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**Aurora Institute's Federal Policy
Priorities:** Charting a New Path for
America's Learners

Aurora Institute's Federal Policy Priorities: Charting a New Path for America's Learners

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About the Aurora Institute

Aurora's mission is to drive the transformation of education systems and accelerate the advancement of breakthrough policies and practices to ensure high-quality learning for all. Aurora is shaping the future of teaching and learning for more than 14 million students through its work in policy advocacy, research, and field-building/convening. We work on systems change in K-12 education, promote best practices, examine policy barriers, and make recommendations for change. Aurora has a national and global view of education innovation and lifts up promising policies and practices that yield improved outcomes for students. Aurora envisions a world where all people are empowered to attain the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to achieve success, contribute to their communities, and advance society.

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Foreword by Susan Patrick, President and CEO, Aurora Institute

The *Aurora Institute's Federal Policy Priorities: Charting a New Path for America's Learners*, provides guidance and recommendations for policymakers to introduce and advance student-centered learning. It identifies specific entry points, policy levers, and a path forward to adopting a more equitable and robust approach to educating our youth to prepare them for the future.

It is critically important for our country to reimagine education and focus on investing in our future, not our past. The current K-12 education system has not been able to produce anything close to equitable outcomes. Many states and districts have taken steps to become ready to move in new and improved directions, but far more work must be done. The federal government must support the transformation from a system that produces inequitable outcomes, ranking and sorting our kids, to one that supports success for each and every student. Our leaders must be incentivized to advance important conversations on the need for change, reorient the purpose of education around human flourishing and excellence for all, and examine how to “backward-map” new designs to achieve more ambitious goals that give our youth a guarantee. This will require policy leaders to advance education systems change and leapfrog to new designs for learning ecosystems. Our federal government can and must do a better job of creating the conditions that shift the problems that have been held in place by outdated structures, policies, and mindsets on what education looks like and should be.

The pandemic has exacerbated long-standing historical inequities. Every school and district in America will need to develop effective strategies to get all students a personalized learning plan and pathways to achieve their goals in the immediate term and beyond. The federal government has provided stimulus money, but much of those resources will be devoted to rigid, time-limited, strategies such as tutoring that merely put a band-aid on the problems rife in the current education system. This is a time when resources should be driving innovation that can transform our education systems to ensure that every student is prepared for a successful and prosperous future.

Our education system's needs are dramatically changing. Communities and states are coming together to ask, “What is the purpose of K-12 education? What do students really need to know and be able to do upon graduating? How does our society provide equitable access to education, resources, and technology for all?” And there's growing recognition of the need to bridge learning inside and outside of schools, in the community, and in internships and work-based learning while students develop as human beings, build competencies, deepen capabilities to find solutions to increasingly complex problems, engage in anytime, anywhere learning, and communicate effectively.

While the United States centers education policy-making power at the local and state levels of government, the federal government plays a major role in shaping the size and scope of the lanes for accelerating change to modernize education. Currently, significant roadblocks and barriers to impede change at the local and state levels exist, stemming from federal reliance on tweaking old structures and outdated policy frameworks instead of investing in systems transformation. The federal government can stimulate change by seeding grants and programs that will pave the way and spur new designs at the local and state levels, enabling new designs for teaching and learning that are driven by local wisdom, sensitive to local context, and adaptive to accelerating changes happening in regions and states.

We need to reimagine education and rebuild from our centuries old, outdated factory model of education, which values ranking and sorting students above meeting students where they are and accelerating learning through personalized learning that happens anytime, anywhere. The federal government could help invest in innovation zones at the state, regional, and local levels that create learner ecosystems across K-12 education, higher education, career and technical education (CTE), and the workforce of tomorrow.

Massive changes are occurring all over the globe with automation, sustainability, inequality, and globalization shifting workforce demands and needs. Education systems and employers are not adapting fast enough. By creating learner-centered ecosystems and competency-based pathways, schools, education institutions, local communities, businesses, and other organizations in regions and states could better align themselves, reimagine competency-based pathways, and serve people more nimbly to skill up and reskill. This process would support as well as foster a guarantee for youth that a prosperous future awaits based on individual goals and needs.

This is a vision for a “Learner Promise.” A “Learner Promise” is a commitment that every learner will have access and support to pursue a certified pathway with system-wide opportunities that guarantee entry into a meaningful, chosen career that will build social and economic capital over the course of their lives.

Operating under this promise, the federal government would support states to enact systems of governance, policy, and infrastructure to certify that learners who demonstrate competencies in K-12 education, postsecondary, workforce, and community settings along a supported pathway will have access to continuing education and a purposeful, living-wage career. States would commit to taking the systemic action necessary to disrupt inequities in access, engagement, and attainment for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people and people from low-income households. The federal government could reimagine education not as a linear, time-bound sequence of learning that occurs within institutions of formal education but as a learning ecosystem. This ecosystem would be an equitable, dynamic, and responsive system in which learners can customize their learning experiences as they navigate experiences across schools, workplaces, and communities.¹

This need for leapfrogging requires policy leaders to critically examine the status quo, one-size-fits-all model of education, which locks individual students in desks in rows based on age, grade level, and seat time and which sets rules for comparability by batching students on age, not stage of learning—rather than responsive, reliable measurements of learning across progressions in K-12 education. Students must be able to move on when ready and when they can show what they know based on demonstrating mastery in order to avoid learning gaps and build critical knowledge and skills in any setting. This requires a move from a system based on seat time to a future-focused system that is personalized, competency-based, student-centered, and responsive.



For policymakers, the Aurora Institute is examining best practices in education policy and connecting with leaders in education innovation with a focus on equity and high-quality education for all. We work to share promising policies and examine the context and conditions for catalyzing change at every level. Our future must become centered on developing our youth and advancing the learner promise. We must create learning ecosystems to respond to our learner's needs and not vice versa.

