

The Federal Role in Advancing Education Equity and Excellence

Gone are the days when, for many Americans, rote learning of routine skills led to a good job and a stable, middle-class life with time for family and friends and opportunities for civic engagement. Today's fast-paced technological advances are continually changing the nature of the job market. Not only can computers check you in at the airport and check you out at the grocery store; together with robotics, they can clean houses, conduct surgery, and steer self-driving cars. As the pace of global change continues, the old assembly line model of education will not suffice. The [top skills needed for employment in 2020](#) are the abilities to make sense out of complex information and events, to think creatively to solve real-world problems, to work well with others, to engage effectively in cross-cultural contexts, and to manage many forms of media and data in sophisticated ways.

As other countries that have been attending to these skills are surging ahead, U.S. students' scores during the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era dropped on international assessments like the Program in International Student Assessment (PISA) and, recently, on our own National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). More importantly, people who lack access to higher-level skills will increasingly find themselves unable to join the workforce and participate effectively in society. This has enormous implications for us all. With a greater number of seniors living longer, for example, the social compact that supports our collective health and retirement benefits cannot be sustained unless younger generations can gain productive employment, support themselves, and pay taxes to help support others, as well as participate productively in a civic democracy.

At the same time, U.S. childhood poverty rates have grown by more than 50% since the 1970s and are among the highest of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations, [reaching 21% in the latest published statistics](#). Even before the current global pandemic, more than half of children attending U.S. public schools qualified for free or reduced-price lunch—the [highest percentage](#) since the National Center for Education Statistics began tracking this figure decades ago. Furthermore, American children living in poverty have a much weaker safety net than their peers in other industrialized countries, where universal health care; housing subsidies; and high-quality, universally available preschool are the norm.

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While there are pockets of progress across the United States, adequate and equitable educational opportunity is far from a reality for many students of color, students from low-income families, and other historically underserved students. Recognizing the guarantee of a high-quality education as one of the cornerstones of a more just and equitable society, then President Johnson and Congress worked together to pass the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA)—one of many critical civil rights laws enacted during this era. Following the passage of ESEA and other key civil rights laws, the federal government continued for a period of time to fully use the tools at its disposal to make educational equity and excellence a reality for all students, particularly students of color and students from low-income families. During this time of significant federal action and investment coupled with efforts by states and local school districts, the nation experienced increased student achievement and substantial closing of educational opportunity and achievement gaps.

Unfortunately, beginning in the 1980s, the federal government retreated from its role in securing equity and excellence through investment and action. Had the rate of progress achieved in the 1970s continued, the achievement gap between Black and White students [would have been fully closed](#) by the beginning of the 21st century.

We must learn from these lessons as we chart the path forward. It is our collective responsibility—including the federal government’s—to ensure that all young people have equal access to a high-quality, world-class education. This goal has never been more important than in today’s fast-growing knowledge economy that is coupled with increasing rates of poverty as more and more families are left behind.

Federal policymakers can learn from states in which progress is being made, from past federal investments that resulted in equitable advancement, and from high-quality research on what works to improve learning and how federal tools and resources can support productive efforts at the state and local levels. These include advancing the federal policies described below.

Support High-Quality Teaching and Learning

We now know a great deal about [how children and adults learn and develop](#), but our educational systems are much less responsive to this knowledge than those of high-achieving systems abroad. This is partly because our policies often undermine productive school designs and instructional practice and partly because we invest far too little in professional learning for adults. Many of our schools still operate on the factory model designed a century ago to run like a standardized assembly line, even though we know that children learn differently and that effective teaching is enhanced by relationships that allow educators to know children well and must be culturally and linguistically responsive. And many policies continue to treat teaching as the transmission of disconnected pieces of information, even though we know that people learn best when they can connect learning to real-world events and their lived experience and apply it in meaningful ways. We know a great deal about the [most effective methods](#) of teaching, but we invest very little in

the training of teachers and principals so that they can use these methods. Federal policy should expand this knowledge base and its use in schools so that all students have access to the kind of education they need to be successful in college, career, and life. To support high-quality learning, federal policies should:

