



America Forward on K-12 Education

America Forward is the nonpartisan policy initiative of New Profit, a national nonprofit venture philanthropy fund that seeks to break down barriers between all people and opportunity in America. To date, New Profit has invested over \$150 million in scaling innovative organizations' impact. America Forward unites social entrepreneurs with policymakers and advances a public policy agenda that fosters innovation, rewards results, catalyzes cross-sector partnerships, and translates local impact into national change.

The America Forward Coalition is a network of more than 70 social innovation organizations that champion innovative, effective, and efficient solutions to our country's most pressing social problems. Our Coalition members are achieving measurable outcomes in more than 14,500 communities nationwide, touching the lives of 8 million Americans each year, and driving progress in education, workforce development, early learning, poverty alleviation, public health, Pay for Success, social innovation, national service, and criminal justice reform. Since 2007, America Forward's community of entrepreneurs has played a leading role in driving the national dialogue on social innovation and advocating for lasting policy change.

Together, our Coalition organizations have leveraged \$1.5 billion for social innovation and have driven millions of federal resources along with resources leveraged from donors and philanthropy toward programs that are achieving measurable results for those who need them most. Every day we are doing the hard work of helping students from under-resourced communities prepare to graduate high school ready for college and career and re-engaging those that have dropped out of school to become productive citizens. Therefore, we hold ourselves to high standards and we measure our results – that is how we know we are making a difference.

We believe that innovative policy approaches that foster innovation, reward results, and catalyze cross-sector partnerships can transform these local results into national change and propel all of America forward.

Why We Care

The organizations that make up the America Forward Coalition provide diverse supports in thousands of schools across the country, serving large numbers of students and teachers from under-resourced communities. Some of us provide a pipeline for teacher and leaders, while others offer volunteers or national service participants to bolster the human capital available to schools. Some of us run charter schools or alternative schools that re-engage young people who have left high school without a diploma, while others transform under-resourced schools through interventions that address nonacademic and academic barriers to student success. Many of us provide critical student and family supports and improve access to outside providers, while others provide expanded learning opportunities for students. We work in early childhood education, elementary and secondary schools, afterschool and summer programs, and college access and success initiatives.

Our organizations, while they may vary in approach, all reflect one central purpose: to ensure that every student, whatever his or her background, receives a first-class education, one that opens doors to economic prosperity and a successful life.

In order to prepare the workforce of tomorrow with the skills needed to succeed and thrive in the 21st century economy, a high-quality education from early childhood to higher education is both an economic and a societal imperative. For children from under-resourced communities, where schools are less likely to have the resources or capacity to equip students with the skills needed to succeed, these investments are even more critical.

What We Believe

We understand what it takes to educate students, particularly those from challenging backgrounds, whether they attend traditional public schools, charter schools, or are educated in other settings. We understand why too many schools in under-resourced communities fail the students they serve – and have done so for many years in spite of historic reform efforts. Students from under-resourced communities often face challenges outside of school that they carry with them into the classroom. Yet too many of the schools that serve students from under-resourced communities are neither resourced nor designed to adequately respond to student needs, and operate in systems that make it difficult, despite the best efforts of educators, to assemble the kind of skilled educators, provide the academic rigor and comprehensive supports, and positive school culture that students need to learn and succeed.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed by Congress and signed into law in December 2015, makes explicit progress in a number of areas – including the elevation of effective external partnerships, an emphasis on investing in what works, the support of learner-centered systems, and strong accountability and transparency – and opens the door to innovation and improvement in other areas. The new law gives States, districts, and schools a strong foundation from which to build public education systems that are responsive to the needs of their individual students, and authorizes the resources necessary to empower educators, families, and local officials to take advantage of the law’s flexibilities in exciting and innovative ways. Passage, however, is only the first step in ensuring that ESSA realizes its promise for students in under-resourced communities. Effective implementation of the law will be equally, if not even more, critical. The U.S. Department of Education should ensure that States and districts retain the flexibility to be innovative and select approaches that work best for their students, while also continuing the strong accountability systems that protect the rights of all students and ensure equity. Congress, should also provide the funding necessary for States and districts to build strong systems of public education in their communities, and should utilize its oversight role to ensure that the key provisions of ESSA are implemented with fidelity.