Education systems must be redesigned to serve the needs of every child, not just a select few. The federal government can support local needs to invest in research and development for new designs for learning, especially those that support historically underserved students, and at the same time promote and advance the research on how students learn best to inform new designs. The federal government can encourage borderless learning and open learning opportunities that expand beyond classroom walls so that students can acquire credit for formal learning outside the classroom. Doing so will require investing in human capabilities to recognize and validate learning outside of classrooms and demonstrations of evidence, through performance assessments and better assessment literacy at every level.

We must break down the silos of education institutions, communities, and workforce systems. We must expand the number of pathways students can use to move through high schools and support students earning credentials or micro-credentials with credentialing that is aligned and coherent at every level of the system, recognizing in real time when students demonstrate mastery of knowledge and skills. Finally, our workforce across education at all levels needs to be modernized and diversified, with future-focused capabilities and a commitment to responsive, student-centered, equity-driven, adaptive leadership to meet students' needs. We must rethink "normal" and meet the call-to-action to chart a path forward for this critical time in our nation's history to modernize education, focus on innovations for equity, and produce lasting, scalable systems change.

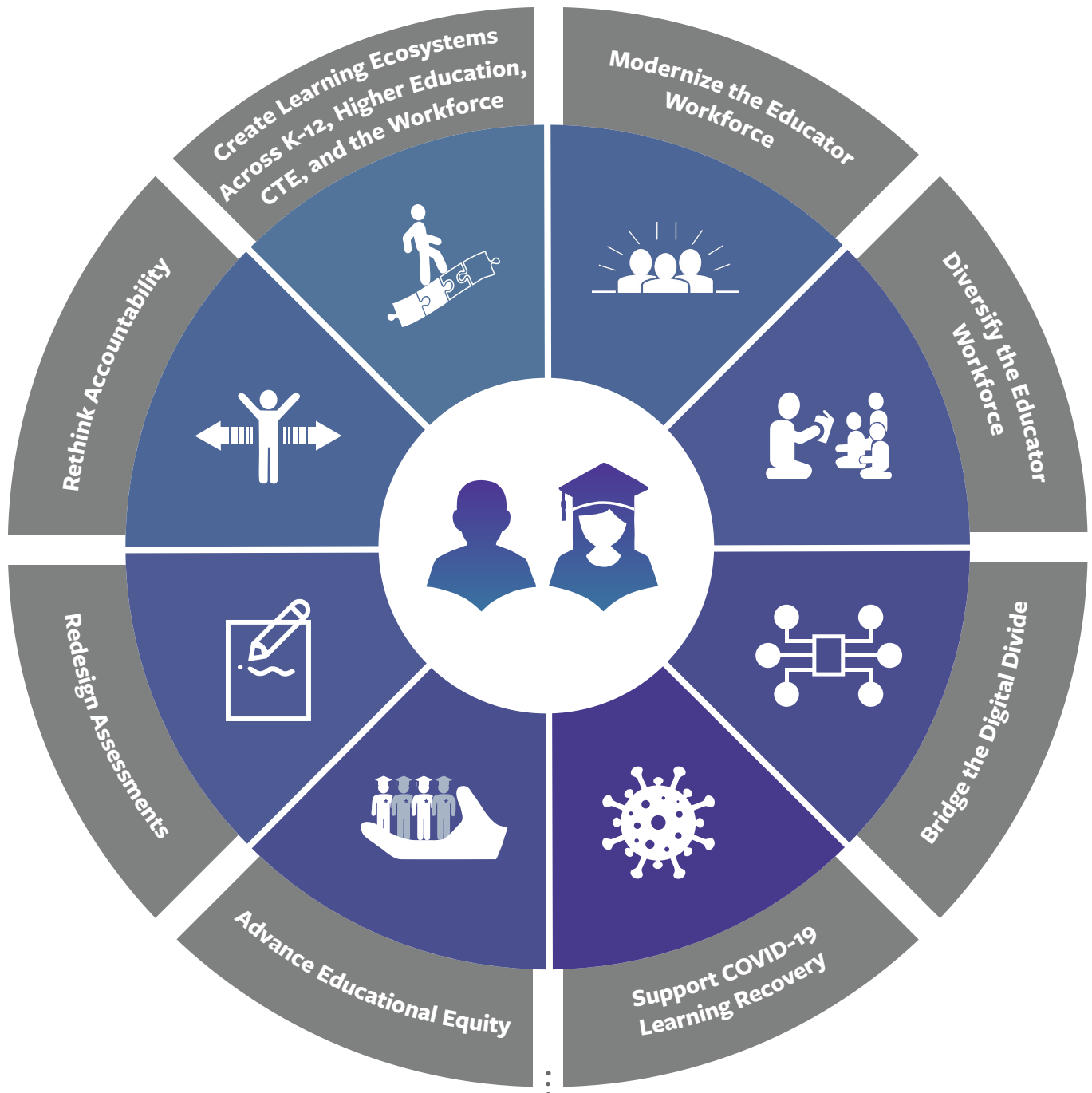
From One-Size-Fits-All Schooling to Learning Ecosystems

"Fewer than one in five American students follow a clear and uninterrupted path from high school through college to career. The promise of a public education is to prepare all learners to engage in, contribute to, and achieve purpose in the world, both as it is today and as it will be tomorrow. And yet, the American education system as we know it is insufficient to realize this commitment... This paradigm's time is up. Today, complex and compounding forces compel something more than incremental change in public education. Skyrocketing racial and economic inequality perpetuate generational poverty, predominantly for Black, Latinx, Indigenous people, demanding that education do more to create social and economic mobility. The future of work means that a person entering the workforce from low-income households today will likely work for six or more decades, during which time they will change jobs every four and a half years and 'upskill' every five. Social changes and advances in technology push more and more learning outside of formal institutions, creating opportunities for dynamic learning ecosystems to take the place of linear, time-bound institutions of schooling." --Katherine Casey and Susan Patrick, *A Promise for Equitable Futures: Enabling Systems Change to Scale Education and Economic Mobility Pathways* (2020)²

Executive Summary

COVID-19 has exposed vast and systemic inequities, and calls for a redesigned education system are growing in number and volume. Top-of-mind issues, such as what reopening should look like, administering in-person versus remote instruction, and keeping students and staff safe, are incredibly important. But now, however, is also the time to confront long-term systemic questions about the purpose of school and how to construct it so that each child has an equal chance for a thriving future.