- 1. Expand and disseminate research about how people learn.** Provide funding for basic and applied research about learning and development and its translation into policy and practice implications, including proven strategies from educators in the field. Create federal centers to support the integration and application of this research into policy and practice so that it informs curriculum and instructional strategies that are rooted in effective practices for teaching challenging content for deep understanding, that are culturally and linguistically responsive, and that are developmentally appropriate. This knowledge should also be used to inform more effective school designs and integrated student supports. Create means and incentives for educator preparation programs to access and put this knowledge into practice as they prepare tomorrow's educators through competitive grants for redesigning programs, resources for new curriculum and faculty training, and networks for shared learning.
- 2. Invest in high-quality professional learning opportunities for educators.** Increase funding under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the Higher Education Act (HEA) to establish, expand, study, and spread effective learning models for school leaders, teachers, and other staff. Prioritize effective preparation and professional development designs—including models of teachers teaching teachers—that enable teachers and school leaders to expand their knowledge and skills for teaching challenging content so that it is deeply understood, teaching diverse learners effectively, supporting social-emotional and academic development in culturally and linguistically responsive ways, and using technology to enhance learning.
- 3. Support better assessments, better used.** Assessments are an important tool to inform students, educators, and parents about student learning and progress. Too often our national discussion is focused on the quantity of testing rather than the quality. Federal requirements for testing should focus more clearly on supporting authentic measures of relevant knowledge and skills as they are used in the real world, support local use for informing teaching and learning, and assess learning across a broader continuum of performance. As is true in many countries, these measures should examine skills such as critical thinking, complex problem-solving, and inquiry through student performance on real-world tasks that require research, experimentation, analysis, use of evidence, and construction of solutions. Federal policies should support educators in learning how to design, implement, and use high-quality assessments to inform and personalize instruction. Policies should encourage the use of assessments for ongoing improvement, not punishment, and for expanding, not limiting, educational opportunities for students.

Strengthen the Education Profession

Research on successful nations makes it clear that the heart of a strong system of education is a highly skilled, stable, and diverse profession. The United States has invested far less than other countries in the educator workforce, providing little support for training, mentoring, and professional learning, and in most states, salaries have been allowed to fall far below those of other professions requiring comparable education, and even further for those working in the field of early care and education (ECE). As a result, teacher shortages are widespread, more than 100,000 classrooms are staffed by substitutes or teachers without training, and teacher attrition rates are high, especially in schools serving children in poverty. The impact of COVID-19 threatens to further deepen these shortages, especially for historically underserved students.

Further, the 2008 recession expanded the inequalities between rich and poor schools in the supports they offer to teachers—a gap that the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic only continues to exacerbate. These conditions have resulted in many individuals entering teaching and school leadership positions without the preparation, knowledge, and skills they need to be successful with diverse learners, working in conditions that undermine their success and willingness to stay in the profession. Teachers who enter without preparation are two to three times more likely to leave than those who are prepared. As a result, a revolving door of underprepared educators is the norm in many schools that serve students of color and those from low-income families. No other education reforms can work unless educators in every school are well-prepared and supported to stay and grow in the profession, allowing them to share their knowledge and expertise to improve practice. To support and strengthen the education profession, federal policies should:

- 1. Pay for teachers' preparation.** In high-achieving nations, teachers attend high-quality preparation programs for free or at minimal expense, often earning stipends or salaries while they train. Today, the cost of a higher education is out of reach for too many, with 45 million students owing more than \$1.6 trillion in student loan debt. Two thirds of those entering the education field borrow in order to earn their degrees, averaging \$20,000 of debt for a bachelor's degree and \$50,000 for a master's degree, costing far more in repayment than a teacher's salary will often support. Research also shows that students of color are more heavily impacted by student loan debt than their white peers. College should be debt-free for all students, starting with public servants, like educators. A debt-free education for teachers can be accomplished in part by reforming loan forgiveness and service scholarship programs for teachers who work in high-need fields and schools so that they are commensurate with the cost of college and are administratively manageable and so that loans are paid for by the government until teachers meet the service requirement to retire their debts completely.
- 2. Expand high-quality pathways to teaching and school leadership for all candidates.** It is equally important that educators have the opportunity to attend high-quality programs and that highly effective preparation models for teachers and school leaders be funded, studied, and expanded. The federal government can help expand, study, and disseminate effective preparation

