America Forward on K-12 Education

Introduction

The learning and development that occurs from when a child enters kindergarten to when they graduate from high school is a critical factor in their long-term health and wellbeing. A strong, equitable, and accessible K-12 education system is vital not only to individual students, but to their families, educators, and communities. Today, deep inequities and disparities – both old and new – continue to prevent too many students, particularly students from under-resourced communities, from accessing the kind of holistic, student-centered educational experiences necessary to foster healthy learning and development. At the same time, too many educators and families are deprived of the supports and resources they need to create safe, joyful, and productive learning environments for their students.

To address these persistent challenges, we must transform the systems we have – using what we know from the science of learning and development to both meet the acute needs of the moment and nurture innovation for the long-term. To achieve this transformation, it's essential that federal policymakers advance policies and provide critical funding that incentivizes innovative, outcomes-oriented and evidence-based programming; effective cross-sector partnerships; the creation of safe and positive learning environments; comprehensive student support systems that work to remove barriers to learning across the continuum of home and school; investments in core infrastructure such as high quality professional learning, instructional materials, and connectivity access; and a strong, supported, and diverse education workforce. Decisive federal action on these priorities can effectively expand access to high-quality learning and development opportunities across K-12 education systems and improve outcomes for students, families, and communities across the country.

POLICY PROPOSALS

Innovation: Promote continued innovation in K-12 education

The impact of high-quality K-12 learning experiences is well-documented, but scaling best practices and ensuring equitable access remains a challenge. Particularly as schools work to address disrupted and unfinished learning and trauma experienced during the pandemic, it is essential to incentivize and learn from innovations from the field that are focused on building an education system that can meet learning needs, support the development of skills students need to succeed in the future, and promote student health and well-being. Leveraging and learning from such innovations will serve as the foundation for a system rooted in equity and focused on developing the whole learner. We must seize the opportunity to

learn from what we know and the innovations happening *now* to transform our education systems and make them more effective, more equitable, and more resilient in the future.

The federal government is uniquely positioned to promote and accelerate innovation across the diverse learning settings in which K-12 education takes place, by providing funding for research and evaluation, as well as evidence-based, innovative, integrated efforts that leverage whole-learner approaches.

We must expand trauma-informed, whole-learner approaches to education that meet the holistic needs of our students and address the varying traumatic experiences resulting from the pandemic. To promote and accelerate innovation, the federal government should:

- **Prioritize the implementation and sustainability of evidence-based, trauma-informed, whole-learner approaches across existing federal early education and K-12 programs** by updating current professional development programs centered around trauma-informed practices and protective environments; incentivizing collaboration with high-quality partners to help bolster whole-learner experiences for school personnel, students, and families; engaging parents by implementing school policies that recognize parents and caregivers as full educational partners; and providing the professional development, technical assistance, and expertise required to seamlessly and successfully merge these tools across diverse school ecosystems.

- Support new funding and initiatives to help nonprofits and school districts **develop and implement evidence-based, trauma-informed, whole-learner approaches.** These approaches must be flexible and accessible to students when and where they are engaged in learning. Key components include things like: a focus on developmental relationships, environments of safety and belonging, personalization of learning and development, establishment of robust tiered support systems, and strong partnerships with health and mental health providers.

- **Support new and increased funding for education research and innovation,** including both rapid development and testing of technology and programs as well as longer-term grants focused on bringing implementation of integrated, outcomes-oriented technology, innovative learning models, and effective programs and practices to scale. In particular, new funding should accelerate innovations that support the strengths and needs of students who are Black, Latino/a/x, Indigenous, Dual Language Learners or English learners, and/or from countries outside the U.S., as well as students with disabilities and students with learning differences, students living in poverty, and students facing systemic barriers to high school completion. Examples of steps federal policymakers could take to support research and innovation include supporting the NEED Act, as well as increasing funding through the appropriation process for the National Advanced Center for the Development of Education (NCADE) pilot at the Institute of Education Sciences (IES).

