

The logo for the Southern Education Foundation, featuring the letters 'SEF' in white on a dark blue rectangular background.

SOUTHERN  
EDUCATION  
FOUNDATION

The background of the entire page is a blue-tinted collage. In the upper left, a woman with dark curly hair is smiling and speaking into a microphone. In the lower right, a man in a light pink shirt is leaning over a desk, smiling and pointing at a document while a young boy in a green shirt looks on. In the center background, the dome of a state capitol building is visible.

# THE SOUTHERN EDUCATION FOUNDATION'S *Public Policy Priorities*

[www.SouthernEducation.org](http://www.SouthernEducation.org)

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The Southern Education Foundation (SEF) would like to thank Center for Community Organizing and Engagement at New York University, Communities for Just Schools, Education Counsel, the Learning Policy Institute, and SEF's Racial Equity Leadership Network Fellows for offering thoughtful feedback and advice in preparation of this document. We appreciate your willingness to share your time and insights as we developed a comprehensive set of policy priorities for policymakers, community advocates, and families. This would not have been possible without your valuable input and feedback. Thank you once again.

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## FOREWORD

The Southern Education Foundation (SEF), in its over 150-year history, has maintained a voice advocating for education opportunities and education equity in the South. The document presented here is a continuation of that history of advocacy through a statement of principles and positions covering what we at SEF consider to be critical issues of policy in K – 12 public education. This document offers sound policy positions supported by credible research and data designed to better inform public education policy development and related legislation in the southern states. This document expands upon and provides foundational support for SEF’s

**Whether SEF is in the position of assisting in the drafting of proposed education legislation or opposing what we believe is ill-advised education legislation, it is critical that our policy positions are informed, refined and explained by quality research and the presentation of data in a manner that strengthens the advancement of the best policies and practices for the education of all children in our public schools.**

Legislative Positions released in December 2018. Our December 2018 Legislative Positions centered around three specific issues in K – 12 public education policy: (1) Education Reform, (2) School Governance, and (3) School Funding.

Our SEF Government Affairs operation continues to work on public education legislation throughout the South on matters that significantly touch upon equity, fairness and opportunity surrounding the issues addressed in this document. Whether SEF is in the position of assisting in the drafting of proposed education legislation or opposing what we believe is ill-advised education legislation, it is critical that our policy positions are informed, refined and explained by quality research and the presentation of data in a manner that strengthens the advancement of the best policies and practices for the education of all children in our public schools. It is also important for our colleagues and others engaged in the continuous pursuit of equity, fairness and opportunity to have information such as what is being presented in this document to advance better understanding of these issues as we work in collaboration for the betterment of quality education opportunity for all children.

SEF is pleased to present this report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Raymond C. Pierce". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Raymond C. Pierce  
President and CEO  
Southern Education Foundation

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For over 150 years, the Southern Education Foundation (SEF) has been committed to developing and advocating for high-quality school systems for students of color and low-income students throughout the South. Today, SEF's focus includes building and supporting new education policy research, developing leaders, and fostering community advocacy to improve outcomes for students of color, but especially Black and Brown children in the South. However, the educational challenges that confront historically marginalized children and their families are too great for a single organization or group to tackle alone.

Policymakers, including those both elected or appointed to critical state and local positions, maintain tremendous influence over the quality of state education systems.

Specifically, state lawmakers, board members, and superintendents develop budgets, select school improvement strategies, identify curriculums, as well as set the overall strategy of the state for education in their respective roles. As such, SEF, supported by its community partners and district leaders, has offered a slate of federal, state, and local recommendations that aim to improve the education quality for Black, Brown, and low-income students in the southern region. We hope this living document serves as a guidepost to advancing researched-based SEF education policy in the South.

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## ISSUE AREA 1 – EDUCATION REFORM

- Expand access to affordable high-quality early childhood and Pre-Kindergarten programs
- Foster collaborative, stable, and quality district and school leadership
- Ensure that students of color, and other historically underserved students, are taught by well-prepared and licensed teachers by advancing evidence-based policies that support teacher preparation, recruitment, development, and retention
- Invest in the use of a community schools approach to meet the needs of the whole student
- Support parent and community engagement that results in shared accountability to improve school systems
- Provide the necessary supports, resources, and opportunities to schools with low-performing subgroups of students and with significant gaps in subgroup performance as compared to their peers
- Implement non-punitive restorative discipline practices and eliminate zero-tolerance policies for non-violent offenses
- Promote culturally relevant, rich, and rigorous curriculum that prepares students for success in college and the workforce
- Support making schools physically and emotionally safe environments for every student

## ISSUE AREA 2 – SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

- Limit control of public education to the level of government closest and most responsive to the taxpayers and parents of the children being educated



