

OUR CHILDREN DESERVE BETTER: A CALL TO RESIST WASHINGTON'S DANGEROUS VISION FOR U.S. EDUCATION



Education Deans for Justice and Equity
In partnership with the National Education Policy Center

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School of Education, University of Colorado Boulder
Boulder, CO 80309-0249
(802) 383-0058
nepc.colorado.edu



KEVIN WELNER
PROJECT DIRECTOR

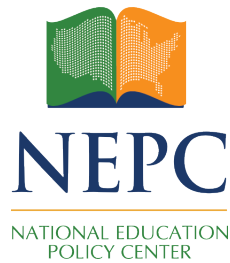
WILLIAM MATHIS
MANAGING DIRECTOR

ALEX MOLNAR
PUBLISHING DIRECTOR

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OUR CHILDREN DESERVE BETTER: A CALL TO RESIST WASHINGTON'S DANGEROUS VISION FOR U.S. EDUCATION

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A half-century ago, in one of the most significant periods of education reform in the United States, the Civil Rights Movement and the War on Poverty envisioned the federal government as a protector of civil rights and an advocate of funding equity. Tragically, since the 1980s [both Democratic and Republican](#) administrations, with bipartisan support in Congress, have increasingly betrayed this legacy and focused instead on deregulation, privatization, and the rapid expansion of school choice. The current administration's inflammatory and misleading rhetoric uses shock and fear to mask the reality that such reforms are undermining public education, promoting corporate profiteering off of public schools, and siphoning resources from the most disadvantaged to improve schooling for the most advantaged. The results are weakening our democracy and harming our children.

As education deans, we add our voices to the growing movement to protect and strengthen public education. Our colleges and schools of education prepare the vast majority of the nation's public school teachers, counselors, leaders, researchers, specialists, and the professors who teach them. We do not aim to defend the status quo, for we know that we all can do better. Rather, we uphold our responsibility to protest policies and initiatives that lack an ethical foundation, a sound research basis, a vision of education for the common good, and a commitment to our democratic ideals. To counter Washington's misleading rhetoric, we promote research-based policies to build the schools that each and every child deserves.

We reaffirm our commitment to the principles expressed in [Public Education, Democracy, and the Role of the Federal Government: A Declaration of Principles](#), released in January of this year and signed by 235 current and former deans of colleges and schools of education across the United States. Since then, our concerns have only increased as problematic rhetoric has hardened into budget and policy proposals that accelerate the move away from these principles. This statement elaborates on the *Declaration of Principles* by detailing three values that underlie our vision for education in a democratic society: Protecting and Nurturing Our Children, Empowering Educators, and Investing in Public Schools.

Protect and Nurture Our Children, Do Not Abandon Them

The Rhetoric and Actions from Washington: Politicians are claiming that federal intervention regarding discrimination or fraud in education is over-reach and unnecessary and that federal programs to close opportunity gaps are financially wasteful and ineffective. For decades, the portion of public-school and public-university budgets from state and federal funding has shrunk significantly, and to top this trend, the administration has proposed to [slash federal education funding](#) by over nine-billion dollars (13% of the education budget) alongside steep cuts in funding for healthcare, Medicaid, mental-health services, and disability services that schools count on to serve children and families every day. In K-12 education, the administration has curtailed efforts to investigate and remedy civil-rights discrimination in schools, as by repealing guidance regarding [discrimination of transgender students](#), as well as proposing to reduce the budget and staff of the Office of Civil Rights and discontinue investigations of individual cases into [systemic causes of discrimination](#). Higher education too has been affected with the weakening of regulations to protect students from [fraudulent debt](#) and cuts to student financial aid, even while the Justice Department is redirecting resources to [undermine affirmative action](#).

The Reality in Our Schools: The Civil Rights Movement and War on Poverty called on the federal government to lead efforts to end racial and other discriminations and inequities in public education. Our country saw measurable improvements in closing gaps in educational achievement and attainment, but problems have persisted and worsened, particularly as such reforms ended. Research is clear that adequate funding and resources, alongside effective strategies and leadership, is necessary to counter discrimination and inequity and improve educational outcomes.[1] Rather than abdicating its responsibility and abandoning those in greatest need, the federal government should be drawing on sound research to increase protections of and improve supports for each and every child.

