

16 for 2016:

16 Education Policy Ideas for the Next President

Edited by Andrew J. Rotherham and Jennifer O'Neal Schiess



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About Bellwether Education Partners

Bellwether Education Partners is a nonprofit dedicated to helping education organizations in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors become more effective in their work and achieve dramatic results, especially for high-need students. To do so, we provide a unique combination of exceptional thinking, talent, and hands-on strategic support:

- Our **Strategic Advising** practice works with leading education organizations on their most pressing strategic and operational issues. We partner to create bold but achievable plans, while ensuring that leaders and stakeholders are in alignment around the path forward.
- Our **Policy and Thought Leadership** practice works to shape the broader education landscape by conducting policy analysis, research and writing, and idea generation, and by advising education entities on policy and public affairs.
- Our **Talent Services** practice identifies, places, and supports education leaders through comprehensive executive searches, customized search advisory services, and individual coaching. We also partner with clients to build talent-ready organizations where diverse teams can work, develop, and thrive.

Why bring all this together? Bellwether was founded on the belief that the only way to ensure that all children have access to high-quality schools is to take a holistic approach to education's most pressing challenges. We believe the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and many of the challenges organizations face are so complex that they require all three areas of expertise. Having all three makes our work stronger by tying innovative thinking to perspectives regarding on-the-ground realities.

In this way, Bellwether has carved out a special and desperately needed niche in the education reform landscape. We aren't just a think tank, or a consulting firm, or a human capital organization. We are all of the above and more, providing comprehensive, coherent, and lasting solutions to education's most longstanding and complicated problems.

Table of Contents

Foreword		Andrew J. Rotherham	v
Chapter			
1.	Seed More Autonomous Public Schools	Sara Mead	1
2.	Transform School Hiring	Chad Aldeman	5
3.	Bring the Blockchain to Education	Victor Reinoso	9
4.	Share the Risk on Student Loans	Andrew P. Kelly	14
5.	Get Schools in the Fight Against Child Sex Trafficking	Courtney Gaskins	19
6.	Scale Great Mentoring to Reach More Kids	Steve Mesler and Leigh Parise	23
7.	Network Early Childhood Education Providers	Ashley LiBetti Mitchel	28
8.	Give Good Food to Kids		
	<i>Local Food for Local Schools</i>	Lindsey Lusher Shute and Eric Hansen	32
	<i>Put Quality Ahead of Cost in School Lunches</i>	Tom Colicchio	36
9.	Make Competitive Grants Work	Juliet Squire	40
10.	Build Charter Schools Like Affordable Housing	James Willcox	44

Table of Contents

11.	Connect Career and Technical Education to Real Post-Secondary Opportunity	Alex Hernandez	49
12.	Provide Sector Agnostic Federal Support for Schools	Andy Smarick	53
13.	Expand Accountability in Higher Education	Michael Dannenberg	57
14.	Create Real Second Chances for At-Risk Youth	Gary L. Jones	61
15.	Give Education Power to Families		
	<i>A Limited Right of Action</i>	Ben Austin	66
	<i>Parent Powered Schools</i>	RiShawn Biddle	70
16.	Democratize Data	Aimee Rogstad Guidera	74
	About the Authors		78
	Endnotes		88



Foreword

Education is not getting much attention on the presidential campaign trail, but that doesn't mean the next administration won't face a variety of opportunities and challenges in the education sector.

In fact, the relative silence is misleading. Given the changes and competing pressures buffeting America's education system, leaders in the Department of Education will have their hands full with vexing problems and new challenges. Improving access to early childhood education, expanding choice and school options for parents, addressing student loans and higher education accountability, making competitive grant programs more effective, tapping technological innovations to help students and teachers, and ensuring healthy food for kids in school are just a few of the issues policymakers will face.

This volume doesn't presume to have answers to all those problems or a monopoly on good ideas for education policy. But it does offer 16 innovative, provocative, and forward-looking policy ideas addressing different aspects of the education world from thinkers and doers with a range of backgrounds and experiences. To build it, Bellwether Education Partners convened experts, talked with teachers and leaders in the field, and listened to a variety of pitches. We're grateful to everyone who contributed time, expertise, ideas, and input. In addition, this volume simply would not be possible without the exceptional work, care, and stewardship of Bellwether's Jennifer Schiess.

It's unlikely every idea here will appeal to you. They don't necessarily appeal to all of us here at Bellwether! Nor should any of them be construed to be endorsed by the generous funder of this project, The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation. A singular agenda wasn't the point of this project. Instead of ideological homogeneity, this volume brings together varying creative ideas for federal education policy. This diversity of thought means that at least some recommendations will appeal to the next administration regardless of who wins the election or leads the next president's education efforts.

The contributors here are Democrats, Republicans, and political independents, and the ideas span the ideological spectrum. The authors are a blend of high-profile advocates and analysts, practitioners and policy wonks, education insiders and people whose work only tangentially touches education, and familiar voices along with fresh ones. What they share is a commitment to trying new things and making the education system more effective for the people it is designed to serve: students.

The resulting policy ideas cover parental empowerment, food and nutrition, human trafficking, early childhood education, career and technical education, school choice, alternative education, and much more.

We hope that whoever prevails in November will realize that part of the message from voters this campaign season is about frustration. Americans want action to address real issues, rather than more partisan fighting and policy paralysis in Washington. We want these ideas to contribute to delivering that action. We hope you enjoy reading them, learn from them, and use them in your work.

Thanks for your time reading; we welcome your feedback.

With best wishes,

Andrew J. Rotherham
Co-Founder and Partner, Bellwether Education Partners

1.

Seed More Autonomous Public Schools

Sara Mead

Sara Mead is a partner with the Policy and Thought Leadership practice at Bellwether Education Partners.

Over the past two decades, local, state, and federal policymakers have tried numerous initiatives to improve chronically low-performing schools: No Child Left Behind required states to impose escalating interventions on those that failed to improve, and the Obama administration’s School Improvement Grants (SIG) program invested billions of dollars in “turnaround” efforts for the lowest-performing schools. There is evidence that accountability systems did in fact drive improvement in underperforming schools.¹ And some previously low-performing schools have undergone dramatic transformations that led to improved student learning outcomes.

For the most part, however, school turnaround efforts have been a bust.² The vast majority of schools identified as low performers remain low-performing years later.³ Nationally, 2,500 schools are currently so identified.⁴ And one million teenagers attend high schools that graduate less than 60 percent of students.⁵ The resulting failure to equip these children with the knowledge and skills they need has long-term costs for both their own life potential and our national economic competitiveness.

Given this track record, should policymakers just give up? By no means. Even as a decade of experience has demonstrated how hard it is to drive lasting change in existing low-performing schools, it has also shown the promise of an alternative strategy: creating new, high-quality schools. Over the past decade, the charter school movement has spurred the creation of nearly 7,000 new schools. While not all charters are high performing, research

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shows that urban charter schools, on average, outperform district schools serving similar students, and produce particular benefits for poor and black students—those most likely to be stuck in low-performing schools.⁶ A subset of high-performing charter schools are producing breakthrough results for historically underserved students.⁷ And the benefits of the new school strategy aren't limited to charters: Research shows that New York City's efforts to create new, small schools within the traditional district yielded achievement gains and improved graduation rates for students.⁸

As the Every Student Succeeds Act reduces pressure on states and districts to turn around low-performing schools, the new schools strategy must become an even more important tool in a national approach to meeting the needs of historically underserved students.

As the Every Student Succeeds Act reduces pressure on states and districts to turn around low-performing schools, the new schools strategy must become an even more important tool in a national approach to meeting the needs of historically underserved students. But the benefits of new schools are much broader: allowing the growth of new educational offerings—such as Montessori⁹ or bilingual schools, for which parent demand exceeds existing supply—and providing space for innovation.

Yet for all the potential benefits, our public education system currently lacks a coherent strategy for creating new schools, whether as alternatives to existing low performers or in response to underserved public priorities or parent demand. A few forward-looking districts, such as New York City and Denver, have invested in creating new schools or developing portfolios of new charter, district, and hybrid options. But most districts maintain long waiting lists for the most sought-after school models, rather than replicating them to meet parent demand.¹⁰

Most states have enacted charter school laws, but do not have a clear strategy for attracting or cultivating charter schools that meet specific state needs, and the quality of charter oversight varies widely across states. A few states have also established policies, such as Colorado's Innovation Schools, that encourage districts to create new, autonomous schools, but this remains relatively rare.¹¹ At the federal level, the Charter Schools Program has played a crucial role in fueling the growth of the charter movement, but funding for the program has not kept pace with the growth of the charter sector over the past 15 years.¹² As a result, charter operators have become increasingly reliant on philanthropic funds for start-up and growth. Funding constraints have also led to increased competition for funding between new start-up schools and established charter operators seeking to grow. Moreover, the federal charter schools program only supports the growth of new charter schools; there is no comparable strategy to support creation of new, autonomous, and innovative schools within districts. Nor is there a clear strategy linking national investments in new school creation to national goals and priorities, such as improving outcomes for high-need student populations, advancing STEM education, or expanding access to early childhood and adult education services.

The next administration should commit to an ambitious strategy to increase the supply of new, autonomous, high-quality schools, and invest \$1 billion a year to create 3,500 new schools over the next five years.

The next administration should commit to an ambitious strategy to increase the supply of new, autonomous, high-quality schools, and invest \$1 billion a year to create 3,500 new schools over the next five years. This increased funding should be accompanied by increased accountability for results. And it should support a broad strategic vision that goes beyond charter schools to replicate effective models and support the creation of new approaches in both the traditional and charter sectors across the P-20 continuum. Funds would support the following activities:

- **New school creation:** The majority of the \$1 billion in funds should be dedicated to support creation of new schools and models, within both the district and charter sectors. As with the existing [federal] charter school program, funds would be allocated to states that would distribute them on a competitive basis to support costs for planning and launching new schools, including costs for staff time, curriculum, materials and equipment, and staff professional development, as well as operating costs before schools begin to receive per-pupil funds in their first year. Roughly half of these funds should be allocated to support start-up costs for new charter school operators, and the other half to support district efforts to create high-quality, new, autonomous schools. Districts should be permitted to use funds only to create new schools that are schools of choice for families; have a high level of autonomy over budget, staffing, and programs; and are accountable for specific learning goals. To ensure that new district schools meet these standards, districts would be required to provide evidence that they have the authority to grant schools necessary autonomy, either through state “innovation school” legislation or district policies and teacher contracts that allow such autonomy.
- **Key national priorities:** A portion of funds for new school creation should be dedicated to building a supply of new schools that address key national priorities, such as quality pre-k, educating youth ages 16-24 who have not succeeded in traditional schools, STEM education, or increasing the number of racially and socioeconomically integrated public schools. The Department of Education should establish specific competitive priorities annually based on analysis of national needs. Both districts and new or existing charter school operators could apply for these funds. Nonprofit and community organizations that offer preschool, adult education, or workforce services could also apply for grants to expand or launch new schools if they demonstrate access to an ongoing stream of public funding (such as state pre-k or child care funds, or federal Workforce Investment Act or YouthBuild funding) for their operations.
- **Replication of existing models:** A portion of funds should be dedicated to support replication of existing effective charter schools. High-performing charter schools have produced impressive results for at-risk students and have the capacity to grow to serve more children, but need resources to do so. In fiscal year 2016, Congress appropriated \$100 million for this purpose.¹³ A dedicated investment in new school creation should double funding for replication of proven models.

- **Ensuring quality:** Accountability is crucial to ensuring that new schools actually produce better results for students. Authorizers play a central role in ensuring school quality, but some authorizers lack the necessary capacity and resources to do their work effectively.¹⁴ As the number of charter schools grows, authorizers will also need additional staff and infrastructure to monitor these schools. Any investment in new school creation should include dedicated investments in enhancing the capacity of charter authorizers to oversee more schools and meet standards for quality authorizing.¹⁵ Because most charter authorizers are school districts, districts that authorize charters should not be permitted to receive funds for new school creation unless they can demonstrate that they meet standards for high-quality authorizing. States that have poor-quality authorizers or create barriers to closing low-performing charter schools should also be barred from receiving new start-up funds.

The new dedicated funding stream would replace existing grants for charter schools (funded at \$333 million in FY 2016) and magnet school programs (funded at \$96.6 million), resulting in a net cost of \$570 million annually.¹⁶ This investment would support sufficient growth of new schools to provide alternatives for children in the 2,500 schools that states have identified as low performing, grow the supply of new school models to meet families' interests and needs, and increase the supply of high-quality preschool as states and local governments expand funding for early childhood education.