Federal policy leaders who want to drive transformation, innovation, and equity can look to these recommendations to learn about entry points, policy levers, and a vetted path forward to revolutionize student-centered learning. This paper outlines core federal education policy issues to advance student-centered learning policies and transform education systems to meet the vast needs of future students.



Key Issues



Create Learning Ecosystems Across K-12 Education, Higher Education, CTE, and the Workforce

The federal government should support the development of high-quality learning opportunities that are accessible to all learners across the K-20 continuum for anytime, anywhere learning, advancement, and acceleration. Federal legislators should consider seeding an innovation grant through the Higher Education Opportunity Act or Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act to states to align competency-based K-12 education, higher education, and career pathways.



Modernize the Educator Workforce

The U.S. Department of Education should support new approaches to competency-based teaching and learning by investing in modernizing the educator workforce and advancing innovative student-centered pedagogies and assessment frameworks. Policymakers can support upskilling for future-focused educators through micro-credentials, competency development, and professional learning to support new design thinking as teachers become planners and orchestrators of new learning models.



Diversify the Educator Workforce

Federal policymakers can increase access to and affordability of both traditional and nontraditional educator preparation programs to recruit and retain a more diverse teacher workforce. Legislators should consider offering new funding initiatives that would support or seed statewide Grow Your Own teaching programs, especially prioritizing those established to serve or operate in communities that are majority Black and Brown.



Bridge the Digital Divide

Policymakers should ensure every school and home has broadband internet access and the technology infrastructure to fully participate in and benefit from anytime, anywhere learning opportunities. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) should continue to streamline the E-Rate application process and expand eligible expenditures, such as the purchase and distribution of hotspot devices, to provide flexibility to meet future student and community needs.



Support COVID-19 Learning Recovery

Reversing the inequities exacerbated by COVID-19 is essential, as is building on parents' and communities' increasing demands to revolutionize 21st-century learning experiences. The U.S. Department of Education can incentivize states to establish COVID-19 recovery task forces to address how education systems need to transform and establish short- and long-term goals for students and communities disproportionately affected by the pandemic.



Advance Educational Equity

Federal policymakers should establish a committee to provide the necessary—and sometimes disproportionate level of—resources to each learner to interrupt historical inequities, create inclusive communities, and cultivate each learner’s unique talents and interests. The federal government can do this, in part, by amending school funding formulas and encouraging states to develop education equity task forces to help address the unique needs of students of color and other historically underserved students.



Redesign Assessments

Investment is needed to redesign and develop high-quality, balanced systems of assessment policies that accurately measure student learning. Federal policymakers can seed investments in assessments that seek to improve teaching and learning, rather than ranking and sorting.



Rethink Accountability

Education systems should genuinely engage communities in new school designs that offer a broader range of approaches to evaluate school performance, advance student learning objectives, and drive holistic educational goals. Federal policymakers can reframe federal accountability by reexamining the purpose of K-12 education and how accountability, evaluation, and quality assurance methods need to be modernized to support high-quality, student-centered teaching and learning.

I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected almost every aspect of daily life since March 2020. This pandemic has been exacerbated by a national reckoning with racial injustice, joined by fervent calls, especially by youth, to make the nation more equitable and inclusive for all. It has become even clearer that old forms of delivering education simply do not meet the needs of future learners. Lessons from other countries strongly suggest that broadening the range of high-quality education pathways we offer to our young people, beginning in high school, might be the single most promising strategy to increase the percentage of young adults who earn a postsecondary degree or credential that prepares them to embark on a meaningful career. To ensure diverse learners are prepared for a more demanding and competitive economy, our education system needs to be reformed and reoriented in order to meet students where they are, and to universally realize anytime, anywhere learning.

The Aurora Institute’s Federal Policy Priorities are an equity-oriented and future-focused set of recommendations designed to ensure that the nation’s education system allows learners to flourish. The priorities are intentionally constructed for federal policymakers to move states and localities forward from their current state of education to future systems capable of preparing all graduates with the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve success, contribute to their communities, and advance our society.

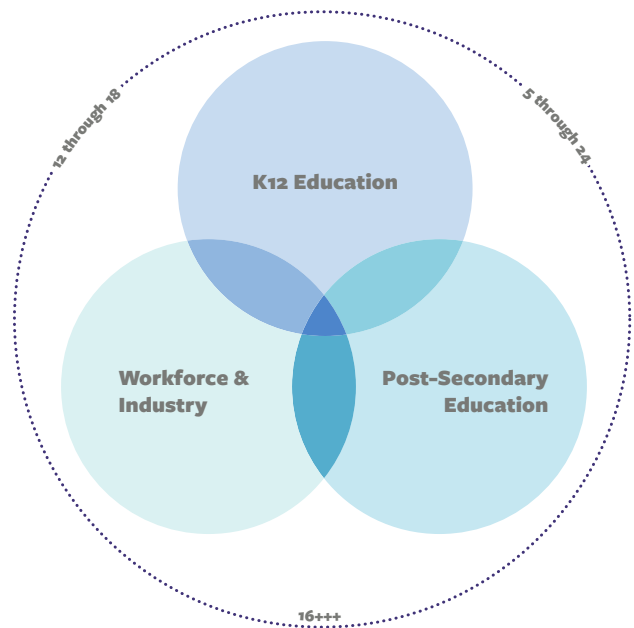
II. Federal Policy Priorities and Key Issues

CREATE LEARNING ECOSYSTEMS ACROSS K-12 EDUCATION, HIGHER EDUCATION, CTE, & THE WORKFORCE

ASK: Support the development of high-quality learning opportunities and educational pathways that are accessible to all students across the K-20 continuum for anytime, anywhere learning, advancement, and acceleration.

