

AASA, THE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS ASSOCIATION

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A NEW EDUCATION VISION FOR A NEW ADMINISTRATION



PREPARED AND PRESENTED BY

SASHA PUDELSKI, NOELLE ELLERSON NG, CHRIS ROGERS

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.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRESIDENT BIDEN

As the nation continues to reel from the COVID-19 pandemic and Congress remains unable to remedy the financial instability experienced by families, localities, and states, AASA urges the next Administration to prioritize investing wisely in the future of our nation through federal programs and policies supporting 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 the CEOs of our public school systems that are the largest employers in many communities, and as experts in K-12 education, AASA has crafted the following federal policy 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.

RECOMMENDATION #1: SUPPORT PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND THE 90% OF K-12 STUDENTS THEY EDUCATE

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the critical function that our public schools perform for children and families, as well as for businesses, industries and communities. Public schools are the hub of countless aspects of community life, and the closure of school buildings during the pandemic negatively impacted virtually every American citizen regardless of whether or not they had children enrolled in the system.

School districts are frequently the largest employers in a community and the health and wellness of a community is directly linked to the health and wellness of the school system. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic over the past eight months, schools have had to step in like never before and find resources and innovative methods to ensure students are eating and learning, and staying healthy and safe.

And now, for the first time in a generation, there is a new, meaningful national conversation about the pandemic that predates COVID-19: the pandemic of educational inequity.



The ties that bind children and families to schools have never been more important nor more strained.

The question on the minds of superintendents is to what extent will the next Administration's policy decisions exacerbate or alleviate opportunity gaps for K-12 students that include unequal access to food, housing, clean water and buildings, technology, health insurance and care, and financial relief measures? Without immediate and systemic corrective action in 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic will only worsen educational inequality and undermine any ensuing educational recovery efforts.

This inequality became most pronounced at the start of the 2020-21 school year, when we witnessed the mass disenrollment of children in our public schools. Some parents were comfortable with the virtual or in-person options their

public schools provided at the start of the school year, others were not and had the means to explore alternative education options, including hiring teachers and tutors for small group learning and taking advantage of options offered by private schools and private businesses. In contrast, parents with less or little financial means have had no such alternatives, and have been forced to adjust to public schools offering—virtual or in-person instruction—regardless of how well it works for their child, their family or their child's teacher(s), or how well-equipped the district is to meet the academic, socio-emotional and technological needs of the school community. Still others have had no way of connecting with any education system—public or nonpublic—because the economic consequences of the pandemic have uprooted and dismantled their lives that they simply could not prioritize the continuation of their child's education.

The ties that bind children and families to schools have never been more important nor more strained. In particular, the inability of educators to teach and reach all students in new and effective ways regardless of where or how the student is learning is deeply concerning. President Biden must have a vision for combatting the expensive and extensive learning loss. The pandemic has also laid bare a fundamental truth about America's education system: Our education system must be intentionally designed for the students who will always attend our public schools rather than as a system for students with the means to opt out of it. This translates to prioritizing our most vulnerable students and the schools and educators who support them and providing a more equitable framework for federal education policy and funding that ensures the neediest students are given the greatest opportunities for success.

Educational equity also requires healthcare equity and a vision for addressing our students' mental health disparities in particular. The pandemic's impact on student mental health has required superintendents to act as caregivers first and instructional leaders second. However, too many school leaders lack the programs and community partnerships in place to provide the intensive socio-emotional supports and mental health services their students and school communities need. This, too, must change.

It also requires an outright rejection of voucher programs or attempts to privatize federal funds. 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 highest-spending districts in the United States spend nearly 10 times more than those that are lowest-spending, with large differentials both across and within states. On average, school districts serving the largest concentrations of students of color receive approximately \$1,800 less per student in state and local funding than those serving the fewest students of color, and the differentials are even greater within states. For example, a 21.7% increase in per-pupil spending throughout all 12 school-age years for children from low-income families is large enough to eliminate the education attainment gap between children from low-income and non-poor families.

[A child's zip code should not determine the quality of school he or she attends, but it should determine the extent to which federal resources are directed to educating that child.](#)



Unfortunately, we continue to underfund and under-resource students who need the most help reaching their potential. What will prevail? The ever-growing achievement gap between rich and poor children, and between white students and students of color. We will then perpetuate the current practice of consigning millions of children to inadequate school buildings that lack good teachers, leaders, curriculum and technology, and appropriate staff to meet their academic, emotional and physical needs.

THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION SHOULD COMMIT TO THE FOLLOWING K-12 EDUCATION INVESTMENTS:

- **Champion the full funding of IDEA.** Until IDEA is fully funded, districts have to pay a higher proportion of the special education cost. As a result, districts are forced to make tough decisions about which programs to fund and divert funds from programs that serve all students (including students with disabilities) into IDEA.
- **Support and develop the utilization of a more accurate student poverty metric** to effectively redirect federal resources to low-income students and students of color. The pandemic has shown that placing the burden on schools to gauge poverty by counting free-and-reduced lunch application forms is antiquated. Instead, poverty should be measured through direct certification.