Intentional policy and financial support will allow States, districts and schools to create systems of public education that assemble all the necessary elements of high-quality education, with proper sequencing to improve outcomes for students and families. There is no magic bullet or shortcut that can take the place of an organized system of proven, locally-selected interventions that work together, along with families and communities, to enable students from under-resourced backgrounds to succeed in school. Success requires that every school encapsulate a number of different factors:

Effective schools create effective partnerships that result in joint efforts to leverage additional resources, human capital and expertise, catalyze innovation and problem-solving, and increase the rate and level of student progress in line with the school's vision for educational excellence.

Effective schools acknowledge that students don't leave their lived experiences at the door and embrace a comprehensive approach to supporting students' cognitive, social-emotional and academic needs through strategic partnerships and efficient wrap-around services.

Effective schools have safe, calm and predictable environments, creating a positive culture for learning and growth, with high standards, and high expectations, and appropriate supports for achievement for all students; they are launching pads for postsecondary success, preparing all students to continue education and training in order to achieve career success, meet workforce demands, and become engaged and effective citizens.

Effective schools coordinate services and build systems to identify children with academic and behavioral risks and work to remove barriers to learning. Reforms must address the needs of students at highest risk (including the specific effects of poverty on student learning), leverage evidence-based practices, and penetrate the whole school, creating an environment that fosters student achievement.

Effective schools continually evaluate the progress they are making in order to make adjustments and identify new interventions or policies that enable them to meet agreed upon goals related to academic achievement, family engagement, and other outcome measures.

Effective schools have strong, supported and effective teachers and school leaders – particularly when the students they serve face heightened individual, family, and community adversities that translate into academic and behavioral challenges in school. They are knowledgeable about data-driven instruction and are able to develop learning pathways for individual students. These teachers do not always come from traditional sources and must be leaders in their own right who know themselves as learners, possessing the skills to both manage classrooms and engage students. Teachers must have access to appropriate academic and behavioral supports. All teachers need time to learn and grow by working with an instructional coach, and beginning teachers especially benefit from additional assistance to learn and accelerate their professional growth. School leaders – including principals, assistant principals, and principal mentors – must have the access to the ongoing professional development and resources that enable them to be strong instructional leaders, talent managers, and culture builders for all students.

On their own none of these elements is sufficient. But they each hold a part of the solution. Financial resources can make a difference, but only if they are well spent. Early childhood education is important, especially for children from under-resourced communities, but its promise won't be realized if it is followed by low-quality elementary and secondary schools. Addressing barriers to learning that exist outside the classroom is critical, but cannot make up for poor instructional programs and inadequate classroom management practices. School districts and schools should have incentives to engage external partners that deliver results and be rewarded when they do. And standards, coupled with appropriate assessments, are key to accountability to help us know what works and to make informed resource allocation decisions. In short, reform efforts must do it all – from a place of political will that empowers, incentivizes, and resources the kind of comprehensive, locally-based systematic change that is needed.

Policy Proposals

The passage of ESSA has redefined the Federal role in K-12 education for a new generation of students. ESSA, which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), returned significant authority to States and local districts to drive policies and practices aimed specifically at their unique student populations, while at the same time maintaining Federal guardrails to ensure that all students are afforded the opportunity to succeed. It also made critical updates to reemphasize the importance of investing in what works and spurring even greater innovation, including support for research and Pay for Success projects. ESSA reflects the importance of ensuring that all students are put in the best position to succeed, and includes key provisions that support the creation of personalized learning environments, a pilot program for new, innovative assessments, the development of partnerships with high-quality community-based organizations, support for adoption of principles of universal design for learning and a new comprehensive grant program dedicated to literacy. The policies advanced by ESSA, when coupled with the essential accountability provisions in the law, create a powerful platform for States, districts, schools, and community partners to pursue new, innovative approaches to educating our nation's most under-served students.