In addition to expanding the supply of high-quality alternatives for children in low-performing schools, these investments would fuel innovation to benefit the broader field by:

- Supporting replication of innovative models that demonstrate effectiveness;
- Creating incentives for districts and educational entrepreneurs to develop new school models;
- Encouraging states and districts to establish policies that provide autonomy for innovation within district contexts; and
- Reducing reliance on philanthropic funding for charter school start-ups, which will allow philanthropic funds to shift toward more cutting-edge innovation that the federal government is not well-suited to support.

Over the past 25 years, creating new schools has proven an effective strategy for both fostering innovation in education and expanding access to quality learning opportunities. Both are crucial to meeting our nation's current and future educational challenges. By continuing and accelerating the pace of new school creation, while maintaining a strong focus on quality, federal policies can ensure that our students and communities have the high-quality, diverse schools they need.

2.

Transform School Hiring

Chad Aldeman

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Teacher quality is the most important factor under a school's control that influences student achievement. The quality of principals is a close second. The recognition that educator performance matters, and matters tremendously, has led policymakers to a suite of educational reforms mainly focused on improving the performance of *existing* educators. In the last few years, states have dramatically revamped how educators are evaluated and expanded the list of personnel decisions that can be made based on the results of those evaluations.

Still, states and school districts have done comparatively little to affect the quality of educators *coming into* our nation's schools. School districts today mostly hire teachers and principals in the same ways they always have—even as the labor market has changed dramatically. They go to local universities and job fairs, post job announcements in newspapers, and poach experienced educators from neighboring districts. The vast majority of teachers are still prepared at their local college or university, and they're trained in pretty much the same way teachers have always been trained. Districts, meanwhile, do not work to attract candidates to their schools, and few offer more desired candidates any extra incentives to join.

These challenges are not all unique to the education sector, but what is unique is the extent to which the teacher labor market relies on homegrown talent. Teachers, more than other professionals, have strong geographic roots pulling them back to their hometowns,

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and the majority of new teachers live within 20 miles of the high school they attended.¹⁷ This cycle—where communities tend to hire their own former students as teachers of the next generation—slowly reinforces any existing inequities. While ongoing efforts to improve teacher preparation pipelines at the federal and state levels are important, plain geography dictates the need to pay attention to local hiring networks as well. For school districts to ensure they have a high-quality supply of new teachers, they must work with their local teacher preparation programs to ensure they attract sufficient candidates with the right mix of knowledge and skills to meet their needs. Although some programs—like Teach For America, citywide teaching “fellows” programs, or other grow-your-own programs—have tried to offer alternatives, teacher labor markets are still largely dominated by geographic concerns.

Districts that have revamped their hiring timelines land more qualified candidates earlier in the year, and those candidates hired earlier tend to have higher retention rates.

Meanwhile, district hiring processes are notoriously rigid and unresponsive, and schools often don’t even know how many openings they’ll have to fill in the coming school year until well into summer. But there are ways forward for improving this dynamic. For example, districts that have revamped their hiring timelines land more qualified candidates earlier in the year, and those candidates hired earlier tend to have higher retention rates.

Districts could also learn from each other and do a better job of screening applicants for real teaching ability. Many teachers are hired without even demonstrating an ability to teach. But it doesn’t have to be this way. In Spokane, Washington, for example, the district uses its own front-end screening mechanism that is closely related to actual teacher performance.¹⁸ And as part of sweeping reforms to its recruiting process, the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) district now requires all candidates to either conduct in-person lessons or submit a video of actual teaching. Those mock teaching lessons strongly predict future classroom effectiveness, and have enabled DCPS to significantly improve the caliber of its incoming teacher workforce.¹⁹ Although many other professions require potential candidates to complete performance tasks, this was considered a radical ask of potential teachers.

Even after selecting their preferred candidates, schools are unlikely to offer them a hiring bonus or other incentives. Less than one in 10 school districts offers any recruiting incentives for teachers or principals, and only about one in six districts offers extra financial compensation for educators to work in shortage areas. Despite complaints of a “teacher shortage,” districts act like the laws of supply and demand don’t apply to teachers, and they treat teachers as if they’re immune to financial incentives.

Finally, districts have much to learn about how to successfully on-board new hires. For example, Teach For America (TFA) is now the largest supplier of new teachers, and its results stand up to the best teacher preparation programs in the country. And yet, no district has copied what makes TFA unique. TFA screens for certain personal characteristics linked to effectiveness in the classroom and then places all future teachers

in a low-stakes teaching environment through its summer training institute. While TFA uses this summer training as the only pre-service preparation its teachers receive, districts have not borrowed these techniques and asked new hires about their dispositions or asked new teachers to begin teaching immediately in summer school. Such an opportunity would give all new teachers a chance to practice their craft, get comfortable with their school and future students, and begin planning for the school year ahead.

School districts could revamp their hiring practices on their own, and some already have, but the pace of change is likely to be slow and uneven. For example, when the Boston Public Schools district revamped its hiring timeline, it was able to raise \$900,000 in external funding to support recruitment efforts, evaluations of the new teachers, and professional development for them. Yet, that figure fell \$3.5 million short of its target, limiting the district's ability to recruit, evaluate, and train a wide pool of diverse candidates.²⁰

The gap between the need to reform teaching hiring practices and the resources available to do so could be filled by the federal government through a competitive grant program to school districts committed to improving their practices in this area. There is a clear model for this now. The structure could be comparable to what the federal government has done for in-service teacher development through the Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF). For the last 10 years, the TIF program has offered competitive grants for low-income districts to offer performance incentives in order to attract and retain high-performing teachers and principals. That theory of action has proved challenging for a number of political and methodological reasons, but the investment helped spawn dramatic changes across schools and states around how to evaluate and reward teachers and principals.

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act, Congress authorized \$230 million to continue TIF's mission of changing the way teachers working in low-income schools are evaluated and compensated, but there has been no similar effort to improve front-end hiring practices in those same schools, even though it may be a more promising approach.

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act, Congress authorized \$230 million to continue TIF's mission of changing the way teachers working in low-income schools are evaluated and compensated, but there has been no similar effort to improve front-end hiring practices in those same schools, even though it may be a more promising approach. For one, improvement in hiring practices should not face the same methodological question about how to define and quantify who is a "high-performing" teacher or principal. Success in this case could be defined as having more candidates per opening, hiring candidates earlier in the year, landing a higher percentage of preferred candidates, and leaving fewer unfilled openings at the start of the school year. Those are all quantifiable measures and not dependent on complicated statistics to derive them.

Second, revising hiring practices may also provide more value for the dollar than offering teachers bonuses. Unlike performance incentives, which incur ongoing expenses for annual rewards to high performers, changing district hiring timelines primarily requires one-time investments to update *processes* and a much smaller share for recurring expenditures tied to increased personnel costs. In the Boston example, the district budgeted a one-time investment of \$4.4 million to update their hiring processes, but

incurred less than \$600,000 in ongoing annual costs for hiring stipends.²¹ Districts will still face political decisions about how to implement better hiring practices, but these reforms should not require significant ongoing costs.

Instead of continuing to focus solely on in-service teachers, federal policymakers should create a similar program for willing low-income districts to revamp their hiring practices. For the same \$230 million the federal government will be investing in revamping the ways districts treat existing teachers, it could fund the equivalent of 52 Boston-like efforts. Since Boston hired about 300 new teachers a year during its reforms, that implies a potential national impact of 15,600 teachers a year going through a more streamlined and effective hiring process. Districts could use their funds to design an incentive system for new hires, improve their screening tools for candidates, adjust internal practices to allow for earlier start dates, and create or modify data systems to track applicants and hire dates. That would allow districts to plan more effectively, hire earlier in the year, and get teachers in low-stakes teaching opportunities before the school year begins. All this would, in turn, lead to more effectively run school systems and to better teachers coming into schools.

3.

Bring the Blockchain to Education

Victor Reinoso

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In the financial realm, money exists to facilitate trade. As trade became increasingly complex, the role of financial intermediaries—such as central banks, credit card networks, and securities exchanges—grew. Similarly, in education, intermediaries such as school districts, state departments of education, and the U.S. Department of Education emerged as public education became more formalized and complex, and stakeholders sought trustworthy third parties to facilitate, approve, and standardize education delivery across communities.

The digital revolution transformed how many institutions in both these sectors function. But the improved productivity that digitization could have enabled wasn't reached because most institutions—including government—adapted new technologies to existing processes, instead of revamping processes to fully leverage the capabilities of new technologies.

Now, over time, financial and educational institutions have centralized massive datasets. Large financial institutions hold records for millions of accounts, documenting countless transactions. Large education institutions hold records for millions of students, documenting grades, test scores, and other data. Because each institution bears independent responsibility for maintaining data security and integrity, collaborative data sharing, which could enable quicker responsiveness to challenges and better working relationships among parties, is nearly impossible due to incompatible structures and systems and concerns about security risks.

The blockchain allows people and institutions that might otherwise have no confidence in each other to collaborate without the need of a neutral central authority.

In the education sector as in finance, distrust characterizes debates about accountability, standards, student data, and more. And in education, with the emergence of test-based accountability systems, schools, districts, and states have become the repositories for enormous amounts of student information. An unintended consequence has arisen: The institutions holding these massive datasets are increasingly exposed to breaches, attacks, or simple user error.

In the world of finance, one promising tool that has emerged to tackle these problems is the blockchain—the trust protocol undergirding Bitcoin and other crypto-currencies. The blockchain allows people and institutions that might otherwise have no confidence in each other to collaborate without the need of a neutral central authority.

A Blockchain Primer

Most people think of Bitcoin as a virtual currency or an alternative transaction system, but a closer look at its underlying technology, the blockchain, reveals that monetary transactions are only one of its many possible applications.

The blockchain is a *distributed, comprehensive, public, and secure* transaction ledger. It's *distributed* because it exists on a network of computers provided by volunteers (anyone can join) instead of being managed by a single institution or central authority. It's *comprehensive* because all transactions are immutably logged (including information on the time, date, and participants involved), and *public* because the entire encrypted ledger resides on the network for anyone to see.

The blockchain is *secure* because each node on the network owns a full, encrypted copy of the blockchain and because all the nodes in the blockchain communicate automatically and continuously to verify its integrity. The nodes must be unanimous for a transaction to be verified. If anyone attempts to corrupt the blockchain (for example, by falsifying a transaction or claiming ownership of currency that isn't theirs), the nodes will fail to reach consensus and as a result, refuse to incorporate the transaction into the blockchain.

The currency units on the blockchain can be programmed to integrate transaction requirements into the currency, so that Bitcoin earmarked for a particular purpose (say health care or salaries) could only be used for that purpose. It can even be programmed to return currency to its source within a specified time if it is not used for that purpose. Because it is programmable, the blockchain allows for the automating of transactions, compliance, and more, significantly reducing the need for intermediaries, bureaucracy, and their associated costs.

By replacing centralization with mass collaboration, the blockchain redistributes governance authority broadly, shifting the nexus of trust from centralized institutions to the network itself, radically reducing the costs of financial transactions while increasing their security and privacy. It also returns data ownership and control to users without compromising community accountability.²²

The Potential for the Blockchain in Education

The potential applications for the blockchain in education could improve education quality and address concerns about student data privacy and security. Some examples include:

- 1 Use the blockchain to facilitate personalized and competency-based learning and instruction.** Because the blockchain can store a comprehensive set of transactions, it may be the ideal student record for a personalized or competency-based learning environment.

In most schools today, evidence of student learning is fleeting—teachers keep past assignments and may or may not return them to students, much less record mastery of a standard in a way that can be easily communicated to another teacher or school.

The blockchain can change all that. For example, as students move from simple to more sophisticated concepts in a standards-aligned learning progression, the blockchain can record and provide verification of content or skill mastery along the path in real time, reducing if not eliminating the need to interrupt instruction for interim or end-of-year testing. A blockchain-based student competency record could provide independent verification of content or skill mastery to a new teacher or to a new digital learning platform, reducing the need for re-teaching or retesting of material, and helping teachers focus their instructional practice on high-impact student engagement.

Taken further, these comprehensive and immutable competency records could be used as alternatives to college entrance exams such as the ACT or SAT II and to help colleges more accurately place students in classes that align with their competencies.

