

An Education Policy Agenda for the 117th Congress & Administration



The COVID-19 outbreak has upended our lives and, with it, our nation’s education system. Students living in high-poverty communities and communities of color—urban and rural—will be the most adversely impacted because their cities and towns are already plagued by high rates of unemployment, food-insecurity, limited access to basic healthcare, lack of access to broadband, and other challenges that make everyday life a struggle. The imperative of ensuring all students in our nation have access to a quality education is greater than ever before.

A plan for our nation’s public education system must be comprehensive, innovative, and nimble in order to meet the current and future needs of our students. Education is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Now more than ever, learning must be student-centered and specialized. The federal government plays a critical role of promoting educational access and protecting the rights and interests of students disadvantaged by discrimination, poverty, and other experiences that adversely impact their opportunities to learn. The tragic events of this year have made abundantly clear that unless we put students living in high-poverty communities and communities of color, who comprise more than 50% of the public-school population, at the heart of what we do, our nation will not move forward. Put bluntly, without bold action to support these students, our country’s best days may already be behind us.

The next President must uphold the responsibility of promoting a culturally responsive education plan that promotes equitable access to quality educational opportunities for all students, but especially for the students facing additional obstacles: students living in poverty, students with disabilities, students learning English, students experiencing homelessness and in the foster care system, students who are incarcerated, students who are undocumented or are from mixed

status families, Black and Brown students, Native students, and students who identify as LGBTQ.

Significant federal investment in education is needed, but more funding alone is not the answer. A 2019 [national poll](#) found that voters across party lines strongly believe that it will take more than just money to improve education from preschool to college. Those voters support a range of robust education policies including a more equitable allocation of resources, improvements in training and preparation for educators, choices in quality public schools, meaningful accountability, and a higher education system that is not only more affordable, but also one that leads to gainful employment afterwards.

Before COVID-19, the next Congress and Administration had an opportunity to improve education by charting a new path that puts equity at the heart of policymaking. Under the “new normal,” it is now an imperative for our elected officials and leadership at the highest level of office to put forth and implement an education agenda that involves an unprecedented increase in federal financial investment in our nation’s public education system, an assurance that resources are equitably distributed and effectively deployed, and a commitment to adequately equip educators with the tools, resources, and support so student learning will continue, in and out of school, no matter what.

The undersigned organizations representing students from all backgrounds, put forth the following ten recommendations:

Early Childhood Education: A Strong Foundation Begins at Birth

All children deserve nurturing, enriching early experiences which support their healthy development. This process begins even before birth. For example, partnerships with pediatricians and home-visitors should be expanded so infants and toddlers are supported in meeting important child development milestones. Furthermore, child care is a critical tool to support parents and caregivers in creating enriching experiences and providing safe environments for children to thrive. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, significant investment was needed to support access to high-quality child care. The pandemic has shined a spotlight on child care as an essential service upon which much of our nation’s productivity rests. Now, just as before, significant federal investment is necessary to expand access to quality, affordable child care and to make the industry a financially viable career option for talented early educators across the nation.

1. Expanding Access to Affordable and Flexible High-Quality Early Education. Increase federal investments in early childhood programs, including child care, home visiting and healthcare. Provide specific incentives for states and localities to expand access to high-quality early learning programs, such as Early Head Start, Head Start, and preschool programs for three- and four-year-olds. Provide investment at a level that ensures no family spends more than 7% of their income on child care, with low- and moderate-income families paying less based on a sliding scale, and that supports paying early childhood educators a livable wage with benefits. Provide targeted incentives for programs offering care during nontraditional hours, serving families and children with disabilities, and those serving infants and toddlers.

K-12 Education: Prepare Students to Succeed in Tomorrow's Economy

America needs an education system that recognizes the talents and abilities of all students and ensures we are globally competitive. Public education under “the new normal” requires significant investments to meet the unique needs of both students and educators. Addressing vast racial and socio-economic disparities in the allocation of critical resources requires a full revamp of our current system—the type of shift that the COVID-19 pandemic has already thrust upon us. In a matter of weeks, educators, students, and parents nationwide have proven that reinventing our nation’s education system with a student-focused approach to learning isn’t the aim—it’s the imperative.

2. Promoting Resource Equity. Significantly increase federal investments in K-12 education programs, including Title I, Title III, and IDEA, through a formula that targets aid to the highest-need states and school districts and incentivizes states to distribute their own education dollars equitably and in a manner that addresses racial and socio-economic disparities. School districts should be encouraged to adopt weighted per-pupil funding formulas that equitably target resources at the school-level. Resource equity goes beyond ensuring that dollars go to the students who need them most; it also requires that schools educating underserved students have quality teachers, safe and updated school buildings, access to rigorous and advanced coursework, and postsecondary education pathways that lead to a career.