Background

Digital delivery of information and artificial intelligence are completely transforming the current and future world of the global workforce. The World Economic Forum predicts that by 2025, 85 million jobs will be lost due to automation and the advancement of artificial intelligence.³ Yet we also know that the changing nature of the workforce will lead to multiple career placements that will demand employees to demonstrate 21st-century career skills such as critical thinking, communication, problem-solving, effective teamwork, and a continual desire to learn new knowledge, expectations not universally demanded from prior generations. Because the 21st-century learner also needs these workforce traits, actors in the K-20 education and workforce preparation ecosystem should establish competencies for building knowledge and skills, align and integrate learning across levels, and collaborate to redesign the curricula and learning experiences all students need to thrive in an increasingly demanding, competitive, and evolving economy. Furthermore, school systems can and should become learning hubs that simultaneously allow students to receive a world-class academic education and support workforce experiences that both prepare graduates to improve the economy and strengthen our society's fabric.



Present-Day Relevance

Following the impact of COVID-19, schools should not snap back into old, antiquated models of learning linked to an outdated siloed framework that does not meet the needs of future students. School systems will have to prioritize anytime, anywhere learning that encourages expanding learning opportunities, builds knowledge and skills, and develops learner agency. This learner agency prepares graduates to contribute to the economy and their communities, improving the harmony of this diverse nation. The future of education will require improved integration of place-based learning and formal and informal learning, as well as expanding paid internships,



apprenticeships, and work-based learning experiences to improve high school graduates' skills. Individual learners will need to demonstrate evidence to show what they know and focus on proof of continuous learning through their lifetimes. Learners will earn micro-credentials and badges based on recognition of learning by providing evidence of learning and building skills for changing work capabilities. The future of demonstrating knowledge will require building states' capacity for high-quality, valid, and reliable assessments and tools to share the evidence of learning. We urge federal policymakers to adopt the recommendations outlined in this section to support states, regions, and local communities in advancing aligned pathways across early childhood, K-12 education, postsecondary education, CTE, and the workforce.

Recommendations

- Publish a universal qualification framework that defines success at each level of a pathway, including from K-12 education through employment and beyond.
- Seed an innovation grant through the Higher Education Act or the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act to states to align competency-based K-12 education, higher education, and career pathways.
- Align systems of early learning, K-12 education, CTE, higher education, and workforce training by creating competency-based pathways and certifications, including micro-credentials through CTE and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.
- Seed funding for better data collection and data sharing among the workforce, higher education institutions, the military, and adolescent health care professionals.
- Fund research on how to develop and assess the full set of skills graduates need to be successful in the future economy.
- Encourage states to adopt mandatory Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion policies so that low-income students better comprehend student aid packages, leading to more equitable college matriculation outcomes.
- Extend Pell Grant eligibility to high school students taking college courses while still enrolled in high school programs to help scale proven solutions for increasing access to and completion of postsecondary education.
- Double the maximum Pell Grant award amount to \$13,000, and provide more funding for work-based learning internships, such as through the federal work-study program.



INVEST IN MODERNIZING THE EDUCATOR WORKFORCE

ASK: Support new approaches to competency-based teaching and learning by investing in modernizing the educator workforce, advancing innovative teaching, and prioritizing student-centered pedagogies and assessment frameworks.

Background

Preparing teachers to lead in 21st-century learning environments will require significant changes in preservice preparation, certification, and ongoing professional development. To transform K-12 education to personalized, student-centered learning systems, policymakers also need to modernize educator preparation and development systems to become learner-centered, personalized, and competency-based. Few educator preparation programs focus on the competencies and roles needed in learner-centered models. More often than not, teachers trained and credentialed in U.S. teacher preparation programs are exposed to strategies and methods with a heavy focus on delivering academic content within traditional seat-time learning models, not training that supports personalized competency-based pathways. Educators and school leaders will take on new roles, and many will require new skills to adapt instruction for students with varying levels of competency and interests. Their success will depend on significant changes to preservice preparation, professional development, and evaluation frameworks to ensure educators have the support and resources to make this transition.

Communities have long asked that schools be a place where local wisdom and knowledge are celebrated and appreciated, where families are connected to their children's learning, and where educators build respectful relationships with students. To foster strong relationships, school personnel must have a sense of the culture and experiences that shape their students' lives. Educator and educator leader preparation programs must prioritize preparing educators to value the community's insight and perspectives.

Present-Day Relevance

COVID-19 exposed the shortcomings of and a rift in the K-12 education system between, on the one hand, modern learning models better prepared to provide flexibility, use hybrid and online learning, personalize learning, and have continuous learning anytime, anywhere and, on the other hand, traditional one-size-fits-all models that are ill-equipped to serve students during remote instruction. Exposing this chasm allows education leaders the space and opportunity to reimagine how teachers and students are prepared for 21st-century teaching and learning. As schools closed to help combat the virus' spread, many educators found that they were simply not prepared to teach in an online or remote environment. In a 2020 RAND study, 62% of teachers indicated that they had received some



training on virtual learning, and fewer than 30% of teachers indicated that they had received any training over the past year on ensuring that distance learning activities are accessible to all students, differentiating distance learning to meet individual student needs, engaging families in at-home learning, or providing distance learning opportunities that support students' social and emotional well-being.⁴ Moreover, 30% of teachers reported that they had not received adequate guidance and support to address the learning needs of students with mild to moderate disabilities.⁵ While teachers shifted and adapted quickly to the changing learning environment, many were not trained to teach in an environment outside of the classroom walls. Rethinking the way we train educators, including piloting and spreading contemporary, innovative pedagogies, is essential to ensuring that educators are prepared for 21st-century teaching and learning.