- 2 Expand opportunities for school-based wraparound services by reducing the friction of privacy laws.** Privacy laws such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) were designed to protect educational and health information from being released without authorization. While the privacy protections offered by these frameworks are well intentioned, the prevailing data storage models and conflicting regulatory interpretations have instead made student data both more vulnerable and less valuable than it should be. FERPA and HIPAA limit data sharing among allied public or private organizations, stunting the potential for school-based provision of health and mental services and other wraparound services.

Because the blockchain can store a comprehensive set of transactions, it may be the ideal student record for a personalized or competency-based learning environment.

With the right policy frameworks in place, blockchain-enabled student information systems could be used to track the delivery and impact of wraparound services offered to individual students. The blockchain could then be used to identify which services or service providers correlate with improvements against academic as well as social and emotional learning (SEL) measures.

If the blockchain's transaction requirement capabilities were enabled, payments to service providers could also be automated, which would be an enormous win for many community-based service providers that are often forced to wait extended periods of time to be paid. This in turn could expand their capacity to serve additional children, by removing some of the payment risk often associated with providing services to schools.

- 3 Support data portability by integrating the blockchain into Student Information Systems (SIS) or State Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS).** Because the blockchain empowers users to control their own data, integrating the blockchain into student information systems or statewide data systems could facilitate data portability and improve its security.

The blockchain could automatically transfer a student's data file (including transcripts, formative and summative assessment data, etc.) to a new school. This would reduce the administrative burden on schools and local education agencies (LEAs) and better equip teachers to meet the needs of new students by providing them with accurate and comprehensive student records.

- 4 Use the blockchain for smarter, more flexible student loan programs.** The blockchain could automate student enrollment verification for student loans or even simplify the creation of micro-loans. These federally subsidized micro-loans could allow students to study key skills/standards in micro-courses that could create new job-ready credentials, accumulate for progress toward full degrees, or provide remediation needed prior to enrolling in full degree programs.

Seeding Education Blockchain via Education Innovation and Research Grant Program

To jumpstart the opportunity, the Department of Education should include the blockchain as an investment priority for three awards of up to \$5 million each in the development grant tier of its Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program—the successor to the Investing in Innovation (i3) program.

The EIR program's development grants are designed to support the development of high-potential and relatively untested practices, strategies, or programs. The EIR program requires development grant winners to secure a 15 percent private-sector funding match, which will facilitate engagement from private-sector blockchain

entrepreneurs and investors. In addition, the structure of the EIR program, which establishes increasingly rigorous standards for evidence of desired outcomes, can support further development and broader implementation of successful blockchain efforts.

The grant program could remain neutral on the specific application of the blockchain that grantees pursue, or the application process could incentivize work aimed at addressing particular issues. For example, in order to address growing teacher and parent concerns around excessive testing, the grant competition could favor applicants whose use of the blockchain reduces total instructional time spent testing or in test preparation. Alternatively, the competition could encourage respondents to use the blockchain to support personalized learning plans or inform instructional practice.

The blockchain has numerous potential applications to improve the quality and efficiency of education. But the only way to unlock its potential is to get started. The federal government can catalyze that first step through its existing grant programs, creating real-world demonstrations.

4.

Share the Risk on Student Loans

Andrew P. Kelly

Until August 2016, Andrew P. Kelly was a resident scholar in education policy studies and the founding director of the Center on Higher Education Reform at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a national policy think tank.

Higher education accountability has climbed toward the top of the federal policy agenda. The federal government shells out more than \$150 billion in grants and loans to colleges and universities annually, but asks comparatively little in return regarding student outcomes. In the face of sharp tuition increases, stagnant student completion rates, and delinquency rates on student loans that rival those on subprime mortgages in 2008, policymakers are under pressure to demand more of our nation's colleges and universities.

Existing federal policies designed to hold institutions accountable—cohort default rates, the 90/10 rule, and financial responsibility scores—fall short of ensuring that taxpayer dollars are well spent. Colleges rarely lose federal aid (Title IV) eligibility for any reason, and access to grants and loans props up schools that would not pass a market test if students had to pay on their own.

How should federal policymakers reform accountability in postsecondary education? The key is to find an approach that is simple, transparent, difficult to game, and that applies to all institutions. One idea gaining bipartisan traction is “risk-sharing,” or “risk retention,” the notion that institutions should bear some fraction of the financial risk when their students fail to repay their loans after school.²³ Risk retention is common in other areas of lending, and research suggests that lenders behave differently when they have “skin in the game.”

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Why would a risk retention policy be an improvement on the status quo? How might policymakers design such a system? And how can they protect against potential unintended consequences?

The Status Quo in Quality Assurance

Federal policies designed to hold colleges accountable for the quality and cost of their programs do a poor job. The primary federal lever—the cohort default rate—measures the proportion of students who default on their federal loans within three years of entering repayment. Schools with 30 percent or more student borrowers in default over three consecutive years (or 40 percent in one year) are subject to sanction. Introduced in the early 1990s, the rule curbed the worst abuses and drove default rates down.

So long as students default outside of the three-year window, colleges are held harmless. This creates an incentive to nudge students into deferment or forbearance, which avoids default for a time but leaves balances to grow with accruing interest

But the policy doesn't work so well at ensuring a basic level of accountability. First, it is easily gamed. So long as students default outside of the three-year window, colleges are held harmless. This creates an incentive to nudge students into deferment or forbearance, which avoids default for a time but leaves balances to grow with accruing interest. When the Department of Education shifted from two-year to three-year default rates, the average jumped 4.6 percentage points.²⁴ Though the official three-year default rate is just under 14 percent, a recent study found that the five-year cohort default rate for the 2009 cohort was double that.²⁵

Second, the rule is binary: Colleges whose default rates are just below the federal standard retain access to federal aid programs. Those institutions that are close to the threshold likely have incentive to improve in order to avoid sanction in the future. But the set of schools with relatively high default rates that remain below the thresholds are held harmless when students are unable to repay. These thresholds are not magical, yet policy treats colleges on either side of them completely differently.

Third, the binary measure is extremely high-stakes; losing access to Title IV aid is essentially a death sentence for colleges. Institutions have a host of opportunities to challenge and appeal the Department of Education's ruling, and policymakers have been reticent to sanction schools under the policy. According to the Congressional Research Service, just 11 of the 7,000 institutions that receive federal aid lost eligibility on the basis of their default rates between 1999 and 2014.²⁶ In 2014, the Department of Education revised the default rates of a subset of institutions based on concerns about inadequate loan servicing, effectively saving them from sanction.²⁷

In short, under current policy, institutions encourage their students to take on federal student loans but bear only a small fraction of the risk of default. Whether or not tuition is affordable and students are successful, colleges are paid in full. The result: Federal loan programs create incentive to enroll students but less incentive to worry about keeping tuition low or promoting student success.

To be clear, student success is a shared responsibility between students and institutions, and students should bear the bulk of the risk. At the same time, rigorous evidence indicates that colleges do have an effect on student success and that they can adopt interventions to improve retention and completion rates.²⁸

Risk Retention

The idea here is to give colleges—not just those with the highest default rates—stronger incentive to focus on keeping tuition affordable and promoting the success of their students.

How would colleges respond if they retained some of the risk on the loans their students take on? The idea here is to give colleges—not just those with the highest default rates—stronger incentive to focus on keeping tuition affordable and promoting the success of their students. To be sure, many colleges already promote these goals as part of their mission. For those that charge high tuition for programs of dubious value, a risk-sharing policy would give them a reason to consider changes to institutional practice, resource allocation, and tuition pricing. Importantly, that policy would not dictate the remedies that colleges would have to adopt, but leave those details up to them. Institutions might respond by adjusting their admissions standards; working to contain costs and lower tuition; rethinking practices, programs, and policies; or some combination.

Risk retention is common in other lending markets, and having even a small stake (e.g., three percent) in loan performance seems to affect lender behavior.²⁹ In the lone simulation of risk sharing in higher education, Temple University economist Douglas Webber found that a policy where colleges had to pay back 20 percent or 50 percent of defaulted loans would “bring about a sizable reduction in student loan debt,” though at the cost of “modestly higher tuition rates.”³⁰ Webber shows that if colleges were able to reduce their default rates 10 percent, the reduction in loan debt would be considerable.

How might policymakers think about implementing risk sharing in the real world? The simplest approach would be to charge institutions a percentage of the outstanding balance on non-performing loans in a given cohort, perhaps targeting institutions whose repayment rates fall below a certain threshold. Charging on a sliding scale, where the percentage charged increases as repayment rates worsen, would ensure that schools just below any standard receive a lighter penalty while poor performers are subject to stronger sanctions. Either way, the formula should be continuous, not riddled with sharp cliffs.

The two key design questions are: How should the percentage be calculated, and to what outstanding loan balance should that percentage be applied? On both questions, policymakers should move away from relying exclusively on default rates, data which are increasingly noisy due to a heavier reliance on Income-Based Repayment (IBR). Instead they should consider relying on repayment rates—the percentage of students who have paid down at least a dollar of principal over a set period of time (at least five years).

On the percentage, a norm-referenced formula that reflects both overall sector performance and national economic trends would ensure that colleges are judged fairly. For example, policymakers could take the difference between a school's five-year repayment rate and the national average for the sector (two-year or four-year colleges). That difference could be adjusted uniformly for all schools (i.e., by dividing it by 10) to keep the percentage within reason. The point isn't to put colleges out of business overnight, so the penalty need not be enormous.

The policy could then apply that percentage to the outstanding balances of the students in a given cohort who, after five years, either fail the repayment rate test or are in default.³¹ To allow for economic trends, the formula could adjust that sum based on the national unemployment rate for workers between the ages of 25 and 34. Colleges would be on the hook for the resulting amount.

When it comes to implementing those sanctions, there are a few options. The federal government could withhold the amount from subsequent aid disbursements. Alternatively, institutions could be required to place a portion of their tuition revenues that is proportional to the risk of non-repayment into an escrow account or student aid insurance fund that would cover the cost of sanctions. Or institutions could simply remit a payment to the federal government.³²

Caveats

The most obvious criticism is that risk sharing will reduce access for low-income students. In some cases, encouraging institutions to think twice about enrolling students who are unlikely to be successful is not necessarily a bad thing. Policy should encourage students to enroll in institutions where they are likely to be successful, not any institution that will take them.

However, to provide institutions with continued incentive to enroll qualified low-income students, policymakers should offer institutions a bonus for every Pell Grant recipient they graduate. Such a reward could be financed via risk-sharing payments and would help balance the potential financial risk of enrolling low-income students. In addition, schools that improve their outcomes over time should be eligible for "safe harbors" that protect them from sanction.

Colleges have also raised concerns that risk retention would hold them accountable for behaviors they do not control. For instance, the Department of Education has discouraged colleges from limiting how much students are allowed to borrow for living expenses, which gives the colleges little control over borrowing beyond the cost of tuition. Students are allowed—and perhaps encouraged—to borrow in excess of tuition.³³

There are two options here. One is to adjust the formula to reflect the ratio between tuition and the total cost of attendance—thereby holding colleges accountable for tuition. The other is to allow colleges more power to limit borrowing for particular types of students (those in online programs, attending part-time, or living with family).

Risk sharing will be controversial with colleges and universities, as all accountability ideas are. Unlike other plans (i.e., the college ratings), though, it has the advantage of being simple, transparent, and non-binary.

5.

Get Schools in the Fight Against Child Sex Trafficking

Courtney Gaskins

Courtney Gaskins, Ph.D., is the vice president for programs at Youth For Tomorrow (YFT), a private alternative school serving at-risk youth in Virginia.

Joe Gibbs, the legendary NFL Hall of Fame Head Coach, is equally admired in Washington, D.C. for his selfless commitment to providing children in crisis with an opportunity to learn Christian values, become self-reliant and productive citizens in our communities around the Nation. Under his leadership as Founder, YFT has served over 25,000 teenage boys and girls since 1986.

As children head back to school, parents and school officials are likely not thinking about children being recruited by sex traffickers. Most do not realize that this problem exists in America. But demand for sex with children, as well as other forms of commercial sexual exploitation, is growing steadily; profit to sex traffickers has increased, helping fuel this criminal exploitation.

