

STRATEGIES FOR THE NEXT PRESIDENT TO STRENGTHEN PUBLIC EDUCATION

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FutureEd
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About FutureEd

FutureEd is an independent, solution-oriented think tank at Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy, committed to bringing fresh energy to the causes of excellence, equity, and efficiency in K-12 and higher education. Follow us on Twitter at @FutureEdGU

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FOREWORD

Among the many challenges facing the next president is the future of the nation's public education system, a vast enterprise of 100,000 schools reaching into every community in the country.

Like every other sector of American life, public education is struggling to navigate the COVID crisis. But the nation's public schools also have been a significant source of the troubling racial inequities that have plagued the nation. And the work in recent decades to bring higher standards to every classroom is far from finished.

FutureEd is an independent, solution-oriented think tank at Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy. We work to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for disadvantaged students. In keeping with that mission, we have developed eight federal policy recommendations for the next president. They are not radical strategies. Nor are they costly. Rather, they are pragmatic solutions to pervasive problems in public education.

Amanda Fuchs Miller of Seventh Street Strategies helped navigate the complexities of federal education statutes and the boundaries of the federal role in education policymaking. And FutureEd Senior Fellows Lynn Olson and Greg Richmond lent their expertise to several of the recommendations.

The path forward in American education is truly daunting. These proposals represent a step in the right direction.

Thomas Toch
Director, FutureEd

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This is a difficult moment in the nation's history. The convergence of a public health crisis, economic collapse, a wrenching racial reckoning, and a fractured political landscape has produced enormous personal hardship and an unprecedented test of our democratic institutions and national resolve.

Not surprisingly, the nation's public schools are at the center of the maelstrom.

The pandemic and last spring's troubled shift to remote learning made clear the importance of strong public schools to the preparation of the next generation of Americans, the magnitude of the challenge of effectively educating 50 million students in a vast, decentralized educational landscape, and the key custodial contributions of schools to the productivity of the workforce.

At the same time, racial inequities permeate the nation's education system, undermining student success, thwarting social justice, and slowing economic progress.

While states and local school systems have the primary responsibility for delivering public schooling in the United States, the quality of public schools has been a national policy priority for many years and there are concrete steps the next president can take to improve the educational opportunities and outcomes of all of the nation's students.

School reforms supported by both Republican and Democratic administrations have yielded a wider commitment to teaching all students to high standards, increased insights into school performance, an infusion of talented school leaders and innovative school designs in many school districts, steps to strengthen the teacher profession, and an expansion of public school options for many students.

FutureEd has developed eight federal policy recommendations for the next president that build on these successes and help the education sector respond to the coronavirus pandemic and address longstanding racial inequities.

They focus on four priorities: building a stronger, fairly compensated, more diverse educator workforce; making sure public schools are safe for all students and staff; ensuring student testing is more helpful to classroom teachers; and expanding high-quality public-school options for every student.

Importantly, at a time when national education policy debates are no less polarized than the national political landscape, our recommendations are pragmatic responses to systemic problems in public education today. They are solutions that put students first.

I. Build A Stronger, More Diverse Educator Workforce

Effective educators are critical to student success. In order to ensure a highly effective educator workforce, the next administration must work to ensure teachers get the compensation they deserve for the difficult jobs they do and create pathways to a more diverse teacher and school leader workforce. Public schools are serving growing numbers of students of color, and research reveals that when students have teachers who look like them, academic achievement rises, disciplinary infractions decline, and more students attend college. Federal education policy should leverage these insights to support the nation's students of color and other traditionally underserved student populations, especially given the need to address long-standing structural racism in many of our institutions, including our schools.

Create a 21st Century Teacher Corps

Establishing a modern-day Teacher Corps would be an important step toward creating a stronger, better compensated, more diverse teaching force. A federal Teacher Corps would send a powerful signal about the importance of the teaching profession by reducing corps members' college debt and providing them stipends based on their years of service and in return for working in high-poverty school systems committed to rigorous teacher standards, competitive compensation, and greater educational equity. It would provide a new avenue for talented individuals from all backgrounds to enter the profession and encourage school districts to put in place policies and practices needed to elevate the teaching profession.

Support Diverse Teacher and School Leader Pipelines

Federal higher education laws should ensure that federally funded teacher-preparation programs are working toward the creation of a more diverse educator workforce. The Higher Education Act plays a critical role in holding teacher-preparation programs accountable, and its reauthorization is overdue.

To encourage teacher-preparation programs to increase the representation of teachers of color in the educator pipeline, the next administration should work with Congress to require those programs to report the graduation and certification rates of their students disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender and Pell Grant status. In addition, programs should be required to demonstrate how their graduates are contributing to the educator workforce by providing disaggregated reporting on outcomes such as the percentage of their graduates teaching in Title I schools and their graduates' retention rates once they start teaching.

Furthermore, the federal government should use grant monies to incentivize teacher-preparation programs to admit and graduate high-achieving students of color, including by prioritizing funding for programs at minority-serving institutions.

II. Make Schools Safe for Students and Educators

Our leaders have a responsibility to ensure our nation's public schools are safe for every student, teacher, and administrator. A safe, welcoming school climate is essential to improving students' academic and behavioral outcomes and there are steps the federal government can take to support state and local efforts to strengthen school learning environments.

End Inequitable Discipline Practices

Data from the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights shows that students of color are disproportionately suspended, expelled or referred to law enforcement compared to White students.