Recommendations

- Support new approaches to competency-based teaching and learning by investing in modernizing the educator workforce and advancing innovative student-centered pedagogies and contemporary assessment frameworks.
- Support upskilling for future-focused educators through micro-credentials, competency development, and professional learning to support design thinking as teachers become planners and designers of new learning models (e.g., providing new seed grants to support teachers as teacher entrepreneurs working with students and communities, and prototyping new learning designs).
- Launch an innovation pilot to modernize teacher preparation in the Higher Education Act for preservice providers to equip educators with the skills to teach and lead in competency-based environments for anytime, anywhere learning.
- Build assessment literacy to support competency-based assessments and recognition of learning across formal and informal education systems.
- Provide resources and incentives to states to modernize their educator and leadership professional standards to align with the skills needed to teach in student-centered learning environments.
- Encourage training for educators, paraprofessionals, and administrators in antiracist, culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and restorative practices.
- Expand pathways to new potential teachers by offering loans or loan forgiveness to mid-career professionals, veterans, community activists, and other nontraditional prospective educators by modeling or extending successful efforts such as the GI Bill and military College Loan Repayment Program.



DIVERSIFY THE EDUCATOR WORKFORCE

ASK: Increase the access to and affordability of both traditional and nontraditional educator preparation, to recruit and retain a more diverse teacher workforce.

Background

A teaching workforce that reflects the diversity and life experiences of today's youth is an important part in closing long-standing achievement and opportunity gaps and ensuring that all students graduate college- and career-ready.⁶ Research shows that all students, including white and wealthier students, benefit from a diverse and highly qualified educator workforce,⁷ yet 80% of the educator workforce is white.⁸ For decades, the United States failed to prioritize teacher diversity during critical junctures in this country's history. Immediately following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, for example, Black educators were fired or their positions were eliminated just as Black students integrated white-only schools. One study found that in 781 districts between 1964 and 1972, Black teacher employment dropped 32%.⁹ But the loss represented more than just statistics: Black students lost advocates, role models, and community liaisons as Black educators were pushed out of the classroom while white teachers kept their positions during and after school integration.

As this country reckons with injustices, recruiting and retaining a more racially diverse teaching profession is essential to making the education system more equitable. The costs of educator preparation tuition and loan repayment can be barriers to entry for all prospective teachers, particularly those who have shared life experiences with Black and Latinx students, students living in poverty, students living in underinvested communities, and students whose families have immigrated to the United States. Federal policies that increase access and affordability are, therefore, necessary to achieve the goal of diversifying the teacher workforce.



Present-Day Relevance

The teacher workforce is the linchpin for the future success of students and schools themselves. As the country diversifies, it is imperative that the educator workforce reflect the population change. For instance, studies show that Black teachers hold Black students to higher academic expectations than non-Black teachers do.¹⁰



Educators of color also are shown to form stronger and more trusting relationships with students of color; this contributes to deeper learning of academic concepts.¹¹ Educators of color often serve as advocates for students and families of color, helping them navigate and succeed in public education systems.¹² Data show learners experience fewer disciplinary incidents with educators of the same racial identity.^{13,14} To diversify and create more equitable preservice pathways, federal policymakers should consider strategies that address college affordability, persistence, and completion in federal student aid policies.



Recommendations

- Offer new funding initiatives that would support or seed statewide Grow Your Own teaching programs, especially prioritizing those established to serve or operating in communities that are majority Black and Brown.
- Propose doubling the TEACH Grant award from \$4,000 to \$8,000 for college students who agree to teach in high-need schools.
- Enable competency-based models in higher education by ensuring that eligibility for loans is not tied to units of time (such as credits completed and seat-time hours) but rather to outcomes (such as program completion, performance assessment, and demonstration of competency against program and state standards).
- Establish a national goal to diversify the teacher profession such that it reflects the racial makeup of the national population.
- Support new funding for historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and other minority-serving institutions (MSIs), such as the Augustus F. Hawkins Centers of Excellence program, which would create or scale up centers of excellence teacher preparation programs at MSIs.
- Reform the Teacher Loan Forgiveness program to make it more attractive to prospective teachers by removing inequitable debt burdens and incentivizing service in areas of need.
- Increase funding for the Teacher Quality Partnership Grant program to \$300 million, including funding for teacher residencies that increase recruitment and retention of diverse and highly effective educators in high-need districts.



BRIDGE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

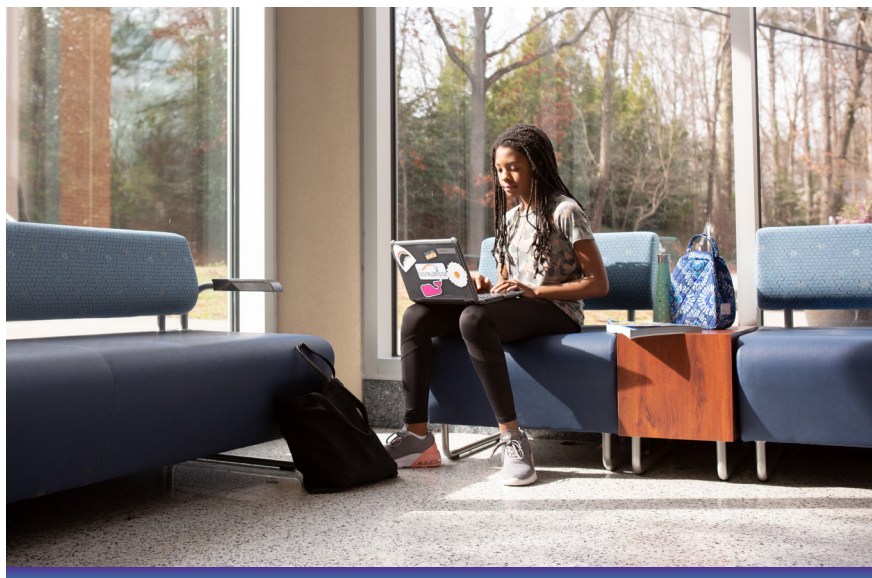
ASK: Ensure that every school and home has broadband internet access and the technology infrastructure to fully participate in, and benefit from, anytime, anywhere learning opportunities.

