a pop quiz and then woke me up when they were handing in their papers. I assume this was to shame me into staying awake, or possibly to renew my zest for algebra, which did not work because I was tired and also did not really care about algebra. (Sorry, Mr. Kenas. Turns out I do have a calculator on me at all times, and I have never once used it to solve for x.)

Anyway, let's talk about schools. (But not algebra.)



The Big Takeaway

I may have been sleeping, but I was at least at school, which has become somewhat of an anomaly in Indiana. [Last year](#), 19.3% of the state's students were [chronically absent](#), down 2.8% from the year before but nowhere near the pre-pandemic rate of 11.2%. It's a [national problem](#) with no clear solution — and *that* is a big problem for state Republicans, who are pushing education overhauls they say will improve student literacy rates and career readiness, [the Indiana Capital Chronicle reported](#).



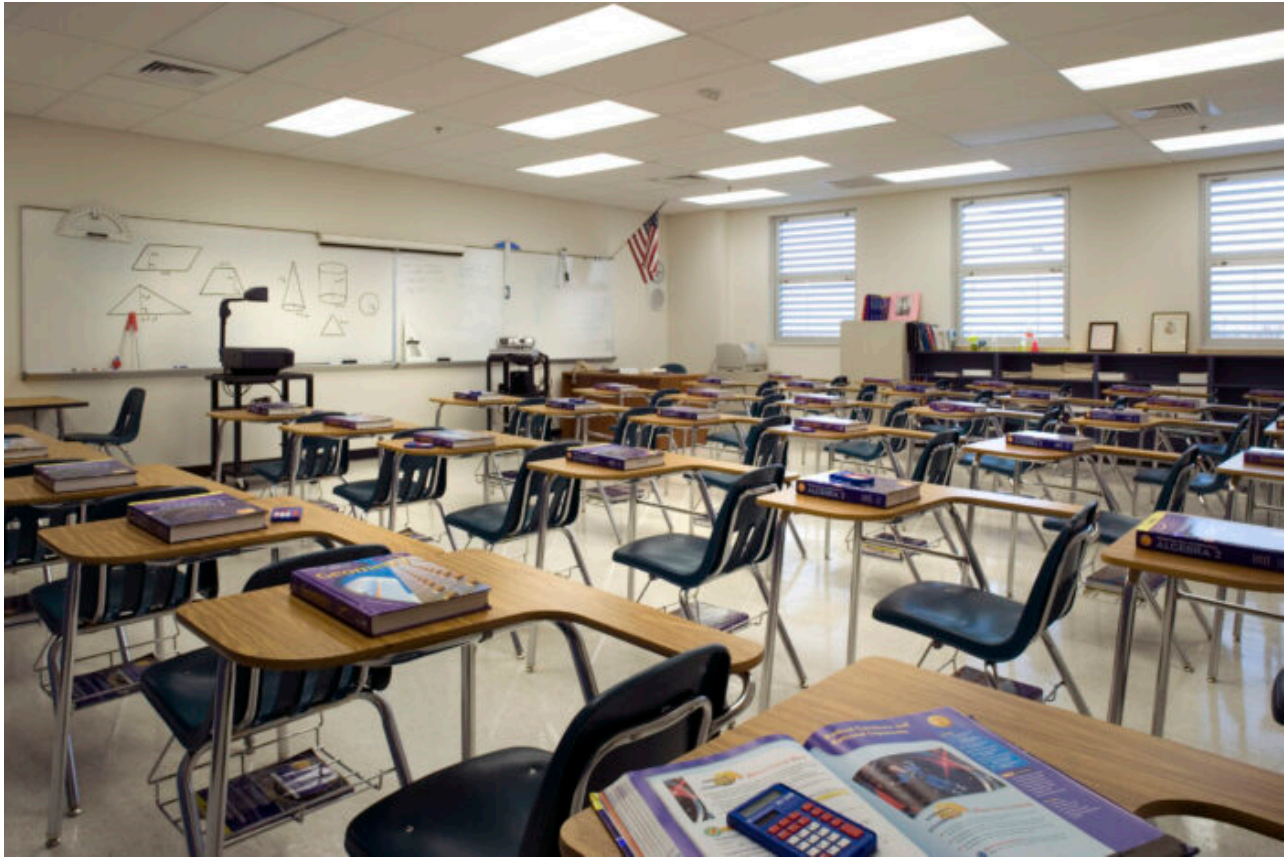
Sad.

(Photo by Getty Images)

The crux of that plan involves “reinventing” high school by adding more work-based learning, which GOP lawmakers [pitched as a way](#) to improve college-going and credentialing rates among the state’s students. Education officials are still working to [implement those changes](#), but if attendance rates don’t improve, it might not matter. Missing as few as three days of school can affect students’ grades, test scores and overall academic performance; long-term, poor attendance is better than test scores at [predicting a student’s likelihood](#) of dropping out before graduating high school. The negative impacts are already evident in Indiana, where chronic absenteeism [has been linked](#) to dismal scores on standardized tests for language arts and math.

Generally, chronic absences are most common among Black students and in high-poverty urban school districts and charter schools. But the reasons vary widely. Some kids have family challenges that keep them at home; others lack reliable transportation. Post-pandemic, many families are also more comfortable keeping their kids home for minor illnesses. It’s a broad range of issues that require targeted solutions — precisely the opposite of what lawmakers might prefer.

