



America Forward Policy Platform on K-12 Education

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Introduction

All our nation's students deserve access to high-quality K-12 education that provides them with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed academically, meet the evolving demands of today's workforce, and thrive. However, as our country's lackluster K-12 outcomes demonstrate, too many students do not receive the education and support they need to reach their full potential. This is particularly true for students from under-resourced communities.

Using what we now know about the science of learning and development, we now have a critical opportunity to address persistent challenges and transform our K-12 education system to better meet the acute needs of the moment. Policy reforms can lay the foundation for a stronger K-12 (as well as higher education and workforce) system. To achieve this transformation, it's essential that federal policymakers prioritize funding and policy solutions that incentivize innovative, outcomes-oriented, and evidence-based programming; encourage effective public/nonprofit partnerships; enable the critical conditions and relationships for learning; and support a strong educator pipeline.

America Forward is a national nonpartisan advocacy organization that unites social entrepreneurs with policymakers to promote a public policy agenda that fosters innovation, rewards results, and catalyzes cross-sector partnerships. America Forward leads the America Forward Coalition, a network of 100+ of the nation's most impactful and innovative non-governmental organizations that develop and advocate for more effective public policies to advance opportunity and move all of America forward. Our Coalition members are at the forefront of delivering high-quality programs and supports – ranging from mental health services to academic coaching to educator preparation – in schools and communities around the nation. Working around the country in schools every day and in every state, we have seen both what has failed our students and what works and enables our students to thrive.

Together, we call on federal policymakers to take decisive and comprehensive federal action on the following priorities through vehicles such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the Education Services Reform Act (ESRA), the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, and federal appropriations. We urge policymakers to:

- 1) Invest in Evidence-Based Strategies and Innovation
- 2) Encourage and Incentivize High-Quality Partnerships
- 3) Emphasize Performance, Improvement, and Results
- 4) Strengthen the Educator Pipeline
- 5) Provide the Critical Conditions for Learning

1) Invest in Evidence-Based Strategies and Innovation

As K-12 school systems across the nation confront a range of critical challenges – from decreases in student achievement across multiple subject areas, to a nationwide student mental health crisis – we must double down on the development, implementation, and expansion of evidence-based practices proven to improve student outcomes.

The federal government is uniquely positioned to fund and advance rigorous, action-oriented innovation across the diverse learning settings in which K-12 education takes place as well as support the systematic scale-up of the strongest solutions in communities across the nation. Federal policymakers should:

- **Continue and expand funding for the Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program, the landmark federal evidence fund that supports innovation, rigorous evaluation, and scale-up of the most promising K-12 education strategies.** Federal evidence fund models, have demonstrated outsized success in identifying and advancing practitioner-led innovation, learning, and scale-up of high-impact evidence-based programs since 2009.¹ We support providing ongoing capacity-building support and growth capital to programs that complete the top tier of EIR as a key path to scale the programs with the strongest evidence bases across the nation.
- **Prioritize the development, sustainability, and expansion of whole learner approaches.** A broad array of evidence supports a particular focus on solutions leveraging whole-learner approaches to education. Whole-learner approaches provide each and every student with the strong academic rigor and holistic range of skills, relationships, and supports that all learners need to thrive. This approach is grounded in evidence-based strategies that create safe, supportive relationships and a positive school climate; rigorous, relevant, and engaging learning that includes the intentional integration of essential life skills; comprehensive student supports; and data-informed interventions. We support codifying a definition for the term “whole-learner approaches” across the ESEA and creating a competitive pilot grant program to incentivize nonprofit and school partnerships that will create transformative, school-wide systems. This approach relies on excellent educators working in partnership with engaged families, backed by comprehensive student supports and interventions. Schools use data-driven instruction and continuous improvement processes to identify needs early, coordinate responses, and accelerate progress.
- **Prioritize deeper investments in research-backed, scalable approaches that strengthen teaching and learning across the K-12 system.** These investments should elevate models with a proven track record of improving student outcomes and expand the capacity of both schools and high quality, evidence-based, external partners to deliver results. Moreover, it is critical

¹ For more information on the impact of evidence funds, see Sackett, Covell, and Lopez (2023), *America Forward, Unlocking Innovation*, <https://www.americaforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/America-Forward-Unlocking-Innovation-in-Evidence-Funds-October-2023.pdf>.