Empower Our Educators, Do Not Undermine Them

The Rhetoric and Actions from Washington: Federal leaders are openly voicing hostility towards the public-school professions, as by publicly sparring with teacher unions, and even claiming that teachers in a public school visited by the Education Secretary seemed to be [“waiting to be told what they have to do.”](#) Leaders are also attacking sources of knowledge and skepticism that typically hold the government accountable, from the [disregard of scientific](#) and scholarly inquiry to the [demonizing of journalism](#) and other media that offer alternative perspectives. These attacks build on decades of education reform initiatives that undermine effective teachers and the teaching of critical thinking. For example, struggling public schools are still told to narrow the curriculum to focus on test-prep and on the knowledge and skills that purportedly are needed for the work-

place. Spreading are competency-based forms of education that emphasize not the educational experience but merely the certification that students know and can do certain things. Educational technologies and virtual curriculums are increasingly offered as panaceas and are receiving substantial funding when they purport to transmit information more efficiently than do teachers. In such a context, teachers who insist that students question, think, and imagine—and the programs that prepare and support such teaching—risk being labeled as dangerous or harmful.

The Reality in Our Schools: Teaching is an exceedingly complicated process that demands the highest caliber of professionals. Education in an authoritarian or totalitarian society might understandably aim toward ignorance, conformity, and obedience, but not so in a society that aspires toward participatory governance and democratic values. The rhetoric and reforms that attack and undermine teachers serve to lower the standards for teaching, hinder effective teaching practices, create revolving doors of employment, de-professionalize teaching, and deregulate teacher preparation.[2] Research is clear that effective schools have rich and demanding curricula that require students to think, question, imagine, feel, and collaborate. Such a curriculum can only be taught by teachers who are well-educated in their content areas, highly skilled in how to teach and assess, sensitive and responsive to individual student needs and interests, connected with and caring towards their students' families and communities, committed to participating in shared governance, and appropriately compensated through salaries and job protections.

Invest in Our Public Schools, Do Not Privatize Them

The Rhetoric and Actions from Washington: Politicians and profiteers argue that if schools are failing in a democracy, parents should have the freedom to choose another school for their children. They further insist that such consumer choice and market competition will result in greater effort and ingenuity and drive improvement.[3] Following this logic, the federal administration is proposing to significantly increase [funding to expand school choice and voucher](#) (or voucher-like tax-credit or savings-account) programs that would, among other things, allow public funds to flow into elite private schools, exclusive Christian schools, other schools unaccountable to the public, and even schools that [exclude entire groups of students](#). They are simultaneously advocating for decreasing the oversight and regulation of charter schools while hyper-regulating traditional public schools.

The Reality in Our Schools: A [2016 national poll](#) revealed a long-standing disconnect: although most parents are satisfied with the public schools their children attend, they simultaneously believe that public schools overall are failing. Truth resides in both of these perspectives: schools succeed in some ways, even in the face of insurmountable odds, but in other ways schools also fail our

children and our country when they merely reproduce social inequities and hierarchies, particularly in high-need areas. Research is clear that a move to privatize and deregulate public education will only widen system disparities and disconnect schools from the communities they serve. For example, school-choice programs have been shown to increase racial segregation, and voucher programs have been shown to divert funds to private and religious schools that are not required to accept and serve all students (including students with disabilities) and leave struggling schools with even less financial and community resources than before.[4] Research on academic outcomes shows that, on average, students using [voucher programs](#) or attending [charter schools](#) do not perform better academically, and in some areas perform worse, than their counterparts in traditional public schools. Public school systems are most effective and successful when they draw on community resources and provide wrap-around services that support the wellbeing of the whole child and their families.[5] But communities cannot do this on their own, particularly when our country is plagued by federal funding cuts and regressive tax policies that ensure that poorer communities are the least likely to have adequate funding for schools.