Background

To prepare students to succeed in the 21st century, student access to technology and the internet is a requirement—and it is imperative for equity. Comprehensive broadband infrastructure provides access to the internet for learning purposes. The COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated the significant size of the digital divide and inequitable access to the internet across the United States. Many students, especially those who have been historically underserved, did not have the adequate technological resources necessary to continue learning throughout the pandemic. Research has shown that people of color, even when controlling for income, have fewer choices for broadband providers, are more likely to live in an unserved or monopoly area, and are less likely to have access to the latest-generation broadband technologies.¹⁵

Present-Day Relevance

Black, Latinx, rural, and low-income students, in particular, are significantly more likely to lack access to high-speed internet and learning devices than wealthier white students in urban or metropolitan areas. For example, data on digital disparities reveal that nearly 20% of Black children ages 3 to 18, and 21% of families earning less than \$40,000 per year, have no access to the internet at home.¹⁶ Fourteen percent of rural families do not have at least one computer in the home, compared with 9% of families living in metropolitan areas.¹⁷ In today's modern era, access to the internet at home helps support student access to a high-quality, world-class education.



Bridging the digital divide will require increasing federal funding and expanding access to broadband so that 100% of the K-12 education population is connected to the internet. Congress and the FCC should continue to take proactive, positive action to continue to modernize and expand the E-Rate and Lifeline programs for schools and home residences to address the persistent inequalities that unconnected students face. To reach this universal connectivity milestone, critical federal modifications to the E-Rate and Lifeline programs are



needed. While many strides have been made through recent legislation, such as flexibility in using E-Rate funds and supplemental funding in the American Rescue Plan, more progress is needed to ensure equitable access to broadband.

Recommendations

- Continue to streamline the E-Rate application process and expand eligible expenditures, such as the purchase and distribution of hotspot devices, to provide flexibility to meet future student and community needs.
- Fund E-Rate and Lifeline programs and develop the digital infrastructure necessary for all economically disadvantaged students to access broadband internet.
- Make the Emergency Broadband Benefit program permanent to increase the number of low-income students who can access remote instruction.
- Create a third category under the E-Rate program to fully subsidize the cost of at-home broadband for students who attend schools that enroll a majority of rural students, low-income students, students with disabilities, or other populations of students who are disproportionately affected by the homework gap.
 - This third category should also subsidize broadband costs for homes with at least one student attending a school identified for Comprehensive Support and Improvement by state educational agencies.
- Invest in an FCC and Institute of Education Sciences research and development agenda focused on advancing new models of technology-empowered teaching and learning that promote equity and improve outcomes for all students.
- Publish an FCC annual report that examines how much funding is needed for E-Rate to keep pace with the accelerating demand for high-speed broadband connectivity at school and in homes to ensure equitable access to various high-quality learning pathways for all students.
- Improve reliable data collection methodology that does not rely on self-reported coverage information.
- Coordinate efforts among federal agencies to increase awareness among educators and communities of additional federal broadband funding programs, such as the Rural Development Broadband ReConnect Program, National Telecommunications and Information Administration's BroadbandUSA, and the Minority Broadband Initiative.



SUPPORT COVID-19 LEARNING RECOVERY

ASK: Reverse the inequities exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19 and build upon the increasing demand from parents and communities to revolutionize 21st-century learning experiences.

Background

COVID-19 disrupted the lives of millions of adults, parents, students, and others across the United States and billions more around the world. Many students are performing worse than they did before the pandemic, but for students of color, there is a growing learning acquisition gap that is disproportionately affecting Black, Brown, and Indigenous students.¹⁸

The racial injustice and racial unrest that emerged during 2020 cannot be untangled from the pandemic's impact. Many communities, especially those that are mostly people of color, are still reeling from the trauma inflicted on them by learning of the senseless killings, such as those of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, as well as other racist attacks, such as those experienced by Asian Americans during the pandemic. For years to come, states, districts, and communities should rethink how best to address the unique educational, psychological, social, emotional, and economic needs of students and families disproportionately affected by COVID-19.



Present-Day Relevance

COVID-19 continues to exacerbate academic and opportunity gaps that were decades in the making. While some large school districts are reporting typical levels of growth for the 2020–2021 academic school year in the most optimistic cases, the rate of academic attainment for students of color at this time is much lower than that of their white peers.¹⁹ It would be unjust for the American education system simply to continue in its current form. The entire education ecosystem of learning needs a revolutionary change whereby schools can facilitate high-quality, borderless learning anchored in culturally affirming practices and personalized youth development support. Student recovery efforts will need to meet students where they are, organize a team of advisors to



support learners, and allow students to advance based on the acquisition of knowledge acquired, not according to seat time.

Returning to the old, Industrial-Age model of our system to prepare students—which relies on seat time, and ranking and sorting students based on variable learning—is simply unacceptable. Decades of student achievement gap data, civil rights education lawsuits, and declining international education rankings, among other indicators, show the U.S. education system failing too many students across the country.

For the United States to effectively rebound from the pandemic, we urge federal policymakers to support and incentivize state policy efforts that center student engagement, student motivation, and personalized learning.



Recommendations

- Incentivize states to establish COVID-19 recovery task forces to address how education systems need to transform and establish short- and long-term goals for students and communities disproportionately affected by the pandemic.
- Provide funding priorities to states that implement competency-based education strategies that meet students where they are and advance them by demonstrated mastery of knowledge and skills.
- Provide targeted funding through new Title I dollars so states can address the unique needs of students of color, low-income students, and other historically underserved students.
- Encourage states to develop multiple pathways to graduation, to ensure students gain the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to be successful in postsecondary education and careers.
- Encourage innovation and competency-based education through competitive grants.