that these efforts move beyond stand-alone interventions towards durable changes to the instructional core that prioritize strong relationships, responsive teaching, and continuous improvement rather than temporary or supplemental solutions. Policymakers and educational leaders should rethink how time, content, instructional design, and educator roles are organized to better meet the needs of today’s learners. Key evidence-based approaches include:

- **Invest in evidence-based literacy initiatives grounded in the science of reading.** Systematic, explicit instruction in phonics, vocabulary, and language comprehension is strongly linked to improved reading proficiency. A robust research base also shows that family literacy programs—those that equip parents and caregivers with tools to support reading at home—significantly strengthen children’s early language development and long-term literacy outcomes alongside enabling adults to attain their own life and economic goals. Federal resources should strengthen teacher preparation and support the adoption of high-quality materials and nonprofit partnerships that enhance literacy instruction.
- **Invest in and incentivize scalable, evidence-based tutoring models, including virtual tutoring.** High-dosage tutoring remains one of the most effective strategies for accelerating student learning. Policymakers should support schools and high-quality nonprofit partners to implement these proven models at scale, especially in communities with the greatest unmet learning needs, through critical funding streams including Federal Work-Study.
- **Strengthen instructional leadership and high-quality coaching for teachers and principals.** Sustained, job-embedded coaching and strong school leadership have demonstrated substantial impacts on instructional quality, educator retention, and student achievement. Policymakers should invest in effective coaching and leadership development models that help educators implement evidence-based practices with fidelity, including apprenticeships.
- **Scale evidence-based family and community engagement strategies and student support models.** Research shows that strong partnerships between schools, families, and community organizations improve attendance, achievement, and graduation rates. Federal funding should sustain proven approaches, such as community schools, that foster meaningful two-way communication, shared learning goals, and coordinated supports that help students navigate academic and developmental challenges.
- **Expand access to high-quality afterschool, summer, and extended-learning programs grounded in strong evidence.** Rigorous studies show that well-designed expanded-learning programs—especially those delivered in partnership with high-quality nonprofit organizations—improve academic achievement, increase student engagement, and provide safe and enriching environments beyond the traditional school day. Federal policymakers should invest in scaling these evidence-based

programs, particularly in under-resourced communities where students benefit most from additional learning time and holistic supports, and ensure key funding streams such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers are predictable and stable.

- **Support and encourage innovative, evidence-based college and career navigation and readiness initiatives, including programs led by non-governmental providers.** Federal policymakers must invest in accessible programs that demonstrate a strong track record of improving academic achievement, graduation rates, college access, college completion, and career success. These strategies include early exposure to postsecondary options, high-quality advising, and hands-on learning experiences such as CTE, pre-apprenticeships, apprenticeships, internships, dual enrollment, and early college high schools, as well as financial literacy education that prepares students for college and careers.
- **Incentivize the replication and expansion of high-quality public charter schools with demonstrated success serving public school students.** Policymakers should support schools that significantly improve outcomes for all students; ensure access for all students, including students with disabilities; and demonstrate strong operational and financial capacity for sustainable growth.

Policymakers must also invest in foundational research and development to improve outcomes, address a quickly changing world, and reverse recent downward achievement trends, and then effectively translate the existing broad body of evidence into accessible on-the-ground guidance. We recommend that policymakers:

- **Support increased funding for education research, including rebuilding the Institute of Education Sciences (IES).** More, rather than less, funding is needed for education research and innovation. The termination of nearly all staff at IES as well as the cancellation of numerous research contracts is detrimental to the research and knowledge base necessary to improve the education system. While we support efforts to improve IES's impact and efficiency, these actions have disrupted critical research, data, and evaluation to ensure an educated workforce that drives our economy. Policymakers should work to rebuild IES's capacity as soon as possible with a greater focus on action-oriented, practitioner-focused approaches.
- **Invest in responsive, effective education research and innovation.** Continued and increased investment in educational research and innovation that leverages on-the-ground perspectives is important. For example, it is critical to invest in a science of numeracy that complements the strong evidence on the science of reading. Historically only 0.1 percent of overall education spending supports research,² and only a slim portion of IES funding supports practitioner-led, as

² Kane (2017), "Making Evidence Locally," *Education Next* 17(2), <https://www.educationnext.org/making-evidence-locally-education-research-every-student-succeeds-act/>

opposed to researcher-led, efforts that build towards scalable models.³ In particular, moving forward, policymakers should shift educational research investment to more applied, action-oriented initiatives in partnership with practitioners and to set clearer pathways from R&D to adoption and scalability, such as by establishing a National Advanced Center for the Development of Education (NCADE) at IES. As part of this effort, policymakers should focus on innovations that support students' diverse needs and strengths, such as students with disabilities and students living in poverty.

