

AASA, THE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS ASSOCIATION

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# A NEW EDUCATION VISION FOR A NEW ADMINISTRATION



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# ABOUT AASA



AASA, The School Superintendents Association, founded in 1865, is the professional organization for more than 13,000 educational leaders in the United States and throughout the world. AASA's mission is to support and develop effective school system leaders who are dedicated to equitable access for all students to the highest quality public education.

AASA members are the chief education advocates for children. AASA members advance the goals of public education and champion children's causes in their districts nationwide. As school system leaders, AASA members set the pace for academic achievement. They help shape policy, oversee its implementation and represent school districts to the public at large.

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# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NEXT ADMINISTRATION

As our education systems continue to rebound from the COVID-19 pandemic we urge the next administration to prioritize investing wisely in the future of our nation through federal programs and policies that support the nation's 50 million K-12 public school students. A comprehensive and significant investment in the education of our public school students has never been more important to reducing the racial and socio-economic inequities plaguing American society today and providing a pathway for social and economic mobility.

On behalf of public schools CEOs with deep expertise in education policy and as the largest employer in many communities, AASA crafts these

recommendations for how the next administration can dramatically improve educational outcomes, reduce educational inequities and ensure the students in our schools today are able to excel in an increasingly competitive global workforce.

Public schools perform critical functions for children and families, as well as for businesses, industries, and communities. Public schools are not just places where children can come to learn about democratic values; they are polling locations, interim food banks, and emergency shelters. The pandemic reminded us that the health and wellness of a community is directly linked to the health and wellness of the school system.

## TOP RECOMMENDATION: SUPPORT PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND THE 90% OF K-12 STUDENTS THEY EDUCATE

The next administration must commit to prioritizing our most vulnerable students and the schools and educators who support them by providing a more equitable framework for federal education policy and funding that ensures the neediest students are given the greatest opportunities for success. The next Administration must be steadfast in its outright rejection of voucher programs or attempts to use federal funds for vouchers. Study after study has shown that private school vouchers do not improve student achievement or provide greater opportunities for the low-income students they purport to serve. Private schools do not provide the same rights and protections to students as public

schools, such as those in Titles VI and IX of the Civil Rights Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Every Student Succeeds Act. Private school voucher programs do not offer real choice as most private schools can reject students with vouchers for a variety of reasons, ranging from disability, disciplinary history, English proficiency, and ability to pay. Private school vouchers also do not save taxpayer money. Rather, they divert limited federal and state resources away from schools that need more resources to schools that can rely almost exclusively on private funding and fundraising to educate students.



The next administration must take dramatic action to reverse the underfunding and under-resourcing for students who need the most help reaching their potential through a re-examination of our federal formulas that purport to direct aid to communities and students in need. If we continue to settle for the status quo, then we can never close the achievement gap between rich and poor children, white students and students of color, and we perpetuate the current practice of consigning millions of children to inadequate school buildings that lack high-quality teachers, leaders, curriculum and technology, and the appropriate staff necessary to meet their academic, emotional and physical needs.

## THE NEXT ADMINISTRATION SHOULD COMMIT TO THESE K–12 EDUCATION INVESTMENTS AND POLICIES:

- **Champion fully funding IDEA and propose policy and funding recommendations to strengthen IDEA.** As we approach the 50th anniversary since the original passage of IDEA known as the Education for All Handicapped Children’s Act, we urge the administration to prioritize funding IDEA in the budget submission to Congress. We also urge the creation of a Commission at the U.S. Department of Education to make recommendations to Congress about how to improve IDEA reauthorization to ensure more equitable funding of IDEA, to reduce the shortage of educators and specialized instructional support staff that work with special education students, and to ensure more effective dispute resolutions when conflicts arise.
- **Take significant action to assess and refine the federal data collection for school districts.** There are 2,023 required data elements in 12 education laws that districts must annually report. The changing reporting guidelines, timelines, and data elements lead to considerable administrative burden for districts and rarely shed any valuable insights into district practices, policies, or student outcomes given the delay in reporting information. The next administration should request an audit of all federal data collection items and how to dramatically streamline collections from the state to the federal level, so districts are not reporting separate but similar data elements to multiple education agencies at different times of the year.
- **Leverage resources and expertise of the federal government to identify the most reliable and accurate student poverty metric.** The pandemic has shown that placing the burden on schools to gauge poverty by counting free and reduced price lunch application forms is antiquated and increasingly unreliable. The accurate count of students from low-income families is critical to ensure the equitable distribution of federal funding and to holding schools accountable for the academic success of all students. The National Commission on Education Statistics (NCES) should be directed to investigate and make recommendations on what metrics should be used to identify students from low-income backgrounds.

- **Support the preservation of the Universal Service Fund, including the program that supports internet access to schools and libraries, commonly referred to as E-Rate.**

Over the last 25 years, the Universal Service Fund transformed internet access across the country, with an especially critical role in supporting equitable access to affordable internet in high-cost, low-income, and rural areas. Internet access is ubiquitous and necessary to engaging in daily life: you use the internet to map a route, to find out who's hiring, to access the email communications from your child's school, and much more. Disruption of the USF would be a catastrophic event to the day-to-day operations of American society. The administration could support a legislative fix preserving the structure of E-Rate that clarifies Congressional intent and nullifies problematic court interpretations.