3. Paying Teachers Like Professionals. Educator salaries, including principals, must be elevated so these professions are as economically competitive as other fields that require the same levels of education. Higher compensation, including financial incentives to teach in schools and subject areas where shortages are most prevalent (e.g., high-poverty schools, English Learners, STEM, special education) will help recruit and retain a more skilled and diverse cadre of current and prospective educators and principals that reflect the cultural, racial, and linguistic background of the students they serve.

4. Improving Teacher Preparation. Educators should be equipped from day one to help all students succeed and deserve to be supported throughout their careers, like all professions. Achieving these two aims requires an evidence-based approach to preparation (e.g., a requirement of completing at least a one-year residency or internship prior to becoming a teacher of record), opportunities for highly effective educators to advance professionally without having to leave the classroom and training our educators to be culturally responsive to their students.

5. Gauging What Works, Fixing What's Not Working. Congressional Democrats and civil rights groups fought hard to require academic assessments and accountability for results based on multiple measures under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which requires annual, statewide testing for particular grades in reading and math, as well as science. We know objective data on how students are doing academically helps identify gaps in opportunity and areas that require evidence-based interventions. Congress and our next President must preserve and, where necessary, strengthen these vital components of federal education law.

6. Choices in Quality Public Schools. Access to high-quality choices among different pre-K-12 public education providers is needed now more than ever as evidenced by the severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the way schools deliver learning to students. Congress and the next Administration should promote high-quality public education options so that all students can attend a school that meets their academic and social-emotional needs. These public options include magnet schools, charter schools, career academies, language immersion schools, traditional district-run schools, and dual enrollment programs.

7. Personalized and Online Learning. With the advent of the coronavirus pandemic and closing of the vast majority of schools, at-home and online instruction have become the norm. Experts predict that the pandemic may require intermittent school closures over the next one to two years even if students return to in-person school in the fall of 2020. Educators should be empowered and supported with the professional development and tools needed to personalize instruction for all students—in a virtual or traditional classroom. The federal government should also incentivize the creation of accessible online resources and materials for students who traditionally have not had quality on-line materials made available to them (e.g., English Learners and students with disabilities). We also must expand the federal E-rate program to ensure every family has access to broadband Internet and provide every student with internet-connected, one-on-one devices through which they can access cost-free, and high-quality instructional materials.

Postsecondary Education: Higher Education Quality & Affordability

Because postsecondary education and training is a virtual prerequisite and at the very least, a springboard for students of color and students from low-income households to a middle-class life, quality college access, affordability, and widespread success are moral imperatives for our nation. As it stands, however, students from low-income families and students of color, separately, suffer from a lack of access to quality institutions of higher education, and once admitted, from low levels of degree completion accompanied by high levels of student loan debt. Too many shoddy for-profit education and training providers have ripped-off families and taxpayers for decades. Similar colleges with similar admissions standards and similar student characteristics generate wildly different levels of success with students overall and disaggregated subgroups in particular in terms of degree completion and loan repayment rates. We support policies that challenge state and college leaders to protect higher education consumers and fix these inequities.

8. A Meaningful Commitment to Diversity & Socioeconomic Mobility. All postsecondary education institutions and states should be expected to demonstrate a meaningful commitment to diversity, inclusion, and socioeconomic mobility as reflected in fair admissions policies, sizable enrollment of historically underrepresented and low-income students, equitable distribution of aid, and critically, adequate and comparable to their more advantaged peers, disaggregated success levels of students with disabilities, students who are Black, Latinx, Southeast Asian, LGBTQ, and who are from low-income backgrounds.

9. Debt-Free Higher Education. We propose all two- and four-year public colleges, as well as private HBCUs and other minority serving institutions, be debt-free for undergraduate students. In addition, direct aid should be provided to colleges, first and foremost to HBCUs and other minority serving institutions, to upgrade academic programs, as well as community-based organizations supporting on-time college completion in exchange for schools and recipients being held accountable for results. These results include improving socioeconomic mobility and closing success gaps between students from advantaged and historically disadvantaged backgrounds, such as students of color, students identifying as LGBTQ, and students with disabilities.

10. Student Debt Forgiveness. Addressing college affordability going forward cannot undo the long-term damage to many students from exposing them to unaffordable amounts of student debt. Some of this is due to for-profit schools of dubious judgment and quality, but it is also the result of insufficient federal and state funding that has forced many students into debt where a well-supported system would have provided grants instead. We urge policymakers to cancel significant amounts of federal student loan debt, particularly for borrowers failed by the system, including those exposed to predatory for-profit colleges and low-income earners, regardless of where they pursued their training.