## ISSUE AREA 3 – SCHOOL FUNDING

- Implement equitable K-12 state funding formulas that address historical and present-day opportunity and achievement gaps and fiscal inequities that negatively impact students of color

## ISSUE AREA 4 – SCHOOL CHOICE

- Eliminate school voucher programs, education savings accounts, tax-credit scholarship programs, and other efforts to fund private schools with public dollars
- Prohibit the use of public resources for virtual and for-profit charter schools
- Support the advancement of high-quality magnet schools that promote racial and socioeconomic diversity
- Support high-quality charter school networks that are inclusive, evidence-based, and accountable for serving all students

**The Southern Education Foundation works to implement equitable K-12 state funding formulas that address historical and present-day opportunity and achievement gaps and fiscal inequities that negatively impact students of color.**



# INTRODUCTION

**F**OR OVER 150 YEARS, THE SOUTHERN Education Foundation (SEF) has been committed to developing and advocating for high-quality school systems for students of color and low-income students throughout the South. SEF's work has ranged from building public schools post-Civil War for the children of the previously enslaved population, to our analysis of student demographic trends in education across the South and how education policies are disproportionately impacting students of color. Our historical perspective continues to inform the manner in which we pursue our mission of advancing educational opportunities for African Americans and people of color in the South.

Education is *the* civil rights issue of this generation. It can perpetuate systemic and historical inequities, or it has the power to equalize life outcomes by increasing opportunities and access to high quality school settings. Horace Mann, a 19th century education

**Education is the civil rights issue of this generation. It can perpetuate systemic historic inequities, or it has the power to equalize life outcomes by increasing opportunities and access to high quality school settings.**



reformer, said “Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery.” Today, SEF aims to support the development of schools that will enable all children, but especially Black and Brown students, to succeed in a fast-changing global economy and diverse democracy. To develop an excellent pre-kindergarten through grade 12 school system for students of color, SEF believes governments at all levels need to support and implement education policies anchored in equity and academic excellence for all students.

SEF has outlined four key issue areas (Education Reform, School Governance, School Finance, and School Choice) and

developed the accompanying policy recommendations below for state and federal lawmakers to adopt, as well as for grassroots advocates to support. We believe a strong education system supported by the accompanying recommendations will foster rich, purposeful learning experiences to children and adults. The policies support capacity-building, continuous academic and developmental improvement, and meaningful connections between school systems and communities. SEF also believes these policies will create more equitable and achievement-oriented schools for students of color in the South. However, this is a dynamic document that will continue to be updated over time based on research and partner feedback.





# EDUCATION REFORM

**SEF RECOMMENDATION:** *Expand access to affordable high-quality early childhood and Pre-kindergarten programs.*

**RATIONALE:** Investing in comprehensive birth-to-five early childhood education increases student achievement and saves taxpayers by minimizing government costs to adults who receive quality early educational experiences. Groundbreaking work of the Abecedarian Project in North Carolina initiated in 1972

found that students who had access to early childhood education programs have stronger learning gains throughout their school years. These same children reaped benefits in some cases as much as two decades later. According to the project, children who participate in Pre-K programs are less likely to become teen parents, more likely to be employed, less likely to be enrolled in

**Children who participate in Pre-K programs are less likely to become teen parents, more likely to be employed, less likely to be enrolled in public assistance programs, and more likely to enter and complete college.**

public assistance programs, and more likely to enter and complete college than their peers without a Pre-K experience. High-quality preschool and birth-to-five programs for disadvantaged children can deliver between 7-13% per year return on investment.<sup>i</sup> Implementing an effective high-quality preschool program requires offering compensation and support that attract and retain a highly

qualified workforce; a program day that provides adequate, productive learning time and activities; and child assessments used for individualized learning.<sup>ii</sup>

## **FEDERAL AND STATE EFFORTS SHOULD:**

- Increase funding to support the development of high-quality early childhood and Pre-kindergarten programs in communities with scarce high-quality early childcare or Pre-Kindergarten facilities.
- Expand access to effective home visiting programs to support families of young children.
- Require ongoing professional development training, such as college courses and research-based trainings, for child care and early childhood professionals to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of young children.
- Create multiple pathways to earn recommended early childhood education degrees or other credentials, including competency-based pathways, for individuals who have worked in the field for multiple years.
- Create or expand an early education scholarship program for early childhood educators working in



the field to obtain an early childhood education degree.

- Ensure adequate funding for programs such as Head Start and universal Pre-K.
- Ensure early childhood education professionals' salaries and employee benefits are the same as starting school district teachers.
- Advance effective data utilization practices in early education settings to improve teaching and learning environments to support the needs of young children.

## **DISTRICT EFFORTS SHOULD:**

- Partner with local early childhood education community-based organizations and healthcare providers to scale free and recurring screenings for developmental delays and connect children diagnosed with developmental delays to local resources.
- Provide professional development to school and district leaders to better understand, support, and evaluate early childhood teachers and classrooms.
- Provide culturally competent family engagement opportunities that support and engage families of all students.