The story of sex trafficking in America is one of supply and demand. Sex trafficking has been called “America’s dirtiest secret” by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott, and traffickers gross approximately \$9.5 billion a year. Contrary to stereotype, the vast majority of those buying sex from children are married, often respected members of society—such as elected officials, corporate employees, religious leaders, military officers, and teachers. It is believed that as many as 100,000 to 300,000 children are bought for sex in America every year. The U.S. Department of Justice has found girls as young as ten years old being recruited on the Metro in Washington, D.C., and then being trafficked by a criminal ring while they still live with their parents. According to the National Center for Missing and

It is believed that as many as 100,000 to 300,000 children are bought for sex in America every year.

Exploited Children, one in five runaways in 2015 were likely sex trafficking victims in the United States. That is up from one in six in 2014, reflecting the growing incidence of this crime against children in America.

Domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) is the official term for commercial sexual exploitation of American children under age 18 within U.S. borders. The age of the victim is a critical issue—there is no requirement to prove that force, fraud, or coercion was used to secure the victim’s actions when children are involved. In fact, the law recognizes the effect of psychological manipulation by the trafficker, as well as the effect of threat of harm that traffickers use to maintain control over their young victims. DMST includes but is not limited to the commercial sexual exploitation of children through prostitution, pornography, and/or stripping.

Traffickers prey on vulnerable youth and groom their victims to enter “the life” of being forced to sell sexual services for the profit of others. Like others who prey on children, they target places where children congregate, including schools. Most public school systems and school personnel are unaware of or unprepared to prevent domestic sex trafficking, or to deal with students who have been victims of traffickers.

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Schools should be safe havens for students, especially for those students whose lives are otherwise characterized by instability and lack of safety or security. What’s more, school personnel are often in a unique position to identify and report suspected abuse and connect students to services—actions that can prevent trafficking and even save lives. Everyone who is part of the school community—administrators, teachers, bus drivers, maintenance personnel, food service staff, resource officers, and other school community members—has the potential to be an advocate for child victims of human trafficking.

But *first*, school community members must learn the indicators of the crime, its warning signs, and how to respond when a student is an apparent victim.

Understanding recruitment methods and how trafficking occurs in a particular community can greatly assist school personnel in preventing recruitment and identifying potential victims. For instance, one recruitment strategy is for traffickers to train students in middle and high schools to recruit their peers, either in person or through social media; the recruiter pretends to love the victim and isolates him or her from other friends and family, then sells the victim for sex.

Schools can also do more to support students who have been victims. In 2009, Youth For Tomorrow (YFT), a private alternative education program for at-risk students in Virginia, began providing comprehensive services to female DMST victims. Since then, YFT has helped more than 90 students in its residential treatment program and school. Many of the girls placed at YFT were recruited into trafficking while attending public middle or high schools.

At present no federal funding is available specifically for schools aimed at the prevention of domestic minor sex trafficking, training of education staff, or educational support services for minor victims of human trafficking.

Over the past eight years of developing a universal treatment model for female minor victims of trafficking, YFT has gone from a 60 percent to a 95 percent program completion rate. A student “completes” the program when she meets set criteria across the treatment model. This includes achieving benchmarks of progress in academic and social-emotional domains, such as attaining a GED or a high school diploma or meeting 85 percent of individual treatment goals. The program offers a holistic service model where each girl’s educational, residential, and clinical service plan addresses the underlying trauma associated with her victimization (i.e. low self-esteem, family dysfunction, etc.) as well as the psychology of recruitment and the factors that kept her in the trafficking situation, such as coercion, debt, manipulation, and emotional attachment to the abuser. YFT clinical staff have developed a curriculum that works in promoting successful program completion, and to their credit, states across the country are now seeking to place girls from as far away as California in YFT’s education and treatment program.

Support for efforts like these can make an enormous difference, but at present no federal funding is available specifically for schools aimed at the prevention of domestic minor sex trafficking, training of education staff, or educational support services for minor victims of human trafficking. Most federal funding related to human trafficking is allocated through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services or the U.S. Department of Justice. While this funding offers aid and support to adult *and* child victims of human trafficking, including both national and international victims, it does not assist in preventing trafficking or in training others to prevent trafficking. Additionally, these funding streams don’t specifically address the unique needs of minor victims in the American education system.

The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires school personnel to participate in “high-quality training for school personnel, including specialized instructional support personnel, related to... (ii) effective and trauma-informed practices in classroom management and (iv) human trafficking.” While a step forward, this language doesn’t go far enough to specify the breadth of issues related to human trafficking that need to be addressed—from prevention, to detection, to treatment and recovery. And absent dedicated resources and support, ESSA is unlikely to make a meaningful dent in the problem.

The next administration has an opportunity to comprehensively tackle this problem by helping schools prevent domestic minor sex trafficking and support victims:

First, the education field needs guidance in specifying components of training required for school personnel related to human trafficking under ESSA. These training components should include:

- an overview of human trafficking, including minor sex trafficking, and information on how human trafficking impacts schools;
- information about risk factors that make certain student populations vulnerable to trafficking;

- options for the identification and assessment of victims (carried out by clinical professionals);
- referral and reporting procedures when victims have been identified; and
- prevention practices, treatment, and services available to support victims.

Second, the next administration can build on these efforts by encouraging school districts to develop policies and procedures to address the scope of human trafficking, including:

- required training of staff and parents made available through school districts;
- prevention plans and policies;
- procedures for referring victims and suspected victims to appropriate support and law enforcement agencies;
- policies on victim identification and assessment by professional staff; and
- establishment of partnerships that connect local social services, mental health services, law enforcement, and private providers.

Third, the next administration should seek to broaden federal mandatory reporting requirements related to child abuse to include sex trafficking. At a minimum, school staff must be required to report suspected incidents to law enforcement, as is the case with other manifestations of child abuse.

Finally, the new administration can ensure that federal funding streams connected to child abuse and neglect prevention are flexible, so that schools can use them to fund relevant services. Funds should go directly to whatever type of school or facility (public or private) is providing the service. For example, Title II of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act authorizes a state grant program to develop, operate, expand, and enhance community-based, prevention-focused programs and activities aimed at supporting families in order to prevent child abuse and neglect. In addition to the federal funds dedicated for child abuse prevention, there are three funding streams—Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Social Services Block Grant program (SSBG), and Medicaid—not specifically targeted for child welfare activities that many states rely on to fund child abuse prevention services and other services for child welfare clients. The federal guidelines for the use of these funds could be expanded to include the identification and support of child trafficking victims.

Human trafficking of children for sexual exploitation is not just something that happens in other countries. It happens in American communities and impacts American children. By implementing these recommendations, the new administration will create new tools to fight child sex trafficking. And if local school districts know they represent fertile recruiting ground for traffickers seeking minor victims, they will be better able to protect their students.

6.

Scale Great Mentoring to Reach More Kids

Steve Mesler and Leigh Parise

Steve Mesler is co-founder of Classroom Champions and Olympic gold medalist in the four-man bobsled. Classroom Champions is a nonprofit organization connecting Olympic and Paralympic athlete mentors with classrooms in the United States and Canada.

Leigh Parise, Ph.D., is co-founder, head of education, and board member at Classroom Champions.

Like many of his classmates, Michael, a young student in Camden, N.J., was disengaged from school for as long as most of his teachers could remember. Being good at school wasn't cool in his community. But a mentor encouraged Michael and his classmates to believe in themselves, showed them how to accomplish a challenging goal, and taught them to dream big. Michael decided to step out of his comfort zone and entered an essay contest. Simply writing the essay about his mentor—and going the extra mile at school—was a win in and of itself. But the win became more tangible when Michael's essay was selected as top in the region. School changed for Michael when he started taking his mentor's words seriously, and he's now on track to staying, and excelling, in school. Michael's support was unique: His mentor was an Olympic athlete headed to the Rio Olympic Games.

The challenges many American students face parallel athletes' experiences in sport in many ways. Personally, I persevered through a disappointing five years of injuries in college after being a high school track and field national champion. Not accepting a fate of being mediocre, I changed sports to pursue my Olympic dream. Ten years later, I led my four-man bobsled team to the first American Olympic gold medal in 62 years. I didn't give up, found ways around my challenges, and succeeded.

—U.S. Olympic Gold Medalist Steve Mesler

With such a narrow focus on academic skills, schools neglect to cultivate other critical competencies vital to students' long-term success.

Teaching our country's most challenged students to persevere like an Olympian and develop the skills to relentlessly pursue their goals despite an environment that rallies against them is vital to changing the landscape of American education. When students interact with people who are living their goals, they learn tools for success that transfer to all stages of life, not just school. Real change happens.

Over the last several decades, education policy has focused so heavily on testing and accountability that many school systems have lost sight of the ultimate goal of schooling: preparing students to be secure, successful, and productive members of society. With such a narrow focus on academic skills, schools neglect to cultivate other critical competencies vital to students' long-term success.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) skills include the ability to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. Research indicates that evidence as early as kindergarten of whether a child has developed SEL skills significantly predicts whether a child will complete high school, enter and complete college, be incarcerated, use drugs, have good mental health, and be employed.³⁴ Ensuring that students develop strong SEL skills is perhaps even more critical today than it has ever been because the jobs of tomorrow aren't just about math, science, and literacy. Students will need to be able to identify, understand, and solve problems using technology, in the context of increasingly complex social environments.

In order to develop these types of skills, schools must look beyond traditional textbook-based teaching. Providing students with strong mentors and role models has proven to be an effective means of engaging youth and fostering the skills students need for success both in school and beyond. Students need more experiences with and connections to positive adult role models demonstrating SEL competencies, and schools need more options for providing them to students.

Using Mentors to Help Prepare Today’s Students for Tomorrow

Traditional mentoring has proven valuable in promoting positive school and social-emotional outcomes by connecting students with strong adult role models. Students who meet regularly with adult mentors are 52 percent less likely than their peers to skip a day of school and 37 percent less likely to skip a class. Mentored youth are also less likely to use drugs and alcohol than their peers and tend to maintain better attitudes about school.^{35, 36}

However, traditional mentoring has several shortcomings that make it challenging to implement broadly. For example, mentoring programs are often limited to one adult per one child, requiring large numbers of qualified mentors to serve large groups of students. And interaction with mentors is often limited in frequency and most often happens outside of class, or outside of school entirely, separating teachers from the knowledge and guidance that mentors provide and isolating the experience from social situations with peers.

We believe many of these challenges can be addressed through teacher involvement, innovation, and the use of technology now readily available in schools. To reap the benefits of youth mentoring at scale and to reintroduce SEL learning to schools, we must transform mentoring using innovative and scalable models that bring real-world experiences to life in the classroom.

Redefining and Supporting Innovation in Mentoring

Thinking outside the box to scale mentorship opportunities in our schools requires a shift away from viewing mentoring as a one-on-one, in-person relationship, instead encouraging the development of more innovative models. We can begin by viewing a mentor in their purest form—*someone who teaches or gives help and advice to a less experienced and often younger person*—and getting more creative.

Programs such as iMentor and Classroom Champions exemplify this definition of mentoring while also instituting new models of mentoring and teaching.

iMentor partners with public schools to ensure every student receives a mentor. In this model, mentors and mentees have online and virtual one-on-one interactions on a weekly basis through technology, and then meet in person once per month. Nonprofit partners across the country use iMentor’s model, and through the use of technology and partnership, iMentor reaches significantly more students than traditional mentoring would allow.

Classroom Champions transforms the mentoring model by creating a one-to-many mentorship ecosystem. The Classroom Champions model introduces mentoring as a “co-teaching” system between the in-classroom teacher and the mentor. Partnering with public school teachers, Olympian and Paralympian mentors work with entire classrooms

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to focus on social and emotional learning themes that teachers tie back into local school curricula. The teacher facilitates all interactions online in a group environment utilizing video lessons, live video chats, and social media, drawing on his or her knowledge about individual students' needs to create in-class opportunities to engage the lessons they're learning from their mentor. The use of technology allows an unprecedented scale and provides in-school opportunities to learn, practice, reflect, and share back to the mentor.

Both iMentor and Classroom Champions leverage technology and challenge traditional mentoring models. Both provide youth with positive role models who teach them new skills in engaging ways. Both capitalize on our youngest generations' ability to foster relationships in a virtual environment so they can work at scale and at lower cost. Both programs have demonstrated impacts on students' social and emotional learning outcomes.^{37,38}

Policies Supporting SEL Development Through Innovation in Mentoring

While many in the education sector focus on how to measure SEL or hold schools accountable for it, we should first give schools the tools to help students learn these skills and attributes. Successful mentoring programs offer a proven means of fostering SEL development, but one that is underutilized in school environments.