In order to help States, districts, and schools realize the full potential of ESSA, Federal K-12 policy must continue to prioritize and incentivize the creation of effective partnerships that build capacity, the development and use of data and evidence to guide decision making, and continued innovation to identify and scale up even more effective practices. This can be achieved through effective implementation of and necessary funding for ESSA – including additional guidance, policy letters, and grant priorities– as well as through other legislation related to K-12 education. Advancing these priorities also requires that States and local districts – especially those serving high percentages of students from under-resourced communities and other high-need students – work to take advantage of the new law to make needed improvements to improve outcomes for students- and have the resources necessary to succeed. Therefore, we believe that the following principles must be addressed in the implementation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act:

- 1. Encourage and Incentivize Partnerships Between Schools, Districts, and Effective External Partners** – ESSA reflects the important role of effective community partners and intermediary organizations by both including specific requirements that States and local districts work with external partners – including in the development and implementation of programs under Title I – and providing States and districts the authority to engage partners across a range of programs. Effective external partners provide solutions that range from comprehensive whole school transformation interventions to a collection of specific initiatives, which can provide an aligned, comprehensive continuum of supports and assistance to remove barriers to learning, build teachers' and leaders' capacities, and make the delivery of educational services more efficient by bringing in low-cost, high impact additional person power, including through the deployment of national service members.
 - a. Provide information and guidance on the role of external partners.** As States approach the implementation of ESSA, Federal policymakers should provide guidance on how external partners can serve as an expert resource, increase school and district capacity, and provide other supports during the implementation process. This information should include examples of effective, existing partnerships that may serve as models. To be successful, the

work of effective partners must be data-driven and coordinated with the school's own improvement efforts. Effective partnerships should:

- i. Focus efforts on joint goals that align with schools' visions for educational excellence including increasing the academic performance of all students, erasing the achievement gap, increasing student engagement and time on task, and decreasing barriers to student learning and provide a well-rounded education;
- ii. Provide evidence of success, including through supporting research and evaluation, providing documentation of successful implementation, and providing evidence of impact on student learning;
- iii. Focus on program implementation by utilizing a comprehensive implementation system including joint use agreements and a definition of roles for members of the partnership where appropriate, systematically monitoring quality, degree and pace of implementation, explicitly planning for sustainability, and full integration of the partner organization into the school community; and,
- iv. Monitor program impact and hold programs accountable by identifying specific impact indicators, providing instruments to collect impact data, and systematically monitoring impact data to ensure adjustments are made when needed.

Support programs that specifically focus on preparing students for college and career with the support of effective external partners. ESSA emphasizes preparing students with 21st Century Skills that enable them to be successful in postsecondary education or the workforce. School districts, schools and communities, including work done in partnership with national service participants, should be encouraged and incentivized to provide students with opportunities for enriching activities, internships, apprenticeships, college preparation through advanced coursework opportunities including through dual enrollment and early college high schools, and expanded learning opportunities that align with challenging state academic standards and have a track record of improving academic achievement, graduation rates, college access, and success.

- b. **Ensure consultation between Local Educational Agencies and community partners.** Effective community partners leverage Title I funding to provide critical supports to underserved students. As states implement ESSA, particularly Title I, we urge the Department of Education, through the plan approval and guidance process, to ensure that states and districts, in developing and implementing Title I programs, are working with outside intermediary organizations, to the extent feasible.
- c. **Ensure that external partners have access to relevant student data (in a way that protects student privacy).** Data on student achievement and other outcomes is essential to enabling both schools and external partners to provide more effective services and instructional support to students, educators, and schools. In addition, this data allows for the high-quality evaluation and continuous improvement of programs, helping to ensure that limited resources are invested effectively. Federal policy should ensure that external partners have reliable access to student data, so long as adequate student privacy protections are in place.

- d. **Recognize the important role that national service participants and community volunteers play in supporting successful external partnerships.** Federal policymakers should support the critical role that national service participants and community volunteers play in supporting programs that make learning more relevant and provide exposure to real world learning opportunities that help students develop skills critical to academic and workforce success and should continue to support program efforts to engage volunteers.

