



# A First 100 Days Agenda for K-12 Education

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In November, amid a global pandemic and economic crisis, voters will choose the next president of the United States. Clearly, there will be no shortage of pressing issues to tackle within the first 100 days of the next administration. Addressing COVID-19 and the economy will certainly be top agenda items, but regardless of this election's outcome, the next administration must also prioritize and take immediate action to dismantle the structural inequity in the K-12 education system and provide schools much-needed relief in the pandemic recovery. While the vast majority of K-12 education funding comes from the state and local levels, and local school districts have control over critical decisions, the problems that schools face today are simply too vast to be solved without federal involvement. As the Center for American Progress outlined in 2019,<sup>1</sup> the next administration's agenda should focus on five core areas:

1. Applying an explicit racial equity lens to policy development
2. Preparing all students for college and the future workforce
3. Modernizing and elevating the teaching profession
4. Dramatically increasing investments in public schools and improving the equity of existing investments
5. Bringing a balanced approach to charter school policy

This issue brief outlines actions in each of these areas for the next administration's first 100 days that will help to provide every child with the opportunity for a quality education—particularly children who have historically been denied that opportunity.

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## Applying an explicit racial equity lens to policy development

The first 100 days of the next administration present a unique opportunity to ensure the federal government applies a racial equity lens to education policymaking using a community-informed process. This is a critical role for both the U.S. Department of Education and the White House's Domestic Policy Council (DPC).

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) calls for equitable access to quality education through a number of provisions, including the cultivation of higher-order thinking skills for all students; multiple measures to assess performance and progress; equitable access to educational resources; and research-based strategies for intervention that close opportunity gaps. The following recommendations call on the Education Department and the DPC to rejuvenate existing structures and establish new ones that reflect their leadership role in ensuring equitable access to quality education for every child in American schools.

#### [Reestablish and restructure the White House education initiatives](#)

The president should sign executive orders reestablishing the five White House initiatives on education, including the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities; the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics; the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; the White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education; and the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans. As part of that action, the president must clarify their roles and reporting structures; delineate a timeline of no longer than 90 days for appointing their commissions; and commit to engage those initiatives at a high level to exchange ideas with community members and grassroots organizations about desired policies supporting every child's success. Initiative leaders should be expected to meet regularly with the president's senior adviser for education and serve as members of the secretary of education's senior leadership team. Leaders of the initiatives should be at the Senior Executive Service level where possible and at minimum a GS-15 appointee. Importantly, initiatives require staffing and budgets commensurate with their missions and responsibilities.

Initial priorities of the White House initiatives should include establishing a racially diverse educator workforce, supporting the establishment of community-informed policymaking strategies, and assessing community impact in the face of COVID-19. In addition, they should surface community-driven ideas for redesigning schools and for investing targeted resources and bring those ideas to the White House and Education Department.

#### [Commit to a community-informed policymaking approach](#)

The White House initiatives, in partnership with the DPC and the Office of the Secretary of Education, should plan and launch a nationwide listening tour to learn more about experiences of schools and communities in the face of COVID-19 and ongoing racial unrest. Armed with that information along with statewide equity plans, the Education Department should crystalize an equity agenda centered on fortifying resources and policies that close gaps in opportunities. That effort should include incorporating a regular feedback loop with people across the country who are students in American schools, who have children in American schools, who are working in American schools, and who are advocat-

ing at the grassroots level to advance priorities of those community members. The Education Department and the DPC should not primarily rely on national organizations as the only expertise available for policy development and implementation and should, to the greatest extent possible, convene groups who take different approaches to addressing gaps in opportunity.

Additionally, the secretary of education should issue a memo directing all program offices to develop and implement a community informed policymaking strategy with consultation from the White House initiatives. All grant offices should rely on those strategies for direction on grant-making, technical assistance, rule-making, and official guidance. The Education Department should also issue regulations creating a new secretary's discretionary grant priority that advantages grantees proposing a community-informed approach to their work.

#### Increase the racial diversity of the teaching and school leader workforce

The president should use the first joint address to Congress to make clear that developing a racially diverse educator workforce is an administration priority. The secretary of education should further articulate the administration's commitment to and approach for cultivating and supporting a well-trained racially diverse workforce of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders. The Education Department should hold a convening with chief state school officers, union leaders, and leaders in schools of education and teacher preparation programs, especially those at historically Black colleges and universities, tribal colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, and other minority-serving institutions, to extend the process of identifying opportunities and obstacles for developing a racially diverse workforce—and one that prioritizes culturally responsive, affirming, and sustaining education practices.