To spur the proliferation of high-quality, scalable, school-based mentoring programs, the federal government should establish a grant program that supports efforts to start up, test, and implement innovative and scalable forms of mentorship. Grants would be awarded to nonprofit organizations (NPOs) with multiple school district or charter network partners (e.g., local education agencies or LEAs) that focus on schools serving high proportions of disadvantaged students.

USA Mentorship Innovation Model: Startup to Maturity Grant Program

The grant program should mirror business startup phases, including (1) startup (existence and survival), (2) success and takeoff, and (3) resource maturity.³⁹ In each phase, grantees should be required to participate in a community of practice with fellow grantees to share, discuss, and problem-solve around successes and challenges. And each phase would require evaluation. Evaluations should estimate the impact of the program on relevant SEL and school outcomes (e.g., attendance, grades). The application process should favor programs with evaluation plans, including a well-designed experimental or quasi-experimental study. Program evaluations should also include analysis of the fidelity with which selected interventions are implemented and the mechanisms by which programs are hypothesized to affect student outcomes, as well as key challenges and other factors affecting implementation.

The components of an eligible mentoring model would include:

- Innovating beyond traditional, one-on-one, in-person forms of mentorship;
- Using technology to achieve scale and leveraging young people's ability to create relationships through that technology;
- Connecting what's happening in the mentoring relationship to what's happening in the classroom—making mentors and teachers a team that focuses on the development of students' SEL skills; and
- Providing ongoing training and support to mentors and teachers.

The three phases of grants should increase in scale based on demonstrated success. All three phases would be open to programs implementing an eligible mentoring model, but Phases Two and Three should favor successful grantees from prior phases of the program.

Phase One: Startup—\$24 million annually

Phase One would fund 12 grants of \$2 million to eligible mentoring models serving two or more LEAs. Grants would cover a three-year period, including a one-year planning period plus the first two years of implementation, to fund planning and piloting, plus ongoing training and support for mentors, program staff, technology and infrastructure, and evaluation. Programs should reach a minimum of 25 percent of students served in partner LEAs.

Phase Two: Success and Takeoff—\$36 million annually

In Phase Two, grantees meeting eligibility requirements could apply for grants of \$6 million over four years to support program growth, implementation, and evaluation. Phase Two grantees should partner with four or more LEAs serving a high proportion of high-need students and should demonstrate a minimum capture rate of 30 percent of students served across each LEA.

Phase Three: Resource Maturity—\$40 million annually

Grantees in the resource maturity phase must demonstrate a sustainable model and clear evidence of success to qualify for a \$10 million grant over four years. Programs must be implemented across ten or more LEAs and should reach 40 percent of the students served across each partner LEA.

Alternative models to traditional one-on-one in-person mentoring, whether virtual one-on-one or one-to-many, have already begun to yield extremely promising results and data to support them. It's time for us to step into the 21st century, refine what has been working, invest in new innovations, and create schools where our kids learn all the skills they'll need to succeed.

7.

Network Early Childhood Education Providers

Ashley LiBetti Mitchel

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Head Start is a valuable program that provides crucial resources and services to children and families in need. It is the largest early childhood program in the country, serving more than one million children in poverty.⁴⁰ The best Head Start programs can change a child's life trajectory: Research shows that children who attend Head Start are more likely to graduate high school and have better adult outcomes than their peers.⁴¹

But Head Start could be stronger. The average Head Start program produces weaker learning outcomes than the highest-performing early childhood programs. And while Head Start prepares children for kindergarten better than other programs, there's evidence that the advantage fades as children progress through elementary school.⁴²

Yet the federal resources dedicated to making Head Start better are inadequate and ineffective. Currently, Head Start site operators, or grantees, are expected to improve program quality using federal supports that are often irrelevant to local context while being held accountable for a long list of compliance requirements. Many grantees who are trying to improve program quality find that improvement in program performance is often in spite of, not because of, federal efforts.

Under this system, the Office of Head Start (OHS), within the federal Administration for Children and Families, is responsible for defining what a quality program looks like and providing grantees with the resources to get there. Grantees have neither the incentive nor the freedom to do more than the minimum requirements.

Many grantees who are trying to improve program quality find that improvement in program performance is often in spite of, not because of, federal efforts.

A better system would incentivize and empower groups of grantees, supported by researchers, to drive program improvement. Through these groups, which we call Networked Learning Communities (NLC),⁴³ grantees improve program quality by pooling resources to increase capacity, disseminating best practices, and developing innovative practices—all within their local context.

At the same time, Networked Learning Communities free up resources at the federal level; they drive local program improvement efforts so the Office of Head Start can instead focus on system-wide issues. Networked Learning Communities also give the Office of Head Start an intermediary organization to leverage to support grantees. This structure allows the Office of Head Start to simultaneously address multiple programs with similar concerns, rather than working program-by-program with thousands of grantees.

Funding for Networked Learning Communities would come from existing resources. In 2014, more than \$270 million⁴⁴ went to the Office of Head Start's two performance improvement systems: accountability and training and technical assistance (T/TA). In theory, the accountability system allows OHS to monitor grantee performance and require corrective action, if necessary. The Head Start T/TA system complements the accountability measures, providing grantees with funding, training, and supports to address areas of need. But there are nearly 3,000 Head Start programs, so it's virtually impossible for the Office of Head Start to design an accountability or T/TA system that meets the needs of each and every program. In its current iteration, the accountability system assesses grantees almost exclusively on their ability to comply with a checklist of program features, rather than how well their children and families are faring, and T/TA resources are neither tailored to grantee needs nor available in real time. As a result, there's limited return on these large investments.

In its current iteration, the accountability system assesses grantees almost exclusively on their ability to comply with a checklist of program features, rather than how well their children and families are faring.

Truly and systematically improving Head Start program quality would require overhauling the accountability and T/TA systems—but that can't happen until the next reauthorization of the Head Start Act. Instead, reallocating a portion of T/TA and accountability funding to this new structure would allow grantees to refocus their program improvement efforts, giving Networked Learning Community members the time and resources to collaborate on new initiatives, professional development workshops, and program research. Networked Learning Communities provide an alternative vehicle for program improvement that can easily complement—not replace—the existing systems. Specifically, Networked Learning Communities would accelerate improvement in four ways: increasing grantee capacity, replicating best practices across more grantees, using data for continuous improvement, and encouraging innovation.

Increase Grantee Capacity

Through Networked Learning Communities, grantees can increase their purchasing power and pool resources to reduce costs. Grantees within an NLC could share the cost of a specialist, for example, allowing them to offer a service to families they otherwise couldn't provide, or to offer the service for a lower cost. In the same way, grantees can split costs on certain services, such as transportation or dental hygiene.

Networked Learning Communities also allow grantees to leverage their time and expertise to offer higher quality services to children and families. Grantees could save time, for example, if they collaborated to develop a common data system, and would likely develop a better product with their shared expertise than if each grantee created a separate system.

Replicate Best Practices

By partnering with researchers, grantees in Networked Learning Communities can identify, evaluate, and implement strategies that improve program quality. Grantees can work with researchers to test out existing promising practices with rapid-cycle evaluations—shorter-term formative evaluations that test specific strategies.⁴⁵ For example, rapid-cycle research may show that a particular practice improves kindergarten entry performance for students with disabilities in urban areas or increases rural parents' verbal interactions with their children.

Other grantees within the Networked Learning Community can replicate effective practices immediately. Alternatively, the NLC can develop a reserve of effective interventions, with information on when and how to use them, for current or future grantees with similar needs.

Use Data for Continuous Improvement

Networked Learning Communities can also help provide a solution to one of the major challenges facing accountability and program improvement: a lack of sufficiently robust, agreed-upon measures of child and family outcomes. Comparable, federally defined outcome measures are necessary for system-wide quality improvement—but until that happens, Networked Learning Communities can drive continuous improvement on a smaller scale.

Grantees within a Networked Learning Community can work together to identify and define crucial outcome measures, then assess and compare program performance on those measures to inform changes in practice. The Minnesota Head Start Association, for example, began this type of continuous improvement effort with 23 programs in 2011.

The programs used the same child assessments and voluntarily reported data on a shared set of variables in a common child outcome database. A research partner, the University of Minnesota Human Capital Research Collaborative, managed the database, analyzed the data, and helped programs develop performance goals.⁴⁶

Encourage Innovation

To improve program quality, grantees must have the flexibility to innovate within a structure that ensures only high-quality practices are pursued and replicated. Through Networked Learning Communities, high-performing grantees can apply for flexibility from the existing, compliance-based monitoring system. There are three conditions to flexibility: Every grantee must be high performing and agree to pursue the same innovation; the affiliated researcher must agree to conduct public, rapid-cycle evaluations of any innovation; and the hub organization must sign off on the proposed innovation.

Under the current—and highly decentralized—system, the Office of Head Start struggles to adequately support the nearly 3,000 Head Start programs operating nationally. With Networked Learning Communities, policymakers give more power to grantees, encourage data-informed decision-making and innovation, and make it easier for the Office of Head Start to support grantees, all with existing resources. The ideal time to propose Networked Learning Communities would be in the next administration, specifically during the reauthorization of the 2007 Head Start Act.

Finally, the structure of Head Start is conducive to Networked Learning Communities, but there's no reason to limit Networked Learning Communities to Head Start programs. There are thousands of early childhood providers nationally. Networked Learning Communities funded by Head Start dollars could incorporate these other providers, supporting greater coordination across fragmented programs and funding streams at the local and state level.

8.

Give Good Food to Kids

Local Food for Local Schools

Lindsey Lusher Shute and Eric Hansen

Lindsey Lusher Shute is the executive director of the National Young Farmers Coalition, a nonprofit that represents, mobilizes, and engages young farmers to ensure their success.

Eric Hansen leads the National Young Farmers Coalition's federal policy work, focusing on improving young farmers' access to credit, training, and land.

For the past five years, Mike Nolan at Mountain Roots Produce has been selling his vegetables to the biggest restaurant in Durango, Colo., and pleasing the smallest customers. While the term “restaurant” might be a stretch, Durango’s 9-R school district serves over 2,000 meals a day, and thanks to Nolan, students munch on locally grown potatoes, beets, carrots, rutabagas, and winter squash. This farm-to-school program is a huge opportunity for a farmer like Nolan, who can sell between 500 and 2,000 pounds of potatoes, for example, in a single transaction with the school district. The school district is a stable, high-volume market for him, and it’s a rewarding place to sell his produce. Not only does Nolan feel he is contributing to food system change, but those same students eating his vegetables recognize him as an invaluable part of the Durango community.

Farm-to-school programs put more fresh fruits and vegetables into school lunches, teach children about where food comes from, inspire students to eat healthier, and support local farm economies.

Farm-to-school programs have exploded in recent years, with 42 percent of school districts surveyed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reporting they had farm-to-school activities in the 2013-14 school year.⁴⁷ These activities include local sourcing of food for the school, school gardens, or educational programming around food production. Specifically, the USDA found 7,101 school gardens and 23.6 million students engaged in these programs.⁴⁸

Multiple benefits come out of farm-to-school programs: They put more fresh fruits and vegetables into school lunches, teach children about where food comes from, inspire students to eat healthier, and support local farm economies. In its survey, the USDA found that \$789 million was invested in local communities through farm-to-school activities, driving \$1 billion in new local economic activity.⁴⁹

From the farmer perspective, institutional buyers, like schools, represent an important piece of the local food system. Many farms get their start by selling produce through direct markets, such as farmers markets or community-supported agriculture efforts (CSA). These channels, while providing high price points, require intensive marketing and customer recruitment to succeed. Institutions, on the other hand, provide farmers access to larger, more stable markets that require less one-on-one consumer contact, which is particularly beneficial as farms grow from small- to mid-sized operations. Having a diversity of market channels supports local food producers at a range of farm sizes. This diversity strengthens the overall food system by creating more opportunities to connect farmers' produce with consumer demand.

Successfully implementing farm-to-school programs requires important social and institutional infrastructure, including:

- First and foremost, strong relationships between schools and the local farm community;
- In-school kitchen facilities capable of cooking food, rather than just reheating prepared meals;
- Funding to purchase local food for school meals that may be more expensive than non-local produce; and
- Local farmers with the capacity to meet demand.

