

Unraveling the Web of Educational Decline:

A Systems Literature Review of Causes, Consequences, and Causal Relationships

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ABSTRACT: The U.S. education system is facing a multidimensional decline marked by persistent achievement gaps, fragmented policy responses, and inconsistent innovation outcomes. This article presents a Systems Literature Review (SLR)¹ of 62 peer-reviewed studies published between 2000 and 2025, revealing the complex and interrelated causes, consequences, and feedback loops that sustain educational decline. Applying the DSRP framework—Distinctions, Systems, Relationships, and Perspectives—we identify structural and cognitive blind spots that prevent the field from perceiving educational failure as a systemic issue. We find recurring errors in how reforms draw false distinctions, overlook scale-crossing dynamics, fail to trace causal linkages, and exclude marginalized voices. Our web of causality visualization illustrates how reinforcing loops—linking educational inequality, diminished socioeconomic mobility, weakened public trust, and policy instability—sustain long-term decline. This study offers a novel systems-based reframing of the educational crisis and calls for systemic, feedback-aware, and equity-centered approaches to transformation in education policy and practice.

KEYWORDS: Educational Decline | System | Educational Inequality | Systems Literature Review | Web of Causality | Education Policy | Wicked Problems | U.S. Education System

I. Introduction

The American education system is in a state of profound and multidimensional decline. Across the country, educators, parents, and policymakers are sounding the alarm about persistent achievement gaps, declining student readiness, fractured curricula, teacher burnout, and politicized standards. Despite decades of reform, substantial progress has remained elusive. What's more, many interventions have failed to address—or have even reinforced—the root causes of decline. The result is a system that continues to fail large segments of the student population, particularly those from historically marginalized backgrounds.

¹ Cabrera et al. (2023) The Steps to Doing a Systems Literature Review (SLR) Journal of Systems Thinking, (23) 3.

While existing scholarship has addressed key issues in education—such as early childhood development, resource equity, college readiness, and systemic reform—these studies often treat problems as discrete and unconnected. The prevailing approach to research tends to analyze isolated variables, missing the complex, interrelated nature of educational failure. Without a framework to understand how these challenges interact and reinforce one another, the field remains limited in its ability to craft solutions with lasting impact.

To address this gap, we conducted an SLR of 62 peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2025. Drawing on the DSRP framework, we apply a systems-thinking lens to identify the core themes, causal relationships, and reinforcing feedback loops that drive educational decline in the United States. We also interrogate the literature itself, uncovering blind spots in the way scholars and practitioners construct distinctions, analyze relationships, and incorporate (or exclude) perspectives.

Our review uncovers five dominant themes, visualizes the systemic web of causality, and identifies three major feedback loops that entrench long-term educational dysfunction. By situating educational decline as a product of complex systems—not isolated failures—this paper offers a new way of seeing both the problem and the path forward. In doing so, it challenges researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to think differently, act systemically, and prioritize interventions that are adaptive, equity-driven, and grounded in the full complexity of the educational landscape.

II. Coverage of the Literature

To explore the complex and multifaceted decline in American education, our research team conducted an SLR focused on identifying, mapping, and synthesizing the root causes, consequences, and systemic interactions behind this national concern. An SLR combines traditional research practices with AI support—in our instance, we utilized ChatGPT to detect patterns among our data, including themes, empiricism, and methodology. The central question, *"Why is education in the United States failing?"*, emerged from patterns identified across a diverse body of literature. Scholars have raised concerns about the lack of curriculum coherence necessary to meet the demands of a knowledge-based society (McCombs, 2003), the persistent gaps in teacher preparation and civic education (Journell, 2015), and the implementation challenges associated with educational innovations like personalized learning models (Gross, Tuchman, & Patrick, 2018). Together, these signals suggest that educational decline cannot be understood through isolated reforms but must be approached as an interconnected system of reinforcing challenges.

Applying a systems thinking framework allowed us to move beyond surface-level observations and instead examine the underlying feedback loops that link policy decisions, instructional practices, teacher development, and student outcomes. As Cabrera and Cabrera (2022) argue, systems thinking provides essential tools for understanding how discrete failures at different levels of the education system accumulate and perpetuate broader patterns of systemic decline. This perspective framed our investigation, ensuring that we remained attentive to both the structural and dynamic elements at play.

Focusing specifically on the U.S. education system between 2000 and 2025 enabled us to capture the legacies of earlier policy reforms, the effects of ongoing demographic shifts, and the disruptive impact of emerging technologies and crises. By anchoring our review within this critical window, we aimed to offer a comprehensive and interdisciplinary understanding of the evolving web of challenges that continue to shape educational outcomes in the United States.

Selection Process

Our literature selection process began with identifying key search terms and focusing our parameters. Regarding parameters, our team decided that we wanted to explicitly focus on the United States' education system and information from the years 2000-2025. From there, a consensus was reached to narrow our scope to primary education, as some of the problems in secondary education can be traced back to the primary education system. Once narrowing our scope, the team explored a variety of search terms in order to gain a preliminary understanding of key terminology needed to generate promising results. After trial and error, with various iterations of search terms, our team was able to quickly narrow our search terms to the following: causes of educational decline in the United States, effects of educational decline, student readiness decline, American student preparedness, K-12 education needs in the United States, and public expectations of K-12 education in the United States (see Table 1 below).

