

A Governor's Pledge: Algebra Mastery by the End of 9th Grade

A state strategy to help every student master Algebra I
and succeed in the 21st-century economy

In November 2026, voters will elect governors in 39 states, including 21 where leadership will turn over due to term limits or retirements. These elections represent a pivotal opportunity to shape the future of K–12 education.

Governors play a central role in setting education priorities, aligning policy, and ensuring that every student has the opportunity to reach their full potential. That leadership is especially critical now. Across the country, student achievement in both reading and math has declined to historic lows, revealing widespread unfinished learning.

In response, many states have made meaningful investments in literacy, advancing comprehensive initiatives grounded in the science of reading. These efforts demonstrate what is possible when states set clear goals and back them with aligned policy and resources.

Now, math requires that same level of urgency and focus.

Strengthening math outcomes is essential not only for academic success, but for long-term economic opportunity. Jobs requiring science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) skills are among the [fastest-growing and highest-paying](#) in the country. At the same time, states are increasingly prioritizing industry-aligned career connected learning pathways. Both depend on a strong foundation in mathematics.

To meet the demands of the 21st century economy, states must ensure that all students are prepared to succeed in math—and that those who have fallen behind have a clear path to catch up.

This brief outlines a set of policy recommendations to help gubernatorial candidates lead that effort and significantly improve math outcomes for all students in their state.



Why It Matters

In 2024, just 28% of 8th grade students performed at or above the proficient level in math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). This is especially concerning because 8th grade proficiency is a strong predictor of readiness for Algebra I—a key inflection point in students' academic trajectories. Students who pass Algebra I by the end of 9th grade are more likely to [graduate from high school, attend college and earn higher salaries](#). Those who don't are [four times more likely to drop out of high school](#).

In response, many states have started to pursue policies aimed at improving math education, including early numeracy initiatives, instructional coaching, and expanded access to advanced math pathways.

While these strategies are necessary and important, they do not fully address what the science of learning shows is required in math—particularly for students who have fallen behind. That is because:

- **Math is cumulative.** Students must master a sequence of foundational skills to be prepared for future content. If a student has not mastered key foundational skills—such as multiplication or fractions—they will struggle with higher-level concepts. Even the strongest grade-level instruction is not designed to address that unfinished learning.
- **The most missing skills emerge in middle school.** Many students enter middle school with unfinished learning from earlier grades. As math concepts become more complex, prerequisite skills are revisited in increasingly demanding ways. As a result, learning challenges compound over time.
- **Students who fall behind rarely catch up.** [Research shows](#) that the vast majority of students who are behind in math as early as fourth grade remain behind and do not graduate college- or career-ready. Instructional time is limited, and current policies make it difficult for teachers to both cover grade-level material and address individual missing skills.
- **Teachers lack the tools to meet diverse needs.** In a typical 5th-grade classroom, students are performing across as many as [seven different grade levels](#). Yet instruction is usually tied to a single textbook and a single set of grade-level standards, making it extremely difficult to meet each student's needs.
- **Current policies discourage acceleration.** A rigid focus on grade-level content can hold back students who are ready to move ahead, forcing them to repeat material they have already mastered.





Actions

Governors have the opportunity to change this trajectory by setting a clear, ambitious goal: **Every student will master Algebra I by the end of 9th grade.**

Achieving this goal will require maintaining high expectations while ensuring that systems are designed to support all students in meeting them. Establishing a statewide initiative—**“Algebra Mastery for All”**—can provide a clear framework for organizing and implementing this work.

This initiative also must be sufficiently resourced. Governors should advocate for dedicated funding in the state budget for this work, comparable to recent investments in the Science of Reading.

To deliver meaningful results, this initiative should deliver the following commitments within the first 100 days of taking office:

1 Provide a Clear Roadmap for Getting Students Back on Track

Create state-specific skill maps that provide visibility into and guidance around students’ missing foundational skills.

To effectively meet students where they are, educators need a shared understanding of how math learning develops over time. States can support this by developing skill maps aligned to state standards that illustrate how key math concepts connect across grade levels, identify prerequisites for advanced content, and help educators map efficient pathways from unfinished learning to Algebra I proficiency.

2 Know Where Every Student Stands

Promote the use of universal screeners for all students in K–3 and diagnostic screeners for all students in grades 4 through Algebra I.

Teachers and families need clear, precise information about what students know and what they still need to learn. Universal screeners have proven effective in identifying students who need additional support or disability testing in early literacy and numeracy for K–3 students. But as students progress, more precise diagnostic tools are necessary. States should enact policies that require or incentivize the use of diagnostic screeners in grades 4 through Algebra I that identify which specific skills a student has mastered and which they have not, including skills from prior grades.

3 Equip Teachers with Tools to Help Students Catch Up Without Holding Others Back

Develop statewide approval lists for supplemental instructional tools that create personalized pathways to Algebra I mastery.

Teachers are currently expected to deliver grade-level instruction while also addressing individual student needs—an expectation that is extremely difficult to meet. Many states have invested in improving grade-level instruction by promoting the adoption of new high-quality core instructional materials, but few have done the same for personalized supplemental tools used for both intervention and acceleration. States can support educators by developing approval lists for these tools, ensuring that they integrate with core instructional materials and help students build missing foundational skills from earlier grades while also allowing advanced students to move ahead when ready, all with the goal of mastering Algebra I by the end of 9th grade.