models featuring more intense clinical training, such as [teacher and leader residencies](#) and partnerships between professional development schools and universities that provide the kind of hands-on learning that teaching hospitals provide in medicine. One avenue for this strategy is the Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) program in Title II of the HEA. To better leverage effective practices, funding for TQP could be increased to \$500 million annually (from its current level of \$50 million) and managed through strong partnerships with states who can transform their accreditation systems and network programs for learning.

- 3. Increase investments in teacher and leader preparation programs at minority-serving institutions of higher education.** All students benefit from having diverse teachers, and [teachers of color](#) support greater attainment and achievement, especially for students of color. In addition to paying for teachers' preparation and expanding high-quality pathways, the federal government could do more to support a diverse educator workforce. It could directly invest \$300 million in high-quality educator preparation programs at minority-serving institutions, building a diverse, well-prepared pipeline of teachers and school leaders.
- 4. Improve educator compensation.** [A substantial body of research](#) demonstrates that teachers' wages affect the quality of those who choose to enter the teaching profession—and how long they stay once they get in. On average, U.S. teachers currently earn at least 20% less than other college-educated workers even after the work year difference is taken into account. While the federal government has a limited role in addressing locally set salaries for educators, it can support teachers by providing income tax credits that extend their financial capacity. Such a credit could be structured on a sliding scale so that all teachers receive at least \$5,000 annually and those teaching in the highest-poverty schools and in early education settings receive as much as \$12,500 annually. In addition, the federal government can make federal housing subsidies more readily available to educators and provide matching grants to districts that provide housing supports, as this is one of the costs that drives teachers out of many urban and rural communities or out of the profession itself.

Fund Schools Adequately and Equitably

Public schools in the United States are among [the most inequitably funded](#) of any in the industrialized world due in large part to reliance on local property taxes. In many states, the wealthiest school districts [spend two to three times](#) what the poorest school districts can spend per pupil. School districts serving the greatest proportion of students of color [spend \\$1,800 less per student](#) than districts serving the fewest students of color. The funding disparities that separate high- and low-wealth districts are reflected in differential access to the opportunities and [resources students need to learn](#)—well-qualified educators; preschool education; strong curriculum opportunities; up-to-date books, technology, materials, and supplies; and adequate facilities, including sufficient broadband access. Although state grants-in-aid are somewhat equalizing, they are typically not sufficient to close the gaps caused by differences in local property values. Furthermore, the wealthiest states

spend [about three times](#) what the poorer states spend. [Recent data are clear](#) that when it comes to education, both the level of funding and its allocation matter for student achievement, attainment, and future life success, particularly for students from low-income families and students of color.

Despite these widespread inequities, federal education policies have not explicitly required that states demonstrate progress toward adequate funding or equitable opportunities to learn. With over half of public school students coming from low-income families and [only 11 states](#) allocating at least 10% more funds to high-poverty than low-poverty districts, the federal government could leverage more equitable funding at the state level while also increasing and more equitably targeting its own investments. To support more adequate and equitable resources for learning, federal policies should:

- 1. Expand and equitably allocate federal education funding across states.** The federal government invests [less than 2%](#) of its budget across all levels of education and has not maintained its commitments to local schools. For example, the 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) promised nearly [\\$26 billion](#) for Title I, Part A programs and school improvement by fiscal year 2007, yet today funding is at [\\$16.3 billion](#). Title I funding should be substantially increased and allocated more equitably to the states based on pupil needs rather than state spending levels. Funding should leverage stronger investments in educator development and well-grounded school improvement strategies, including high-quality curriculum and assessments, student-centered school designs, and social-emotional learning.