By abdicating its responsibility to protect and nurture all children, attacking rather than valuing and empowering teachers, and refusing to invest adequately in locally controlled public schools, the federal government is undermining public education and setting public schools up for failure. Make no mistake about it, the rhetoric and actions of the current administration build on decades of failed reforms that fundamentally harm our children, our schools, and our democracy. To sustain itself a democratic society must offer the very best education to each and every child. It can do so by nurturing and cultivating the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to critically question and courageously imagine, to make informed and independent decisions and actions, to value students and their communities, and to work and live collectively with others to build a better tomorrow for all. These are the very things that we expect from ourselves as educational leaders and from our country's leaders as well.

We join with countless others in demanding a better future for our children and our country, and we stand ready to collaborate with federal leaders and all who care about public education as we work to bring this vision into reality.

Notes and References

- 1 Berliner, D.C., & Glass, G.V. (2014). *50 myths and lies that threaten America's public schools: The real crisis in education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
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- 4 Ravitch, D. (2013). *Reign of error: The hoax of the privatization movement and the danger to America's public schools*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf.
- 5 Carter, P.L., & Welner, K.G. (2013). *Closing the opportunity gap: What America must do to give every child an even chance*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Contact Information:

Education Deans for Justice and Equity (EDJE), <http://educationdeans.org>
Contact Person: Kevin Kumashiro, Chair of EDJE, kevin@kevinkumashiro.com

Endorsements and Signatures

Endorsed by 17 national education organizations:

American Educational Studies Association (AESA)
Badass Teachers Association, Inc. (BATS)
The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles at UCLA
Council of Academic Deans of Research Education Institutions (CADREI)
Council on Anthropology and Education (CAE)
Education for Liberation Network
National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE)
National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME)
National Association of Holmes Scholars Alumni (NAHSA)
National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest)
National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER)
Network for Public Education (NPE)
Rethinking Schools
Teacher Activist Groups - National (TAG)
Teacher Education Council of State Colleges and Universities (TECSCU)
United Opt Out National (UOO)
University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA)

The following 205 current and former deans of colleges and schools of education (or directors or chairs of education departments where there is no separate school of education) have endorsed this statement. Institutions are listed for identification purposes only.

George Abaunza, Interim Dean, School of Education, Felician University
Judy A. Abbott, Dean, James I. Perkins College of Education, Stephen F. Austin State University
Cheryl Achterberg, Dean, College of Education and Human Ecology, The Ohio State University
Jose Luis Alvarado, Dean, College of Education, California State University Monterey Bay
James D. Anderson, Dean, College of Education, University of Illinois - Urbana
Lauren Anderson, Chair, Education Department, Connecticut College
Rene Antrop-Gonzalez, Dean, School of Urban Education, Metropolitan State University
Heidi Barker, Chair, Department of Education, Regis University
Nancy Barno Reynolds, Former Director, Inclusive Adolescence Education Programs, Cazenovia College
Vicki Bartolini, Chair, Department of Education, Wheaton College Massachusetts
Carole Basile, Dean, Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University
Carol Batker, Former Associate Dean & Director, Master of Arts in Teaching Prog., Empire State College SUNY
Joseph B. Berger, Dean, College of Education and Human Development, University of Massachusetts Boston
Lisa Blanca Battaglino, Dean, College of Education and Allied Studies, Bridgewater State University
Paul Beare, Dean, Kremen School of Education and Human Development, California State University Fresno
Barbara Beatty, Chair, Department of Education, Wellesley College
Lee Anne Bell, Former Director, Education Program, Barnard College - Columbia University
Terry Bergeson, Interim Dean, School of Education and Kinesiology, Pacific Lutheran University