- **Take steps to eliminate funding for the D.C. voucher program.** In addition, the new administration should promote policies that would require private schools that participate in any federal program or receive any federal aid to abide by all federal civil rights laws and be far more transparent in how they use taxpayer funding.
- **Issue narrow, time-limited waivers related to federal assessments and accountability.** Simply accessing assessments will be anything but equitable this school year, but it is imperative there is a mechanism for districts to document learning loss, learning progress in 2020-21 and the impact the pandemic has had on achievement gaps.
- Any infrastructure plan must include the nation's public schools. K-12 public schools are the second largest national infrastructure sector for capital investment. Our nation's schools serve more than 56 million students and staff each day, with more than half of these buildings in need of repair, especially in urban and rural areas. **Schools and student connectivity must be an integral part of any national infrastructure plan.** In addition to starting to address the homework gap by funding the E-Rate program at \$4 billion as part of the next COVID package, we call on the Biden administration to support the authorization of \$100 billion to meet long-standing school infrastructure needs.
- The pandemic has highlighted both the importance of and lack of school-based healthcare services throughout the United States. Medicaid is the fourth largest federal funding stream for school districts, yet the process for receiving reimbursement for providing direct and indirect healthcare services to low-income students is wholly inequitable for districts and largely based on their administrative capacity to process claims. The next administration should **devise a system for streamlining the reimbursement process for school-based Medicaid programs** to ensure districts of all sizes can receive this critical reimbursement and afford to offer critical health services to children.
- Schools should not bear the brunt of the cost for feeding children. **Prioritize the financial health of school nutrition programs** through an investment of \$2.6 billion to mitigate a portion of the estimated financial loss that programs experienced during periods of virtual learning in 2020.
- **Support the Strength in Diversity Act**, which would authorize \$120 million in grants for voluntary community-driven strategies to increase diversity in schools to low-income students and students of color.

RECOMMENDATION #2: REPEAL RECENT REGULATIONS THAT HARM PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS AND DISTRICT OPERATIONS

Over the past four years, we have seen a series of regulations introduced and finalized that have made it increasingly difficult to serve students, particularly students in poverty. These regulations have made it more difficult for administrators to efficiently manage federal programs in schools. In addition, the regulations adversely impact how schools provide critical services to students as well as transform school district practices in a dramatic and unhelpful way.



Repeal the parental consent requirement for Medicaid reimbursement (34 CFR 300.154(d)(2)(iv))

The next administration should repeal the requirement for a written parental consent for districts to access Medicaid reimbursement to allow schools to quickly draw down eligible funds to address the needs of their special education population.

Repeal the Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Sex In Education Programs or Activities Receiving Federal Financial Assistance (85 FR 30026)

The recent Title IX regulation is unnecessary and costly, and can undermine the health and safety of students and their ability to report and seek redress for Title IX violations in school.

Repeal the Revision of Categorical Eligibility in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) RIN 0584-AE62

This regulation will exacerbate the food insecurity of children, as categorical eligibility plays a critical role in ensuring TANF families have protection against hunger during times of financial instability. This regulation will take away free school meals for more than 500,000 students and create a more onerous application system for districts trying to process families for the SNAP program.

Repeal the Public Charge regulation (22 CFR 40.41)

This regulation puts the health and well-being of millions of immigrant children at risk and places new burdens on school districts to provide health and nutrition-related services for children who qualify for these benefits through federal programs.

RECOMMENDATION #3: ENSURE CONTINUOUS AND DIRECT ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN LOCAL EDUCATION OFFICIALS AND THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Over the past 12 years, there has been minimal direct contact between federal education staff and superintendents to inform each other of their respective work, their worldview and their understanding of the immediate, short-term and long-term challenges experienced by students, educators and education leaders. In contrast, at the state level, it is common for the personnel in the state education agency, as well as state education commissioner or state chief, to regularly communicate and connect with school superintendents for feedback on state funding, policy ideas and needs, and to have their hands on the “pulse” of what is working and not working in schools. If we hope to see a greater return on federal investments in K-12 education, we cannot continue to work in silos at the local and federal levels.



- **Assign 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 strongly urge the next administration to rectify this major gap between policy and practice by **forming a professional learning community of U.S. Department of Education staff and members of AASA** to ensure that they have a feedback loop on how and where the department should act and what actions could be helpful, harmful or neutral for students and districts.
- We recommend that before issuing any guidance, regulation or policy document (including data collection) impacting the K-12 space, the **U.S. Department of Education should take steps to ensure it has appropriately gauged feedback 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.
- Finally, while the more significant communication and information sharing gaps exist at the U.S. Department of Education, we would urge other agencies such as the **Federal Communications Commission, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to also assign a point of contact for liaising directly with school leaders** about critical federal programs under their management.

CONCLUSION

As a non-partisan organization, AASA is committed to having a strong professional and collaborative relationship with the Biden Administration as we have with prior administrations.

We understand that the profound and unconscionable learning loss that has resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with the continuous under-resourcing of public schools for decades cannot be rectified overnight. Furthermore, the incredible leadership demonstrated by superintendents during this time, particularly given the absence of both federal leadership and resources, cannot be understated.

However, it is our belief that, if supported by the Biden administration and approved by Congress, our leaders, coupled with the AASA policies and funding priorities, can set a new, positive course for American public education for every child.