In addition, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) should be fully funded at the promised federal commitment of [40% of the additional cost of special education](#), more than double its current level, while being redesigned to emphasize high-quality opportunities to learn. This requires ensuring supports for research, much deeper teacher education, access to qualified teachers and specialists, and well-designed instruction for students with special education needs.

- 2. Support and provide incentives to states to provide adequate and equitable resources to districts.** To ensure school finance reforms are grounded in research-based practices that will deliver adequate and equitable resources, a federal commission on school finance should be established to examine federal, state, and local school funding, solicit public feedback, and provide ongoing research, recommendations, examples, monitoring, and support. A competitive grant program could be created that would support state efforts to restructure their school finance systems, providing research and implementation support to assist states in designing and transitioning to more equitable and adequate school funding systems that allocate funds based on pupil needs. Funding could also be used to support a district's transition to a weighted student funding approach as permitted under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the most recent law to reauthorize ESEA.

3. Require states to track progress toward equity. The next reauthorization of the ESEA must go further in ensuring that all students have the resources necessary to learn. ESSA includes a number of equity provisions designed to ensure that the students who are the furthest from opportunity have the resources and supports they need to succeed. ESSA requires the collection of measures related to comparability of funding and staffing; racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic integration; and equity of access to advanced courses, as well as an assessment of the adequacy of resources for schools identified for intervention and support. ESSA also requires that students from low-income families and students of color have equitable access to experienced and effective teachers who are serving in fields aligned to their area of preparation. These provisions, which have historically been ignored, should be carefully monitored and supported.

The federal government should also require states to track progress on these and other opportunity-to-learn indicators across schools and districts (e.g., funding; qualified and diverse teachers and administrators; facilities; and availability of high-quality curriculum and learning materials, including access to up-to-date technology and the infrastructure necessary to support its use), alongside indicators of student outcomes. States should be expected to develop plans to close resource and opportunity gaps. The federal government could support this work by providing technical assistance to states in conducting resource assessments and identifying research-based strategies for closing gaps in educational opportunity.

4. Invest in strategies to close the digital opportunity gap. In addition to being an international public health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided an inflection point for our nation that exposes the many inequities in our society, [including in education](#). Well-funded districts and families with sufficient resources can provide the technology and broadband in school and at home needed for a 21st-century education. These resources become of particular importance during a time of crisis, but they are routinely critical today for access to the knowledge and skills needed for social, economic, and civic life. Federal policymakers should take a multi-pronged approach to supporting states and districts in closing the digital opportunity gap. The federal government should orchestrate policies and resources across agencies ranging from Education and Commerce to Housing and the Federal Communications Commission to ensure access and to make investments that provide all schools, students, and educators with the technology and the broadband capacity necessary to access information and support learning. To develop a deeper understanding of needs and successful strategies for access and instruction, the federal government should establish a national research center to monitor access and track, evaluate, and disseminate successful practices. Finally, policymakers can use this information to guide [increased investments in professional learning for teachers](#) and leaders to support them in taking advantage of high-quality tools that can deepen student learning.

Reduce the Effects of Poverty on Children’s Learning

Along with inequality in school funding and resources, the root of inequality in educational outcomes in the United States is the combination of growing poverty and resegregation. U.S. childhood poverty rates have grown by more than 50% since the 1970s, [reaching 21%](#), which is among the highest rates of childhood poverty of countries that are a part of the OECD. Children living in poverty in the United States have a much weaker safety net than their peers living in other industrialized countries, where universal health care; housing subsidies; paid parental leave, and high-quality, universally available child care are the norm. ECE lays the foundation for learning and development. [A review of current research](#) demonstrates the benefits of high-quality pre-k programs. Economists have also shown the benefits of early education investments, which generate [\\$2 to \\$17](#) for every dollar invested, with greater returns evident as children are followed further in life. While [about two thirds](#) of children under the age of 6 have both parents in the workforce today, our main investment in child care reaches only [15%](#) of eligible children from low-income families. Child care for an infant [costs more than in-state college tuition and fees in 30 states](#), and [nowhere in the nation](#) is child care affordable for a full-time minimum wage worker.