#### Additional first 100 days actions on applying an explicit racial equity lens to policy development

- Restore Obama-era school discipline and Title IX guidance and consider rule-making to strengthen each of those policies.
- Issue guidance on how the Education Department's Office for Civil Rights will use disparate impact to evaluate civil rights complaints.
- Propose \$40 million in funding in the president's first budget request for the Augustus F. Hawkins Centers of Excellence grant program to strengthen teacher preparation programs at minority-serving institutions and increase the racial diversity of the educator workforce.

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## Preparing all students for college and the future workforce

Too often, students do not aspire to the kinds of jobs that will be prominent in the future, especially those requiring advanced technological skills. When students are not exposed to a variety of fields, occupations, and professionals—through hands-on learning experiences—factors such as their family income play a greater role in their career aspirations, and they fail to acquire the broad range of skills needed to succeed in the 21st-century workforce. Furthermore, if their high schools are not designed to integrate career, college, and civic readiness, then students are more likely to be disengaged from their studies.

Throughout the K-12 experience, student learning must be relevant to the future so that students can aspire to, and prepare for, choosing relevant pathways that fit their interests. In other words, the K-12 experience needs to be reimagined. Federal leadership in this reimagining is desperately needed, and the president can take the following steps in the first 100 days to lay a groundwork that can be built upon throughout the next four years.

### Establish a federal interagency commission focused on aligning K-12 education, higher education, and workforce funding and policies

This commission should include representatives from the Education Department's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education; Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education; Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services; Office of Postsecondary Education; and Federal Student Aid, as well as the U.S. Department of Labor and other relevant agencies. The members of the commission will work together to better align K-12 and higher education with workforce funding and policies, including through ESSA, the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and the Higher Education Act.

#### *Questions this commission should seek to answer include:*

1. Which funds can already be used across programs in all five laws to create seamless, high-quality pathways from K-12 education to postsecondary training and good jobs?
2. What new legislation, regulations, or guidance would be required or helpful for better alignment?
3. What level of funding would be required to allow states to develop, pilot, and expand high-quality pathways?
4. What existing state-level models could provide guidance for national expansion?

The commission should make recommendations to the president, the secretary of education, and the secretary of labor for legislation, regulations, guidance, and a research agenda on this topic.

### Establish a commission on innovation in assessment and the future of testing

The administration should convene researchers and experts across the fields of assessment and measurement; computer science and artificial intelligence; and education policy, as well as school staff, student, family, and community representatives, to lay the groundwork for dramatically better approaches to student assessment over the next 10 years.

#### *Questions the commission should seek to answer include:*

1. What opportunities and challenges do advancements in technology—for example, machine learning and virtual reality—present for the future of testing?
2. What are the characteristics of the ideal assessments for different purposes—for example, holding districts and schools accountable to all students, providing information to parents, and supporting real-time adjustments to teaching and learning?
3. What supports do educators need to become practitioner-researchers who use a variety of types of assessment results to evaluate their practice and continuously improve?

The proposed commission should make recommendations to the president and the secretary of education for legislation, regulations, guidance, and a research and development agenda on this topic.

### Additional first 100 days actions on preparing all students for college and the future workforce

- Issue guidance reiterating ESSA's requirements for annual assessments and provide technical assistance to states on adjusting assessments for remote learning, as necessary.
- Initiate a study on the disaggregated impacts on student learning and well-being due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Propose an increase in funding for ESSA's Competitive Grants for State Assessments program and assessment research at the Institute of Education Sciences as part of the president's first budget request, to support innovative approaches to assessment.
- Propose an increase in funding for ESSA's Student Support and Academic Enrichment grants program as part of the president's first budget request and provide guidance to states and school districts on how to use these funds to better prepare students for the future of work, improve access to counseling, and provide equitable access to advanced coursework.

## Ideas for the president's first joint address to Congress

- Announce that developing a racially diverse educator workforce is an administration priority.
- Announce that modernizing and elevating the teaching profession is an administration priority.
- Announce a proposal for the Public Education Opportunity Grants program in order to dramatically increase federal education funding.
- Announce a plan to create an Opportunity and Counseling Corps to help students and young adults recover from the COVID-19 crisis.

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### Modernizing and elevating the teaching profession

The health of the teaching profession has a profound impact on student achievement and student outcomes. Evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that a racially diverse, well-compensated, and well-trained teacher workforce that has the support and resources to succeed is one of the best ways to ensure an excellent education for students. Over the past decade, however, the teaching profession has been in crisis, with stagnant salaries, difficult working conditions, and teacher shortages in many states.