Each team member utilized Google Scholar for our academic searches. Collectively, our search terms generated 1,176, 630 results. Out of the results, our team selected the top 50 items per search term, narrowing our focus down to 300 items combined, which was done for relevancy. After combing through each term's 50 items based on relevant article titles, our collective list of literature was narrowed from 300 total items to 137. The abstracts of these 137 items were then read to double-check for relevance to our research question and search terms. After reading the abstracts, the total number of items was 101.

The final number of items utilized from our academic search was 61. Unfortunately, there were access

issues for quite a few of our items with relevant abstracts, which prevented our team from using all 101 relevant items. Despite this, our search was still able to generate robust results, which will be explored later in this paper.

Table 1: State of the Literature from SLR Template

Level of Review	Search Term						
	Causes of “educational decline” United States	Effects of educational decline	Student readiness decline	American student preparedness	K-12 education needs in the United States	Public expectations of K-12 education in the United States	Total
Total Items returned	1,030	17,800	19,400	51,400	684,000	403,000	1,176,630
Top 50	50	50	50	50	50	50	300
Articles with Relevant Titles	30	32	28	21	12	14	137
Articles with Relevant Abstracts	23	27	24	13	7	7	101
Number of Articles Selected for Full Review	10	21	11	9	5	6	62

Results by Search Term

To better understand the complexity of educational decline in the United States, we explored the topic through six distinct search terms (Table 1). Although each search term reflected different aspects, where some focused on root causes, others on readiness or public views, the articles selected for full review often addressed similar themes. From our data, five key themes emerged, which we were able to classify each article under. These included systemic reform, educational inequality and achievement gaps, college and career readiness, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and issues within the current K–12

infrastructure. Thematic coding helped us trace patterns across the literature, even when articles were responding to different research questions.

Articles under the K–12 education needs category tended to focus on structural challenges in American schools. These included the need for curriculum redesign, stronger teacher development programs, and more coherent state-level policy implementation. Studies under the public expectations term looked at how families and communities view the role of schools today. This group of literature reflected concerns about political influence, lack of trust in school systems, and the desire for more responsive education models.

Most articles came from the student readiness decline category. This group focused heavily on early childhood development, school entry readiness, and the relationship between behavioral skills and academic performance. Many studies emphasized the importance of self-regulation and executive function as early indicators of long-term success. Literature under the American student preparedness term focused more on high school students and their ability to transition into college or the workforce. These articles often raised concerns about the mismatch between what schools provide and what is actually needed for adulthood.

Finally, studies linked to the causes of educational decline tended to take a broader view. These articles pointed to historical inequities, policy fragmentation, and system-level factors such as underfunding and teacher shortages. Rather than focusing on individual students, they aimed to explain how large-scale structures have contributed to long-term decline.

Although each study came from a different search term, many of them pointed to the same underlying issues in the education system: whether students' needs are truly being met and what factors continue to block meaningful change. These overlapping themes shaped the synthesis that follows in the next section.

III. Synthesis of the Literature

Building on the 62 peer-reviewed articles identified through our structured SLR, we synthesized key findings to map the complex web of factors contributing to educational decline. The synthesis reveals that educational decline is not the result of a singular cause, but rather a convergence of systemic breakdowns across curriculum design, governance, public perception, innovation implementation, early childhood preparation, and equity efforts.

Several studies highlighted foundational weaknesses in curriculum design and system structures. McCombs (2003) argued that many K–12 educational frameworks remain outdated, failing to prepare students for the demands of a knowledge-based economy. Efforts to redesign education have often lacked coherence, creating fragmented learning experiences that leave students underprepared for higher education and workforce demands.

Policy fragmentation and gaps in civic education further undermine systemic coherence. Journell (2015) documented the uneven state-level commitment to civic education, revealing significant policy inconsistencies that leave many students without the knowledge necessary for active citizenship. Relatedly, Manna and Harwood (2011) emphasized the growing disconnect between governance structures and educational expectations, showing how federal, state, and local policies often operate at cross-purposes.

Public perceptions of the education system have also shifted in ways that reinforce decline. Houston, Peterson, and West (2023) found that partisan divides increasingly shape public evaluations of school quality, while Archer (2021) documented the growth of negative perceptions of American public education across the political spectrum. These trends contribute to unstable support for educational reform efforts and create barriers to consistent improvement.

Innovation, while often presented as a solution, has introduced new challenges. Gross, Tuchman, and Patrick (2018) noted that personalized learning initiatives, while promising, frequently widen achievement gaps when implementation is uneven, particularly in under-resourced districts. Without systemic support, technological and instructional innovations can exacerbate, rather than alleviate, inequalities.

Early childhood readiness emerged as a critical area in understanding long-term outcomes. Blair and Raver (2015) and Ursache, Blair, and Raver (2012) underscored the central role of self-regulation skills in preparing children for academic success. Ramey and Ramey (2004) further demonstrated that early learning interventions can mitigate achievement gaps, but only when implemented systematically and equitably.

College and workforce preparedness represent another area of systemic failure. Venezia and Jaeger (2013) and DiBenedetto and Myers (2016) highlighted the difficulties students face in transitioning from high school to postsecondary education, particularly among first-generation and low-income students. These studies showed that misalignments between K–12 systems and college expectations contribute to

persistent inequities in higher education access and completion.

Finally, equity considerations run throughout the literature. Welton and Martinez (2013) emphasized the need for culturally sustaining leadership pathways that address systemic racism and build more inclusive educational environments. Without attention to racial and socioeconomic equity, reforms risk replicating the very inequalities they seek to eliminate.

Compounding these systemic challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced additional disruptions. Dorn et al. (2020) documented significant learning losses during the pandemic, disproportionately affecting marginalized students and deepening existing achievement gaps.