To reduce these inequities, the Obama Administration in 2014 issued guidance allowing school disciplinary practices that disproportionately impact students of color to be discriminatory under federal law. The next administration should restore the Obama-era guidance, rescinded by the Trump administration, to stop schools from discriminating on the basis of race, color, or national origin when disciplining students.

Incentivize Schools' Use of Climate Surveys

A growing number of schools are surveying students and teachers to gauge how safe students feel at school, whether students believe they're valued and supported, how confident they are as learners, and other social and emotional markers of school success. In schools where surveys show students feel safe and welcome, they are more likely to attend class, earn good grades and graduate from high school, research shows.

Several school-climate surveys have emerged in recent years, including a suite of free surveys for schools, districts, and states developed by the U.S. Department of Education under the Obama Administration.

These measures are particularly valuable in gauging the impact of the pandemic on students and in helping schools respond to long-standing discriminatory treatment of students of color, whether students are learning in person or remotely. Often, these surveys show that Black and Latinx students feel less valued and are less likely to succeed at school than other students.

The next administration should further expand schools' focus on school climate, by requiring that schools report to the Education Department's Civil Rights Data Collection the percentage of students, teachers and staff taking such surveys.

III. Make Tests More Helpful To Teachers

School reformers and state and federal policymakers turned to standardized testing over the years to get a clearer sense of the return on a national investment in public education that reached \$680 billion last year, to spur school improvement, and to ensure the educational needs of traditionally underserved students were being met.

Despite these benefits, pressure to reduce testing in the nation's public schools has been building from many sources, including educators who support testing but don't believe current regimes are sufficiently helpful to their day-to-day work in classrooms.

In the wake of the coronavirus outbreak and with the Trump administration's support, states in 2020 suspended student testing required by the federal Every Student Succeeds Act. The status of 2021 testing is unclear.

In this environment and in anticipation of ESSA's reauthorization in the coming years, the next administration should strengthen national support for testing by encouraging the development of a new generation of standardized tests that are more valuable to classroom instruction.

Support Next Generation Assessments

While state and local school districts must make their own determinations about tests, there are several ways the next administration can make testing more helpful to the nation's teachers, such as supporting innovations that produce more timely and useful information for instruction, including tests more closely linked to the curricula that teachers actually teach; fostering closer coordination between state and district testing to increase coherence and eliminate redundancy; and incentivizing score reports that are teacher- and parent-friendly.

The Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority

Congress established the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority under the Every Student Succeeds Act to support states wanting to pilot new and innovative testing systems. But the pilot was limited to only seven states and failed to provide funding to support the states in designing or implementing innovations. The next administration should support the pilot's expansion and propose funding for technical assistance for states to develop and implement innovative testing systems.

The Competitive Grants for State Assessments Program

In the same way, the next administration can use the U.S. Department of Education's Competitive Grants for State Assessments program to fund innovations in state testing systems, including better diagnostic tests to determine learning needs stemming from the closure of schools during the coronavirus pandemic; assessments more closely tied to classroom instruction and curricula that provide actionable information for teachers; and reviews of state and district testing systems to increase coherence and eliminate outdated or unnecessary testing.

The Department of Education’s State Testing Peer Review Process

A third lever for improving state assessments is the U.S. Department of Education’s system of peer reviewing new or significantly modified state testing systems. The next administration should use this authority in a genuine way to ensure states are doing the right thing for students, teachers, and families by, for example, making more timely teacher- and parent-friendly score reports a component of the department’s peer review process.

IV. Promote Equity and Innovation in Public Charter Schools

Supporting educational innovation should play a significant role in federal funding decisions for schools, especially as schools struggle to respond to the coronavirus pandemic.

Charter schools were created, in part, to bring innovation to the nation’s public-school system, and the federal government should encourage charter schools to double down on that mission. At the same time, charter schools—like all public schools—must serve all students equitably; and the federal government, through the Charter School Program, should ensure charter schools fulfill that responsibility.

Incentivize Use of Common Enrollment Systems

Common enrollment systems allow families to select traditional public schools or charter public schools in their cities or school districts using a single application system that matches as many students as possible to their preferred schools—an innovation that makes public school choice systems fairer for families and helps both charter schools and traditional schools plan more effectively.

While it is up to local school districts to determine their own enrollment systems, the federal government can help ensure that all students—regardless of their family circumstances—have an equal opportunity to take advantage of public-school choice programs. The federal Charter School Program should give priority under its grant programs to states where charter schools are part of common enrollment systems.

Update the Charter Schools Program to Include Innovation Grants

The federal Charter Schools Program should be modernized to encourage the development of innovative charter school models. A new strand of funding should support creative teaching strategies, innovative school staffing models, school-community partnerships, new ways of serving special student populations, and other innovations that can be adopted by traditional public schools.

Eliminate Funding of For-Profit School Management Companies

While the federal Charter Schools Program bans for-profit charter schools from receiving federal grants, the money often benefits for-profit school management companies that contract with charter boards to run both brick-and-mortar and online schools. That practice should end in order to strengthen the financial and educational integrity of the federal investment in charter schools. The U.S. Department of Education should prohibit schools receiving funding under the Charter School Program from contracting with for-profit school management companies.

The first step in implementing federal policies that strengthen the nation's public schools and put students first is ensuring that the leaders of the U.S. Department of Education, from the secretary down, are committed to educational equity and finding innovative solutions to the unprecedented challenges our schools are facing today. The American people deserve an education department staffed by public servants committed to pursuing high standards for all students and a highly effective, diverse educator workforce; who recognize the foundational importance of having a clear picture of the performance of every school; and who go to work every day fighting for safe, high-quality public school options for every student.



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