

The Elections and Issues Around Racial and Ethnic Diversity



Between now and November 5th, we are running a series of 10 Q&As with NEPC Fellows about education issues relevant to the 2024 federal election. The goal of the series is to inform readers about the education-related stances of the nation's two major political parties, drawing upon the Republican and Democratic parties' national platforms and on Project 2025. Q&A participants were selected on the basis of their research expertise on the topics they have been asked to address. In addition to describing the parties' positions, each expert is providing background information, with a focus on summarizing research findings.

Today's final Q&A is with [Kevin Lawrence Henry, Jr.](#), an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Dr. Henry researches market-based approaches to education and issues around racial equity. His research elevates the perspectives and practices of Black educational actors while examining how the persistence of anti-Blackness and white supremacy shapes Black peoples' educational experiences.

1. *From a historical perspective, why has the federal government been engaged in this issue?*

The federal government's involvement with issues of race, ethnic diversity, and equity is one rife with complications, contradictions, and complexities. In some instances,

federal engagement has worked to reproduce and maintain white supremacy and racial inequity, while other policies have worked to minimize that inequity. In this short response, I can only provide a brief example. But for the former, one can think of Federal Indian Boarding Schools (c. 1819-1978), which forcibly removed Indigenous peoples from their families, homes, lands, and cultures, while simultaneously physically abusing and attempting to “assimilate” indigenous peoples. It is also important to note, this federal education approach coincided with larger governmental efforts that aimed to expand the settler state, which is simply to say that federal education policy can often be part of a constellation of policies that reflect broader political mandates and interests.

On the other hand, the federal government has pursued educational racial justice, due in part to the dogged persistence and willful determination of communities of color, who refused second-class citizenship and demanded educational equity. This can most clearly be seen during the Civil Rights Movement, where activists challenged segregationist policies. One success of this movement was the *Brown* decision, which overturned the “separate but equal” doctrine that allowed for state-sanctioned segregation.

Related statutory successes include the 1964 Civil Rights Act, including Title VI, discussed briefly below. In addition, while President Lyndon B. Johnson’s 1965 War on Poverty was not specifically framed as a race-conscious initiative, the racial impacts are clear. These policies included Head Start, Food Stamps, Medicaid and Medicare, which have together had long-term positive effects for communities of color. Despite racial disparities persisting, official poverty rates are down for people of color.

2. *From a research perspective, how has federal government involvement been helpful or harmful to preparing students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds to succeed in college, career and life?*

The anti-poverty programs noted above have a critical impact on the educational and life outcomes for students of color. Moreover, federal educational provisions and regulations that are concerned with the enforcement of civil rights protections can positively impact the educational lives of students. For instance, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights enforces a variety of consent decrees, ranging from ensuring desegregation within school districts, to improving multilingual learner instruction, to addressing racial discrimination in student discipline. Further, federal initiatives such as President Obama’s efforts to address discipline disparities that disproportionately impact Black and Latinx students is noteworthy. Federal guidance, interventions, and oversight that address racial inequity attends to institutional and organizational realities that stymie and limit educational opportunity, and in doing so gives meaning to educational equity and the unreached promises of a multiracial democracy.

Nevertheless, these initiatives are fragile. And the tools available to the federal government are still sometimes used to entrench white supremacy. During Donald Trump’s administration, movement away from race-conscious remedies for racism-caused

harms intensified. For instance, the Trump administration rescinded Obama-era guidance on the reduction of suspensions and expulsions. Additionally, the Trump administration reduced the federal emphasis on enforcing Title VI protections for English Language Learners (ELLs) and decreased Office of Civil Rights investigations into systemic discrimination. Through the Justice Department, Department of Education, and elsewhere, the administration sought to protect white people from race-conscious programs and policies designed to directly address racial inequities. These race-evasive approaches were conscious efforts to roll back civil rights protections, guidance and enforcement and to roll out decentralized, deregulated, privatized policy measures. But this retrenchment, abrading, and weakening of civil rights protections has been a long-standing effort and was clearly manifested as early as the Nixon and Reagan administrations. The success of these efforts is seen in a series of Supreme Court decisions, including *Milliken v. Bradley*, *San Antonio School District v. Rodriguez*, *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, and *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, as well in non-education-related cases such as *Shelby County v. Holder*, which invalidated a significant provision in the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

This policy retreat from educational equity initiatives abandons or contorts hard-won civil rights victories for those who have been historically and presently marginalized, furthering discriminatory practices and marshaling governmental resources to advance racism.