- Utilize federal funding, such as through ESSA, to better coordinate education services for low-income young children.
- Connect Pre-K through 3rd-grade data and achievement systems in order to support best practices that promote the full range of a child's development and transition into elementary school.

### **SEF RECOMMENDATION:**

*Foster collaborative, stable, and quality district and school leadership.*

**RATIONALE:** The Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) found that collaborative and steady leadership is one of several “essential supports” for success. CCSR also found that school leaders who foster collaboration, give teachers a voice in school instruction and administration, and work intentionally to engage parents and communities in the school have greater success in transforming low-performing schools than those that lead in a top-down manner inside the school.

In order to advance toward racial equity, districts should have a clear vision and

a plan to equitably distribute school resources. District leaders must set direction and influence school levers through an ongoing cycle of improvement in partnership with school community members.

## STATE EFFORTS SHOULD:

- Ensure district and school leaders commit to equity for the most disadvantaged student population by changing policies that impede school improvement activities for the neediest students.
- Incentivize positive and inclusive approaches to racial diversity at the district and school levels by including commitments to racial equity in accountability and school improvement plans.
- Provide supports and professional development opportunities for district and school leaders to ensure the *conditions for teaching* meet the needs of the teachers.

## DISTRICT EFFORTS SHOULD:

- Develop a clear vision, policy, and measurable plan approved by the local school board to achieve racial equity.<sup>iii</sup>

- Perform an equity audit conducted by a third party with input from the local district and make all equity reports publicly available.<sup>iv</sup>
- Provide equity training and leadership development for the school board, central office, and district principals.
- Address teacher shortages in fields essential to college- and career-ready courses and create recruitment and retention strategies that ensure all students are taught by a qualified educator.

## SEF RECOMMENDATION:

*Ensure that students of color, and other historically underserved students, are taught by well-prepared and licensed teachers by advancing evidence-based policies that support teacher preparation, recruitment, development, and retention.*

**RATIONALE:** Research suggests that, among school-related factors, teachers matter most. A teacher is estimated to have two to three times the impact of any other school factor on student reading and math test scores.<sup>v</sup> Research also indicates that teachers of color boost the academic performance of students of color, as well as their white peers, including higher reading and math assessment results, improved graduation rates, and a rise in college aspirations.<sup>vi</sup> Greater diversity of teachers mitigates feelings of isolation, frustration, and fatigue that can contribute to individual teachers of color leaving the profession when they feel they are alone.<sup>vii</sup> Overall, public schools perform much better when states invest in career educators and support them with strong preparation induction, ongoing professional development, and leadership roles in classrooms and schools.

### **FEDERAL EFFORTS SHOULD:**

- Support teacher candidates of color by underwriting the cost of teacher preparation through service scholarship and loan forgiveness programs. These programs cover or reimburse a portion of tuition costs in exchange for a commitment to teach in high-need schools or

subject areas for 3 to 5 years.

- Scale-up teacher preparation programs that enhance pedagogy and subject mastery, such as residency models and other opportunities for district-university partnerships that provide clinical experiences for teacher (and leader) candidates, and invest in programs to recruit and support teachers of color to lead classrooms that are demographically changing.
- Fund teacher and leader preparation programs that emphasize culturally relevant and responsive practices to ensure teachers understand students' cultural and/or economic contexts.
- Invest in expanding high-quality educator preparation programs, including those at Minority Serving Institutions, that offer a science-based and developmentally sound course sequence that centers on understanding child and adolescent development.

### **STATE AND DISTRICT EFFORTS SHOULD:**

- Require teacher candidates to complete clinical training, and provide funding for high-quality



clinical experiences, such as teacher residencies.

- Adopt “profession-ready” standards for teachers that fully reflect the knowledge and skills teachers need to effectively teach all students and offer different opportunities to demonstrate mastery of “profession-ready” standards, such as through the use of a high-quality teacher performance assessment.
- Prioritize new teachers who meet profession-ready standards as evaluated from high-quality performance assessments prior to becoming the teacher of record.
- Incorporate educator competencies regarding support for social, emotional, and cognitive development, as well as restorative practices, into licensing and accreditation requirements for teachers and administrators as well as counseling staff.
- Support teacher recruitment and retention in high-needs schools by investing in evidence-based strategies, such as mentoring and induction programs, designed to improve instructional quality and supports for teachers.
- Continue to invest in building teacher capacity through the

provision of evidence-based professional development and by underwriting the cost for teachers to gain additional licenses, including National Board Certification.