- **Fund research and development of valid, reliable, and relevant assessments**, working with states, that will create a more comprehensive and complete picture of students' strengths, successes, and areas for growth in alignment with the broad evidence base on whole learner approaches. In turn, these assessments can support new research measuring the impact of whole learner approaches on children's development and outcomes. These measures may include, but are not limited to, state summative assessments, adaptive assessments, competency- or portfolio-based assessments, and other indicators aligned to academic growth, persistence, and postsecondary readiness.

2) Encourage and Incentivize High-Quality Partnerships

Schools are being asked to meet an increasingly complex set of academic, behavioral, mental health, and developmental needs, and no single system can do it alone. Encouraging and incentivizing strong, well-designed partnerships between K–12 local education agencies (LEAs) and evidence-based community nonprofit organizations allows schools access to specialized expertise and supports that complement, rather than duplicate, their core mission. High-quality nonprofits bring expertise and proven approaches in areas like tutoring, mentoring, college and career readiness, mental health supports, and family engagement, helping schools meet the outcomes they are accountable for. Evidence-based nonprofit partners also offer models with demonstrated impact, giving state and local leaders confidence that these collaborations can improve student learning, well-being, and long-term success. Policies that strengthen and sustain these partnerships can expand educators' capacity, improve educational opportunity, and ensure students receive the full set of supports they need to thrive.

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 supports, such as high-impact tutoring, to students to help meet the needs of each and every child. Incentives could include additional funding or

³ See Klager & Tipton (2022), "Summary of IES Funded Topics," Northwestern University, commissioned by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, https://nap.nationalacademies.org/resource/26428/READY-KlagerTipton_IES_Topic_Analysis_Jan2022v4.pdf.

language to promote evidence-based partnerships.

- **Remove federal, state, and local barriers that limit effective partnerships between schools and community-based organizations.** Policymakers should identify and eliminate administrative, regulatory, and funding obstacles that make it difficult for districts to partner with high-quality nonprofit providers—including burdensome procurement rules, misaligned eligibility requirements, restrictive data-sharing policies, and fragmented funding streams. Clarifying guidance, streamlining procurement pathways, and supporting secure, privacy-protective data-sharing agreements would enable schools to access proven external expertise more efficiently and equitably.
- **Enable the braiding and blending of federal funds to sustain effective school–community partnerships.** Many districts struggle to coordinate multiple federal funding streams—such as Title I, Title II, Title IV, and AmeriCorps resources—due to inconsistent rules and siloed program structures. Policymakers should clarify allowable uses, streamline reporting requirements, and provide technical assistance to help states and districts combine funds strategically to support evidence-based partnerships that address academic, behavioral, and mental health needs.
- **Make capacity-building federal grants to evidence based nonprofit and national service organizations.** Planning and scaling grants should be available for nonprofits implementing program models with a strong evidence base, along with operational grants to enable programs to operate in under-resourced schools.

Additionally, we urge policymakers to invest in national service as a critical means to strengthen our nation’s education system. National service is a powerful tool that can be leveraged to strengthen civic participation, develop community leaders, and invest in workforce development, all while supporting students’ academic achievement. Many of the nation’s leading non-governmental evidence-based providers have leveraged the power of service members to provide critical services ranging from literacy and math tutoring to college advising in service of students, families, and communities. Policymakers must reverse recent actions that have threatened the role of national services programs and instead deepen public investment in these programs and:

- **Fund and implement AmeriCorps.** Schools and providers around the nation have faced massive service cuts and ongoing uncertainty in light of recent federal attempts to cut or limit AmeriCorps programs, with profound implications for students, families, and communities. Policymakers must protect AmeriCorps investments and ensure the continued delivery of these essential programs. Over time, policymakers should expand AmeriCorps to ensure all under-resourced schools have the option of engaging AmeriCorps members to address priority needs and allow for more positive developmental relationships and differentiated instruction.
- **Support the Youth Mental Health Corps to enhance mental health services and create career pathways in behavioral health.** Funding the Youth Mental Health Corps, an innovative public private partnership that leverages AmeriCorps funding, will enable young adults to support mental health within schools, community organizations, and health clinics, all while providing

young adults with on-ramps into behavioral health careers. This innovative initiative both addresses urgent mental health needs and helps alleviate the national shortage of mental health professionals. Moreover, by embedding comprehensive mental health support in educational settings, the Youth Mental Health Corps aligns with a whole-learner approach, enabling students to focus on their academic and developmental growth while also attending to unaddressed mental health challenges.

- **Encourage the Department of Education to provide technical assistance and guidance to states and districts to support AmeriCorps partnerships.** This guidance could include highlighting what federal education funding streams can be braided or blended to fund partnerships with AmeriCorps programs that bring additional capacity to schools, especially to support high-quality tutoring, mentoring, and personnel with demonstrated knowledge of whole-learner approaches.
- **Support enrollment of national service participants in higher education.** We encourage incentives within current grant programs to support AmeriCorps alumni who have served the equivalent of at least one full year term (1700 hours) in the previous five years in their application to and enrollment in postsecondary programs focused on developing K-12 educators and educational leaders. We also support encouraging institutions to award credit for college-level learning gained through a service year or other service experience.

3) Emphasize Performance, Improvement, and Results

Driving stronger outcomes for students across our nation requires a more coherent, effective approach to performance management and improvement. Too often, our K-12 system— including national grants programs— focuses on input measures and compliance as opposed to improvement and ultimate outcomes. To shift states and districts’ emphasis towards growth and results, policymakers should:

- **Leverage multiple measures.** As schools and systems adopt more innovative instructional models, policymakers should support the use of multiple, aligned measures—including standardized assessments, performance-based assessments, indicators of durable skills, engagement and attendance data, and college and career readiness outcomes—to capture a fuller picture of student progress and enable continuous improvement.
- **Support outcomes-focused approaches.** Policymakers should empower school districts to deploy federal dollars to link funding to outcomes by providing stronger incentives, along with funding for staff, capacity-building, and technical assistance, to execute pathbreaking pay-for-success projects within the K-12 system as first authorized by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), including provisions that allow state and LEAs 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.
- **Partner with schools in outcomes-focused approaches.** Federal technical assistance centers, such as the Comprehensive Centers and Regional Educational Laboratories, should bolster

their technical assistance to enable states, local agencies, and partners to strengthen their performance systems, and develop, identify, adopt, and scale innovative and proven practices. This work should include an emphasis on forging strong community partnerships to ensure funding drives better measurable outcomes for children and families served, with an emphasis on outcomes growth.

- **Encourage and expand the Innovative Assessment and Accountability Demonstration Authority.** Policy leaders should take advantage of, and expand, this important authority that 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.

To support these efforts, policymakers must invest in high-quality, privacy-protecting data infrastructure, including both technology as well as robust capacity across government and non-governmental partners. Key steps include:

- **Support use of administrative data for analysis and improvement.** Policymakers should strengthen data infrastructure to enable administrative data to be linked across systems including, at minimum, early learning, K-12, postsecondary, and workforce systems, with the goal to incorporate public benefits systems as well. These efforts should include financial support both for state data systems and cross-state collaboratives and leverage national earnings and employment data. These systems should also provide for secure, privacy-protected access for key stakeholders such as nongovernmental providers for performance management, continuous improvement, reporting, and evaluation. We support investments in this infrastructure under the State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) and Workforce Data Quality Initiative (WDQI) programs alongside robust technical assistance for linkages as well as to protect privacy.
- **Report on college persistence and completion outcomes for the K-12 system.** Postsecondary outcomes are critical metrics of K-12 success. Policymakers should add college persistence and completion rates to data that is required to be reported at the state, district, and school levels, and should ensure researchers can leverage these data in a privacy-protected manner to support learning and improvement.
- **Update federal student data privacy laws to protect students and families while supporting learning and improvement.** As a starting point, policymakers should deeply engage students, families, teachers, and other educators in developing rules relating to data collection, secure storage, access, and deletion of student data. In addition, policymakers should support the use of strong, standard data-sharing agreements and offer robust technical assistance so every state, district, and school does not need to reinvent the wheel to provide partner organizations with privacy-protected access to anonymized student achievement and outcomes data. This access is critical to enable schools and their partners to offer tailored supports, assess progress, support continuous improvement, and conduct high-quality evaluations.