It remains to be seen how the school shutdowns that resulted from COVID-19 will affect the profession, but the economic fallout from this public health crisis is sure to lead to some of the same problems that followed the 2008 recession: increased demands on schools as the number of students experiencing poverty grows, drastic cuts to education funding that mean teachers have fewer resources to succeed in their jobs, and potentially widespread teacher layoffs. The below ideas are powerful ways for the next administration to demonstrate a commitment to modernizing and elevating the teaching profession within the first 100 days, as well as longer-term plans for how to make this goal a reality.

#### Announce a priority to modernize and elevate the teaching profession in the 2021 joint address to Congress

The president's joint address to Congress is an opportunity to explain why teacher working conditions matter for students and announce this as a priority for the administration. This announcement should include research findings<sup>2</sup> on the effects an excellent teacher can have on student achievement and broader student outcomes, including data<sup>3</sup> detailing the positive impact racially diverse teachers can have on students of color. In addition, the announcement should make a strong argument for increasing teacher salaries as a way to recruit and retain

a high-quality and racially diverse teacher workforce. The administration can emphasize the importance of this announcement by inviting a teacher with a compelling story about either their own educational experience or the impact they have had on their students as a guest for the joint address.

#### [Establish a working group to modernize and elevate the teaching profession](#)

After outlining a long-term vision to modernize and elevate the teaching profession in the joint address to Congress, the president should task the secretary of education with creating an Education Department working group to support these goals. In partnership with the White House initiatives on education, the working group should focus on diversifying the profession and bringing teacher working conditions in line with other professions, including raising teacher salaries to comparable levels. This should begin with targeted efforts to get high-quality teachers to the schools and students who need them most.

The working group should comprise teachers, school leaders, key federal legislators, Education Department officials, state and district leaders, and representatives from varying education organizations—including teachers’ unions, teacher voice groups, think tanks, research institutions, teacher preparation programs, grassroots and community organizations, and other nonprofit entities working for education equity.

The members of the working group would work to ensure all students—especially those from low-income communities, students of color, English language learners, and students with disabilities—are taught by excellent teachers by disseminating information and spurring stakeholder interest in this issue. This could include creating a website that highlights federal, state, and district policies and practices dedicated to improving student learning by modernizing the teaching profession as well as amplifying students’, teachers’, and school leaders’ personal stories on the need to strengthen the teacher pipeline to better serve students and how they and their students have benefited from such policies.

#### [Use the president’s first budget proposal to prioritize targeted investments to modernize and elevate the teaching profession](#)

##### *Increase teacher salaries*

Attracting and retaining diverse, high-quality teachers is difficult, in part, because teachers are underpaid<sup>4</sup> compared with other college-educated professionals, with salaries that have been stagnant<sup>5</sup> for decades. The next administration should include in its first budget a federal proposal to dramatically increase teacher pay to professional levels, such as through a \$10,000 refundable tax credit for teachers in high-needs schools.<sup>6</sup>

### *Establish an Equitable Access to Excellent Teachers Fund*

The next administration should establish an Equitable Access to Excellent Teachers Fund, which would provide competitive grants to school districts to create ideal teacher working conditions in places that have historically had the most difficulty attracting and retaining teachers and boosting student achievement. Transforming the working conditions of these schools to attract the best teachers will ultimately benefit not only the teachers but also the students, who will see improved outcomes and better learning opportunities at these schools. The administration could create this program by revamping ESSA's existing Teacher and School Leader Incentive Fund or the Supporting Effective Educator Development program, either through regulation or new proposed legislation.

### *Create a Presidential Teaching Scholarship*

The next administration should propose competitive grant funding for a four-year Presidential Teaching Scholarship to be awarded to diverse, high-achieving teacher candidates attending high-quality teacher preparation programs. This may be structured in part as additional support for the Augustus F. Hawkins Centers of Excellence. Each selected candidate would receive four years of full tuition support to attend a high-quality teacher preparation program, and the program would prioritize candidates who seek to teach in shortage area subjects. As a requirement of receiving the scholarship, these candidates would pledge to teach in high-need schools for three years upon graduation.

### *Additional first 100 days actions on modernizing and elevating the teaching profession*

- Issue guidance on how states and school districts can support efforts to modernize and elevate the teaching profession through Title II of ESSA and other existing funding streams.
- Issue guidance notifying states that the Education Department will review current ESSA state plans and conduct monitoring of their implementation to ensure that Title II funds are used as part of a comprehensive and cohesive strategy to strengthen their teacher pipelines in ways that reduce educational inequities and inequitable access to great teaching.
- Initiate a comprehensive report on the teacher labor market, including shortages; supply and demand at the national, state, and local levels, including schools operated by the Bureau of Indian Education; and projections of future needs for the profession.