Taken together, the literature paints a picture of an educational system beset by interconnected and reinforcing failures. Addressing educational decline requires not only targeted reforms but a systems-level approach that recognizes the dynamic interactions among curriculum, governance, public support, teacher preparation, student development, and equity initiatives.

Gaps in the Literature/Limitations

While the reviewed literature provides critical insights into educational decline, it also reveals significant gaps that themselves reinforce fragmented understandings of systemic failure. These limitations constrain our ability to fully map the complex webs of causality shaping educational outcomes.

First, much of the research disproportionately emphasizes immediate academic outputs—such as standardized test scores or short-term readiness benchmarks—while offering limited attention to long-term civic engagement, career trajectories, or social mobility. Although McCombs (2003) and Journell (2015) address systemic curriculum and civic education concerns, few studies trace how early educational deficiencies cascade across a student's life course, limiting our ability to understand education as a dynamic, cumulative process.

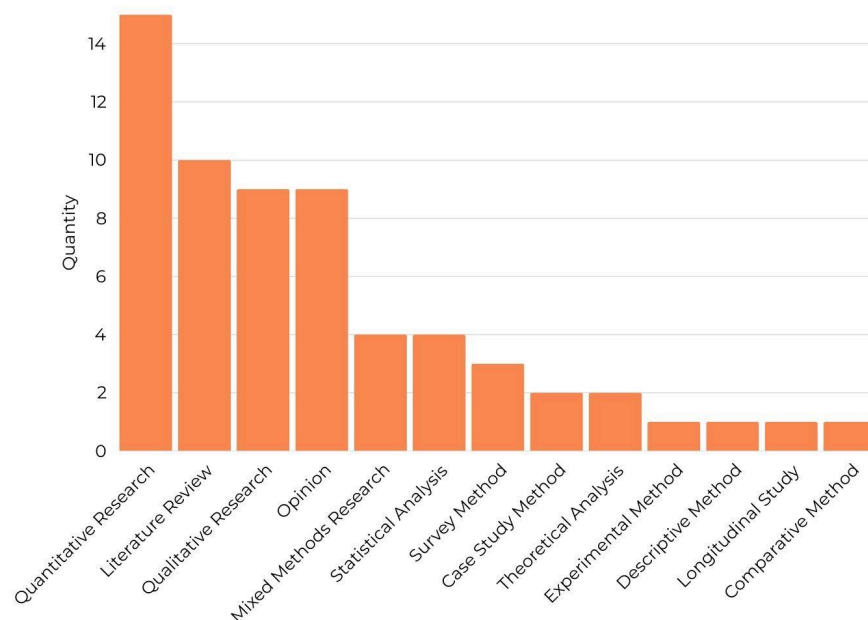
Second, methodological limitations weaken efforts to model causal relationships. Several influential studies on school readiness (Blair & Raver, 2015; Ursache, Blair, & Raver, 2012) primarily rely on qualitative or correlational designs. While rich in description, these methods often leave the deeper feedback loops between early learning experiences and long-term outcomes insufficiently mapped. The lack of longitudinal and experimental designs constraints efforts to trace how interventions produce reinforcing or disruptive effects across time.

Third, intersectionality remains underexplored in systemic analyses. Welton and Martinez (2013) highlight racial disparities in college access, but few studies capture how overlapping factors such as race, class, geography, and language background weave together to sustain or mitigate educational inequity. Without this perspective, the field risks treating causal pathways as isolated rather than interdependent.

Fourth, studies on educational innovation and personalized learning (Gross, Tuchman, & Patrick, 2018) often examine interventions in isolation, with limited attention to how such reforms interact with existing structures of inequality. In the absence of systemic evaluation, it becomes difficult to determine whether innovations disrupt webs of causality or become entangled within them, reinforcing existing patterns of advantage and disadvantage.

Fifth, while the immediate learning losses from the COVID-19 pandemic are well documented (Dorn et al., 2020), few studies have yet captured how these disruptions feed into longer-term systemic weaknesses—such as teacher pipeline disruptions, deepening resource inequities, or eroded public trust in education systems.

Figure 1: Distribution of Methodologies in SLR



Finally, our review of 62 peer-reviewed articles revealed that more than half (31) relied on descriptive,

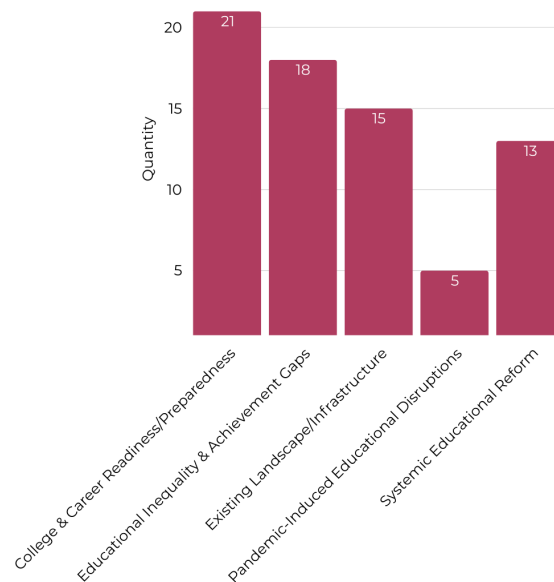
opinion-based, theoretical, or qualitative methods. While valuable, this overrepresentation of non-empirical approaches weakens the field's ability to determine causal links or policy effectiveness. The limited use of robust quantitative methodologies—such as regression modeling, experiments, or mixed-method designs—makes it difficult to establish which interventions yield measurable, systemic improvements. This absence of methodological diversity hampers our understanding of the education system as a dynamic, interacting whole and inhibits clarity around which levers policymakers should prioritize.