### **SEF RECOMMENDATION:**

*Invest in the use of a community schools’ approach to meet the needs of the whole student.*

**RATIONALE:** Community schools are public schools that partner with families and community organizations to provide well-rounded educational opportunities and supports for student success. Community schools<sup>viii</sup> improve student attendance, engagement, behavior, and academic performance, especially for low-income students. Services range from academic tutoring to family mental health services—all supporting students, the family, or the community. SEF believes there are four key pillars that together create the conditions necessary for students to thrive: (1) integrated student supports, (2) expanded and enriched learning

time and opportunities, (3) active family and community engagement, and (4) collaborative leadership and practices. Numerous studies show that community schools, when implemented effectively and given sufficient time to mature, can help close achievement gaps for students from low-income families.<sup>x</sup> These benefits help to create a more equitable society and increase the number of young people who are prepared to succeed in college, career, and civic life.

### **FEDERAL AND STATE EFFORTS SHOULD:**

- Increase or begin funding for community schools, including providing funding for conducting an initial needs and asset assessment, a planning year, and the hiring of a full-time coordinator in each school or district to help build and maintain the relationships required to sustain wraparound supports.
- Provide resources for community schools in the state school funding formula and joint funding across departments, such as health and human services, workforce development, and early childhood education.

- Issue guidance and technical assistance regarding the use of federal funds from different agencies.
- Foster cross-agency alignment and form support networks of schools.

### **DISTRICT EFFORTS SHOULD:**

- Integrate community schools in local school board policies, resolutions, and mayoral initiatives.

### **SEF RECOMMENDATION:**

*Support parent and community engagement that results in shared accountability to improve school systems.*

**RATIONALE:** Research suggests that strengthening ties between schools and communities is a critical component of an effective school turnaround.<sup>x</sup> To increase academic achievement, school leadership should build community and parent ties and ensure schools are welcoming and accessible, particularly to parents.

Strong parent engagement programs have proven effective in increasing school attendance, test scores, and overall parent involvement. Additionally, effective family engagement can decrease student suspensions and expulsion rates.

## **STATE EFFORTS SHOULD:**

- Ensure that all districts and all schools report student outcomes that are meaningful and understandable to families, students, educators, and other stakeholders, and that it is shared

publicly in an accessible and user-friendly way.

- Engage in regular periodic statewide stakeholder engagement with families, students, educators and other stakeholders for feedback on the reporting instruments to ensure they are understandable and are improved based on stakeholder input.
- Encourage and support districts and schools in conducting student and family school climate surveys and use the feedback to improve school climate.



## DISTRICT EFFORTS SHOULD:

- Support high-quality student, parental, and community engagement that empowers students, parents, and community stakeholders to interact and drive school-level policies.
- Support professional development for school leaders to provide opportunities for students, parents, and community members to express their opinions and integrate their views into the operation of the schools.
- Encourage and provide professional development opportunities for district and school leaders to establish, discuss, and respond to racial equity policies.
- Support schools in conducting student and family school climate surveys, in disaggregating and understanding the survey results to identify areas for improvement, and in using that feedback effectively to improve school climate for families and students.
- Align a system of policies, standards, and programs that promote family engagement beyond the traditional ways that

families have been invited into schools, especially for students who have experienced violence, trauma, homelessness, hunger, or other challenges.

### SEF RECOMMENDATION:

*Provide the necessary supports, resources, and opportunities to schools with low-performing subgroups of students and with significant gaps in subgroup performance as compared to their peers.*

**RATIONALE:** If the nation is truly committed to having every child graduate from high school ready for college and a career, accountability must be present at each level of government. Accountability should be paired with the provision of the necessary supports, resources, and opportunities for success. Accountability systems can provide the information necessary to reveal gaps in educational resources, opportunities, and

outcomes and identify which schools are making progress, which ones are struggling, and why they are struggling. Information from these accountability and improvement systems should be used to direct resources to the schools and students that need them most. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides states with the opportunity and flexibility to create accountability systems that comprehensively measure school performance and allow individual subgroups to matter.<sup>xi</sup> States drive accountability policies, but they are not the only actor. District and school leaders are also responsible for a child's education, but they must be given the resources, guidance, and flexibility to implement the appropriate evidence-based strategies to succeed.

## STATE EFFORTS SHOULD:

- Ensure that schools struggling to close significant gaps in subgroup performance are accurately identified for support and intervention within a state's accountability and improvement system.
- Implement an "n" size of 15 for all subgroups, unless a state can

prove an "n" size of 15 would jeopardize individual student data privacy.<sup>1</sup>

- Use data provided by the state's accountability and improvement systems to inform the distribution of resources.
- Implement accountability and improvement systems that recognize and reward growth and achievement overall and for subgroups of students across all indicators of performance.
- Ensure that poor performance on an indicator, overall and by subgroup, is not masked by performance on other indicators.
- Disaggregate and report the individual measures included within any composite indicator to allow for the analysis of performance on the individual measures overall and by student subgroup.
- Set performance targets that are measured against an overall goal for all students and not based on relative performance.
- Include measures of school climate, social-emotional supports, and school

<sup>1</sup> An "n" size refers to the state determined minimum number of students required to create a subgroup of students at the school, district, and state levels. The "n" size must not reveal personally identifiable information about the student and must yield statistically reliable information

exclusions in accountability and improvement systems, so that these are a focus of schools' attention, and ensure that data are regularly available to guide continuous improvement.