- 2. **Reward Results and Invest in What Works** – ESSA significantly advances the role of evidence in guiding decisions related to policy and practice. The law includes a tiered “evidence-based” definition and incorporates the term throughout nearly all major provisions of the law, including in major formula and grant programs. Specifically, States, districts, and schools are required to identify evidence-based interventions to be used as part of school improvement efforts. In addition, ESSA includes strong support – and funding – for robust evaluation of programs funded by the law. The language in ESSA supports America Forward’s vision of investing in programs and interventions that we know are effective, while providing space for innovation – coupled with comprehensive, ongoing evaluation – to identify new and promising approaches. Federal policymakers should provide sufficient funding – including in Title I, Title II, and Title IV – to enable States, districts, and schools to develop, implement, and evaluate different approaches – in line with the flexibility embodied in the law – to determine what works best for their students and families. In addition, Federal policymakers should:
 - a. **Provide support to guide States, districts, and schools in identifying and implementing evidence-based practices.** Given the new evidence guidelines introduced by ESSA, Federal policymakers should provide local officials and educators with information on existing resources to support them in identifying and implementing the most evidence-based interventions available to meet the needs of their community as outlined in their state plans. These resources should include external partners who can help identify and implement strategies and interventions that meet the new requirements; if schools or districts, alone, do not have the capacity to implement evidence-based interventions with fidelity, it can undercut the interventions effectiveness, making support from external partners particularly vital. Specifically, ED should encourage evidence-based practices that include services that reduce barriers to learning, support the needs of the whole child, and build a culture for learning and growth for students and educators. These strategies include: utilizing professional providers, national service members, and community volunteers to deliver academic and non-academic services, implementing strategies such as multi-tiered systems of supports and universal design for learning; mentoring, tutoring, and mental health counseling; teacher skill-building and classroom management; parent and community engagement; college and career exposure and hands on learning; and service-learning opportunities delivered by both professional providers and community volunteers.

 - b. **Support the Education Innovation and Research Program.** The evidence-based approach embodied in the EIR program is critical to driving investment in the development and implementation of practices that are demonstrated to have an impact on improving student achievement. As such, we encourage the Department – through regulation and guidance – to emphasize the program’s focus on evidence, and assist states in developing interventions, collecting data, integrating research on learning, and scaling-up best practices.

- c. **Support proven expanded learning time programs and strategies** – specifically the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program – that leverage evidence-based community partners and integrate academics, enrichment and skills development in ways that make learning relevant, capture student interest and strengthen student engagement in learning, promote higher class attendance, improve retention and reduce risk for drop out, and make graduation and college and career readiness more likely.
 - d. **Support the replication and expansion of high quality charter schools that have success in significantly increasing achievement for all students, sound financial and business management plans in place, and transparent plans for closing schools that do not meet high standards of performance.** This includes supporting equal access and enrollment for all students, including students with disabilities and other disadvantaged students.
 - e. **Coordinate and improve evidence-based early learning educational solutions to help ensure all children are kindergarten-ready by supporting proven and effective partnerships between districts and external partners that are helping students succeed in early learning settings.** In order to ensure that all young people have access to a high quality education and the opportunity to succeed, significant national investments are also needed to support specific effective interventions. These include evidence-based early childhood programs that help to build cognitive and social-emotional skills aligned with school success and that lead to school readiness, with appropriate, comprehensive outcome measurements. Outcome data can help determine, and point resources to, the most effective programs –including public, private or public-private partnerships – that increase the number and percentage of under-resourced children in each age group of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers who are enrolled in high quality early learning programs, and provide incentives for states and districts to design and implement integrated systems of high-quality early learning programs and services.
 - f. **Support high quality, targeted, evidence-based intervention programs proven to increase literacy achievement.** Federal policy makers should ensure that ED provides states and districts access to the latest research, guidance and technical assistance so that educators have the tools and resources on the best evidence-based interventions available to improve achievement and literacy development for all young people.
 - g. **Create incentives for ensuring high-quality external partnerships by supporting the establishment of benchmarks for outcomes and other quality measurements.** In addition, ED should also guarantee that results of those benchmarks are used to ensure greater resources are provided to top performers, and to reward states and school districts with track records of effective partnerships with high performing, external partners.
3. **Promote Innovative Solutions** – ESSA provides States and districts with the flexibility to pursue innovative approaches to instruction, assessment, accountability, and professional development that more closely reflect the needs of students and educators. Through the use of innovative technology, personalized learning, early childhood opportunities, early college opportunities and competency-based approaches – among other strategies – States, districts, and schools have the ability to make education more relevant, more engaging, and more effective for all students. Federal policies should continue to lift up and support the expansion of high-quality innovative practices.