In short, the limitations of the current literature not only leave important questions unanswered; they fragment our ability to perceive and respond to the interconnected nature of educational decline. Future research must prioritize systems-oriented, longitudinal, and intersectional analyses—grounded in rigorous methodology—to illuminate the full webs of causality at work within the American education system.

Key Themes

Our SLR revealed five key themes that consistently emerged across the 62 peer-reviewed sources and are reflected in Figure 2: Distribution of Thematic Codes in the SLR. These themes illustrate the systemic and interconnected nature of educational decline in the United States and offer insight into where targeted interventions and reforms may be most impactful. These five categories, shown in Figure 2, were the most frequently coded themes across the studies analyzed.

Figure 2: Distribution of Thematic Codes in the SLR



College & Career Readiness/Preparedness

A recurring theme throughout the literature was the mismatch between what K–12 systems provide and what students need to succeed in college and the workforce. First-generation and low-income students were particularly disadvantaged, often lacking the academic and behavioral foundations needed for postsecondary success (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013; DiBenedetto & Myers, 2016). As shown in Figure 2, this theme ranked most prominently across our sources, underscoring a national concern over long-term preparedness.

Educational Inequality & Achievement Gaps

Persistent achievement gaps—especially along racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines—were cited as major contributors to systemic decline. Studies noted disparities in math and literacy performance, graduation rates, and access to rigorous coursework. These gaps are deeply tied to unequal funding, resource allocation, and structural inequities (Welton & Martinez, 2013; Dorn et al., 2020). As seen in Figure 2, this was one of the most frequently coded themes.

Existing Landscape/Infrastructure

The literature consistently highlighted challenges within the existing educational infrastructure—ranging from outdated facilities and instructional materials to teacher shortages and insufficient professional development. Even promising reforms like personalized learning often failed due to a lack of implementation capacity (Gross, Tuchman, & Patrick, 2018). These findings, reflected in Figure 2,

emphasize the need for scalable, equitable infrastructure investment.

Pandemic-Induced Educational Disruptions

COVID-19 acted as a shock to an already strained system, deepening pre-existing inequities. Learning losses were most severe for students from low-income and historically marginalized communities, exacerbating achievement gaps and disrupting educational trajectories (Dorn et al., 2020). Although some districts made gains in digital access, many lacked the systems needed to support consistent engagement. The lower frequency of this theme in Figure 2 highlights the relative scarcity—but growing importance—of scholarship addressing pandemic-era disruptions.

Systemic Educational Reform

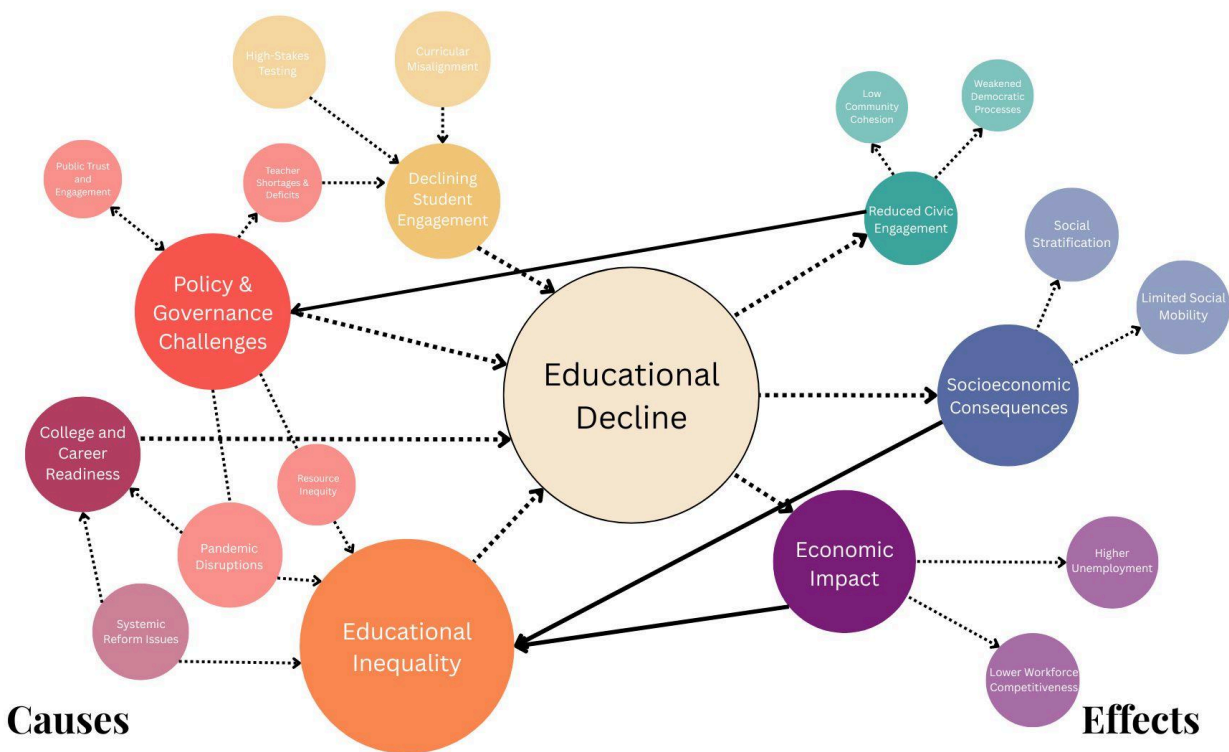
Finally, the literature stressed the need for comprehensive, coherent policy reform rather than piecemeal efforts. Misaligned standards, politicized curricula, and fragmented governance structures hinder long-term progress (McCombs, 2003; Manna & Harwood, 2011). As captured in Figure 2, systemic reform is a foundational concern that intersects with all other themes.