The nation is also becoming increasingly racially segregated. A [2016 report](#) published by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that a growing percentage of k–12 public schools are hypersegregated, with student populations that are more than 90% non-white (largely African American and Latino/a) who are almost exclusively from low-income families. [Research](#) shows that racially segregated, high-poverty schools have a strong negative association with students’ academic achievement. Meanwhile, the benefits of learning in diverse environments—in both [ECE](#) and [k–12 settings](#)—are [well documented](#): Racially diverse schools report stronger achievement for historically underserved groups (with no detriment to others) and positive effects on critical thinking, intergroup relationships, and civic engagement for all groups. To reduce the effects of childhood poverty on educational opportunity, federal policies should:

- 1. Fund wraparound supports and community schools.** Support a comprehensive approach to providing children with the health, mental health, social services, extended learning time, after-school programming, and other supports they need to thrive by creating a Children’s Cabinet that integrates and streamlines programs and funding streams across federal agencies and by significantly increasing funding for community schools and community partnerships that connect these supports to schools.
- 2. Fully utilize and expand federal tools and resources to support state and local efforts to increase schools’ racial and economic diversity.** [This was done](#) alongside school funding reforms after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and by the 1980s, schools were much less segregated than they are today, and gaps in educational achievement and attainment had closed substantially. The federal government should once again take up the mantle of civil rights by creating a program similar to the 1972 Emergency School Aid Act, which targeted federal aid equivalent to about \$2 billion in 2020 dollars to “encourage the voluntary

reduction, elimination, or prevention of minority-group isolation,” authorizing funding for magnet schools, improvements to other schools, and transportation to support integration efforts. [Syntheses of the research](#) on magnet schools have found positive effects on school integration and intergroup relationships as well as achievement, graduation rates, student motivation and satisfaction with school, teacher motivation and morale, and parent satisfaction. The Department of Education should also support state, local, and community efforts to integrate and diversify schools, including by updating and reissuing its [Guidance on the Voluntary Use of Race to Achieve Diversity and Avoid Racial Isolation in Elementary and Secondary Schools](#); by issuing new guidance on how to utilize ESSA’s Title I School Improvement funding to support school integration; and by aligning and coordinating efforts with other federal agencies such as Housing and Urban Development to further support school integration.

- 3. Significantly increase investments in early care and education (ECE).** Build on federal investments in ECE by expanding federal programs and providing matching funds to states to provide access to high-quality child care and preschool that is free for families making up to 200% of the federal poverty level and that offers subsidies on a sliding scale for those making more than this amount so that no family pays more than 7% of its income for early care and learning. As a requirement for receiving federal funds, states would need to implement quality assurance systems for programs, design ECE programs so that they can be racially and socioeconomically integrated, ensure that programs can support dual language learners and meet the needs of children with developmental delays and disabilities, and adequately compensate their ECE educators.

Conclusion

Decades of research illustrate the types of federal investments that can be made to improve opportunities and outcomes for all students. The federal government has an ongoing opportunity to advance policies that are aligned with this research and to target resources to those who are the furthest from opportunity. These policies include supporting state and local efforts to ensure that all children have the strong foundation that high-quality early childhood education programs can provide; consistent access to a well-prepared, fairly compensated, culturally and linguistically responsive, and diverse educator workforce; a rich and engaging curriculum that prepares them for college, career, and lifelong learning; the wraparound services needed to meet their social, emotional, and academic needs; and the opportunity to learn in diverse learning environments. With these kinds of investments and strategies in place, gaps in opportunity and achievement will shrink, academic achievement will increase, and the United States will be well positioned to compete in an increasingly global world. Research shows that these investments ultimately pay greater dividends for society than they cost initially. Most importantly, if the federal government takes these steps to fulfill its responsibility, we can help ensure that all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential.



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