The federal government already addresses some of these challenges. The USDA offers Equipment Assistance Grants to schools that need to upgrade equipment in order to serve healthier meals, with a focus on increasing fruit and vegetable consumption. In 2016, \$30 million was available through this program.⁵⁰ The USDA also administers the Farm to School Grant Program. Funded at \$5 million a year, this program assists the planning and implementation of farm-to-school activities that bring more local food into schools. While agricultural producers are among the entities eligible for funds under the program, only two grants, constituting one percent of total funding awarded, have been made to farmers since the program began in 2013.⁵¹

Institutional markets, like schools, sometimes place additional requirements on farmers that farmers markets and other, smaller retail channels do not.

But without a ready supply of farmers, farm-to-school cannot work. And the capacity of local farmers to support farm-to-school programs remains a critical, under-addressed challenge. The ability of local farmers to meet farm-to-school demand extends beyond just seeds in the ground or tomatoes on the vine. Institutional markets, like schools, sometimes place additional requirements on farmers that farmers markets and other, smaller retail channels do not.

These requirements, called “Good Agricultural Practices” (GAP), ensure that food is grown in a way that minimizes food safety risks. While ensuring the safety of food served in our schools, hospitals, and other large institutions is obviously important, these additional requirements create a significant hurdle to new farmers looking to scale up their farms and access institutional markets. And the requirements vary from state to state, and sometimes from district to district. North Carolina, for example, requires GAP audits and certification for farms that supply its schools. In Illinois, farmers are required to be GAP trained, but not certified or audited. In other states, the decision about training and certification is made on a school-by-school basis.

Moving forward, requirements for GAP certification and training will only increase, as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) implements stricter mandatory food safety regulations. The USDA, which runs the voluntary GAP certification program, is actively working with the FDA to ensure continuity between FDA produce standard requirements and the USDA GAP program. It’s hoped that this coordination will result in a single harmonized food safety certification run by the USDA. A single standard will benefit farmers by streamlining myriad regulations.

Farmers face two different and significant costs to GAP certification. First are the costs of certification, recordkeeping, and verification necessary to demonstrate compliance. These costs include fees associated with the audit and certification process, the time needed for required paperwork, and the time and training required to understand the certification program requirements. The second set of costs are the actual practice changes and equipment upgrades required to comply with the certification. These costs include changes in the way food is grown and the way farming is conducted to minimize food safety risks, plus the purchase of new equipment.

Assistance with these practice changes and certification costs provides the best opportunity to further farm-to-school programs and support small farmers. To address the costs of certification, a cost-share program between the USDA and the farmer would go a long way toward bringing certification within reach for a small farmer. A USDA auditor charges \$92 an hour to perform an annual GAP audit, a necessary step for certification. A research study by North Carolina State University and the Carolina Farm Stewardship

Farming has slim margins and uneven revenue. An extra \$1,000 can be a significant deterrent for a farmer, particularly at the beginning of the season.

Association found that the average cost of an audit is almost \$1,000.⁵² Farming has slim margins and uneven revenue. An extra \$1,000 can be a significant deterrent for a farmer, particularly at the beginning of the season. Lowering the audit fee, through a federal cost-share program or another graduated fee structure, would increase the feasibility of farm-to-school activities for small farms. The USDA's National Organic Program provides a model through its cost-share program, which reimburses farmers for up to 75 percent of the actual cost of their organic certification.

The expense of practice change can be prohibitive as well. Required changes can be as small as new, sanitizable bins for harvesting produce, which cost \$10-\$20 apiece, or as large as upgraded washing and cold-storage facilities, which can cost as much as \$70,000. The USDA could reduce these costs through a grant program, which would reimburse a portion of expenses for necessary, but costly, farm equipment upgrades. New York State already runs a small grant program for farm equipment and operating expenses, The New York State New Farmers Grant Fund.⁵³ While not specific to GAP certification, this program still provides a useful model that could be scaled elsewhere.

The FDA estimates that 35,503 farms will be covered by the new food safety rules.⁵⁴ Assuming a 75 percent cost-share and \$1,000 in audit costs per farm, it would cost around \$26.6 million per year to provide assistance to every farm. Not all of these farms may need or want the cost-share funds, but there will likely be farms currently not subject to the food safety rules that are interested in certification and cost-share as well. The need for equipment and practice change grants is more difficult to estimate, since the needs and costs vary greatly from farm to farm. However, an amount double that of the cost-share at \$50 million per year could serve as an initial investment.

Farm-to-school programs have already shown their value. They help children learn where their food comes from and make healthier food choices. They drive money back into the school's local community, and they provide an important wholesale market for farmers who are ready to scale up or diversify marketing channels. However, these programs do not come without challenges for local farms—challenges that have been largely overlooked by the USDA and the federal government. Targeted investment in cost-share and small grant programs would reduce the cost of entry into the farm-to-school markets. By helping farmers access these programs, we can set them up for long-term success while supporting the growth of the local food movement and reaping educational and health benefits in our schools.

Put Quality Ahead of Cost in School Lunches

Tom Colicchio

Tom Colicchio is a chef, owner of Crafted Hospitality, and the co-founder of Food Policy Action.

My mother was a school cafeteria worker. Long before our nation's food policies were on my radar as a chef, I remember her lamenting the fact that the lunch she served was likely the only meal some kids would eat that day. She retired about a decade ago, but since then the problem has grown worse.

Poverty and obesity are two of the most pernicious challenges facing children and adolescents in this country, producing negative consequences for children well into adulthood. Childhood poverty links not only to negative social and economic outcomes, such as lower rates of high school graduation, early parenthood, and adult poverty, but also affects brain chemistry and development in childhood.⁵⁵ Childhood obesity significantly increases the likelihood of adult obesity and all the concurrent health challenges—cardiovascular disease, diabetes, stroke, cancer, joint diseases, and more—occurring in adulthood.⁵⁶ Between 1980 and 2012, the obesity rate more than doubled among children aged 6 to 11 and quadrupled among adolescents aged 12 to 19.⁵⁷ At the same time, the poverty rate for children under 18 increased from 14 percent in 1969 to 22 percent in 2012.⁵⁸

Given the growing concern about childhood poverty and obesity, many—including First Lady Michelle Obama—have seized on the potential of school lunches to address these dual challenges. Championing the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, which raised the nutritional standards for foods served through the National School Lunch Program, Obama stated, “...When our kids spend so much of their time each day in school, and when many children get up to half their daily calories from school meals, it’s clear that we as a nation have a responsibility to meet as well.... I think that our parents have a right to expect that their kids will be served fresh, healthy food that meets high nutritional standards.”⁵⁹

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) National School Lunch Program (NSLP) provides meals to more than 30 million children every day. The vast majority of meals (22 million) are provided at low or no cost to children living in low-income families. Schools receive federal cash reimbursements for these meals, at a total cost of nearly \$13 billion annually.⁶⁰

Providing free or low-cost lunches to needy children in an attempt to address the problem of child hunger and malnutrition is something the United States has done as early as the 1850s.⁶¹ The federal government began supporting school meals in various ways during the Great Depression, but the National School Lunch Act of 1946 established the national program and solidified its funding. When President Harry Truman signed the program into law, its defined purpose was to serve as a “measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation’s children.”⁶² The goal of the program remains largely the same today, and the NSLP balances three priorities in achieving it: serving children a nutritious meal, getting children to purchase and eat the meal, and making the most of limited funding.⁶³

The NSLP requires participating schools to serve meals that meet minimum nutritional requirements prescribed by the secretary of agriculture, and to provide free or reduced-price meals to students meeting certain income thresholds. Schools receive cash reimbursement for the number of free, reduced-price, and paid meals they serve. In addition to standard reimbursement rates, schools certified as compliant with new nutrition requirements, updated in 2012, are eligible to receive an additional six cents per meal served.⁶⁴

Unfortunately, the practices for procuring food service contracts encouraged by federal regulatory guidance tend to emphasize one objective—cost—at the expense of other equally important goals, including quality and nutrition.

Schools face very real challenges in obtaining meals that are both high in nutritional content and low in cost. To help administer the school lunch program, a school or district (known as a school food authority)⁶⁵ can contract with a food service management company. Federal guidance outlines two procurement methods that schools may use when contracting for food service: Competitive Sealed Bids (an Invitation for Bid, or IFB) and Competitive Proposals (a Request for Proposal, or RFP).

Although both procurement methods are options for schools, federal guidance favors the sealed IFB process and pushes for price to be the most important criterion in all food service decisions. The rationale for prioritizing cost above all else assumes that because federal minimum nutrition requirements for school meals exist, the only difference between the products offered by various companies is price. But in reality, it means the lowest price rather than the best food wins.

Not surprisingly, the focus on price encourages vendors to cut costs wherever possible—meaning that they may use the cheapest and least-nutritional foods available (while still meeting minimum thresholds), rather than attempting to maximize nutritional quality within the federal reimbursement rate. For example, schools that serve more, and more varied, vegetables have higher-than-average food costs.⁶⁶ But vendors participating in a

Unfortunately, the practices for procuring food service contracts encouraged by federal regulatory guidance tend to emphasize one objective—cost—at the expense of other equally important goals, including quality and nutrition.

process where price is prioritized above all other factors have little incentive to exceed federal minimum nutrition standards and include additional servings of vegetables or greater variety if it costs them more.

More surprising, the majority of schools do not utilize the full federal reimbursement rates to cover the costs of school lunches. A 2008 study of the reported costs of producing reimbursable lunches found that, in school year 2005–06, the mean cost of an NSLP meal was \$2.28, well below the reimbursement rate of \$2.51.⁶⁷ Seventy-six percent of all lunches served in school year 2005–06 were produced at a cost lower than the federal reimbursement rate for a free lunch.⁶⁸ On average, revenues from reimbursable meals exceeded the reported costs of producing these meals.⁶⁹

Schools are allowed to then spend the surplus money on other food service items, which can include à la carte food items, food for vending machines, or adult food sales.⁷⁰ Doing so is a common practice that helps school budgets but does little for childhood nutrition.

New Jersey provides one example of how existing federal guidelines could result in lower-quality food for kids. In advance of the 2015–16 school year, four schools in New Jersey issued RFPs for food service. In each case, the school sought a higher-quality offering for their students. Every vendor that responded submitted a bid below the reimbursement rate—so every bid was affordable within the schools' food budgets. The New Jersey Department of Agriculture advised the schools that they were required to choose the lowest bids, even though the schools wished to reject those bids due to the poor quality of food proposed. Thankfully the school leaders invested time and resources to advocate for their students, and after significant back and forth, the state conceded and allowed the schools to go back out to bid (a challenging administrative process) so that they could make a choice consistent with their quality and service expectations. These schools were ultimately able to achieve this outcome with a significant investment from the school leaders. Most schools do not have the resources, time, or political skills to do this and will instead accept the low-quality, low-bid option.

In order for the NSLP to successfully address important issues like childhood hunger and obesity, there must be incentives in place for states, schools, and food service management companies to provide the best quality food possible to their students.

Using factors other than cost in evaluating bids would incentivize vendors to capitalize on the federal reimbursement rate to provide healthy, nutritionally dense meals that exceed minimum federal nutrition standards. Evaluating food service bids based on criteria that consider nutrition is common sense if we're serious about healthy kids. Most parents probably assume that's how the system works now.

Federal policies and guidance should encourage schools to prioritize the factors that are most important to them in their school meals, rather than pushing them to prioritize price over all other criteria.

Evaluating food service bids based on criteria that consider nutrition is common sense if we're serious about healthy kids. Most parents probably assume that's how the system works now.

Incentivizing schools to use an RFP procurement process instead of the IFB process would be an important step in this direction. Federal guidance rightly describes the RFP process as more complex. It requires greater technical skill in evaluating proposals and experience negotiating with vendors, ongoing monitoring of revenue and expenses, significant up-front time to develop evaluation criteria, and the potential for reopening of negotiations prior to signing the contract.⁷¹ However, schools using this procurement method have greater flexibility in prioritizing factors other than cost, and in selecting a food service management company that best meets their needs.

Similar to USDA's current policy to encourage schools to meet the higher nutritional standards adopted in 2012, the agency could add a premium to the regular reimbursement rate to encourage the use of the more complex RFP process to include criteria other than cost as a significant determinant in evaluating food service bids. Based on the roughly 30 million meals served per day, a reimbursement premium would cost about \$54 million per additional penny. Setting the premium at the same six-cent level as the nutritional standards premium would drive a cost of \$324 million per year. This supplemental funding can offset the greater cost associated with procurement under a more complex system and potentially bolster schools' capacity to create higher-quality food service programs.