ADVANCE EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

ASK: Provide the necessary—and sometimes disproportionate level of—resources to each learner to interrupt historical inequities, create inclusive communities, and cultivate each learner’s unique talents and interests.

Background

For over a century, students of color, especially Black and Brown students, have fared worse in almost every traditional educational measure of success when compared with their white peers. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress assessments, white students outperform Black students by up to 40 percentage points in math and reading.

White high school graduates are almost six times as likely to be fully prepared for college than Black high school graduates.²⁰ Gaps in economic and social outcomes between races persist as well: Black college graduates earn 12% less than their white counterparts.²¹ Furthermore, Black adults are six times as likely to be incarcerated as white adults.²²

To be clear, the disparities in educational and social measures are not the fault of an individual student or group of students. For more than 100 years, the U.S. education system has been and is still designed by people who create policies that perpetuate inequality, segregation, and the normalization of white supremacy. This is so much the case that several states have been sued because they failed to provide all students, especially students of color, with a high-quality education mandated by state constitutions.^{23,24}

Ironically, in the wake of COVID-19, the education community has come to recognize that equality—providing the same services or educational opportunities—is not enough to meet the needs of students and families who have been historically underserved. Equity—giving all individual students what they need, when they need it—requires us to meet students where they are to help them excel to the best of their abilities. Now is the time for the nation to target the necessary resources that will allow each student to thrive in the face of social and historical inequities.



Present-Day Relevance

Efforts to advance educational equity are a manifestation of a place where all students are valued, seen, and heard. These efforts ensure each student is in an education system that can respond and adapt to their individual needs at all levels. An approach that focuses on equal resources and equal access, although important, is not equity. It is equality, and it is historically insufficient to ensure that each student graduates high school being ready for college, career, and life. Advancement toward equity, however, requires learning ecosystems to create personalized pathways throughout a child's education; improve student motivation and engagement through connecting to purpose, goals, and interests; and embed local culture into the curriculum.

The federal government should use its bully pulpit to assert that we cannot revert back to the delivery of a traditional education system. Returning to the status quo will only reinforce an inequitable education system. Personalized, competency-based pathways and student-centered learning can be restorative for students, educators, and communities by advancing elements that strengthen educational equity. We urge federal policymakers to consider the recommendations outlined below.

Recommendations

- Encourage states to develop education equity task forces to help address the unique needs of students of color and other historically underserved students.
- Use new Title I dollars to incentivize districts to ensure the implementation of more equitable state and district school funding allocations.
- Establish a national goal to diversify the teacher profession so that it reflects the racial makeup of the national population.
- Increase funding for HBCUs and other MSIs that build or expand K-20 pathways.
- Provide new funding for the Education, Innovation, and Research federal program to study new learning designs that would reduce opportunity gaps between students of color and their white counterparts.
- Provide at least a 15% increase in funding to federal education programs that serve historically underserved students, such as Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Full-Service Community Schools, Promise Neighborhoods, Parent Training and Information Centers, Career and Technical Education state grants, Pell Grants, Federal Work-Study, and Minority-Serving Institutions.



REDESIGN ASSESSMENTS

ASK: Invest in redesigning and developing high-quality, balanced system of assessments that accurately measure student learning and can be used to improve teaching and learning, rather than ranking and sorting students.

Background

The development of student assessments has a complicated history in the United States. Standardized tests originated in the 20th century and were misused to measure intelligence rather than academic achievement. Because of this improper use of standardized tests, low-income people, as well as people of color, had significantly less educational and economic opportunity to advance.²⁵ Today, student assessment results need to provide educators, parents, and students with the data and information that reflect what students have learned and the content they have mastered. Designing high-quality assessments can also build capacity and unify various actors to expand student-centered learning that can meet the multitude of needs identified from assessments. It is critical for policymakers to offer, encourage, and support improved assessments to transform learning experiences for students.

Present-Day Relevance

Student assessments should be used to improve teaching, learning, and whole-child support rather than to rank, sort, and stigmatize students. Whether assessments are formative, summative, performance-based, or another form, all students require a balanced system that offers reliable and valid data with opportunities for them to show what they have learned and that yields meaningful information to students. The federal government should encourage states to develop balanced systems of assessments, such as through the State Assessments grant program, that are aligned to achieve high outcomes—for example, based on common definitions of success in a state vision of what students should know and be able to do.



Educators must develop the professional judgment to reliably and accurately evaluate and determine student mastery in student-centered learning environments. Assessment literacy becomes essential as systems move away from singular, overly narrow measures of proficiency and toward assessing mastery based on multiple



forms of evidence using student work. Increased assessment literacy throughout the system will increase trust, improve system quality, and support new learning models that help all students succeed.

Improving teaching, learning, and assessment design is key for curriculum redesign and for holding practitioners and policymakers alike accountable for student outcomes with increased transparency. High-quality assessments are essential to developing high-quality, student-centered learning environments that support learning anytime, anywhere.

Recommendations

- Empower states to use students assessments to improve teaching and learning rather than ranking and sorting.
- Support future-focused assessments that are learner-centered, and accept that learning can take place anytime, anywhere.
- Promote a balanced assessment system, including building capacity to use a range of appropriate assessments that yield valid and reliable information on learning, especially those that support innovative models and culturally and linguistically responsive teaching and learning.
- Increase and allocate Title I funding to help build capacity for high-quality state and local assessment practices.
- Improve the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA) program by lifting the seven-state cap on the number of states that can apply to participate in the program, allowing multiple pilots within a state to foster research and development of new designs, and creating flexibility in the timeline for pilots—from planning through implementation stage—to inform a strategy to scale up statewide.
- Build assessment literacy through focused investments at the federal level and across the field of K-12 education for educators, practitioners, students, parents, state and local policymakers, and community members to deepen understanding of appropriate assessments for different purposes, especially reliably evaluating student learning.
- Focus on incentivizing including assessment literacy in teacher training programs.
- Increase the State Assessments program to \$500 million to meet the needs of states that are working to redesign, improve, innovate, or implement balanced systems of assessments to support student-centered learning and to better evaluate students' demonstrations of building knowledge and skills.