David C. Berliner, Former Dean, Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University
Sandra Beyda-Lorie, Dean, Daniel L. Goodwin College of Education, Northeastern Illinois University
Kate Boyle, Dean, College of Education and Counseling Psychology, Saint Martin's University
Amanda R. Bozack, Director, School of Teacher Education and Leadership, Radford University
Jane S. Bray, Dean, Darden College of Education, Old Dominion University
Edward Buendia, Dean, School of Education, University of Washington - Bothell
Lisa Burke, Chair, Department of Education, Elmhurst College
Colette Cann, Chair, Education Department, Vassar College
Pamela S. Carroll, Dean, College of Education and Human Performance, University of Central Florida
Mara Casey Tieken, Co-Chair, Education Department, Bates College
Barbara Catbagan, Chair, Department of Contemplative Education, Naropa University
Anita Charles, Director, Education Department, Bates College
Anita Chikkatur, Chair, Department of Educational Studies, Carleton College
Rose Wan-Mui Chu, Former Interim Dean, School of Urban Education, Metropolitan State University
Joseph Ciccone, Chair, Education Department, College of Saint Elizabeth
Hardin L.K. Coleman, Former Dean, School of Education, Boston University
Ken Coll, Dean, College of Education, University of Nevada - Reno
Sara Cook, Dean, College of Education, Science, and Mathematics, Viterbo University
Jeane Copenhaver-Johnson, Chair, Department of Education Ithaca College
Cindy Cruz, Former Chair, Department of Education, University of California at Santa Cruz
Shannon Cuff, Dean, School of Education and Child Development, Drury University
Ada Beth Cutler, Former Dean, College of Education and Human Services, Montclair State University
Mary Ann Danowitz, Dean, College of Education, North Carolina State University
Michael E. Dantley, Dean, College of Education, Health and Society, Miami University of Ohio
Sonja Darlington, Former Chair, Department of Education and Youth Studies, Beloit College
Lynn DeCapua, Dean, School of Education, Georgian Court University
Anne Dichele, Dean, School of Education, Quinnipiac University
LuEllen Doty, Former Chair, Education Department, Elmhurst College
Susan Douglas Franzosa, Former Dean, Graduate School of Ed. & Allied Professions, Fairfield Univ.
Jacob Easley II, Dean, School of Education & Professional Studies/Graduate Division, Eastern CT State Univ.
Donald Easton-Brooks, Dean, School of Education, University of South Dakota
Stacey Edmonson, Dean, College of Education, Sam Houston State University
Amy Eguchi, Chair, Division of Education, Bloomfield College
Rick Eigenbrood, Dean, School of Education, Seattle Pacific University
Laurie Elish-Piper, Dean, College of Education, Northern Illinois University
Rachel Endo, Dean, School of Education, University of Washington Tacoma
Niki Fayne, Former Dean, School of Education, Lehman College
Jay Fiene, Dean, College of Education, California State University San Bernardino
Margaret Finders, Chair, Department of Education, Augsburg University
Scott Fletcher, Dean, Graduate School of Education and Counseling, Lewis & Clark College
Viola E. Florez, Former Dean, College of Education, University of New Mexico
Derek Furr, Director, Master of Arts in Teaching Program, Bard College
Dana Fusco, Chair, Department of Education, York College
Maria E. Franquiz, Former Dean, College of Education, University of Utah
Timothy J. Frederiks, Chair, Education Department, Centenary University
Brenda Fyfe, Dean, School of Education, Webster University

