

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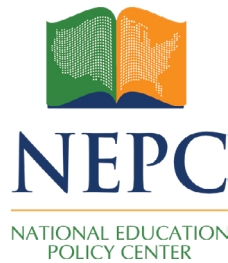
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OUR CHILDREN DESERVE BETTER: A CALL TO RESIST WASHINGTON'S DANGEROUS VISION FOR U.S. EDUCATION

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

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.

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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 220 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.

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