## STATE AND DISTRICT EFFORTS SHOULD:

- Provide schools with resources and technical assistance as they seek to interpret and use data in the accountability system, including any data from teacher, student, or parent school climate surveys, and develop responses to what they find.
- Train educators in the analysis of the data they collect and the implementation of high-quality programs, professional development, and school organizational changes that support students' development based upon that analysis. State-level and district support may include technical assistance for program development, widely available professional development, and the provision of state and federal funding to support schools' efforts.

## SEF RECOMMENDATION:

*Implement non-punitive restorative discipline practices and eliminate non-violent zero-tolerance policies.*

**RATIONALE:** Successful schools are places where both students and educators feel safe and respected. Schools and districts across the country are turning to evidence-based restorative practices and positive behavior interventions to replace ineffective and rigid non-violent zero-tolerance discipline policies. Many school districts, pushed by youth and adult organizing, have abandoned zero tolerance, recognizing the traumatic implementation that forces students out of school and does not make school safer for students.

## STATE AND DISTRICT EFFORTS SHOULD:

- Replace non-violent zero-tolerance policies with discipline policies focused on explicit



teaching of social-emotional strategies and restorative justice practices that support young people in learning key skills and developing responsibility for themselves and their community.

- Prohibit the use of corporal punishment in public schools—which is used disproportionately on African American students—in the 19 states that still allow it.
- Eliminate referrals to law enforcement for all nonviolent, noncriminal offenses by developing model school

student suspensions, expulsions, and school transfer rates by student subgroup, and use this data as part of an annual audit of state student discipline data; and submit a bi-annual improvement plan to the legislature designed to reduce the overall rates of exclusionary discipline and eliminate disproportionate rates based on race, gender, disability, LGBTQ, or English learner status.

- Provide funding for school climate surveys, social-emotional learning and restorative justice

## **Replace non-violent zero-tolerance policies with discipline policies focused on explicit teaching of social-emotional strategies and restorative justice practices that support young people in learning key skills and developing responsibility for themselves and their community.**

discipline policy and memoranda of agreements (MOUs) that clarify the roles and responsibilities of school resource officers (SROs) and distinguish them from school administrators' role in discipline.

- Collect, analyze, and report discipline data, including length and frequency of individual

programs, and revamped licensing practices (including appropriate assessments) to support these reforms.

- Provide professional development to all adults in the school building in restorative justice, positive behavioral supports, and implicit bias.



- Design schools for strong, personalized relationships so that students can be well-known and supported (e.g., by creating small schools or learning communities within schools, looping teachers with students for more than 1 year, creating advisory systems, supporting teaching teams, and organizing schools with longer grade spans) all of which strengthen relationships and improve student attendance, achievement, and attainment.
- Develop schoolwide norms and supports for safe, culturally responsive classroom communities that provide students with a sense of physical and psychological safety, affirmation, and belonging, as well as opportunities to learn social, emotional, and cognitive skills.

### **SEF RECOMMENDATION:**

*Promote culturally relevant, rich, and rigorous curriculum that prepares students for success in college and the workforce.*

**RATIONALE:** Students do better when they see themselves reflected in their school, their teachers, and their studies. Many districts and schools are successfully integrating curriculum options that allow students to reflect on their cultural backgrounds. Curricula like the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Teaching Tolerance curriculum help teachers deliver culturally rich and sensitive topics to develop the broad range of skills students need to reduce prejudice, improve intergroup relations, and support equitable school experiences. The materials that are provided through programs like Teaching Tolerance affirm diversity and bridge home, school, and community experiences while creating a classroom atmosphere that is rigorous, rich, and culturally relevant.

## STATE EFFORTS SHOULD:

- Encourage all schools, Pre-K -12, to offer courses in the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of their student bodies.
- Ensure that curriculum standards at all subject and grade levels accurately represent the histories, narratives, and backgrounds of diverse identities.
- Ensure that state high school graduation requirements are fully aligned with their college—and career-ready standards.
- Establish sufficient and stable funding streams to promote equitable access to college—and career-ready programs of study. For example, states can increase the proportion of students from low-income families and students of color participating in advanced coursework by ensuring there is no tuition burden or barrier for dually enrolled students, and by paying for textbook and testing fees for AP or IB courses.
- Facilitate access to high-quality materials, align curricula across grade levels, and provide professional development for teachers so they can support college- and career-ready courses of study.