Edward Garcia Fierros, Chair, Department of Education and Counseling, Villanova University
Gregg Garn, Dean, Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education, University of Oklahoma
Cynthia Gerstl-Pepin, Dean, College of Education, University of Massachusetts Amherst
Jack Gillette, Dean, Graduate School of Education, Lesley University, and Former Director, Teacher Preparation and Education Studies, Yale University
Maureen Gillette, Dean, School of Education and Human Services, Seton Hall University
Mark R. Ginsberg, Dean, College of Education and Human Development, George Mason University
Mark Girod, Dean, College of Education, Western Oregon University
Christine Givner, Dean, College of Education, State University of New York at Fredonia
Gene W. Gloeckner, Co-Director, School of Education, Colorado State University
Kenneth Gold, Founding Dean, School of Education, The College of Staten Island CUNY
A. Lin Goodwin, Vice Dean, Teachers College, Columbia University
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Karen Graves, Chair, Department of Education, Denison University
Helen Greene, Former Dean, Schools of Education, Long Island Univ. at C.W. Post & NY Institute of Technology
Margaret Grogan, Dean, Donna Ford Attallah College of Educational Studies, Chapman University
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Jean Haar, Dean, College of Education, Minnesota State University - Mankato
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Mike Hillis, Dean, Graduate School of Education, California Lutheran University
Elizabeth R. Hinde, Dean, School of Education, Metropolitan State University of Denver
Randy Hitz, Dean Emeritus, Graduate School of Education, Portland State University
Marvin Hoffman, Former Associate Director, Urban Teacher Education Program, University of Chicago
Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy, Dean, School of Education, American University
Adam Howard, Director, Education Program, Colby College
Jingzi Huang, Director, School of Teacher Education, University of Northern Colorado
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Kathleen Hulgín, Former Chair, Department of Education, Mount St. Joseph University
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Ron Jacobson, Executive Director, School of Education, Central Washington University
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Bruce Johnson, Dean, College of Education, University of Arizona
Joseph F. Johnson, Jr., Dean, College of Education, San Diego State University
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Karen M. Kaye, Dean, School of Education, Baldwin Wallace University
Joseph E. Keferl, Dean, College of Education and Human Services, Wright State University
Virginia L. Keil, Interim Dean, Judith Herb College of Education, The University of Toledo

Hilton Kelly, Chair, Educational Studies Department, Davidson College
Pete Kelly, Dean, College of Education, University of Mary Washington
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John W. Kohl, Dean Emeritus, College of Education, Health & Human Development, Montana State Univ.
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Andrea Lachance, Dean, School of Education, SUNY Cortland
Ok-Hee Lee, Dean, College of Education and Human Services, Minnesota State University Moorhead
Alan Lesgold, Renee and Richard Goldman Dean Emeritus, School of Education, Univ. of Pittsburgh
Elliott Lessen, Dean Emeritus, School of Education, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville
Tamara Lucas, Dean, College of Education and Human Services, Montclair State University
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Suzanne McCotter, Dean, School of Education, The College of New Jersey
Jeffrey A. McCubbin, Dean, College of Health and Human Sciences, Colorado State University
Robert H. McPherson, Dean, College of Education, University of Houston
Debra Meyer, Former Chair, Department of Education, Elmhurst College
Craig A. Michaels, Dean, Division of Education, Queens College - City University of New York
Nicholas M. Michelli, Dean Emeritus, School of Education and Human Services, Montclair State University,
and Teacher Education, CUNY
Michael Middleton, Dean, School of Education, Hunter College
Renée A. Middleton, Dean, The Gladys W. and David H. Patton College of Education, Ohio University
Danny Mielke, Dean, College of Education, Eastern Oregon University
Hanfu Mi, Dean, College of Education and Human Services, University of Illinois at Springfield
Allan A. Morotti, Former Dean, School of Education, University of Alaska Fairbanks
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Robert D. Muller, Dean, National College of Education, National Louis University
Beth Nason Quick, Dean, College of Education, The University of Alabama in Huntsville
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Spencer Niles, Dean, School of Education, College of William & Mary
Catherine O'Connor, Dean ad Interim, School of Education, Boston University
Rachel Oppenheim, Director, School of Education, Antioch University Seattle
Jeff Passe, Dean, College of Education & Integrative Studies, California State Polytechnic Univ. Pomona
Sheilah M. Paul, Dean, School of Education, Medgar Evers College of CUNY
Jon E. Pedersen, Dean, College of Education, University of South Carolina
Randy Penfield, Dean, School of Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro
George J. Petersen, Founding Dean, College of Education, Clemson University
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Don Pope-Davis, Dean, College of Education, New Mexico State University
Stewart Purkey, Chair, Department of Education, Lawrence University
Cindy Reed, Dean, College of Education and Human Services, Northern Kentucky University

