



# Pre-K–12 Education

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In this critical moment, when the nation reckons with enduring racial and economic inequalities, it is essential to adopt bold changes in the nation's pre-K–12 education system that ensure all children have access to high-quality public schools. We know what is needed to improve opportunities for all children, and particularly for those students who are low-income, of color, and English learners. What has been lacking is a commitment from policymakers to tackle segregation and ensure that education reforms are fully funded and firmly targeted on the populations that continue to be left behind



**THE BIG IDEA:** America will not achieve racial and economic equality of opportunity without first establishing a solid and level educational learning field for all children by ensuring their schools are diverse, properly funded, and built for the future.

## TCF's 2021 Pre-K–12 Policy Priorities

1. **Increase the Number of Children Who Attend Integrated Schools**
2. **Fully and Equitably Fund Public Education**
3. **Support English Learners**
4. **Modernize America's Schools**
5. **Expand Access to and Promote Integration in Early Education**

### 1. Increase the Number of Children Who Attend Integrated Schools

One of the starkest examples of racial and economic inequality in America, as well as a leading cause of it, is the nation's highly unequal and highly segregated education system. This segregation begins in early childhood and continues throughout higher education. At the K–12 level, two in five Black and Latinx students attend school with almost no white students, and one in five white students attend school with almost no students of color. The nation needs a P–16 agenda for racially and socioeconomically integrated education, which is why this theme features prominently in The Century Foundation's higher education 2021 priorities as well. Ordinary Americans can confront and change segregation in their schools, by demanding diversity, confronting the discrimination that led to most of the school and residential boundaries that determine where their children go to school today, and seeking creative solutions to the problem of segregation. But policymakers have a key role to play. The next administration and Congress should:

- **Create a new \$2 billion fund for school integration.** School integration efforts can be a highly effective way of producing educational gains for students—sometimes even more cost-effective than compensatory spending. We recommend quadrupling Title I funding (discussed below), with \$2 billion of the increase allocated by formula to districts and charter schools to employ Title I funds for school integration. As part of this effort, federal leaders should also remove the Title I funding penalty for school integration; the federal government should create a safe harbor for

The full report “The Century Foundation's Top Policy Priorities for 2021” can be found at <https://tcf.org/content/report/century-foundations-top-policy-priorities-2021/>

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schools where integration efforts could risk the loss of Title I funds.

- **Institute federal pre-clearance of efforts of school districts to secede.** Adopt a requirement for federal preclearance of major district boundary changes or secessions in order to better protect low-income children and children of color from further disinvestment due to discriminatory intent or effect.
- **Pass the Strength in Diversity Act.** Passed by the House of Representatives on September 15, 2020 on a bipartisan basis, the bill would authorize a new grant program to districts for “voluntary community-driven strategies” to reduce school segregation; it would also strike Section 426 of General Education Provision Act (GEPA), which prohibits federal funding for transportation to promote integration.
- **Increase federal magnet school funding tenfold.** Funding for magnet schools should be significantly increased, from today’s \$105 million per year to \$1 billion. The funding increase should be coupled with strengthened accountability to ensure that magnet schools reduce racial and economic isolation.
- **Require annual reporting on all districts under federal desegregation orders.** By TCF’s count, there are over 700 hundred school districts nationwide that are under active court desegregation orders or voluntary agreements, but data on these schools and their progress is not systematically compiled and reported to the public. The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights should be required to publish each year key statistics about the standards and progress of these school districts.
- **Reinstate guidance on the voluntary desegregation of schools.** The next administration should reinstate guidance, rescinded by the Trump Administration in 2018, on voluntary racial desegregation in K–12 schools that had been jointly issued by the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Education during

the Obama administration, thus discouraging school districts and charter schools from undertaking such efforts.

- **Pass the Advanced Coursework Equity Act.** Introduced in August 2020, the bill would fund programs to increase enrollment of Black, Latinx, and Native American students, students from low-income families, English learners, and students with disabilities in advanced courses, setting more students on a pathway to success and giving them the benefit of learning with and from more racially diverse classmates.
- **Leverage the Charter Schools Program (CSP) to open or expand “diverse-by-design” schools.** There are stellar examples of racially and socioeconomically diverse charter schools across the country, yet school integration is not part of the defined purpose of the CSP, and several aspects of the program actively work against integration. Policymakers should expand priorities for diversity in each of the three CSP competitive grant programs and revise guidance on weighted lotteries to allow for a broader range of diversity-conscious admissions preferences.
- **Provide incentives within school infrastructure legislation for school integration.** A priority in federal funding should be provided not only to the school districts with the greatest infrastructure needs and the least ability to pay for improvements themselves, but also to those districts that are taking proactive steps to implement school integration plans. State-level initiatives, such as those in Connecticut, can provide a model for federal efforts.
- **Reform housing policy.** In a nation where three-quarters of students attend neighborhood public schools, efforts to reduce school segregation must address housing policy. Although the 1968 Fair Housing Act has helped modestly reduce racial segregation, four steps could help combat local policies that have socially engineered segregation.