- **Leverage data for personalized learning.** Strengthening data infrastructure can also support privacy-protected personalized learning that accelerates student achievement and allows for data-informed decision making. This includes using data to support personalized learning and track and improve outcomes, while ensuring student data privacy. Data should be easily accessible to parents and teachers, so that families and educators can team up to support student learning.

4) Strengthen the Educator Pipeline

The quality of a classroom teacher is the most important in-school factor influencing a student’s success. Today, our nation’s educator pipeline is in dire need of improvement, whether to address geographic or subject specific staffing shortages (particularly in STEM and special education), to remedy persistent gaps in the quality and diversity of the educator pipeline, or to address critical student mental health needs. Policymakers should prioritize policy changes that strengthen our nation’s ability to recruit, prepare, and support highly effective educators across our K-12 system, including teachers, school leaders, and para-professionals. At the same time, policymakers should invest in rigorous research and development to identify the most impactful approaches to strengthening educator quality and the educator pipeline.

First, we call on policymakers to take foundational steps to strengthen our educator pipeline:

- **Strengthen educator training under Title II of the Higher Education Act (HEA).** Title II should better support training and professional development opportunities designed to prepare teachers to implement and lead innovative models, including whole-learner approaches. Title II should also prepare teachers with what they need to partner with parents in service of student learning at home and in the classroom, including through practical experiences in which teachers team up with parents to help students reach learning goals. Additionally, Title II should help prepare teachers to ensure that students have access to postsecondary opportunities such as advanced coursework, dual enrollment and career and technical education, even before high school, so that they have strong onramps to college and careers. Policymakers must ensure that Title II of HEA and Title II of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) work in concert to achieve these goals, and also that training for early educators aligns with preparation for K-12 educators so that all children can experience a continuum of whole-learner approaches.
- **Strengthen professional development under the ESEA.** Policymakers should prioritize efforts to develop and implement evidence-based professional development programs that support educators to respond to the needs of today’s students and to take advantage of cutting-edge best practices. This includes emphasizing and investing in evidence-based activities under Title II of the ESEA, including strategies tied to the science of learning; whole learner approaches; personalized learning, including complementary family engagement; and the delivery of competency-based instruction. In particular, policymakers should ensure that federal resources, including national programs under Title II of the ESEA, support the implementation and delivery of these strategies by non-governmental providers at scale.

- **Encourage the use of effective, holistic educator assessments.** Policymakers should encourage the use of more effective educator assessment strategies under ESEA Title I plans, building on the research base developed over the past thirty years. For example, educators should receive regular, formative feedback that drives improvement. In addition, we encourage efforts to incorporate whole-learner approaches in such assessments.

Second, we encourage policymakers to take steps to broaden access to careers in education and address urgent gaps for educators:

- **Invest in a high-quality educator workforce that reflects the community.** Extensive evidence supports the value of strengthening educator diversity across an array of characteristics as a means to support stronger outcomes for all students.⁴ Federal resources should support teacher diversity efforts, ranging from financial support to providing positive, supportive conditions for in-service educators. Federal policymakers should also provide clear guidance that supports the use of these strategies in alignment with civil rights protections. Specifically, Congress should amend Part A of Title II of the HEA to enhance principal and school leader preparation programs within the Teacher Quality Partnership Grant Program, with a specific focus on recruitment and retention practices that draw directly from home-grown, community talent to strengthen the principals and school leader pipeline.
- **Support educators in high-need fields and under-resourced areas.** We encourage policymakers to maintain and enhance the TEACH Grant program to support the recruitment and retention of educators who practice in high-need fields, such as special education, mathematics, and science. We also encourage policymakers to strengthen and expand programs like student loan forgiveness and first-time homeowner loans for educators, which are intended to incentivize teachers and school leaders to work in rural, under-resourced schools and high-need fields.
- **Invest in alternative teacher preparation programs.** We support investment in alternative programs with proven outcomes, such as teacher residency programs and registered teacher apprenticeships. These programs can offer streamlined pathways into teaching for individuals who have specific subject matter expertise and are interested in changing careers – a particularly critical strategy for districts facing a shortage of teachers in a specific subject area (i.e., STEM, special education, etc.). In particular, AmeriCorps programs create a powerful pipeline of young people with educational experience to become educators.
- **Strengthen the behavioral health pipeline to meet student mental health needs.** Policymakers must strengthen the pipeline of professionals prepared to meet students' growing behavioral health needs. Schools are facing historic shortages of school psychologists, social workers, counselors, and other mental health providers while reported student anxiety, depression, and