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## Dramatically increasing investments in public schools and improving the equity of existing investments

This nation's schools are chronically underfunded. Funding for education declined drastically after the Great Recession, and nearly half of states have yet to recover to exceed 2008 state spending levels.<sup>7</sup> In many of the states that have experienced the most drastic cuts, schools are still operating at a bare-bones level. Districts have frozen teacher salaries for years, charged students for any elective course or extracurricular activity, or condensed the school into four-day week operations to save money. While the magnitude of the COVID-19 epidemic or its full effect on the economy is not yet known, economists are nearly certain there will be another deep recession. This means schools will again face budget cuts at a time when the students they serve are increasingly facing poverty and economic hardship.

Additionally, America's schools are falling apart, with repairs being delayed and de-prioritized in the face of funding cuts. Poor school infrastructure has significant negative consequences for the health of students and educators, as well as impacts on student learning and the environment.<sup>8</sup> What's more, these impacts are disproportionately felt by Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students and students from families with low incomes, who overwhelmingly attend the most poorly maintained schools.<sup>9</sup>

In the first 100 days of the next presidential administration, the president can take key steps to address chronic disinvestment in schools and promote a vision for long-term plans to make progress on this issue over the course of the next four years.

### Announce a proposal for Public Education Opportunity Grants in order to dramatically increase federal education funding

As the joint address to Congress is one of the president's earliest opportunities to express how they plan to put their priorities into action, the president should use this speech to explain the urgent need for more funding, particularly more equitable funding for the education system by calling on Congress to create a new Public Education Opportunity Grants program.<sup>10</sup> The president should make the case in both the joint address and in the first budget proposal that it is necessary to provide an unprecedented level of federal funding for K-12 education by describing how current efforts, both in response to COVID-19 and during regular appropriations cycles, have consistently been inadequate to remedy the larger structural problems inherent in the U.S. education system.

This speech should also describe some of the broad parameters of the proposed program, including maintaining current funding streams such as Title I; significantly increasing federal funding for K-12 education; reducing funding inequities within and between states; and ensuring accountability to communities for spending new funds in meaningful and impactful ways.

### Announce a plan to create an Opportunity and Counseling Corps to help students and young adults recover from the COVID-19 crisis

In addition to making the case for ongoing increases to federal education funding, during the 2021 joint address to Congress, the president should highlight the need to invest in recovering from the effects of the pandemic for both current K-12 students and young adults just entering the workforce by creating an Opportunity and Counseling Corps.<sup>11</sup> The pandemic will exacerbate existing racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic inequities in education, and millions of students will need support to recover from the lost instructional time and trauma they are experiencing. Expanding national service programs and other employment opportunities to create good jobs will help local economies and jump-start the careers of recent high school and college graduates. It is known that graduating into a recession can have long-term effects on labor force participation, earnings, and even mortality,<sup>12</sup> and so it is imperative that investments be made now to prevent those outcomes. The early signs are already evident, with students from families with low incomes leaving college at high rates and young workers of color not being hired at the same rate as their white peers as jobs that were furloughed return.<sup>13</sup> It is critical that the president call for investments in students through tutoring, counseling, and other supports while creating good job opportunities for young adults.

### Propose a permanent federal funding stream for school infrastructure as part of the president's first budget request

Too many of the nation's K-12 public schools are falling apart, creating hazardous environments that have an impact on health, safety, and student learning. According to a recent report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, about one-third of all schools need repairs or upgrades to major systems such as heating, ventilation, and air conditioning, and about 12 percent need repairs to ensure structural integrity.<sup>14</sup> These numbers are unsurprising given that the average age of school buildings is nearly 50 years old.<sup>15</sup> The situation is particularly dire in cities such as Baltimore and Detroit, on the island of Puerto Rico, and in schools run by the Bureau of Indian Education.<sup>16</sup> Cost estimates to bring all schools into good repair reach \$200 billion in today's dollars, and this does not include costs to modernize buildings and labs to provide a 21st-century education, including high-speed internet access, or to make buildings more energy efficient.<sup>17</sup> The president should call on Congress to immediately reintroduce and pass the Rebuild America's Schools Act and should propose permanent federal funding for school infrastructure in the administration's first budget request.