Professional development can also help teachers design and use performance assessments to inform instruction.

- Support the use of high-quality student performance assessments that measure student competencies associated with college, career, and civic readiness and that provide a more holistic and accurate view of students' mastery of critical skills, while better preparing them to engage in college-level work.
- Increase support for programs such as Early College or career academy initiatives that promote successful transitions to postsecondary education.
- When calculating college and career readiness outcomes—such as pass rates on AP tests and IB tests, dual-enrollment completion rates, work-based learning opportunities, and industry-recognized credentials—base the denominator for each measure on all students and not just the students enrolled in these courses to provide a more accurate measure of overall access and success and to incentivize the inclusion of all students.

## DISTRICT EFFORTS SHOULD:

- Convene diverse groups of educators to create culturally responsive curricula where gaps exist, and provide funding for teachers to purchase such materials.
- Provide ongoing professional development to educators and school leaders to provide culturally responsive curricula and pedagogy.
- Require classroom and school libraries to reflect multiple forms of diversity, as named above.

### SEF RECOMMENDATION:

*Support making schools physically and emotionally safe environments for every student.*

**RATIONALE:** Research continues to illustrate that children who feel unsafe at school perform academically worse and are more at risk of coming into contact with the criminal justice system. Safe schools for students, on the other hand, promote social and creative

learning, exploration, and healthy emotional development. Without a more comprehensive definition of safety, schools are not equipped to support teachers in recognizing and supporting children’s strengths and needs, both academically and social-emotionally—with the goal of equipping them for a successful education and future. Most urgently, school safety policies should not only focus on ensuring physical safety, but also on establishing positive and trusting relationships between students and adults in the school building.

## **STATE AND DISTRICT EFFORTS SHOULD:**

- Ensure that educators have the knowledge and the skills to create safe and inclusive learning environments where students feel physically, emotionally, and identity-safe in the classrooms and schools.
- Increase access to support services, such as mental health supports, by increasing funding for school-based counseling services, by strengthening existing statewide intervention programs, and by supporting schools in developing partnerships with community organizations.

- Ensure that districts that have School Resource Officers (SROs) in schools maintain a memorandum of agreement (MOU) with clearly defined roles and responsibilities of the SROs, particularly to avoid unnecessary school-based arrests of students for behavior that should have been handled by a school administrator.
- Ensure that all SROs receive effective training that makes schools physically and emotionally safe for students, including related to youth development, mediation, and implicit bias training.
- Provide anti-racism and anti-bias training and professional development opportunities for teachers, school staff, and students regarding the early recognition, detection, and reporting of signs of threats of an attack in or upon schools.
- Prohibit any person attending, working at, or visiting school campuses from carrying or using firearms or any other weapon on school grounds.



# SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

**SEF RECOMMENDATION:** *Limit control of public education to the level of government closest and most responsive to the taxpayers and parents of the children being educated.*

**RATIONALE:** There is very little evidence school district state takeovers improve academic outcomes in underperforming schools. According to the Center for Popular Democracy's "State Takeovers of Low-Performing Schools: A



Record of Academic Failure, Financial Mismanagement and Student Harm” report, “children have seen negligible improvement—or even dramatic setbacks—in their education,” resulting from state takeover. Eliminating local control also politically disenfranchises communities, particularly black communities, by shifting power from elected school board members to state officials who do not represent the local communities.

## **STATE EFFORTS SHOULD:**

- Not take over chronically underperforming schools but rather support evidence-based school and district improvement strategies such as conducting an equity audit and needs assessment; implementing personalized learning; improving teacher and leader preparation, development, support, and effectiveness; and investing in non-academic services that increase academic achievement for student subgroups.
- Intervene in the management of local school districts only in the event a district does not meet its financial or student services obligations.

**Eliminating local control also politically disenfranchises communities, particularly black communities, by shifting power from elected board members to that of state officials who do not represent the local communities.**



- Support evidence-based professional development for school board members, especially those who represent a high percentage of students of color.
- Conduct school board elections in the same year as presidential

elections to elevate the importance of the election and increase the representation of the community's electorate body.

- If a state does take over a school district, ensure evidence-based school improvement structures are in place, including the design and implementation of a school performance plan of action to help districts return to independent control. The plan should include such strategies as:
  - Establishing clear goals and benchmarks to measure progress and including a timeline for the State to make improvements.
  - Stabilizing school leadership and hiring responsive and culturally aware principals.
  - Providing evidence-based professional development to teachers, principals, district leaders, and school board members.
- Ensuring highly effective teachers and leaders are in the neediest schools.
- Making significant progress on 3rd - 8th-grade State assessments and ACT scores across all performance levels.
- Reducing student chronic absenteeism to 5 percent or lower.
- Engaging in a genuine dialogue and partnerships with students, parents, and community members.
- Ensuring state board members have consequences for failure to meet takeover goals.