With many families relying on school meals as a significant source of nutrition for children across the country, failing to maximize the nutritional impact of those meals represents an enormous missed opportunity, particularly given growing concerns around childhood obesity and child hunger. Yet, the incentives in the NSLP encourage schools to consider cost, and not nutrition, as the primary factor in food purchasing decisions. The federal government should change those incentives to encourage schools to spend their reimbursement dollars on the highest quality food possible. Families and children deserve nothing less.

9.

Make Competitive Grants Work

Juliet Squire

Juliet Squire is an associate partner with the Policy and Thought Leadership practice at Bellwether Education Partners.

Competitive federal education grants are a hallmark of the Obama administration. Through at least eight large competitive grant programs, the U.S. Department of Education (USED) has selectively sent funds to states, districts, charter schools, and nonprofits that demonstrate the greatest potential for positive impact on student outcomes. Though a small proportion of USED's annual budget, these competitive grants are highly prized by grantees and have helped spur the adoption of the administration's favored reforms.

As a new administration takes the reins of implementing the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), competitive grants are likely to continue to be a powerful lever. ESSA ended the Race to the Top (RTTT) and School Improvement Grant programs,⁷² but it maintained several others. The Teacher Incentive Fund has morphed into the Teacher and School Leader Innovation Program. The Grant for Education Innovation and Research may serve as a second-generation Investing in Innovation (i3) program.⁷³ And the new law authorized increased funding levels for the Charter Schools Program.⁷⁴

However, USED has historically not exercised strong accountability for competitive grants due to funding disincentives, conflicting roles and responsibilities within USED, and application processes that encourage unrealistic goals.

The next administration could chart a different course. By aligning financial incentives, clearly delimiting the role of USED, and giving states more latitude to define their proposals, the new administration can hold grantees to their commitments and better ensure that funds are dedicated to policies and programs that have a lasting positive impact on student learning.

Competitive grants have successfully triggered policy changes at the state level. RTTT, funded with \$4.35 billion from the nearly \$800 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, is the banner for competitive grants. As William Howell of the University of Chicago wrote in *Education Next*, “by strategically deploying funds to cash-strapped states and massively increasing the public profile of a controversial set of education policies, the president managed to stimulate reforms that had stalled in state legislatures, stood no chance of enactment in Congress, and could not be accomplished via unilateral action.”⁷⁵ The Teacher Incentive Fund likewise prompted states to rethink how teachers are compensated for their performance and/or for teaching in hard-to-staff schools. School Improvement Grants induced intensive investments in persistently low-performing schools willing to adopt favored turnaround strategies. And the Charter Schools Program incentivized states to prioritize the growth of public school choice.

Despite state-level policy changes and lofty promises, the long-term results of programs funded through these grants have left many disappointed. Many reforms have had limited staying power and pervasive implementation challenges. In 2012, Ulrich Boser of the Center for American Progress noted, “every state has delayed some part of their grant implementation.”⁷⁶ In 2013, Elaine Weiss of the Economic Policy Institute studied RTTT implementation and found, “many [states] are experiencing substantial setbacks due to unrealistic promises and unexpected challenges.”⁷⁷

Its favored accountability mechanism usually manifests as sternly worded letters from USED leadership. The department seldom uses its most powerful lever—the ability to withhold funds when a grantee fails to meet expectations.

What has USED done to provide oversight and accountability in these circumstances? Its favored accountability mechanism usually manifests as sternly worded letters from USED leadership. The department seldom uses its most powerful lever—the ability to withhold funds when a grantee fails to meet expectations.⁷⁸ It made headlines in trade publications when USED threatened to pull RTTT funds from Georgia and Hawaii in 2012, and again in 2014 when Georgia did, indeed, lose \$9 million (about 2 percent) out of its \$400 million RTTT award.⁷⁹

A review of reports on other competitive grants reveals similar findings. A 2012 review of the Charter Schools Program by the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) concluded that the Office of Innovation and Improvement (OII) “did not have an adequate corrective action plan process in place to ensure grantees corrected deficiencies noted in annual monitoring reports.”⁸⁰ A 2013 review of the Teacher Incentive Fund noted “only one instance of a program officer requesting an update to a grantee’s project during the planning period,” and that while each grantee submitted timelines with their applications, “just two [program officers] used them in monitoring grantee progress.”⁸¹

USED has weak accountability for competitive grants for at least three reasons, and there are steps that the new administration can take to address each of them.

First, USED should use its power to ensure that returned grant funds come back to USED's coffers rather than the general United States Treasury. When a grant authorization period ends, typically after five years, any funds left in the account are forfeited to the U.S. Treasury.⁸² USED can reallocate funds in future rounds of the same grant program if a future round is in the offing, but generally when USED withholds funds from a grantee, it risks losing those funds forever. Funds—especially the discretionary type—are hard won in the legislative process, so it is easy to understand why USED would avoid jeopardizing them or opening them to criticism from political opponents.

To address this disincentive, policymakers could extend or eliminate the expiration dates on grant accounts or create better pathways for USED to repurpose funds. On one hand, there is a risk of overcorrecting and creating opportunities for USED to withhold funds for retaliatory or political reasons, so policymakers should pilot the approach carefully. Yet grantees that understand USED's willingness to withhold funds may be more motivated to meet expectations and less motivated to over-promise in their grant applications. Moreover, allowing USED to reallocate funds increases the likelihood that they will be used for the general purpose they were intended: helping students.

Second, USED should create a clear line of division between accountability and implementation. USED has at least three distinct offices dedicated to helping states with implementation, including the Reform Support Network, the Implementation Support Unit, and the State Support Group. The support ranges from providing resources, to technical assistance, to tailored support based on a state's needs and performance. Unfortunately, USED has a long history of providing technical assistance and capacity building to its grantees while simultaneously trying to hold them accountable. Naturally, the members of these teams become invested in the grantees' success and may become deeply involved in key decisions. USED is less inclined to hold grantees accountable when it has its own hands in how states operationalize and implement their plans. Unfortunately, when USED plays the role of both umpire and coach, it clouds the question of who is accountable for what and allows grantees room to argue that a failure to meet expectations is partly USED's own responsibility.

There are two alternatives to this current arrangement. First, USED could determine that its primary purpose is that of a support agency. In this case, some other entity could assume the authority to hold grantees' feet to the fire or USED could create internal firewalls to better isolate its accountability and implementation functions. The other, preferable approach would be for USED to retain its accountability role in competitive grant applications and empower grantees to seek technical assistance and capacity building outside the government umbrella.

When USED plays the role of both umpire and coach, it clouds the question of who is accountable for what and allows grantees room to argue that a failure to meet expectations is partly USED's own responsibility.

In addition to clarifying USED's role, the latter approach also plays to the strengths of USED and to the private sector. As a federal agency that has a long institutional history of distributing federal dollars and monitoring compliance, USED is well positioned to hold the purse strings on competitive grants. As a large government bureaucracy, it is poorly suited to providing dynamic and responsive support to states operating in vastly different policy and political environments. By relinquishing its role in capacity building, USED can instead pass funds for implementation support down to states and empower them to seek out support organizations capable of meeting their unique and evolving needs.

Finally, USED will be better positioned to hold grantees accountable if it provides room for grantees to craft proposals based on realistic goals. Unfortunately, the specificity of competitive grant requirements foments an application process that is only fleetingly about strategy or policy. Applications are increasingly a technical exercise in checking the right boxes, making the right promises (or overpromises), and getting the most points on the scoring rubric. In other words, competitive grant requirements tell grantees exactly how high they need to jump; unsurprisingly, grantees promise to reach whatever bar USED has set.

A process like this is great for messaging, but tough for accountability. USED cannot provide effective oversight if there is a tacit understanding that goals are in name only. Nor is it likely to sanction grantees when such large proportions of them fall short of expectations.

USED cannot provide effective oversight if there is a tacit understanding that goals are in name only.

Accountability for outcomes can only be meaningful if the outcomes are reasonable and achievable by most grantees. By reducing the prescriptiveness of competitive grant application criteria and allowing grantees more leeway to design their own initiatives, USED can soften applicants' urge to over-promise and better position itself to provide appropriate and meaningful accountability.

Competitive grants will continue to be a pillar of USED's approach under ESSA, and it should learn from the successes and weaknesses of past experience. Ultimately, the impact of competitive grants on student outcomes relies on more than the adoption of promising policies. It relies on the ability of grantees to implement their plans with fidelity and the ability of USED to create the right environment and incentives for them to do so.

10.

Build Charter Schools Like Affordable Housing

James Willcox

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Since their emergence in the early 1990s, charter schools have grown rapidly and have experienced intense parental demand. In several cities, charter schools serve a larger portion of students than traditional district schools do, and in many others they are a significant part of the educational landscape. Research shows that charters are strongest in urban communities, where many charter schools outperform neighboring district schools, particularly with students who have historically fared poorly in public schools.

Charter schools are free and open-admission public schools funded by the same tax dollars that support traditional district schools. But in many states, charter schools receive lower levels of funding per student than district schools and often don't receive any funding earmarked for facilities construction. This funding disparity is exacerbated by the fact that charter schools lack the ability to levy local taxes to fund large-scale capital projects like building schools. In contrast, district schools typically receive more funding for their programs and augment that funding by passing taxpayer-supported bonds to build and renovate school facilities. Charter schools must divert funds intended for school operation and instructional delivery to pay facilities cost, resulting in significant programmatic tradeoffs.

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This financial imbalance means facilities become an economic drain on charter schools. Adequate facilities are difficult to find with scarce resources.

This financial imbalance means facilities become an economic drain on charter schools. Adequate facilities are difficult to find with scarce resources. When facilities are found, they are challenging to finance due to an array of financing risks that charter schools face. In particular, banks look at charter accountability as a big risk—schools must perform, or they will be closed after the term of the charter (usually five years). This makes access to long-term loans (25 to 30 years) difficult, and increases the cost of those loans when they are accessible.

The federal Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program was created to address a similar challenge in affordable housing—a lack of market incentives for developers to build and rent housing to low-income families at affordable rates. LIHTC could serve as a model for creating a similar set of market incentives focused on providing affordable facilities for high-quality charter organizations that successfully serve low-income students.

Brief History of the Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC)

The federal government has long attempted to intervene in the housing market to create affordable options for low-income families. Created in 1986 under the federal Tax Reform Act, LIHTC provides economic incentives to encourage real estate developers to build and rent housing to low-income families at below-market rates. Since its inception, LIHTC has facilitated the development of more than 2.8 million units of affordable housing.⁸³

The core economic engine for LIHTC is the lower total financing cost that developers can access to build affordable housing. The basic mechanics of the program are straightforward: The federal government allocates tax credits to developers on a competitive basis in exchange for building rent-controlled housing for low-income families. The developers sell those credits to investors (usually banks) who use the tax credits to lower their tax liability. The developers use the proceeds from the sale of the credits to partially fund development of affordable housing projects, which lowers the total financing required. The price for the tax credit is set by market demand—typically between 75 and 95 cents on the dollar. By exchanging the tax credits for cash, the developer effectively receives a government-funded financial subsidy that makes rent-controlled, low-income/affordable housing projects economically viable and an attractive business opportunity in the marketplace.

Tax credits are awarded to the investors who bought them only if the housing project meets the government's requirements each year. If the developer a.) maintains a tenant base that meets the family income requirements, and b.) rents the housing units at the mandated rent level, the investors receive a tax credit. If the project falls out of compliance, investors receive nothing. This structure shifts the financial risk of an ineffective policy to the developer and the investors—and away from the government. In effect, the government only pays (through tax credits) for successful policy outcomes.

In effect, the government only pays (through tax credits) for successful policy outcomes.

The key design principles that underpin the success of LIHTC include:

- 1 The program is competitive.** LIHTC attracts best-in-class developers who compete for tax credits; only the strongest projects receive awards. And the ability to complete projects factors into the competition.
- 2 Participants are held accountable.** Credits are awarded only if the social impact is delivered—every year.
- 3 The competition is open to any high-quality developer.** For-profit and nonprofit developers compete to provide affordable housing without limitation. In fact, three out of four affordable housing units developed to date have been built by for-profit companies.
- 4 The program provides sufficient economic incentive to attract talent and capital.** The federal government controls the “revenue side” of the financial equation (the allowable lease rates), and a key piece of the “expense-side” for real estate—the total cost of financing the project. Through both of these factors, the government essentially manages the profits developers earn and ensures that there is a sufficient market incentive to attract them.
- 5 The program operates on a long-time horizon, giving participants adequate time to realize goals.** Tax credits are awarded for 15 years, giving developers a sufficiently long planning horizon, including the ability to access (and replace) multiple sources of capital both during the development process and after the housing is occupied by tenants.