- **Bolster privacy protections for students when they are using education technologies at school** by (1) increasing transparency into the FERPA complaint process conducted by the Student Privacy Policy Office (SPPO), (2) increasing funding for the Privacy Technical Assistance Center (PTAC) to ensure they have the resources to provide necessary student privacy guidance and field training to SEAs, LEAs, and other education stakeholders, (3) pushing for Congress to pass companion student privacy legislation that directly regulates education technology vendors and restricts unnecessary uses of student data and (4) supporting Federal Trade Commission (FTC) rulemaking and Congress's efforts to pass the Children and Teens' Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA 2.0) to increase student privacy protections while taking into account the importance of technology-enhanced education.

- **Modernize the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)** by (1) instructing the Department of Education to initiate a FERPA rulemaking process without delay and (2) working with Congress to make necessary improvements to the FERPA statute. Carefully crafted language to modernize FERPA would allow schools to use insights gained from data and education technology to best serve students and families while also safeguarding the privacy and security of students' personal information.





- **Advance more equitable federal funding for rural school district leaders and students** through greater investments in the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP), Impact Aid and Forest Counties. The REAP program is a critical formula funding source for rural communities because it levels the playing field for small and high-poverty rural districts. REAP, in particular, helps districts overcome the additional costs associated with their geographic isolation, smaller number of students, higher transportation and employee benefit costs, and greater concentration of poverty. Funding REAP helps offset the impact of formula cuts and lack of access to competitive dollars for rural districts. Additionally, the next administration should create an Office of Rural Education Policy within the Department of Education to ensure that rural schools and communities are appropriately supported by the Department and considered in any discussion of new or existing education policies.
- **Overhaul federal grant processes for school districts** by committing to greater outreach and technical assistance for discretionary grant opportunities across the government. Ensure that whenever competitive grants are announced in any federal agency the following occurs: 1) an email is sent to every district prioritized for awards to ensure their awareness of the grant funding, 2) technical assistance and webinar dates are announced in the grant announcement- so districts can prioritize receiving the training they need to apply, 3) the agencies respond to any technical assistance requests or inquiries made by districts in no more than 5 business days, and 4) meaningful investments are made to improve portals to federal grants to ease application submission.
- **Steer efforts to reduce financial barriers to entering the teaching profession.** Build upon the progress made towards improving and streamlining the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) Program, reducing the administrative burden on applicants and ensuring all eligible public servants – including educators – receive the debt relief they were promised. When implemented properly, PSLF can be an effective tool to reward educators for their time in the classroom and incentivize them to remain in the profession.
- **Support the implementation of school meal programs** to ensure students have access to the healthy meals they need and enjoy. Work with industry partners to ensure all districts have access to the affordable products necessary to align with the updated school nutrition standards. The next administration should also support and protect the expansion of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) which increases the amount of students served while minimizing administrative burden on districts.

- **Take steps to eliminate and narrow participation in school voucher programs.** The next administration should propose zeroing out funding for the D.C. voucher program, the only federally funded voucher program, which for 20 years has failed to improve academic achievement for students in Washington, D.C. It should also insist that any private school that participates in any federal program or receives any federal aid must abide by all federal civil rights laws and utilize the Office of Civil Rights within the U.S. Department of Education to investigate private schools that are in receipt of federal funds and are violating the civil rights of students.



In addition to supporting greater investments and smarter policies, there remains a need for greater coordination between federal agencies and superintendents to inform each other's work, worldview, and understanding of the immediate, short-term, and long-term challenges experienced by students, educators, and education leaders that the federal government is positioned to address.

## THE NEXT ADMINISTRATION SHOULD COMMIT TO:

**Creating an interagency working group to review all federal grants** that districts may apply for and determine best practices for disseminating information, reaching and awarding grants to high-need low-capacity districts, building technical capacity for districts to apply for awards, and improve outreach and application quality overall.

**Assigning specific points of contact at the U.S. Department of Education** to liaise directly with a diverse group of superintendents on specific topics and issues on a regular basis. We also recommend that before issuing any guidance, regulation, or policy document impacting the K-12 space that USED should take steps to ensure they have appropriately gauged feedback on policy issues at hand from school district leaders. This can be done through an anonymous survey instrument distributed by AASA on a specific topic as well as through focus group discussions.

**Improving coordination between school superintendents and federal agencies** that provide essential resources to school districts. These agencies include the Federal Communications Commission, Environmental Protection Agency, Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Agency, Federal Emergency Management Agency, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Each agency should designate a liaison to communicate directly with school leaders about key federal programs and grants under their purview.

## CONCLUSION

AASA believes there is a critical role for the federal government in improving K–12 education, but that role is meant to strengthen and support our public schools, not dictate to them. There is a great need for strong collaboration and greater prioritization of K–12 funding and policy to ensure America’s continued economic success.

At a time when our nation and politics are increasingly partisan and divisive, the administration can play a key role as a partner in the work to make headway on important priorities in education. As we anticipate the days after the election, our reality remains unchanged: our path is forward. Schools will still open. Students will still show up. Federal policy will still need to be implemented. We stand ready to support the next administration, to ensure its efforts are informed, powered and supported by the educators who are leading systems and supporting students daily. Strong federal support for K-12 funding and policy is a recipe for success. Investing in students is investing in the future. We have outlined the key policy areas we prioritize and support, given their relevance, potential reach, and importance to AASA members, the nation’s public school superintendents. We welcome the chance to work with the next administration to ensure federal education policy moves America’s public schools forward.