Evidence: Promote continued research and development and the use of outcomes-based and results-driven programs

Although we have seen rapid advances in our understanding of student development and high-impact interventions, critical research gaps remain. Research and development are still needed to address implementation challenges related to whole-learner approaches, and to explore new frontiers of measurement through comprehensive multi-dimensional approaches to assessment, rooted in equity. At the same time, the federal government should work to strengthen its existing grant programs and tiered-evidence approaches by ensuring there is enough funding supporting existing science – as well as implementation science – to ensure that what we know is adopted into practice. Whether it's investigating how to scale proven interventions or investing in integrated interventions that fit into a comprehensive vision of how to improve holistic outcomes for children, we must continue to build an evidence base that can inform and guide policymaking, be openly accessible to practitioners, and guide implementation efforts on the ground. To fulfill its critical role in funding research and evaluation, the federal government can:

- **Create a new Institute for Education Sciences Fellowship program** available to aspiring researchers and psychometricians who will commit to the study of and, when appropriate, test the implementation of effective, evidence-based, whole-learner assessments and measurement tools that will incentivize the adoption of innovative whole-learner approaches at scale. The program should be conducted in partnership with school systems and should ensure it strongly encourages applicants from BIPOC communities to apply.

- **Encourage and expand the Innovative Assessment and Accountability Demonstration Authority**, which allows the Secretary of Education 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.

- **Fund research and development of valid and reliable whole-learner assessments** that will create a more comprehensive and complete picture of students' strengths, successes, and areas for growth. Assessments should include asset-based and culturally relevant indicators and tools. This research and development will incentivize the adoption of whole-learner approaches, which focus on growth and achievement of grade-level academic/cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and creative skills.

- **Support increased funding for tiered evidenced-based grant programs, including the Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program, and expand dedicated funding to support the rigorous study of promising whole-learner innovations**. The federal government should establish funding priorities to allow schools, nonprofits, and other educational organizations with strong whole-learner frameworks to receive more funding for their practices, enabling them to scale locally, regionally, and nationally.

- Ensure that research at IES is increased and directed to help **measure the impact of whole-learner approaches** on children's development and outcomes – both in school and later in life – in order to better understand the opportunity gap and its short- and long-term consequences. This will improve our understanding of how to identify specific approaches and best practices that will meaningfully shrink existing gaps in learning and development.

Partnerships: Encourage and incentivize partnerships between states, communities, K-12 education providers, and effective external partners

Effective school partnerships result in joint efforts to improve classroom- and extended day-based instruction; engage meaningfully with parents and caregivers in service of student learning; leverage additional resources, talent, and expertise; catalyze innovation and problem-solving; and increase student progress and wellbeing. These efforts acknowledge that students don't leave their lived experiences at the door when they come to school, and embrace a comprehensive approach to supporting students' cognitive, social, and emotional development and their mental and physical health in order to create joyful, meaningful learning experiences in K-12, while also readying students for college and career. To ensure schools, students, and families are supported with comprehensive services that meet their needs, the federal government must:

- **Incentivize innovative and evidence-based partnerships in every Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) program**, including Title I, Title II, Title III, Title IV-A, and Title IV-B, in order to help schools and districts support whole-learner experiences for educators, staff, students, and families. Such partnerships could include partnerships with community-based organizations that can provide effective, culturally-competent, trauma-informed mental health and social-emotional supports to all students impacted by the pandemic, including those students who experienced disproportionate impacts –including (but not limited to) students who are Black, Latino/a/x, Indigenous, Dual Language Learners or English learners, and/or from countries outside the U.S., as well as students with disabilities and students with learning differences.

- Incentivize innovative and evidence-based programs that **specifically focus on providing all students equitable access to programs that prepare students for college and career with the support of effective external partners.** This includes providing all students with opportunities for enriching activities, internships, apprenticeships, college preparation — through advanced coursework opportunities including dual enrollment and early college high schools — and other 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.