# SCHOOL FUNDING

**SEF RECOMMENDATION:** *Implement equitable K-12 state funding formulas that address historical and present-day opportunity and achievement gaps and fiscal inequities that negatively impact students of color.*

**RATIONALE:** Research proves that investments in public education matter, especially for students who do not receive extracurricular supports and tutoring services outside of the traditional school day.<sup>xii</sup> Adequate funding spent

effectively leads to improved student performance and overall lifetime outcomes. Many state legislatures throughout the country, however, fail to fully-fund or update K-12 funding formulas to what it costs to properly educate a student today.

in-state disparities at the district level—with wealthier districts often spending more per pupil, including providing higher salaries for educators. In these communities, educators do not need to choose among offering small class sizes, advanced placement courses, hiring a guidance counselor,

## **Some school districts had to shift to a four-day school week or reduce the number of school days on the annual school calendar because the state refused to provide enough operational funding.**

For example, though Georgia fully funded the Quality Basic Education formula, the state’s K-12 funding structure, Georgia still has not updated the K-12 funding formula for nearly 30 years. The needs of students and districts today require additional targeted investments to address inequitable funding practices for students from low-income families and other historically marginalized populations. According to the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, school districts across the state have seen steady fiscal reductions for close to two decades, with the largest cuts totaling \$1 billion per year from 2010 to 2014.<sup>xiii</sup> Further, there are significant

or providing an arts program. In contrast, some school districts, such as in Oklahoma, had to shift to a four-day school week or reduce the number of school days on the annual school calendar because the state refused to provide enough operational funding.

### **STATE AND DISTRICT EFFORTS SHOULD:**

- Update and fund K-12 funding formulas to match the actual costs of educating low-income students and student subgroups.
- Funds for low-income students and students of color should address and improve educator

quality and provide a college and career-ready curriculum, personalized learning, one-on-one tutoring, summer enrichment classes, and wraparound support services.

- Invest more in students who have greater needs—Progressive funding policies and laws that allocate funds needed to support low-income school districts result in greater student learning and reduce achievement gaps.
- Invest in human capital—There is strong evidence that teacher quality is key to increasing student achievement, as is having small class sizes for young students and those with greater needs.
- Address the role of arbitrary factors such as property wealth in school funding formulas to create greater equity in resource allocation.
- Work to amend state and local tax provisions to ensure districts have the appropriate level of resources to invest in early childhood education, college-and-career ready curricula, professional development, high-quality staff, and support services, including by allowing local districts to levy taxes.
- Fully fund transportation costs.
- Invest in student infrastructure funds to pay for technology and other student needs.





# SCHOOL CHOICE

**SEF RECOMMENDATION:** *Eliminate school voucher programs, education savings accounts, tax-credit scholarship programs, and other efforts to fund private schools with public dollars.*

**RATIONALE:** From tax exemptions to direct grants or scholarships, states have found creative ways to funnel taxpayer dollars into private schools. These policies provide families of various income levels and disability (ability) status opportunities to use public dollars to finance their children’s enrollment in private schools.



Limited public resources and benefits, such as tax credits, should be used to support public schools. In addition to contributing to racial and socio-economic segregation, private schools operate under separate discrimination, reporting, admissions, and accountability requirements that are less transparent.

Additionally, a review of the most comprehensive school vouchers from the Center on Education Policy concluded that “studies have generally found no clear advantage in academic achievement for students attending private schools with vouchers.”<sup>xiv</sup> Most research findings show no material difference in learning outcomes. But the evidence that school vouchers have not had a substantial impact on student achievement has not slowed the push for new voucher programs in many states. Advancing separate education systems with public dollars undermines the public school education systems and threatens the very fabric of this country’s K-12 education system.

### **STATE EFFORTS SHOULD:**

- Eliminate any programs or initiatives that divert public funds from K-12 public education settings through the use of school voucher

programs or through education savings accounts or related efforts to fund private or religious schools with public dollars.

- In the case of funded voucher programs, conduct evaluations of the impact of school vouchers, tax credits, and education savings account programs, including information regarding the race, disability status, and family income of students utilizing any state program promoting private schools. The evaluation should be publicly available and updated on a yearly basis.