### Additional first 100 days actions on dramatically increasing investments in public schools and improving the equity of existing investments

- Announce an intention to issue regulations and guidance to strengthen the fiscal requirements of federal K-12 education programs, including maintenance of effort, comparability, and supplement, not supplant.

- Initiate a study of K-12 education funding, including state-by-state information on adequacy, effort, and equity of K-12 education funding formulas.
- Establish a technical assistance center to support states in making their funding formulas more equitable.
- Begin creating a national database on school building and equipment condition, to be updated annually.

## Ideas for the president's first budget request to Congress

- Propose \$40 million for the Augustus F. Hawkins Centers of Excellence grant program.
- Propose to increase funding for ESSA's Competitive Grants for State Assessments program and assessment research at the Institute of Education Sciences.
- Propose to increase funding for ESSA's Student Support and Academic Enrichment grants program.
- Propose to dramatically increase teacher pay through a \$10,000 refundable tax credit for teachers in high-needs schools.
- Propose an Equitable Access to Excellent Teachers Fund.
- Propose a Presidential Teaching Scholarship.
- Propose a Public Education Opportunity Grants program.
- Propose a permanent federal funding stream for school infrastructure.
- Propose a higher proportion of federal Charter Schools Program (CSP) funding dedicated to national activities supporting smart growth investments and help existing charter schools to improve.

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## Bringing a balanced approach to charter school policy

Charter schools are a contentious issue in education policy, particularly among progressives. Since the first laws passed nearly 30 years ago, high-quality charter schools have been a critical strategy to increase opportunity and create more good seats in public schools. Charter schools now enroll more than 3 million students and represent significant shares of enrollment in many communities. In some of the nation's largest cities, charter schools serve one-third to one-half of all students in public schools.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, though, there is merit to some of the critiques of the charter sector, particularly for-profit charter schools.

The federal government must take the lead on modernizing and improving charter school policy throughout the country. The next administration should look to bring a balanced approach to charter school policy that encourages smart growth,

helps existing charter schools to improve, and confronts the challenges in the charter sector. The following suggestions detail how the next administration can begin this work in the first 100 days.

#### [Propose a higher proportion of federal CSP funding dedicated to national activities supporting smart growth investments and help existing charter schools to improve](#)

The vast majority of funding in the Charter Schools Program is dedicated to opening new charter schools. While this is critical funding for school developers to plan and prepare for successful charter school openings before they receive regular per-pupil funding, there are other activities that deserve support as well. For example, grants could help communities analyze enrollment patterns and identify which programs families want in order to ensure there is equitable access to opportunities in both traditional and charter schools. Other grants could help independent charter schools and small networks establish agreements to create purchasing consortia or gain more affordable access to special education expertise. By proposing appropriations language in the president's budget, or potentially re-regulating the CSP, the next administration could diversify the activities that this program supports.

#### [Announce an intention to regulate CSP programs to create stronger requirements to prevent conflicts of interest and improve transparency in charter school operations](#)

While the overwhelming majority of charter schools are run by committed entrepreneurs and dedicated educators, bad actors seeking to profit from running schools have been able to operate for too long. The boards responsible for overseeing charter schools should be independent of the organizations managing the schools and have strict conflict of interest requirements. Information about how federal and other public funds are spent should also be transparent to authorizers and the public. The Education Department could begin the rule-making process within the first 100 days of the next administration in order to provide incentives for state education agencies and charter authorizers to strengthen their requirements in these areas.

#### [Additional first 100 days actions on bringing a balanced approach to charter school policy](#)

- Develop criteria for waivers or other administrative actions to adjust proposed CSP grantee budgets amid the coronavirus pandemic. Timelines for creating and opening new schools are likely to be affected in the coming years, and the Education Department should allow other uses of funds to support existing charter schools.
- Begin listening sessions around the country with students, parents, community members, educators, school district leaders, and charter school leaders to generate ideas for how to encourage greater district-charter cooperation and collaboration to invest in improving the quality of all schools.

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## Conclusion

After being inaugurated in January 2021, the president will face some of the biggest challenges of any administration, as the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis continues. Even as it navigates these crises and looks toward the future, the next administration also has the opportunity to transform K-12 public education in this country. From day one of the administration, the federal government can not only signal to the country that education will be a priority but also take concrete steps to create real change and lay the groundwork for the rest of the term. It is clear now, more than ever, that a robust K-12 agenda that applies an explicit race equity lens to all policies; prepares students for college and the workforce; modernizes and elevates the teaching profession; increases the nation's investment in education; and takes a balanced approach to charter schools is necessary to provide a quality education for every student.

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