⁴ See, e.g., Brownie (2024), "Teacher Diversity: A Critical Lever for Student Success," TNTP, <https://tntp.org/blog/teacher-diversity-a-critical-lever-for-student-success/>.

trauma continue to rise.⁵ To address this gap, federal and state leaders should support evidence-based pathways—such as service-to-career models, paid apprenticeships, and national service initiatives like the Youth Mental Health Corps—that give young adults on-the-job experience and high-quality, stackable credentials in behavioral health. States should also leverage braided funding streams including Medicaid, workforce development dollars, and education funds to sustain school-based behavioral health roles and expand access in rural and under-resourced communities. Strengthening this pipeline ensures timely mental health support and creates long-term workforce pathways that benefit both students and the broader behavioral health system.

5) Provide the Critical Conditions for Learning

We support foundational improvements to the K-12 education system that ensure all students are able to receive excellent, holistic learning experiences, and that address longstanding, systemic barriers. While we support efforts to improve the functioning of federal agencies, including the Department of Education, we urge policymakers to pursue intentional, evidence-based processes to do so. For these improvements to succeed, we must build government capacity and pursue reform with intention. We are deeply concerned by the blunt cuts to federal staffing and capacity, including efforts to eliminate the U.S. Department of Education, under the present administration. These abrupt cuts have had serious negative impacts on our constituents, communities, and partners.

First, we call for policymakers to take the following fundamental steps to protect and strengthen our education system:

- **Protect and expand investment through the ESEA.** In particular, we urge policymakers to resist efforts to shift funding to block grants without clear guardrails, and to instead maintain and expand investment under the ESEA in a way that supports under-resourced communities and student populations with distinct needs.
- **Ensure certainty in public funding.** Recent federal funding pauses and cuts have caused major challenges across our education system. Districts, communities, and providers cannot properly pursue efforts to improve student outcomes in a climate of uncertainty. Policymakers must ensure the predictable, reliable delivery of ESEA, IDEA, and other federal education funds so schools and providers can effectively improve student outcomes.
- **Policymakers must prioritize strengthening government capacity and implementing reforms with diligence.** Recent cuts to federal staffing and resources, including proposals to eliminate the U.S. Department of Education, have weakened essential services and created challenges for educators and community-based organizations. Strengthening the performance and efficiency of government agencies is imperative, but federal reforms must follow an intentional, evidence-based approach that maintains and improves core functions and supports consistent, effective

⁵ See Prothero and Riser-Kositsky (2022), “School Counselors and Psychologists Remain Scarce Even as Needs Rise,” *Education Week*, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/school-counselors-and-psychologists-remain-scarce-even-as-needs-rise/2022/03>.

implementation of necessary programs.

- **Invest in state-level capacity.** In the current policy environment, states increasingly serve as the primary engine of coherence across education systems—translating federal intent into durable instructional, assessment, and capacity-building strategies. Policymakers should prioritize investments that enable states to build and sustain internal capacity for research use, continuous improvement, and cross-district learning, including support for state intermediaries, shared measurement systems, and evidence-based technical assistance. Strengthening state capacity will be essential to ensuring progress even amid ongoing federal uncertainty.