- a. **Support the expansion of personalized learning environments.** ESSA provides states and districts with the flexibility to incorporate personalized learning approaches, and ED can build on the foundation outlined in statute by:
 - i. Utilizing the Innovative Assessment and Accountability Demonstration Authority, which allows the Secretary to grant up to seven States the ability to pilot innovative assessments aligned to grade-level standards for use in their statewide accountability systems, including competency- and portfolio-based assessments.
 - ii. Clarify that funding reserved for direct student services under ESSA can be used to expand, create or improve personalized learning environments, including in expanded learning time settings and in partnership with community and nonprofit organizations.
 - b. Support the implementation of – and continued research on – screening and interventions for learning disabilities, strategies for the integration of cognitive, social, and emotional development into learning environments, and the use of cutting edge brain science to guide child development strategies.
 - c. **Leverage families as learning partners** - Federal policy should acknowledge the powerful role families can play in driving student achievement and encourage and incentivize states and districts to implement educational technology programs, professional development activities, and other school-based support services that have proven effective at providing families with information, tools, and motivation to participate actively in supporting children’s learning outside of school.
 - d. **Leverage innovative educational technology.** Federal policy should ensure that States and districts, especially those serving large rural areas, have the capacity and resources to effectively use available technology to ensure that all students have access to rigorous, varied curricula and resources.
 - e. **Continue to support high-quality charter schools that break the mold of the status quo and create new solutions to meet critical needs.** To ensure that all children receive the education they need to succeed, schools must be innovative, accountable, and committed to the achievement of all students. The charter school movement was founded on these principles and has played an important role in expanding choices for parents and students.
 - f. **Support Title IV, Part A of ESSA.** The Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant Program, authorized by Title IV, Part A of ESSA, allows states the flexibility to pursue a number of different activities in pursuit of (1) well-rounded educational opportunities, (2) safe and healthy students, and (3) the effective use of technology. Federal lawmakers should ensure this program is awarded sufficient funding to empower districts to take meaningful action, and should explicitly clarify that activities under this part may be done in partnership with external partners.
4. **Push Forward on Accountability and Transparency** – While providing greater flexibility to States and districts to make decisions regarding educational policies and practices, ESSA maintains Federal accountability guidelines that are essential to ensuring every student has the best possible chance to

succeed. Through the plan approval process and continued oversight, Congress and the Department of Education should continue to support strong accountability for all schools, and ensure that students, parents, and educators have access to the data and information they need to make informed education decisions, particularly in schools identified as needing improvement.

- a. **Ensure academic indicators are the primary drivers of state accountability systems and that all indicators correspond to increase student success.** Federal policy should consistently reinforce the clear mandate in the statute that the specific academic indicators be weighted more heavily, in the aggregate and of substantial weight individually, than potential additional factors, while still encouraging states to incorporate other indicators in a meaningful way that provides a clear picture of the whole child. Furthermore, Federal policymakers should ensure that States and districts are complying with the statutory requirement that all indicators are developed in consultation with parents, teachers, principals and other school leaders.

Provide support for struggling schools and districts to identify more rigorous, evidence-based interventions. The U.S. Department of Education should offer guidance highlighting various evidence-based programs across the nation for schools and districts to consider as they develop strategies that best suit their communities. This includes schools that are identified as in need of comprehensive support and improvement as well as those in need of targeted interventions to improve outcomes for consistently underperforming subgroups.