Together, these five themes provide a roadmap for understanding the multifaceted nature of educational decline. They suggest that meaningful improvement will require integrated strategies that acknowledge and address these interwoven challenges rather than isolated interventions.

Significant Findings and Feedback Loops

Upon completion of our SLR, an initial AI-designed web of causality was generated, which synthesized emerging patterns from our data set. This initial graphic was used as a springboard, in the creation of our web of causality, in which changes were made in the design, terminology, size of influence, and types of arrows used to convey relationships. Figure 3 (below) shows our complete web of causality for educational decline, which provided a visual representation of the interconnectedness revealed from our findings.. In the image, the system (educational decline) is in the center with causes on the left and effects on the right. Dashed arrows display the relationship between particular nodes within the system, which are sized according to their level of influence within the system. There are three solid, bolded, black arrows moving from the effects side to the causes side—all three of these represent feedback loops that were present within our data.

Figure 3: Educational Decline Web of Causality with Feedback Loops



The first feedback loop, and the one with the largest area of influence, is the connection between educational inequality, educational decline, and socioeconomic consequences (see Figure 3 above). This feedback loop highlights both the cause and effect with the largest areas of influence, meaning this loop is vital to effectively acknowledging the system of educational decline in the United States. Within our research, one of the critical findings reflected across the majority of sources confirmed that equity gaps still exist within the education system. This disadvantages marginalized communities and is particularly exacerbated by socioeconomic status, which has racial affiliations. Equity gaps also exist in the funding structures of schools, which are predominantly funded by property taxes. Property taxes account for approximately 80% of school funding, which disadvantages schools in impoverished areas. These equity gaps negatively impact student achievement and educational outcomes. Furthermore, our research confirmed the existing notion that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing achievement gaps—particularly for marginalized students. Our research confirmed that educational inequality leads to educational decline among marginalized communities, which creates socioeconomic consequences, such as concentrated social stratification or limited social mobility. Essentially, students impacted by

educational inequalities are more likely to be in the same social strata as their parents, which can create generational cycles of poverty and inequality.

Second feedback loop that we found connects the same educational inequality but with long-term economic and labor outcomes (see Figure 3 above). Schools in lower-income areas, which mostly rely on property taxes, often receive fewer resources and have less access to high-quality instruction. Limited resources contribute to lower academic achievements and limited career readiness. This affects the economy, as these students are ill-equipped for available jobs, leading to lower workforce competitiveness. As a result, these economic challenges can reduce public funding or political will to support struggling schools. This only reinforces the original inequality and traps students from marginalized communities in this same cycle. This self-reinforcing loop shows that educational decline is not simply the result of poor schooling but part of a larger pattern where social and economic forces interact with the education system and reinforce inequality over time.

A third feedback loop we identified connects declining public trust in education with weakened civic engagement and unstable and challenging policy reform. Multiple studies noted that dissatisfaction with public education has grown, not only due to academic outcomes but also because of increased politicization and a loss of local control. As community members feel alienated from decision-making and less confident in school systems, their civic participation declines, leading to lower public engagement in educational governance. This, in turn, reduces pressure for thoughtful, community-aligned reform and makes space for inconsistent or top-down policies that often fail to address root issues. These short-lived and fragmented reforms contribute to teacher fatigue, limited system improvement, and further erosion of public trust. As trust diminishes, the likelihood of sustained investment and policy stability also weakens. This feedback loop suggests that educational decline is not just about what happens in classrooms. Education has a direct effect on civic engagement and responsibility, which leads to a breakdown in public trust. This ultimately affects democratic processes, which can trickle down to weaken school stability and make lasting improvement much harder to achieve.

There were also quite a few findings pertaining to curriculum and teaching and learning structures. One was that standardized tests fail to accurately and holistically depict a student's college or career readiness, despite being ingrained into the U.S. education system. Additionally, our research affirmed that credentials and advanced degrees are not as prominent in determining a teacher's effectiveness, despite being advocated for. Within education, personalized learning has become a new term that involves

teachers tailoring education to fit the needs of each individual student. Our research found that while the concept is beneficial, it lacks consistent implementation as many schools lack the capacity and infrastructure required to effectively implement it.

Findings that Agree

After synthesizing our research, there were areas of consensus that emerged across different search terms. To start, many underfunded schools with high minority enrollment experience equity and resource disparities—oftentimes impacting curriculum, teacher preparedness, and overall student success. When considering interventions in the system, sources agree that early interventions are more successful and are best implemented in early childhood education if seeking improved, long-term academic success. Additionally, studies indicate that self-regulation is critical in determining a child's success in school and can be a strong indicator of college and career readiness and preparedness. Furthermore, several studies agreed that political divides are creeping into education—particularly in shaping policies and changing infrastructure. Our research also agreed that technology can be difficult to appropriately integrate into the classroom and can create a digital divide between varying school districts.