### **SEF RECOMMENDATION:**

*Prohibit the use of public resources for virtual and for-profit charter schools.*

**RATIONALE:** Research on virtual and for-profit operated charter schools consistently shows poor student outcomes. Virtual school and distance-learning students perform significantly worse than their counterparts in other types of charter and district public schools. Michigan Virtual Learning Research

Institute references numerous studies saying, “Virtual school students have significantly and substantially lower achievement gains while attending virtual schools than they experience in traditional public schools.”<sup>xv</sup> According to America’s Promise Alliance, Virtual Schools account for 1 percent of all high schools. However, 87% of virtual schools have an average graduation rate of 40%. These schools have low retention and high dropout rates. They also skirt accountability measures and abuse taxpayer dollars. There is also evidence of tremendous financial abuse and marketing exploitations tied to their operation that should not be supported by taxpayer dollars.

### **STATE EFFORTS SHOULD:**

- Prohibit the use of state and local funding for virtual and for-profit charter schools.
- In the case of funded virtual and for-profit charter schools, apply the same accountability and reporting requirements to virtual and for-profit charter schools as traditional district schools.
- In the case of funded virtual and for-profit charter schools, require educators working in virtual or for-profit charter schools to meet the same certification

requirements as teachers in traditional district public schools.

### **SEF RECOMMENDATION:**

*Support the advancement of high-quality magnet schools that promote racial and socio-economic diversity.*

**RATIONALE:** Magnet schools often provide opportunities for students to select schools that focus on special academic and/or career interests, including particular subjects, themes, or learning models. Today, there are approximately 2.6 million students enrolled in 3,400 magnet schools in more than 600 districts in 34 states. Research studies on magnet schools have generally found positive effects on achievement, graduation rates, student motivation and satisfaction with school, teacher motivation and morale, parent satisfaction, intergroup relationships, and integration.<sup>xvi</sup> The U.S. Department of Education provides grants to local educational agencies to establish and operate magnet schools that are part of a desegregation court order.

## FEDERAL EFFORTS SHOULD:

- Increase funding for the Magnet Schools Assistance federal grant program.
- Establish and fund federal programs that support state and local efforts to create greater inter- and intra-district school diversity.

## STATE AND DISTRICT EFFORTS SHOULD:

- Allow for a flexible and autonomous administrative structure.
- Encourage a college-preparatory, STEM-focused curriculum for all.
- Secure well-prepared STEM teachers and professionalized teaching staffs.
- Support students from underrepresented groups.



## SEF RECOMMENDATION:

*Support high-quality charter school networks that are inclusive, evidence-based, and accountable for serving all students.*

**RATIONALE:** Charter schools, the fastest growing variety of school choice, are another approach to providing a range of public school options for students and families. The earliest concepts of public charter schools were that they would be thought of as small educational laboratories in which educational innovations could be housed and then transferred to other public schools. Today, Charter schools are being pushed to replace the traditional school system. Currently, across the country, there are over 6,700 charter schools, more than twice as many as a decade ago. During that period, the number of students enrolled in charter schools tripled, from 900,000 to 2.7 million, and the proportion of public school students in charter schools rose from 2% to 5%.<sup>xvii</sup> Studies of charter school quality show mixed results, finding that 25% of charter schools



showed significantly stronger learning gains for their students, 56% showed no difference, and 29% showed substantially weaker learning gains than the feeder schools.<sup>xviii</sup> Further, while some charters strive for and achieve racial integration, most studies have found that charters tend to increase racial isolation. Therefore, state and local charter authorizing laws are particularly important and should be structured to ensure program quality and student access.

## **STATE AND DISTRICT EFFORTS SHOULD:**

- Ensure all charter schools that receive public funds are subject to the same transparency, reporting, and accountability requirements as non-charter public schools.
- Require charter schools to provide transportation to any student residing in the school district where the charter school is located as well as any student living within a 15-mile radius of the school.
- Establish a rigorous authorization process and ensure that charter authorization laws are fully enforced, including closing charter schools not meeting the requirements of the state charter laws.
- Require at least 50 percent of the members of each charter school governing board to be parents of students at the school (elected by parents).
- Require charter schools to comply with district laws on school-based parent and educator advisory councils or groups to ensure that parents, teachers, and school staff have a voice in school matters.
- Require all educators to meet the same licensure requirements as those in district public schools.
- Require charter schools to notify parents or guardians in writing (including in a language-accessible format) that students with diverse learning needs have the right to attend charter schools, which must provide accommodations and support services to students with disabilities and those who are English learners.
- Require school districts, charter school authorizers, and charter schools—individually or through their networks—to develop and regularly update a multi-year district school plan that includes identifying projected demographic changes, criteria for new school openings or closings, and equitable geographic distribution

of schools and students to ensure that all students have access to schools in their communities and a range of specialized programs.

- Require neighboring school districts and charters serving a high proportion of low-income students and students of color to establish local data sharing and collaborative initiatives to improve student outcomes.
- Standardize and monitor the student recruitment, enrollment, and retention process to ensure that charter school enrollment reflects the demographics of the host school district and/or neighboring district school.



## ENDNOTES

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