- **Make capacity-building federal grants to nonprofit and national service organizations,** because these organizations need access to growth capital in order to expand, even if earned income is available from schools and other sources. Growth capital and planning grants should be available

for nonprofits that base program models on a strong evidence base and, when available, evidence of success, along with operational grants to enable programs to operate in under-resourced schools.

- Update federal student data privacy laws to **enable data-sharing agreements to use a standard process for de-identifying student data** that, if followed, allows for partner organizations to have access to anonymized data for research and learning purposes. Data on student achievement and other outcomes are essential to enabling both schools and external partners to offer tailored supports, assess progress, support continuous improvement, and conduct evaluations. In addition, these data allow for the high-quality evaluation and continuous improvement of programs, helping to ensure that limited resources are invested effectively.

- **Offer incentives for evidence-based, coherent school design and aligned services for schools to advance whole-learner approaches that center student and family voice.** Schools should be encouraged to create a coherent blueprint of their mission, vision, instructional approaches, and family engagement practices to enable alignment, both within the school and with external organizations. This blueprint should include strategies to support learning at home and school. Federal policy should encourage local organizations serving school-age youth and their families to work closely with schools to align services where possible.

- **Fund a Whole-Learner Implementation grant** to support intermediaries operating innovative programs, including those with evidenced-based practices for providing critical technical assistance to educators and supporting the implementation of academic standards, assessments, and accountability systems that reflect a whole-learner, developmentally aligned curriculum that recognizes students' strengths and develops their wide breadth of skills (i.e., cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and creative), and addresses experienced trauma.

National service: Leverage national service to advance equitable access to high-quality education.

National service is a powerful tool that can be leveraged to strengthen civic participation, develop community leaders, and help the country tackle its most pressing challenges, including supporting systemically under-resourced schools and communities. National service members work alongside teachers and families – both in and out of the classroom – to provide whole-learner supports through positive developmental relationships, building school environments of safety and belonging, and supporting students' transition from high school to college and career. To ensure that all students have adequate and equitable access to a high-quality education, as well as add additional adult capacity and expertise for the implementation of whole-learner approaches, the federal government can:

- **Fully fund AmeriCorps,** including the summer of service and semester of service programs, **and increase the number of national service positions to 250,000 by 2026**.

- **Expand AmeriCorps so that there are enough participants in the program to deploy a team of AmeriCorps members to provide every school serving high percentages of students from families experiencing poverty with the option of fielding a team of AmeriCorps members to address their priority needs**. Positive developmental relationships are transformative and key to building the foundation upon which effective and enduring learning takes place. Additional personnel capacity through AmeriCorps will allow for more positive developmental relationships, as well as differentiated instruction and individual attention, which will lead to more responsive instruction and better learning and development outcomes within whole-learner frameworks.

- **Encourage the Department of Education to provide technical assistance and guidance to states and districts,** including highlighting what federal education funding streams can be used (or blended) to fund partnerships with AmeriCorps programs that bring additional supports and capacity to schools, especially support personnel with demonstrated knowledge of whole-learner approaches and high-quality tutoring and mentoring. The Department should specifically highlight what Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) resources can be used for this purpose.

- **Fund a focused recruitment campaign for national service programs**, including (but not limited to) a state-of-the-art website and online service year marketplace to ensure that underrepresented individuals — particularly those from BIPOC communities; under-resourced communities in urban, suburban, and rural America; and those who are opportunity youth — have **adequate and equitable access to national service opportunities**.

- **Establish a new higher education grant program and/or specific incentives within current federal grant programs –** such as enrollment support, credit hours, AmeriCorps Segal Education Awards match or other financial support – **for AmeriCorps alumni who have served the equivalent of at least one full year term (1700 hours)** in the previous five years, to support their application to and enrollment in institutions of higher education in programs focused on developing K-12 educators and educational leaders.