Findings that Disagree

In our Systematic Literature Review, we found that most researchers agree about the necessity of the education reform. However, they disagree on what those reforms should look like. This is either because they value different things or because they see the same results differently. The following paragraphs highlight three areas where major differences appear across the literature.

One of the main disagreements that came up in the literature review is whether personalized learning or standardized instruction better supports student success. On the one hand, researchers found that students benefited most when the system allowed for flexibility and individual pacing. Gross et al. (2018) reported that personalized learning showed promise in schools where teachers had the training and support to adapt instruction. However, others disagree that moving away from standardized instruction leads to undesirable outcomes. Clarke (2014) offered a strong critique of modern education reform. He emphasized that American education reform often shifts too quickly between new strategies, including personalization, without considering long-term stability or consistency. That these constant changes can weaken academic stability and distract from long-term goals. These opposing views on the same issue show that the educational system is complex and needs a systematic approach to bring some desirable solutions.

Other disagreements that stood out in our literature review concern whether local or federal authorities should implement reforms. Some researchers believe that centralized state systems often provide clearer expectations and more unified goals. Manna and Harwood (2011) found that top-down structures help organize reform across districts and reduce policy confusion. However, they also acknowledged that these structures could feel disconnected from the realities schools face every day. Controversially, Houston et al. (2023) showed how political influence at the national level can damage public trust in education. Their study found that when reforms come from federal leadership, people are more likely to question the motives behind them. This tension reflects a larger divide in how researchers view legitimacy in school governance.

Finally, there are disagreements centered on how much value schools should place on non-cognitive skills. Blair and Raver (2015) emphasized that traits like emotional control, self-regulation, and persistence play a major role in school readiness and long-term achievement. They argued that for many students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, these skills matter just as much as academic performance. However, Craig and Sharon Ramey (2004) questioned these traits. They warned that if schools focus too much on abstract behaviors, they might lose sight of foundational academic goals. This disagreement shows a larger uncertainty in the field.

These disagreements do not suggest failure in the research but rather show how deeply context shapes educational outcomes. They also help explain why reforms succeed in some places and struggle in others. Moreover, these disagreements remind us that no single approach can solve problems in a complex system like education.

Anomalies

Along with disagreements, we found out that there are some trends that do not usually follow the patterns or are not commonly observed in the field. One of such cases comes from a study that linked education directly to national security. Klein et al. (2012) argued that weak academic preparation should be seen as a threat to the country's global competitiveness and military readiness. Their report measured success not just by test scores or graduation rates, but by a student's physical fitness, civic understanding, and basic work readiness. This view stood apart from most studies in the dataset, which focused on personal development or equity. It showed how the goals of public education shift when shaped by national policy rather than local needs.

Another case emerged in how gender affects long-term outcomes. Potvin and Hasni (2014) found that although both boys and girls showed early interest in science, girls' interest declined more sharply over time. Meanwhile, boys faced challenges with consistent academic performance. These patterns did not follow a single trend. Instead, they shifted depending on subject, school context, and social factors. The findings did not align with broader trends in the literature, which often present gender gaps as more stable or generalizable.

These cases show that patterns in education can shift depending on context and perspective. These differences matter because they reveal how the system does not always behave the same way. Noticing these unusual patterns helps us see the bigger picture more clearly.

Contribution to the Literature

Upon completing the SLR, a synthesis of all data was conducted. Out of all the literature reviewed, approximately 63% of the findings were empirical. Despite this, there were interesting results when categorizing empiricism by different groups, shown in Figures 4 and 5 below.

Figure 4, below, visually displays a breakdown of empiricism percentages by search term. Overall, there were vast disparities between the levels of empiricism by search term. For example, "Effects of educational decline" in the United States as a search term was 67% empirical, meaning it is a mature, and well-developed field of study. On the other hand, "Causes of 'educational decline' in the United States" only had 20% empirical findings with most research being either opinion or theory based. In contrast to effects, causes of educational decline is a nascent, developing field of research. This juxtaposition illustrates that the United States only has sufficient data to tackle the system of educational decline from the perspective of effects. It is imperative that future research and effective policy changes conduct research on the causes of educational decline in order to accurately and holistically address the system.