3. *Based on your own research expertise, how (if at all) should the federal role on this issue shift? What is the justification for those recommendations?*

We need policies that explicitly aim to redress and counteract institutional and structural racism. This would necessarily mean continuing to support Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, coordinating interagency efforts to expand and reinforce civil rights oversight and enforcement, and creatively reimagining school funding to support districts that serve our most vulnerable students. Moreover, there are several key areas the federal government could spend a considerable amount of energy addressing, including but not limited to: the training, recruitment, and retainment of teacher and educational leaders of color; the overrepresentation of students of color in special education; racial discipline disparities, including considerations for alternative approaches such as restorative justice; increased supports for ELLs; federal intervention on curricular distortions and censorship around inclusive anti-racist curriculum and teaching; and reinvigorated support for affirmative action within the constraints of the Supreme Court's 2023 *Students for Fair Admissions* decision. Additionally, racial equity would be advanced by pursuing policies that might superficially seem to have strong racial-equity implication, such as increased student mental health and counseling services; oversight and evaluation of voucher programs and charter schools; and incentivizing wholistic testing and assessment as opposed to high-stakes testing measures.

4. *Please briefly explain how Project 2025, the RNC national platform and the DNC na-*

tional platform address this issue. (If this issue is not addressed by Project 2025, the RNC platform, or the DNC platform, please note that.)

Project 2025 and the RNC platform completely abandon a vision of a pluralistic, multicultural democracy. Focused on deregulation and the expansion of privatized education (which has historically been used to evade civil rights efforts and currently reproduces systemic racial inequity), these policy statements would significantly curtail and constrain regulatory and civil right enforcements in K-12 and higher education settings. Project 2025 and the platform both call for the elimination of the Department of Education. Moreover, Project 2025 calls for the elimination of Head Start, which, as mentioned earlier, has made significant strides in tackling long-standing racial and economic disparities. Additionally, Project 2025 calls for rescinding the equity provision within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which specially aims to evaluate and address racial disproportionality in special education. Project 2025 calls for the redistribution of Title I funds (over \$18 billion) as deregulated block grants to states, and then for the phasing out of these funds completely over a 10-year period. Title I funds have historically been used to support low-income children. Project 2025 calls for the prosecution of entities committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). This would be a fundamental disavowing of educational justice and should strike concern for those committed to the First Amendment, academic integrity and freedom, workers' rights, and democracy writ large.

The DNC platform largely avoids a direct focus on race, but it nonetheless stands in sharp contrast to the aforementioned Republican mandate. One noteworthy policy proposal calls for universal preschool, which studies have shown significantly narrows racial educational disparities. Moreover, DNC plans call for additional funding for Title I schools, diversification of educator pipelines, and opposition to voucher programs and educational censorship. These investments could very well have meaningful impacts on racial equity in education.

5. *What is your response to the ways in which this issue is addressed by Project 2025, the RNC national platform and the DNC national platform, based on your knowledge of the research in this area?*

The educational policy proposals in Project 2025 and the RNC platform reinscribe white supremacy by creating a narrow vision of the United States that neither acknowledges the history of oppression, nor the current manifestations of racism. It would be a state-sanctioned rejection of democratic efforts to widen the skirt of inclusion and to rectify violations of civil rights and liberties in education. It denies structural inequality and in doing so keeps in place odious forms of racial oppression.

The history of public education for people of color in the United States has been one saturated by white supremacy and inequity. However, that is not the entirety of the story. Demands for a more equitable and just education have always countered policies, practices, and people who deemed such transformative justice-laden visions as unnecessary, unwarranted, and at times “un-American.” The RNC and Project 2025 position racial inequity for communities of color as located in a bygone era, often

contorting anti-racist/equity-centered policies as the same as *actually* racist and discriminatory policies. This is patently false, and it misinterprets constitutional provisions that realigned governmental power against racial oppression and inequity in the form of white supremacy (in particular, the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments). The mandates from the RNC platform and Project 2025 restructure the federal government by strengthening federal powers, only to undo federal institutions, protections, oversight and accountability, especially in relation to racial equity concerns. It unravels the policy efforts that have been key to monitoring and reducing racial inequity, bringing us to a pre-1964 Civil Rights Act period. On the other hand, the DNC has proposed continued and expanded federal involvement with respect to educational equity.

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Federally Funded School Vouchers: Contrasting Party Views

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