Results: Focus K-12 learning resources on performance and results

Too often, national programs for K-12 learning focus on input measures and compliance, without giving similar attention to outcomes and success. To ensure states and districts focus on both performance and outcomes rather than mere compliance, federal law and policy should:

- Empower school districts to **deploy federal dollars to link funding to outcomes** by providing stronger incentives, along with funding for staff, capacity and technical assistance, to execute pathbreaking pay-for-success projects within the K-12 system — first authorized by the Every Student Succeeds Act(ESSA) — and forge strong community partnerships to ensure those funds drive better measurable outcomes for children and families served. With this support, more

districts can take advantage of existing laws that allow state and local educational agencies to tie dollars to outcomes relating to safe and supportive schools and student physical and mental health through the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Program.

● Harness the power of technology to **support personalized learning and allow for data-informed decision making**. This includes using data to track and improve outcomes, while ensuring student data privacy. Data should be equally accessible to parents and teachers, so that families and educators can team up to support student learning.

● **Encourage and incentivize scalable, evidence-based tutoring models.** As students struggle with unfinished learning – and a host of other challenges – as a result of the pandemic, it is important that students have the support they need to catch back up and even accelerate their learning. Research shows that evidence-based tutoring programs can significantly improve achievement levels in reading and math. Strong partnerships between school districts and community based organizations can help increase the capacity and expertise of schools to implement these evidence-based programs.

● Add **college persistence and completion rates to data that is required to be reported at the state, district, and school levels.** And make new, linked data sets available to researchers so that the field can better understand what's working.

● **Develop privacy protections and access protocols for all data**. Policymakers should engage students, families, teachers, and other educators in developing rules relating to data collection, secure storage, access, and deletion of student data, recognizing that students and their families — not schools or government — are the rightful owners of individual student data.

● **Incentivize the replication and expansion of high-quality public charter schools** that have demonstrated success in significantly improving outcomes for all students through a whole-learner lens, and which have sound financial and business management plans in place. At the same time, policymakers should establish transparent plans for closing public charter schools that do not meet high standards of performance. Key measures of success include supporting equal access and enrollment for all students, including students with disabilities and other students who face systemic barriers to their success.

K-12 workforce: Invest in building a strong local K-12 educator and school leader workforce

Effective teachers and school leaders play an outsized role in students' ability to succeed in school. Unfortunately, many schools, especially in high-poverty urban and rural areas, face systemic challenges in teacher recruitment. Nationwide, the teacher corps faces a lack of diversity, particularly teachers who are Black and Latino/a/x, as well as shortages in specific subject areas, like STEM and special education. Ensuring that every school has a strong, diverse pipeline of educators, retains those teachers and

leaders, and provides them with the salary, support and professional development necessary for them to thrive requires a significant shift in national priorities and paradigms. To support states and districts in their efforts to attract, retain, and support a transformative teacher and school leader corps, the federal government should:

- **Ensure all students have effective teachers and attend schools with strong educational leaders**. This includes ensuring that all new educators receive induction, coaching, and mentoring assistance during their first two years on the job, informed by the science of learning and development and whole-learner approaches to education; receive regular assistance from a rigorously selected, trained, and supported coach, mentor, veteran teacher, or high-quality nonprofit partner, with a focus on whole-learner approaches; and receive preparation for working with students who have learning and attention issues. Specific attention should be given to the induction, mentorship, and support of BIPOC teachers and school leaders.

- **Invest in programs that help support a diverse teacher and leader workforce.** This includes building a strong and diverse educator pipeline and aiding schools with their educator recruitment, training, and support, to ensure that diverse teachers and leaders are both entering the profession and staying. Teacher leadership opportunities can also help with retention, particularly for educators of color.

- **Ensure teacher preparation programs equip educators to partner with parents in service of student learning.** Pre-service training must better prepare educators to effectively collaborate with parents in support of learning, at home and in the classroom. Teacher preparation programs should include practical experiences in which teachers team up with parents to help students reach learning goals.

- Strengthen and expand programs like student loan forgiveness, which are intended to **incentivize teachers and school leaders to work in high-need, rural, under-resourced schools and high-need fields**.