Which, for now, seems to be punishment. Senate President Pro Tempore Rodric Bay said last week he expects the General Assembly to consider proposals that would tap local courts and the Department of Child Services to help combat “truancy.” According to Bay, repeated absences among younger kids are primarily “a parenting problem” that could be fixed by “work[ing] with those parents, making them understand how important it is to come to school.”



*Sad, but with worse lighting.
(Photo by Dan Forer/Getty Images)*

“It probably might not be as much of a parent problem when they’re 16 or 17 years old,” he continued. “So you have juvenile delinquency, where you can get the kids into court and have the judges motivate them and work with them so that they understand the importance of finishing up school.”

Advocates generally don’t favor this type of policy, which punishes students for absences that are often out of their control or connected to trauma. Even school officials who favor the approach are skeptical that it could work in Indiana, where courts are chronically backlogged with cases that take priority over attendance problems. But it’s not clear what else lawmakers might consider in the upcoming non-budget legislative session, where anything requiring new funding is likely a nonstarter.

Absence is a different sort of education problem in Nebraska, where people with bachelor's and postgraduate degrees are leaving the state at ever-higher rates, according to newly released census data. The so-called “brain drain” is an ongoing (and regional) trend, though the numbers show the exodus beginning to spread beyond just college graduates, [the Nebraska Examiner reported](#).

“Notably, the data reveals that individuals 25 years and older with other (lesser) levels of educational attainment also are leaving the state,” said Josie Schafer, director of the Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.



LOL WE'RE MOVING
(Photo via the Nebraska Examiner)

Last year, Nebraska lost an estimated 1,089 adults aged 25 or older with a high school diploma or less — a relatively small drop population-wise, but a marked shift from previous years, when the state drew new members of that demographic group. Similarly, the state gained just 35 people with some college experience or an associate degree, compared to a net increase of more than 2,000 people in 2019.

The data did not offer reasons for the shift, but contributing factors likely include a dearth of [affordable child care](#) and [housing options](#) for young professionals.

County-level surveys found other factors, including [ongoing legislative attacks](#) against LGBTQ+ people, “feeling unsafe” due to racism, and reduced employment and social opportunities.

Perhaps some of them are relocating to South Carolina, where school districts have gained so many new students that local boards want authority to raise home-building fees to fund the construction of new schools. Under current law, that process runs through county-level boards, which are free to lower the fees as they see fit, regardless of the project’s estimated cost, [per the South Carolina Daily Gazette](#).

That’s what happened three years ago in York County, where officials approved fees of up to \$4,000 for new homes, \$2,600 on mobile homes and \$2,000 on apartments — roughly a quarter of the amounts recommended by a district study. That decision followed two successful legal challenges brought by homebuilders [against fees](#) in [other school districts](#).

All of which makes the request unlikely to gain traction among state lawmakers. Builders have already opposed it, along with several legislators from growing school districts, who said the current law ensures accountability and cooperation between local and county officials. But other changes are possible under a separate bill, which would remove consulting requirements and spending timelines from the fee process in a bid to make it “more workable” for municipalities, according to state Sen. Tom Davis, a Beaufort Republican.

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State of Our Democracy

Here in America, [most elections](#) are winner-take-all, where the candidate who receives a majority of votes is the one who takes office (even when the losing loser is [mad about it](#)). But in *some* places — two states, three counties and 45 cities, [to be exact](#) — elections are conducted via ranked choice voting, where voters rank multiple candidates in terms of preference. Proponents of ranked choice voting, or RCV, say it delivers fairer outcomes that reflect the will of the voters rather than the extremists, resulting in a government more concerned with constituent services than politics, [our national bureau reported](#).



Come on in, we've got multiple candidates!
(Photo by Bill Pugliano/Getty Images)

There's some proof of this. Years of partisan rancor were curtailed in Alaska's first ranked choice election last year, when bipartisan majorities took control of both chambers of the state legislature. Voters also sent a moderate Democrat to the U.S. House and reelected a conservative Republican governor and a

moderate Republican U.S. senator, effectively proving that ranked choice voting can produce a wide range of outcomes and does not inherently favor one political party over another.

Alas, proof means nothing in the post-truth world, and that is why some Republicans believe that ranked choice voting is [a liberal conspiracy](#) designed to “dramatically push our politics to the left” and “disenfranchise voters and [elect more Democrats](#).” At least five states have banned the system entirely, and a fledgling repeal effort is also underway in Alaska thanks largely to former Gov. Sarah Palin, who blamed her 2022 election loss on the “wack” practice.

But they’re largely in the minority. Voters will decide next year whether to implement ranked choice voting in Nevada and Oregon, and ballot measures are underway in Colorado, Idaho and Arizona. Lawmakers in Illinois and Minnesota passed bills this year to study the system; in Connecticut, legislators approved a measure that allows local governments to use it.

It’s not a fix-all for our ailing democracy, advocates said. But it’s close.

“There’s a huge pressure on reformers to say, this is not a silver bullet,” said Katherine Gehl, founder of the Institute for Political Innovation. “And OK, I get that. But I think it’s as close to a silver bullet as you can come.”

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From The Newsrooms

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- ['Darkest of dark stains': Kansas advocates call for funding of long-forsaken disability services](#)
- [\(Nevada\) Water managers across drought-stricken West start negotiations in Las Vegas](#)
- ['Solar for All,' but not South Dakota: State one of six not applying for grants](#)



One Last Thing

Demi Lovato [got engaged](#) to someone I have never heard of and had no idea she was dating. Congrats to the happy couple!

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