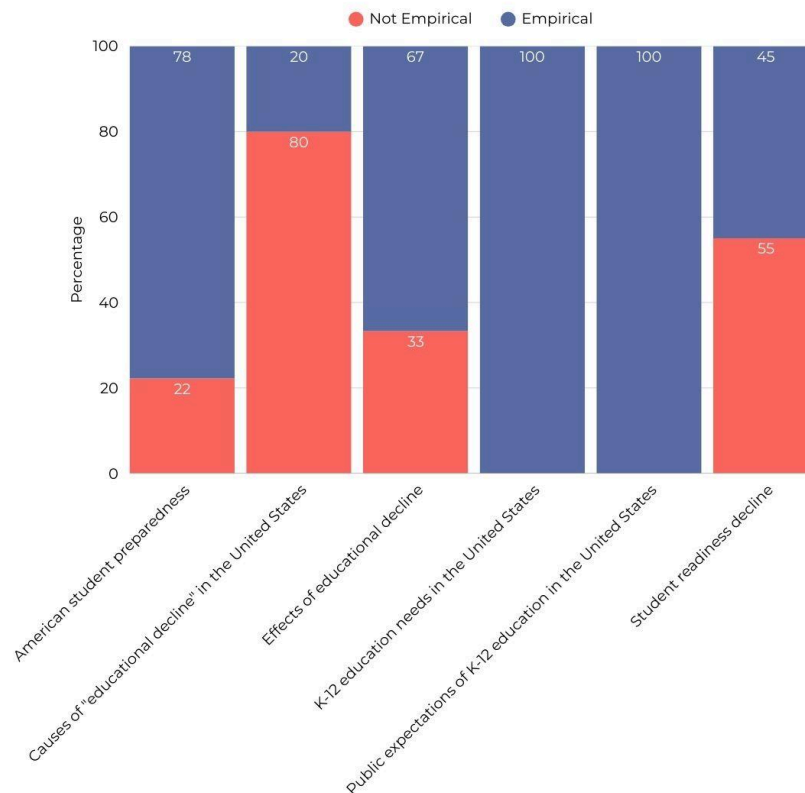
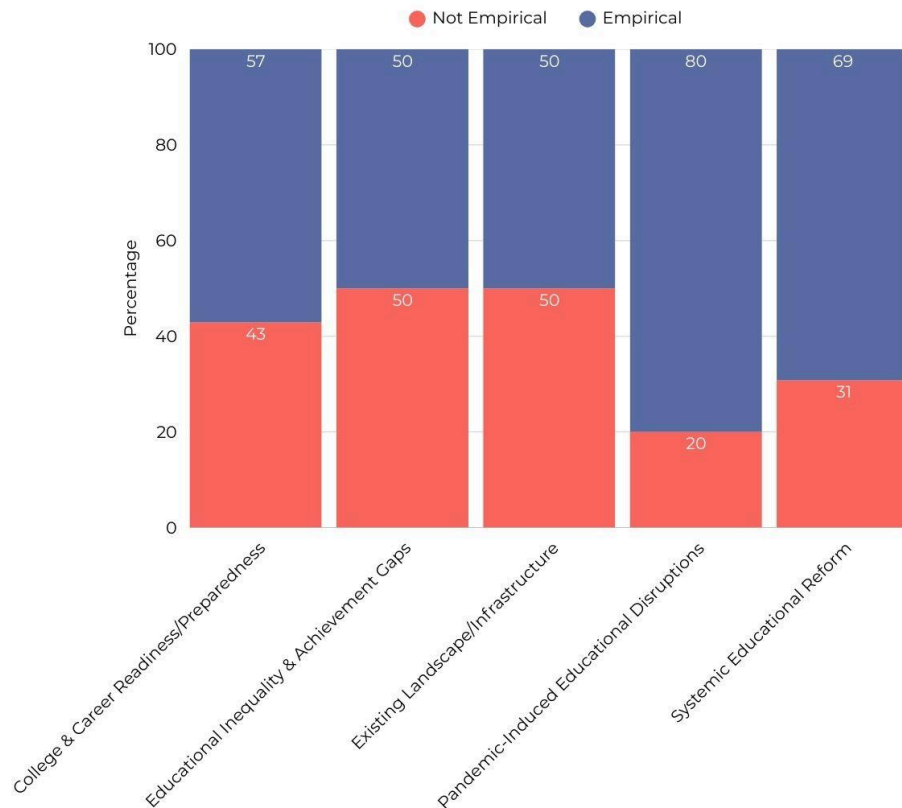
Figure 4: Empiricism Percentages by Search Term

Figure 5, below, reveals the breakdown of empiricism percentages by theme. While the variations are less drastic than the breakdown by search term, this information builds off the aforementioned conclusion of the lack of research for the causes of educational decline. Specifically, “Educational Inequality & Achievement Gaps” as a theme only has 50% empirical findings. According to the web of causality (Figure 3), educational inequality is the largest area of influence with multiple feedback loops, meaning that any successful change implemented needs to effectively address that particular part of the system. However, that field of research lacks high levels of empiricism. Furthermore, “Existing Landscape/Infrastructure” as a theme encompasses the policy and governance nodule in our webs of causality. Similar to educational inequality, this is also a large area of influence with a feedback loop in the system of educational decline. This theme also has 50% empirical findings. Overall, all three feedback loops, which are the most influential in terms of systemic reform, lack substantial levels of empiricism.

Figure 5: Empiricism Percentages by Thematic Code

Even in areas of slightly higher empiricism, such as “College & Career Readiness/Preparedness”, there are still issues that affect the overall knowledge of the field. For instance, our data revealed that this particular theme lacked experimental rigor and relied on surveys and observational work. Additionally, this theme had a distinctions error—meaning little agreement exists on a concrete definition of college and career readiness (CCR). This is problematic as nearly all of the 50 states have CCR indicators and track this data. It is used to evaluate teacher effectiveness, it is a factor in school funding, and it is used to determine a student's ability to succeed post-high school. Ultimately, this means there are likely 50+ different definitions of CCR, each with varying indicators and metrics for success, which is problematic for the school, teachers, colleges, and students.

Our synthesis revealed similar results for “Systemic Education Reform”, which also has higher levels of empiricism but relies on qualitative research or case studies. Again, this is problematic and explains the tendency to quickly pivot to different waves of educational reform and legislation (e.g. Common Core, outcomes based learning, standards based education, No Child Left Behind, Every Student Succeeds Act,

etc.). Overall, this theme requires more empirical research in order to ensure educational reform will be successful, and it would be enhanced through empirical studies on the causes of educational decline.