- b. **Provide and encourage investments in high quality assessment and data systems in order to enable school improvement leadership teams and their external partners to access and use timely data to make decisions and inform instruction.**
- c. **Provide parents and communities the up-to-date data they need to make informed choices and be effective partners in their children’s education.** ESSA continues to require states and local school districts to produce annual report cards that include a wide range of disaggregated data, including information on postsecondary enrollment that will help students and their families better understand how well schools are preparing students to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. Providing this and other data through annual report cards is essential to giving parents and students the tools to make informed decisions, and Federal, state and local officials should ensure that the information presented on report cards is comprehensive, accessible, and clear, and is developed in consultation with parents, teachers, principals and other school leaders.

5. Ensure All Students Have Effective Teachers and Leaders – effective teachers and school leaders play an outsized role in students’ ability to succeed in school. Ensuring that teachers and school leaders have the resources necessary to succeed – including access to high-quality professional development and other supports – is an essential element of improving outcomes for students and families, particularly for addressing the needs of students who may be impacted stress, adversity and/or trauma; have a learning difference or disability; or are English Learners.

- a. **Fund Title II, Part A at its authorized level and provide adequate flexibility** Title II, Part A of ESSA provides States greater flexibility to identify and implement high-quality professional development programming, as well as the option to set aside 3 percent of their funding to support activities designed specifically for school leaders. Federal lawmakers should ensure

that Title II, Part A is funded at its authorized level, which will empower States – in partnership with teachers and school leaders – to implement high-quality professional development and other supports, including activities done in conjunction with external partners.

- b. Ensure State consolidated plans address teachers and leaders.** Consistent with ESSA and current regulations, ensure SEAs describe how they will use State-level strategies meet the needs of teachers, principals, and other school leaders, including improving educator preparation, developing professional growth and improvement systems, and ensuring equitable access to effective teachers, principals, and other school leaders.
- c. Support efforts to recruit, retain, and support highly effective teachers and leaders.** Continue support for the School Leader Recruitment and Support Program, which provides an evidence-based framework for seeding models of promising and innovative principal preparation programs, scaling up preparation programs that have shown positive results, and supporting effective professional development for leaders in the field. Additionally, maintain support for partnerships that help recruit future educators, including national service opportunities, which provide a pathway into the classroom.
- d. Support state efforts to improve the development of teachers and leaders as part of school improvement.** In light of both the requirement that States and local districts implement evidence-based interventions in schools identified for support and improvement, and the requirement that students in Title I schools are not disproportionately served by ineffective, out- of- field, or inexperienced teachers, Federal policymakers should provide guidance and support to states seeking to establish or improve evidence-based systems of teacher and school leader preparation, coaching and development – including in partnership with external organizations – to ensure that each identified school is led by a well-prepared and well-supported team.
- e. Accelerate and support the development of beginning teachers and principals through high-quality, evidence-based induction programs and other supports.** All new educators should be afforded induction, coaching and mentoring assistance during their first two years on the job and receive assistance from a rigorously selected, trained and supported coach or mentor. Programs intended to incentivize teachers and school leaders to work in high-need, rural, under-resourced schools and high-need fields, such as student loan forgiveness programs, should be strengthened and expanded in order to continue recruiting teachers educators into under-resourced communities.
- f. Support state efforts to improve the development of teachers and leaders as part of school improvement.** In light of both the requirement that States and local districts implement evidence-based interventions in schools identified for support and improvement, and the requirement that students in Title I schools are not disproportionately served by ineffective, out of field, or inexperienced teachers, Federal policymakers should provide guidance and support to states seeking to establish or improve evidence-based systems of teacher and school leader preparation and development – including in partnership with external organizations – to ensure that each identified school is led by a well-prepared and well-supported team.

- g. Support and expand the Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) program,** which makes grants to national nonprofit organizations for projects that recruit, select, and prepare, or provide professional development activities for, teachers or principals.
- 6. Support accountability, transparency, civil rights, and achievement standards within public school choice** – While we support high-quality public charter schools that ensure high achievement for all students, including students with disabilities and other disadvantaged students, break the mold of the status quo, and create new solutions to meet critical needs, we oppose any and all efforts to divert federal funding to non-public entities that are not subject to the same accountability, transparency, civil rights and achievement standards.