Lynn K. Rhodes, Dean Emerita, School of Education & Human Development, Univ. of Colorado Denver
Francisco Rios, Former Dean, Woodring College of Education, Western Washington University
Maria S. Rivera Maulucci, Chair, Department of Education, Barnard College - Columbia University
Virginia Roach, Dean, Graduate School of Education, Fordham University
David Rock, Dean, School of Education, The University of Mississippi
Diana Rogers-Adkinson, Dean, College of Education, Southeast Missouri State University
Catherine A. Rosemary, Chair, Department of Education and School Psychology, John Carroll University
Michael S. Rosenberg, Dean, School of Education, State University of New York at New Paltz
Paul Rowland, Former Dean, College of Education, University of Idaho, & School of Ed., Univ. of Montana
AG Rud, Former Dean, College of Education, Washington State University
Rose Rudnitsky, Dean, School of Education, Mercy College
Deanna J. Sands, Dean, College of Education, Seattle University
Doris Santoro, Chair, Education Department, Bowdoin College
Kathy Schultz, Dean, School of Education, University of Colorado Boulder
Deborah Seltzer-Kelly, Chair, Department of Education Studies, Wabash College
Brian Sevier, Dean, School of Education, California State University Channel Islands
Deborah A. Shanley, Interim Dean, School of Education, Lehman College of the City Univ. of New York
Eugene P. Sheehan, Dean, College of Education and Behavioral Sciences, Univ. of Northern Colorado
Dawn Shinew, Dean, College of Education and Human Development, Bowling Green State University
Alan R. Shoho, Dean, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Anjoo Sikka, Dean, Ella Cline Shear School of Education, State University of New York - Geneseo
Jonathan Singer, Chair, Department of Education, University of Maryland - Baltimore County
Timothy D. Slekar, Dean, School of Education, Edgewood College
Graciela Slesaransky-Poe, Former Founding Dean, School of Education, Arcadia University
Joan K. Smith, Former Dean, Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education, University of Oklahoma
Joshua Smith, Dean, School of Education, Loyola University Maryland
Roy Sonnema, Dean, College of Arts, Letters & Education, Eastern Washington University
Patricia Stall, Director, School of Education, California State University San Marcos
Cheryl Stanley, Dean, Education Department, Westfield State University
Janet Stocks, Dean, School of Education, Trinity Washington University
Larry D. Stonecipher, Dean Emeritus, College of Education and Human Services, Univ. of Illinois Springfield
Alfred W. Tatum, Dean, College of Education, University of Illinois at Chicago
Kenneth Teitelbaum, Former Dean, College of Education, Kutztown University
Scott L. Thomas, Dean, College of Education and Social Services, University of Vermont
Eva Travers, Former Chair, Department of Educational Studies, Swarthmore College
Mike Trevisan, Dean, College of Education, Washington State University
Joan E. Venditto, Director, Education Programs, Albertus Magnus College
Carol Vukelich, Dean, College of Education and Human Development, University of Delaware
Cindy M. Walker, Dean, School of Education, Duquesne University
Horacio Walker, Dean, Woodring College of Education, Western Washington University
Andrew Wall, Dean, School of Education, University of Redlands
April Whatley Bedford, Dean, School of Education, Brooklyn College
Jeanne White, Former Chair, Department of Education, Elmhurst College
Kimberly A. White-Smith, Dean, LaFetra College of Education, University of La Verne
Dawn Williams, Interim Dean, School of Education, Howard University
Monika Williams Shealey, Dean, College of Education, Rowan University
Diane Yendol-Hoppey, Dean, College of Education and Human Services, University of North Florida

Lydia Young, Associate Dean, Graduate School of Education, Northeastern University
Sajit Zachariah, Dean, College of Education and Human Services, Cleveland State University
Lisa Zagumny, Dean, College of Education, Tennessee Technological University
Sabrina Zirkel, Dean, School of Education and Counseling Psychology, Santa Clara University