In summation, thinking back to the web of causality for the system of educational decline, the United States only has sufficient data to tackle the system from limited perspectives. This is problematic because educational reforms and policies are not able to adequately address the root causes of educational decline, meaning most are likely to fail; most reforms are zoomed in to a particular nodule in the system and are unable to create holistic and multi-faceted solutions that address the entire system. The system is perpetually left with fleeting, band-aid solutions. Without further research into the causes of educational decline and key areas of influence (such as the feedback loops highlighted), educational reform will continue to fail, which will disproportionately harm marginalized communities and the education system as a whole—and if the system as a whole is unsuccessful, every American will feel those repercussions.

IV. Unique Contribution to the Field of Education: Policy and Practice

This article contributes uniquely to education policy and practice by applying a systems thinking lens—specifically the DSRP (Distinctions, Systems, Relationships, Perspectives) framework—to expose the often-invisible structures and mental models that perpetuate educational decline (. Rather than treating the crisis in U.S. education as a set of isolated issues, we surface how current approaches suffer from cognitive and structural blind spots that prevent stakeholders from “seeing the web” of causality.

Distinctions (D): False Boundaries and Binary Thinking

Our review reveals common *distinction errors* in the field, where artificial separations limit the scope of reform. For instance, McCombs (2003) argues that K–12 curricula fail to prepare students for a knowledge-based society, yet this is often treated separately from teacher development or student self-regulation. Similarly, Gross, Tuchman, and Patrick (2018) highlight the uneven impact of personalized learning, but few studies distinguish between implementation quality and systemic readiness. Treating these elements in isolation ignores how they interdependently affect outcomes.

Systems (S): Missing the Whole or the Parts

Much of the literature focuses narrowly on either policy structures or classroom outcomes without *zooming in and out* to see how they interact. For example, Journell (2015) and Manna & Harwood (2011) expose fragmented civic education policy across states, yet few studies trace how these policy

inconsistencies manifest in student disengagement or long-term civic underpreparedness. Similarly, research on student readiness (Blair & Raver, 2015; Ursache et al., 2012) often highlights developmental factors but does not connect them to state-level funding disparities or curriculum design. Our causal web explicitly maps these scale-crossing dynamics.

Relationships (R): Unmapped or Misunderstood Connections

The web of causality we present draws attention to *relationships that are often implied but rarely drawn*. For instance, Dorn et al. (2020) document pandemic-related learning loss, especially for marginalized students. Yet many studies fail to connect these losses to feedback loops involving teacher shortages, community disinvestment, and public trust erosion. Our work connects the dots—showing how these forces reinforce one another and entrench systemic decline.

Perspectives (P): Narrow Frames and Missing Voices

A persistent gap in the literature is the limited *perspective-taking*. Most research takes a policy, institutional, or quantitative stance, underrepresenting the voices of students, parents, and teachers, especially from marginalized communities. Welton and Martinez (2013) emphasize the need for culturally sustaining leadership, yet intersectional lenses are rare across the reviewed literature. Our approach surfaces how race, class, and geography intertwine, pushing the field to adopt broader and more inclusive viewpoints that better reflect lived realities.

In short, this article pushes the boundaries of how educational decline is conceptualized and studied. By identifying distinction errors, exposing systemic fragmentation, drawing overlooked relationships, and advocating for more inclusive perspectives, we offer not just a review—but a reframing. Through DSRP, we illuminate the hidden architecture of thought that shapes the U.S. education system and chart a path forward that is as much about how we think as what we do.

V. Significance and Conclusion

This study reframes educational decline not as an isolated crisis but as a dynamic system of interlocking causes, consequences, and feedback loops. Using the DSRP framework, we reveal how false distinctions, fragmented system design, unmapped causal relationships, and missing perspectives have hampered the field's ability to mount effective and enduring reforms.

Our Systems Literature Review shows that persistent achievement gaps, diminished student readiness,

and eroding public trust are not just outcomes—they are components of reinforcing feedback loops sustained by policy incoherence, inequitable resource distribution, and insufficient early interventions. These loops perpetuate inequality and resist superficial or piecemeal reforms.

The implications for policy and practice are substantial. Policymakers must move beyond siloed solutions and adopt approaches that are systemic, feedback-aware, and equity-driven. Researchers should prioritize longitudinal, intersectional, and causally rich methodologies that illuminate how educational phenomena unfold over time and across contexts. Practitioners must situate their work within broader structural realities, recognizing how localized actions contribute to or challenge entrenched system dynamics.

Ultimately, the value of this study lies not only in what it uncovers but in how it shifts the lens through which we examine educational decline. Addressing the most pressing challenges in U.S. education demands a transformation in thinking—one that sees beyond isolated variables to the complex, adaptive system in which they reside. Only by embracing a systems perspective can we design interventions with the depth, adaptability, and equity required to transform American education.

Author Contributions (Mock-up: format like [STML 2024 Cohort Article](#))

KC: [Gaps in the Literature/Limitations](#), [Key Themes](#), [Synthesis of the Literature](#), [Significant Findings & Feedback Loops](#), [Selection Process](#), [Findings that Agree](#), [Contribution to the Literature](#), Conducted all data synthesis used to write paper, created all Figures for paper based on data synthesis

AK: [Effects of educational decline](#), [Student readiness decline](#), [Finding that disagree](#), [Anomalies](#), (Earlier contributions of Gaps were incorporated into the final section), [Feedback loop 2](#), [Feedback loop 3](#)

AJR: [Gaps in the Literature/Limitations](#), [Key Themes](#), [Coverage of the Literature](#), [Synthesis of the Literature](#), [Unique Contributions to the Field of Education: Policy and Practice](#), [Significance and Conclusion](#), Abstract, [Bibliography](#), [Introduction](#)

Kristin Condon created all the graphics in the article.

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