Second, we encourage policymakers to focus investment in the following areas to create the conditions for learning that ensure all students have the full opportunities to learn:

- **Prioritize the implementation and sustainability of evidence-based whole-learner approaches.** Alongside targeted efforts to pilot and scale evidence-based whole learner strategies, we encourage policymakers to support the integration of whole learner strategies across existing K-12 education programs. Policymakers should incorporate priorities and technical assistance for whole learner approaches across programs including professional development, parent and caregiver engagement, and assessment and improvement.
- **Prioritize family engagement in education.** Parents and caregivers play the most critical role in the development, mental health, and educational trajectory of their children. However, too often parents and caregivers lack equal opportunities to engage in their children’s education. Policymakers should encourage policies that recognize and engage families as full educational partners, including increasing the ESEA Title I parent engagement set-aside to expand districts’ capacity to do so and provide incentives for evidence-based, coherent school designs, including community schools, and aligned services that center student and family voices.
- **Expand funding for holistic student supports and community schools.** Students come to school with a variety of needs. Increased funding for entities like community schools, community centers, libraries, after-school programs and centers that provide physical and mental health care are critical for student success. Schools and teachers can’t do it alone, and incentivizing partnerships that leverage community resources are critical to creating the supportive system that allows students to learn and thrive.
- **Strengthen and support substance use prevention and early intervention in K–12 education through alignment with evidence-based frameworks.** Policymakers should expand funding and guidance for schools and districts to implement research-backed prevention programs that build students’ skills, resilience, and healthy coping strategies. Federal support should also promote partnerships between schools, community providers, and public health agencies to deliver screening, early intervention, and coordinated supports that mitigate substance use risk and address emerging behavioral health needs.
- **Advance digital opportunity.** We support expanding access to high-quality, evidence-based

technology approaches in under-resourced school systems and ensuring families can access the digital resources and internet access needed to support learning both at home and in their communities.

- **Support the responsible, effective, human-centered integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in PK–12 education.** Policymakers should invest in research, pilot programs, and educator professional learning so schools can use AI to personalize learning, reduce administrative burden, and strengthen instruction—while protecting student privacy, ensuring tool transparency, accessibility, and rigorous safeguards against bias. Federal leadership should advance clear standards for data governance and procurement, ongoing evaluation and accountability, and age-appropriate AI literacy so that AI expands educational opportunity, supports educator capacity, and closes—not widens—gaps in learning and healthy development.
- **Reform exclusionary school disciplinary practices.** Policymakers should prioritize using innovation and evidence-based strategies to improve school safety and stop the practice of referring students – including a disproportionate number of students of color, students with disabilities, and students with learning differences – to law enforcement for minor behavioral infractions. This includes requiring that schools train all school resource officers in restorative discipline practices; reversing zero-tolerance policies; incentivizing the placement of counselors and behavioral health specialists; and incentivizing restorative policies over exclusionary practices. We also support investing in school-safety innovation and giving priority in existing federal justice grants to applicants that promote a community partnership approach.
- **Strengthen evidence-based civic education that increases student engagement and connects learning to real-world experience.** Policymakers should support high-quality civic education that builds students’ civic knowledge, civic identity development, critical thinking, and real-world problem-solving skills while increasing student engagement. Federal policy should encourage the integration of evidence-based civic learning, as well as media literacy and reflective AI fluency, into core academic instruction and support educator professional development and school-community partnerships that enable effective implementation, particularly in under-resourced communities.
- **Support legislative and executive actions to provide a pathway to permanent legal status for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) beneficiaries and protect schools from government activity that interferes with schools’ educational mission.** Long uncertainty over students’ continued status has threatened students’ educational opportunities. We urge Congress to pass permanent legislative protection and a pathway to permanent legal status for DACA recipients. Additionally, because public schools should be a safe place for teaching and learning, we urge the government to restrict immigration enforcement in public schools to serious and immediate threats to public safety so that government action does not undermine educational goals.

Conclusion

Looking ahead, we see enormous opportunity to find common ground and work collaboratively towards education policies that expand opportunity, embrace innovation, leverage science and evidence, and meaningfully advance outcomes for all students. 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 accessible, fair, high-quality systems that support students, educators, workers, nonprofit leaders, and families in all our communities. We look forward to working alongside our Coalition members, partners, and policymakers to make this vision a reality.

About America Forward

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America Forward Coalition members achieve high impact, measurable outcomes in more than 15,000 communities nationwide, touching the lives of over 9 million Americans each year, and driving progress in early child care and learning, K-12 and post-secondary education, youth mental health and wellbeing, economic mobility and workforce development, evidence-based policy, social innovation, national service, and civic participation. Since 2007, America Forward's community of entrepreneurs has played a leading role in driving the national dialogue on social innovation policy and impact.