- **Invest in alternative teacher preparation programs, including teacher residency programs, with proven outcomes**, and take advantage of the powerful pipeline represented by national service corps members. Such programs can offer streamlined pathways into teaching for individuals who have specific subject matter expertise and are interested in changing careers – especially important for districts facing a shortage of teachers in a specific subject area (i.e., STEM, special education, etc.).

- **Refocus Title II of the Higher Education Act (HEA)** on the full complement of training and professional development opportunities necessary to prepare teachers to implement and lead whole-learner approaches, including the development of strong teacher-student relationships.

- Require grantees under Title II of HEA to **align training for early educators with K-12 educators,** so that all children experience a continuum of whole-learner approaches, rather than facing disruption that can hamper positive impacts on learning and development.

- **Support professional learning for teachers to leverage innovative learning models and use technology to support personalized learning opportunities** for students. Such development must include training on how educators can safely access and effectively use the data provided through such technology. With more data available, educators can gain actionable and specific insight into where their students are struggling and where they can accelerate. Professional learning opportunities should also cover other innovative uses of technology, such as the delivery of competency-based instruction and different technology-enabled activities students can engage in. Development must also include **skills training for teachers to meaningfully engage families to support technology-enabled student learning at hom**e.

- Fund professional development providers that leverage **evidence-based, personalized, competency-based professional learning opportunities connected to the science of learning, that modernize and elevate the teaching profession**.

- Expand Title II of ESEA to **support the adoption of evidence-based best practices in both professional development and mentorship** that advance the development of whole-learner approaches in an integrated, technology-rich context.

- Prioritize staffing structures — from district-level leaders to individual support staff — that encourage efforts under Title I and Title II of ESEA to **support school leaders, educators, and staff at the district and school levels with the implementation of whole-learner approaches**.

- Establish regulations that **permit the use of peer-to-peer and team-based learning** that allows educators to experience and develop a common language around the elements of whole-learner approaches.

- Require that ESEA Title I plans for **teacher and school leader assessments incorporate whole-learner approaches and outcomes.**

Equity: Recognize a commitment to equity

All students deserve excellent, holistic learning experiences, with high-quality, culturally-affirming, and developmentally appropriate content. But we know that some students face longstanding, systemic barriers and constrained access to such educational experiences, including students who are Black, Latino/a/x, Indigenous, Dual Language Learners or English learners, students from countries outside the U.S., as well as students with disabilities and students with learning differences.

To address aspects of educational inequity in the K-12 education system, the federal government should:

- **Advance digital equity**, including:

  - Ensuring additional support to make technology acquisition by under-resourced school systems more equitable, and **ensuring that schools can provide up-to-date technology and related learning tools that students need**. It's also important to expand internet access beyond the boundaries of the school, to include libraries, other after school sites, and all the places where students are. Additionally, digital access at home remains a significant barrier to equity in education and has had devastating effects on learning for students from systemically under-resourced communities. Innovative strategies and funding are needed to expand out-of-school technology access for students.

  - Specific federal funding should be designated to **support the integration of durable, equitable, and accessible technology and infrastructure into classroom settings** — including physical technological tools and software — and to provide the technical assistance and expertise required to seamlessly and successfully merge these tools into curricula across diverse school ecosystems, including extended day, home, etc.

- **End the school-to-prison pipeline** by using innovation and evidence-based strategies to improve school safety and stop the practice of referring students — including a disproportionate number of students who are Black, Latino/a/x, and Indigenous, and students with disabilities and students with learning differences— to law enforcement for minor behavioral infractions. This includes:

  - Requiring, as a condition of federal funding, that all school resource officers be trained in social-emotional capacities and reverse zero-tolerance policies, and **incentivize the placement of counselors over school resource officers, ensuring that counselors are trained in de-escalation, trauma-responsive practices, and culturally responsive pedagogy**. Additionally, **incentivize policies that move away from exclusionary and corporal disciplinary practices and instead promote restorative justice, counseling, mental health services, and/or other evidence-based approaches.**

  - **Creating a school-safety innovation fund** that provides funding to test, evaluate, and scale effective behavior and safety-related practices, with special priorities for initiatives developed by students, families, and/or teachers.

