

Transforming the Federal Role in America's Public Schools

From the Learning First Alliance



Our nation's founders understood that a well-educated citizenry is essential to the success of our democracy. This holds especially true today. We now know that our economic strength also depends in large part on how well we serve our nation's nearly 60 million school-aged children, 90 percent of whom are in our public schools.

With each new generation of Americans, our public schools face new challenges. Schools today must embrace rapidly evolving technologies, adapt to dramatic changes in the workplace, serve an increasingly diverse student body, and prepare young people for life and responsible citizenship in a fast-changing global society. The 18 major national

organizations in the Learning First Alliance believe that too many children—particularly poor children and children of color—do not get the education they need and deserve to thrive in this new world.

As part of an American effort to reduce poverty, we must make a vigorous federal, state and local commitment to improving public schools. Only such shared commitment can move us towards a common vision for the public education system we need. This vision is to provide universal access to public schools that prepare all children with the high academic skills, personal responsibility, work ethic and enthusiasm for learning they need to succeed in life, in work, and as productive and active participants in a thriving democracy.

In the past decade, however, the federal effort to help states and school districts improve public education has become distorted. We now have top-down micromanagement of our public schools without the support they require to succeed. What states and districts need from the federal government is the right kind of support to guarantee every child equal access to an excellent public school.

The Learning First Alliance's members represent millions of parents, educators, and education policymakers who have the talent, knowledge and dedication to work with federal, state and local governments in achieving our shared goals. To this end, we advance the following principles for appropriate and constructive federal involvement in education:

- **A Broad Vision of Student Learning.**

We as a nation should create a broad and compelling vision for what students should know and be able to do to succeed in an internationally competitive environment in the 21st century. This vision should encompass reading, writing and mathematics as well as other essential content areas, such as English, science, history, geography, civics and government, economics, world languages, technology, and the arts. It also should include 21st century skills, such as critical thinking, problem solving and teamwork. The federal government should provide supports to advance this vision.

In addition, the federal government should give states resources and technical assistance to improve the quality of assessments for all

students. It should support a variety of assessment models that more accurately measure student achievement and help educators improve instruction. The federal government also should help states improve the reliability and validity of assessments and accommodations for English language learners and students with disabilities.

- **Adequate Funding for Students in Need.** The federal government should be fully accountable for appropriating resources sufficient to meet its mandates and statutory commitments. To help remedy the shocking resource disparities between—and even within—school districts, the federal government should devote more resources to promoting equitable and adequate funding for students in greatest need. It should ensure that the funds it dedicates to these students always supplement, not supplant, state and district funds.

The federal government also should fund efforts to take to scale successful reform strategies, including dropout prevention strategies and strategies to prepare middle and high school students for post-secondary education.

- **Shared Accountability for Student Learning.** Educators, parents, communities, and policymakers at all levels share responsibility for students' learning. The federal government therefore should support state efforts to create more effective and transparent accountability structures that encourage educators, families, and states to collaborate on public school improvement. These structures should use multiple reliable measures of school success, recognize public schools and districts for promoting students' academic growth over time, and provide well-designed support—rather than labels and sanctions—for struggling public schools.

The federal government also should promote state accountability systems that empower parents to

become more active partners in their children's education. Such systems provide parents with clearer, more complete information on their children's public schools, including the after-school, tutoring and public school choice options available to them, and more opportunities to participate in decisions affecting public school improvement and student learning.

- **A Comprehensive Approach to Supporting Students and Families.** The federal government should provide a more comprehensive and coordinated set of supports for disadvantaged students and families. These supports should include health services and programs to encourage parents' involvement in their children's education, as well as early childhood, preschool, after-school and summer programs that offer enrichment opportunities and reinforce learning in school. The federal government should better align existing federal programs in these areas and help states coordinate existing federal resources for maximum efficiency and impact. Community schools offer one promising vehicle for encouraging this kind of coordination.

- **Support for Education Research and Development.** Less than 1% of the federal research budget goes to education research. The federal government should underwrite far more research on and development of innovative and effective practices that enhance educators' and schools' capacity to promote student learning.

The federal government should ensure that federally supported research is unbiased, subject to rigorous peer review and applicable to current challenges confronting public schools and districts. The federal government also should provide greater support for dissemination of best practice findings based on rigorous research.

- **Support for the Education Profession.** The federal government should help states and districts

build the capacity of public school and district staff and leaders by supporting excellent pre-service preparation, residency, mentoring, and professional development programs for them.

The federal government also should promote more meaningful career paths for teachers and other school staff. It should, for example, offer incentives to educators to improve their skills, knowledge and practice, and for those who assume extra responsibilities, such as mentoring or curriculum planning. Finally, the federal government should support incentives to attract and retain effective teachers, administrators and other education professionals for hard-to-staff schools.

The organizations in the Learning First Alliance stand ready to collaborate with the federal government to improve the nation's public schools and give every child every chance for success in the 21st century.

The Learning First Alliance is a permanent partnership of 18 leading education associations with more than 10 million members dedicated to improving student learning in America's public schools. In addition to the Association of School Business Officials International, Alliance members include the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, American Association of School Administrators, American Association of School Personnel Administrators, American Federation of Teachers, American School Counselor Association, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Council of Chief State School Officers, National Association of Elementary School Principals, National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Association of State Boards of Education, National Education Association, National Middle School Association, National School Public Relations Association, National Staff Development Council, National PTA, National School Boards Association and Phi Delta Kappa International. The Alliance maintains www.publicschoolinsights.org, a Website that features what's working in public schools and districts across the country.

www.asbointl.org