Congress should pass an Economic Fair Housing Act to combat discriminatory zoning policies that exclude low-income families and exacerbate economic and racial segregation through exclusionary zoning policies, following the lead of Minneapolis and Oregon. Congress should pass the Housing, Opportunity, Mobility and Equity (HOME) Act, which would require states, cities, and counties receiving funding under the Community Development Block Grant program to develop strategies to reduce barriers to housing development and increase the supply of housing. The next administration should reinstate the Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing Rule implemented in 2015 by the Obama administration and make a rule that would end “source of income” discrimination against Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher holders, following the lead of states and localities that have enacted legislation.

### 2. Fully and Equitably Fund Education

The United States is underfunding K–12 schools by nearly \$150 billion annually, based on a recent TCF analysis of what it would cost to bring every student in America up to national average outcomes, robbing some 30 million schoolchildren of the opportunity to succeed. Black and Latinx students and students from low-income backgrounds attend schools with the largest funding gaps. Greater investment in schools translates to improved student outcomes, and these outcomes are more pronounced and significant for low-income and minority students. While increases by state and local agencies are needed to close these funding gaps, as a downpayment, the federal government should:

- **Quadruple annual Title I funding to help close education funding gaps.** The federal government should quadruple Title I funding, from \$15.9 billion to \$63.6 billion. Funding formulas should include stronger maintenance of effort and maintenance of equity provisions to incentivize states and ensure that they are distributing their own state funds in a manner that ensures the districts with the greatest needs get adequate funding.

### 3. Support English Learners

For decades, English learners (ELs) have been one of the fastest-growing student populations. As of 2018, nearly one-quarter of all U.S. children spoke a non-English language at home; however, federal EL funding has been largely flat since 2002, and policy innovations have lagged as well. The next administration and Congress should:

- **Triple Title III funding for English learners.** To catch up with the growth of the EL learner population and increase the per-pupil funding for ELs needed to provide high-quality supports, Title III spending must be tripled, from roughly \$740 million to \$2.2 billion. Title III funding should also be expanded in scope to allow schools and school districts to use these dollars to support former ELs’ progress, even after they officially test as proficient in English, to provide a gradually decreasing continuum of language learning supports.
- **Track and publish data on teacher diversity.** Policymakers should include a new Title I requirement that states track and annually publish statistics on the racial, ethnic, gender, and linguistic diversity of their public school teachers. ELs do particularly well in bilingual education; tracking this data is the first step toward increasing access to a diverse teacher workforce.
- **Support new bilingual teacher training programs.** Congress should expand funding for the Office of English Language Acquisition to launch a \$200 million competitive grants program supporting the development of new bilingual teacher training programs.

### 4. Modernize America’s Schools

Over half of public school districts must urgently update their facilities to provide students with a safe and healthy learning environment, according to a recent study by the U.S. Government Accountability Office. Some 36,000 schools lack proper heating, ventilation, and air conditioning

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systems, a major roadblock to ensuring a healthy learning environment but also a threat to protecting students, teachers, and staff in the middle of a pandemic. The GAO report also documents multiple facility challenges, including inadequate roofing and electrical systems, and environmental and accessibility issues. Furthermore, millions of students waiting for schools to reopen still lack resources to fully participate in remote learning. As part of a major national infrastructure package to rebuild our roads, bridges, and airports, the next administration and Congress should:

- **Fund school infrastructure repair and renovation.**

The Reopen and Rebuild America's Schools Act would authorize \$100 billion in grants and also authorize a tax-credit bond program to benefit needy schools for repairing, renovating, and modernizing school facilities that pose health and safety risks to students and staff. It would also provide funding to address the student digital divide.

### 5. Expand Access to and Promote Integration in Early Education

High-quality early learning programs can have a huge impact on the future success of low-income children—improving learning and development, boosting health, and increasing future employment and earnings. When middle-class and low-income children have the chance to attend preschool together, both groups benefit from the increased diversity

in the classroom, yet few states have high capacity universal pre-K programs open to and able to serve children of all backgrounds. The next administration and Congress should:

- **Fund universal pre-K for all 3- and 4-year-olds.**

As part of a broader federal effort to make child care affordable for all families who need it and provide high-quality early education to all children, matching funds should be established to encourage states to institute or expand pre-K programs, with added incentives for programs that provide universal access, with no income cap and the capacity to serve all eligible children.

- **Enable and incentivize blended funding in early education programs.**

Across most of the early education landscape, where universal public access does not yet exist, the main opportunities for socioeconomic integration lie in blending the different public funding streams and private pay tuition revenues to serve a range of children in the same classrooms—but program requirements often make this challenging or impossible. Federal investments in early childhood education—including Head Start and Early Head Start, grants to state pre-K programs, and the Child Care Development Block Grant—should include provisions that enable, support, and incentivize providers to blend and braid different public funding streams as well as private tuition.