  - Giving **priority in existing federal justice grants to applicants that propose a community partnership approach** that aims to reduce student interaction with the criminal justice system.

- **Support legislative and executive actions to provide a pathway to permanent legal status for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) beneficiaries.**

  - While undocumented students are constitutionally protected to attend K-12 schools free of impediment or harassment, **legislative and executive actions to support DREAMERS** under DACA would provide additional protection and opportunity.

Family engagement: Support programs that engage families in meaningful ways in their children's learning

Parents and caregivers play the most critical role in the development and trajectory of their children. Parental involvement in their children's learning is a more powerful predictor of academic success than other variables, including social class and level of parental education. Yet, too often, only affluent, educated parents and caregivers – most often those who are white and English-speaking – have easy access to tools to support their child's educational success or clear opportunities to support their child's path through the education system. However, research shows that parents across all demographics are interested in whole-learner approaches to education. Parents see academics and preparation for college and career as the floor, not the ceiling, and are focused on the development of holistic skills – aligned with the science of learning and development – that make students capable of self-sufficiency, social connection, and productivity. Parents know that their children learn in different ways, and not every educational approach works for each child at any given stage of their development.

There are many ways that school systems can adapt to engage parents as educational partners, facilitate their ability to make choices for their children, and ultimately empower them to exercise their innate power as agents of change in their families and communities. To support these efforts, the federal government should:

- Implement school policies that **recognize and engage parents and caregivers as full educational partners**, including sharing information on evidence-based practices to support learning at home; providing data in easily accessible, digestible, and culturally-affirming formats; and engaging parents in goal-setting and school-based decision making. This includes increasing the ESEA Title I parent engagement set-aside to expand district capacity to support schools in engaging and supporting parents — particularly in goal setting and school-based decision making — sharing best practices, and modeling high-quality whole-learner approaches with their children.

- Expand funding for community schools, community centers, and aftercare facilities to **support the co-location of critical services** — **like child care, libraries, and centers for physical and mental health care** — **with opportunities for parents and caregivers to learn about and experience whole-learner approaches** and to explore how they can lift up the concepts at home.

- **Expand the EIR program** to include a priority to evaluate and disseminate best practices for on-site co-location of services to enhance parent engagement and activate parents as partners in learning.

- **Encourage and expand funding for community school models and other whole-learner focused approaches** that include robust family and community engagement, as well as mental health and other holistic supports for students and families.

Conclusion

Looking ahead, we see enormous opportunity to work collaboratively towards policies that expand opportunity, embrace innovation, leverage science and evidence, meaningfully advance equity, and help build a K-12 system that sparks joy and meaning for <u>all</u> students today AND prepares them to participate fully in our democracy and a globally competitive workforce tomorrow. In the face of persistent challenges, we are determined to continue amplifying the voices of our Coalition members; advocating for Federal action to expand effective, evidence-based, community-based solutions; and building more equitable, accessible, high-quality systems that support students, educators, workers, nonprofit leaders, and families in all of our communities. We look forward to working alongside our Coalition members, partners, and policymakers to make this vision a reality.

About America Forward

America Forward is the Washington, D.C.-based nonpartisan policy initiative of New Profit, a pioneering national venture philanthropy organization that invests in a portfolio of breakthrough social entrepreneurs and systems-change initiatives, catalyzes and builds their impact, and transforms how government and philanthropy pursue social change to ensure that all people can thrive.

America Forward leads a Coalition of more than 100 social innovation organizations across the country. Every day, these organizations are working in 15,000 communities nationwide, impacting more than 9 million lives every year.

Together, America Forward Coalition members advocate for public policies that foster innovation, identify effective solutions, reward results, catalyze cross-sector partnerships, and advance equity in workforce development, education, early childhood, and poverty alleviation. Since 2007, our Coalition organizations have successfully advocated for lasting policy change; leveraged $1.7 billion for social innovation; and driven millions of federal resources toward programs that are achieving measurable results for those who need them most.