RETHINK ACCOUNTABILITY

ASK: Engage communities in new designs that offer a broader range of approaches to evaluate school performance, advance student learning objectives, and prioritize holistic educational goals.

Background

The idea behind accountability is to increase transparency and ensure progress in student achievement for all students. In the 1990s, the federal government asked all states to create standards for English language arts (ELA) and math. By 2000, only 11 states had implemented standards. During the drafting of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, most conversations on what accountability could look like were compromised based on the fact that states would need to develop new state-level data systems from scratch. Data models and testing regimens needed to be developed. Many compromises were made as a result, and policymakers stated that the act would be able to be reauthorized more frequently to update the accountability framework. In 2002, No Child Left Behind increased the federal role in education by requiring states to set high standards and hold schools accountable for results in order to receive federal funds. Guided by federal parameters, states are required to develop accountability systems that assess school performance based on age-and grade-level standardized testing and establish frameworks for support and improvement. States also must send additional resources to schools with low performance ratings.

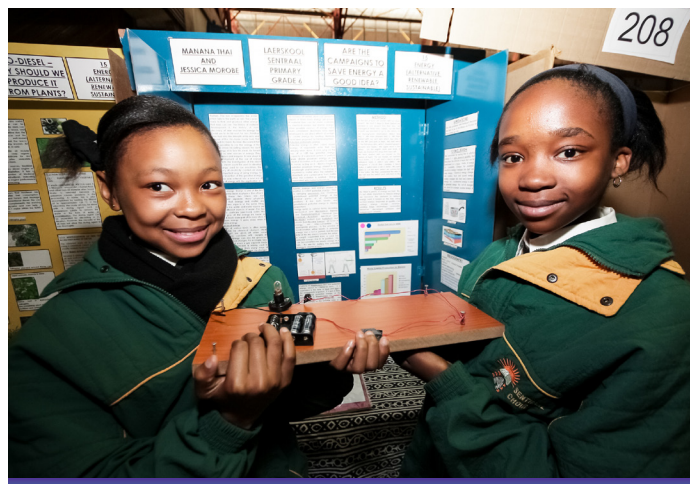
Present-Day Relevance

Families want assurances that schools are providing a high-quality education and fostering a nurturing and safe learning environment for their children. To do this, policymakers and practitioners, at all government levels, should make room to engage various stakeholders, including communities, parents, and students, on what schools are accountable for and how to measure success. These conversations should center around what a student needs to know upon graduating,²⁶ including new definitions of success. Our conceptions of accountability need to be matched with purpose, aligned with a vision of student-centered learning, and supportive of learning ecosystems and coherent structures that provide competency-based learning pathways and that promote equitable funding. Accountability should be geared toward a future-focused system that ensures students have more



personalized learning strategies that foster academic excellence within the context of the local community and local culture.

Working toward future-focused accountability can empower states, districts, communities, and schools with more timely and relevant information about students while offering 21st-century research-based strategies to continuously improve learning. Through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and new regulations, the federal government can also support and catalyze student-centered learning designs to help students learn, grow, and thrive rather than focus on mandated consequences for lack of progress on a limited number of student indicators. We can also draw on global best practices to ensure accountability supports student-centered learning and provides more high-quality, reliable data and transparency to ensure that K-12 education is providing students with a promise for equitable outcomes for all learners to achieve prosperous futures and build stronger communities.



Recommendations

- Rethink accountability to engage communities in new designs that offer a broader range of approaches to evaluate school performance, advance student learning objectives, and advance holistic educational goals.
- Examine the purpose of K-12 education and how accountability, evaluation, and quality assurance methods need to be modernized to support high-quality, student-centered teaching and learning.
- Incentivize districts, schools, and educators to use real-time, individual student data to tailor instruction, supports, and interventions to ensure that each student is on pace to graduate with mastery of college- and career-ready standards and aligned competencies.
- Build capacity through equitable supports and resources to put students at the center, and evaluate inputs and other factors that shape student learning outcomes.
- Support student-centered accountability pilots, and invest in communities leading new accountability models with reciprocity, transparency, and equity.



III. Call to Action for Innovative Learning

We are at a critical juncture in our nation’s history. Omnipresent COVID-19 health concerns combined with rising student disengagement create an opportunity for systems leaders to revolutionize education to serve the comprehensive needs of student learners seeded by this one-time, historical federal infusion of resources.

Parents, educators, and district and school leaders, specifically, are on the front lines making hard decisions about how and where to invest financial and human capital so that students can safely learn and fully develop. It is critical that the investments made today build pathways toward learning ecosystems that support students’ successful outcomes that span well beyond our past conceptions of how educators teach and how students learn.

We urge federal policymakers to put our students and communities on a path that quickly transforms all prior education designs to be more adaptive, personalized, engaging, and flexible—offering a true individual pathway linked to mastery of learning standards. We call for the federal government to:

- Invest in research and development for innovative learning, such as pedagogy, curriculum, and assessments to support new designs.
- Incentivize states to reform state funding formulas that direct additional investments to historically underserved students.
- Support the development of high-quality learning opportunities that are accessible to all students anytime, anywhere, for advancement and acceleration.
- Invest in state and local grants to plan rapid expansion of learning ecosystems.
- Align K-12 education, higher education, CTE, and workforce competencies and pathways.

Realizing a vision for K-12 education systems that can prepare all students to succeed will require sustained focus, support, and leadership. It will also require meaningful, sustained, and inclusive stakeholder engagement. We hope federal policymakers begin to reexamine and probe deeper into their role in catalyzing systems change. We also urge policymakers to ensure that pathways for the “learner promise” are not held back by frameworks that have created the systems we have inherited but instead accelerate the building of pathways for equitable futures.

Thank you for your leadership and service to our nation’s youth.

The Aurora Institute



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