If these key design principles were used to create a program that replicated the structure of the LIHTC—but for the development of facilities for high-performing charter schools—the federal government could provide additional assistance to low-income families by increasing their access to high-quality public schools.

At least initially, a charter school facilities tax credit program should focus on the highest-need students in markets where the problem is most severe—high-cost real estate markets that also have low charter school funding levels. A pilot policy effort should focus in these areas and use the same design principles as LIHTC to create a thriving marketplace for charter facilities with the ultimate goal of an increased supply of high-performing schools for high-need students.

The proposed Facilities Tax Credit Program (FTCP) should adapt the key design principles as follows.

The application process should favor projects that serve the highest-need students in high-cost areas with limited budgets, and those where the tenant is a proven high-performing charter school operator.

- 1 Competitive:** As in the LIHTC model, the FTCP should attract best-in-class developers through a competitive process that controls charter school facility rent at a set level based on the market and subsidizes the cost of capital through tax credits for investors. The application process should favor projects that serve the highest-need students in high-cost areas with limited budgets, and those where the tenant is a proven high-performing charter school operator demonstrating the capacity to expand to serve additional students at the same level of quality.
- 2 Accountable:** Accountability in the program should be linked to outcomes, and tax credits should only be awarded to investors if the desired outcomes are delivered —each year. Criteria for measuring outcomes should include whether projects are leased to charters at an affordable rate and are occupied by a high-quality charter management organization serving a majority of low-income students. “Quality” could be determined by a proxy measure to start, such as limiting participation to charters already selected for replication under the existing federal Charter Schools Program. A more inclusive option might rely solely on state charter policy and limit participation to schools with a charter petition in good standing in their state. To avoid the pitfall of writing a facilities policy that tries to double as a charter quality initiative, tax credits could also be limited to states that meet set criteria for strong charter accountability laws.
- 3 Open to all developers:** For-profit and nonprofit developers alike should be allowed to compete for tax credits. If this market follows the pattern of the affordable housing market, both types of organizations have an important role to play.
- 4 Sufficient economic incentive:** The program must sufficiently lower the cost of capital for charter school facilities financing—the “expense side”—and control the “revenue side” by limiting the rent charters must pay. With a sufficiently attractive investment opportunity, the program will attract the best-in-class developers, and they will compete to serve the best charter operators. In a pilot, the program could experiment with various levels of subsidy to identify the correct economic incentive to invite a response from the marketplace. It is imaginable that it would require far less subsidy to gain the attention of best-in-class developers to serve public schools when compared to that required to provide low-income families with affordable housing. There is no natural “quality standard” for housing tenants like there is within the basic accountability standards for charter schools, and the rent is paid from a more stable revenue stream—government funds for public schools.
- 5 Long-time horizon:** The program should award tax credits for 15 years initially to replicate the flexible, stable planning horizon that developers experience in the LIHTC. This enables developers to access multiple sources of capital at different stages of the project, including after the school occupies the building.

If we replicate the design principles of LIHTC, we can reasonably expect a thriving facilities marketplace to emerge—just as it did with an even more challenging public policy effort to provide affordable housing for low-income families across the country.

By providing tax credits that lower the cost of capital for high-quality charter school facilities that serve the highest-need students, the federal government will ensure that more high-quality public school options will emerge for this at-risk population.

11.

Connect Career and Technical Education to Real Post-Secondary Opportunity

Alex Hernandez

Alex Hernandez is a partner at the Charter School Growth Fund (CSGF), a nonprofit that supports the growth of the nation's best public charter schools.

We once recited the American Dream's first stanza—graduate from high school, go to college, get a job—as a matter of fact.

But the path from school to work is broken for millions of Americans. Over 25 million young Americans fall off the education path before completing an associate's degree or higher.⁸⁴ Of those who do finish college—our most successful students—two-thirds have trouble launching their careers.⁸⁵

At the same time, the economy has been transformed by new technologies at a dizzying speed, making it difficult for schools to keep up. There is little evidence to suggest that our youth are losing jobs to their robot overlords, but, instead, as industries change, workers often get displaced through innovation, evolving skills requirements, or technology.⁸⁶ Our youth will need to reskill for new jobs, upskill to keep existing jobs, or qualify for jobs so cutting-edge that the required skills are being figured out on the fly. These changes are occurring in a “gig” economy that often offers fewer benefits, more contract work, and higher levels of financial insecurity.⁸⁷

Our current system of youth preparation is growing increasingly disconnected with these realities of our economy and job market, and it loses young people at every turn through lack of engagement and other factors. One problem is that we still largely equate youth preparation with earning good grades in academic classes, not with work-based learning

or the social-emotional skills needed to thrive in a job. These “other” skills are often viewed as consolation prizes for academically struggling students, but in fact they are important for everyone.⁸⁸

To address this disconnection and better prepare students, we need to tear down the walls between schools and the workplace. We will not lift this generation by simply forming more business advisory groups for school districts and community colleges. Schools need to find new ways to partner with employers that are responsive to technological change and labor market displacement.

Giving young adults more ladders means we stop placing students, especially poor and/or minority students, into inferior programs that leave them with few options. Instead, success in one program should leave them with a whole new set of education and career options.

Finally, we need to stop running our youth preparation system like a game of “Survivor” and introduce a new game called “No Chutes, Just Ladders.” In this new game, young adults have different paths they can travel, customized just for them, and each step opens a new set of education and career opportunities. To realize this vision, we will need a broader array of education and training opportunities, increased coaching and career development for youth, and new technology platforms that help manage personalized pathways to opportunity. Giving young adults more ladders means we stop placing students, especially poor and/or minority students, into inferior programs that leave them with few options. Instead, success in one program should leave them with a whole new set of education and career options.

What can this look like in practice?

GPS Education Partners, a Wisconsin nonprofit, sets up learning spaces in manufacturing businesses across the state. High school juniors and seniors who want a different preparation experience can take a full academic program at a manufacturing site in the morning and spend the afternoon in internships and other structured work programs. The nonprofit partners with school districts, so the diplomas students earn are from their home high schools. The goal is to immediately position graduates for multiple education and career opportunities. GPS expands the traditional definition of youth preparation, creates tight partnerships with industry, and helps students open doors after graduation.

Big Picture Learning (“BPL”), a nationwide nonprofit, is developing an internship management system to help connect students with specific opportunities and mentors based on their passions. BPL believes that personalized career pathways for students, based on their interests, will help students develop not just the skills but the professional relationships they need to launch their careers. Skills can be of limited value without the career connections and social capital needed to break through in that first job. And students should not be limited to the career paths that just so happen to be offered by their school. There are many job opportunities that do not normally hit the radar of career and technical programs but are legitimate, upwardly mobile careers. An interest-based approach also allows students to explore different careers over time.

Revitalizing youth preparation for this economy will take more than incremental funding increases for existing efforts and new terminology to describe the same ideas. We need a new model of youth preparation as bold as the GI Bill after World War II. Similar to today, the post-World War II economy was changing rapidly and the GI Bill helped veterans skill up by giving them vouchers they could use for higher education and/or workforce training. GI Bill funds also played an important role in promoting community colleges, a new education option at the time.

To move toward this new paradigm of youth preparation, federal policymakers should focus on four key policy levers.

- Retool high school to include academic achievement, social and emotional skills, and work-based learning as equally important parts of youth preparation;
- Create pools of federal startup grants to launch innovative new models of youth preparation across K-12 and higher education;
- Expand the ways students can use federal financial aid to launch their careers; and
- Accelerate investments in technologies needed to support personalized career pathways.

Retool high school to include academic achievement, social and emotional skills, and work-based learning as equally important parts of youth preparation. The radical play is to discard the seven-period high school class schedule and free significant time during the week for students to learn in the workplace and develop important social-emotional skills like professional networking, conflict resolution, time management skills, and giving/receiving feedback. Districts may initially target high school juniors and seniors, helping them complete classroom coursework requirements early on so they can have a radically different experience in the two years leading up to graduation. But this model should not sacrifice academic rigor. The goal must be to provide students with relevant work-based experiences and academic learning simultaneously.

The radical play is to discard the seven-period high school class schedule and free significant time during the week for students to learn in the workplace.

Achieving this integration requires rethinking curricula and assessment and the roles of teachers in schools and employer-based instructors in the field. The federal government can work with school districts to develop flexible solutions for assessment and accountability through authority already established in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) so that districts can be more creative in assessing academic learning and standards achievement in work-based settings outside the classroom. Schools can then use funds from the Carl D. Perkins Act (Perkins) to build out their work and community partnerships, invest in curriculum development and alignment to appropriately blend academic skills and work-based learning, train teachers and employer-based instructors, and redesign student support systems. The proposed shift redefines youth preparation to include the breadth of knowledge and skills required for success beyond high school and bring Career and Technical Education (CTE) into the mainstream.

Create pools of federal startup grants to launch innovative new models of youth preparation across K-12 and higher education. These grants, created through Perkins and other programs, can help break down the walls between school and work by funding new models of work-based learning like the manufacturing programs developed by GPS Education Partners. Traditionally, federal funds are granted directly to local education agencies (e.g., school districts and community colleges). But the government should look for ways to make startup grants available to a broader set of providers, including traditional education agencies, teams of teachers, third-party nonprofits, employers, and others.

Expand the ways students can use federal financial aid to launch their careers.

Another approach is to expand the ways students can use federal financial aid in higher education, similar to what the GI Bill did for veterans post-World War II. The U.S. Department of Education already has two important pilot programs in this area. The Educational Quality Through Innovation Partnerships (EQUIP) program encourages colleges to partner with non-traditional education providers like coding bootcamps. Students can use federal financial aid dollars for these programs and gain access to new youth preparation models that connect schools more deeply to industry. The other pilot, Career and College Promise, lets high school students use federal Pell grants to accelerate access to post-secondary learning. Collectively, these types of efforts expand the number of high-quality options available to young adults while modernizing our approach to youth preparation for today's economy.

Accelerate investments in technologies needed to support personalized career pathways. The federal government has played an important role in supporting new technologies through the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), the Investing in Innovation Fund (i3), In-Q-Tel, the Small Business Investment Company (SBIC) program, and National Science Foundation grants. Federal policymakers can accelerate the development of the technology platforms needed to personalize career pathways by making them a priority in various research and development award programs administered by the federal government. For example, Southern New Hampshire University created an online, competency-based college curricula that it makes available to schools and employers in its College for America program. Partner organizations across the country use this flexible and customizable education platform to power their own youth preparation programs.

Together, these federal efforts, and others like them, can increase options and opportunity for our youth.

The next president has a historic opportunity to create a national education agenda that accelerates young adults from school to work, that is modernized for the new economy, and that opens door after door from the time our youth enter school to when they earn their first job promotion. Literally tens of millions of Americans stand to benefit.

12.

Provide Sector Agnostic Federal Support for Schools

Andy Smarick

Andy Smarick is a partner with the Policy and Thought Leadership practice at Bellwether Education Partners.

Over the last 15 years, the most prominent (and polarizing) K–12 reforms have tended to be centralizing, standardizing initiatives led by the federal and/or state governments, such as federally prescribed school classifications and interventions, new statewide content standards and assessments, and state-determined models for educator evaluation. But at the same time, states have been rapidly, though quietly, creating and expanding private-school choice programs that differentiate school options and decentralize authority to parents and nonprofits. In fact, growth has been remarkable: Today there are about 50 state-level private-school choice programs—including scholarships, tax credits, and education savings accounts (ESAs)—expanding schooling options for about 500,000 students.⁸⁹ The pace of expansion shows little sign of slowing.

Is there anything the federal government could or should do to help these programs succeed?

The hot-take answer is “No!” We’re in the throes of a pronounced backlash to centralizing efforts, evidenced by testing “opt-outs,” the continuing resentment toward Common Core, and the recent replacement of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) by the decentralizing Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). So why complicate the policy and politics of private-school choice by engaging Uncle Sam, especially since these programs have expanded in recent years without any federal entanglement? Moreover, some school-choice antagonists are especially opposed to private-school choice; they’d vigorously fight any supportive federal efforts.

However, the federal government's extensive experience supporting charter schools militates against both sets of concerns. Two decades ago, chartering was in a position similar to private-school choice today. A number of states had passed laws enabling the development of new schools that would be choice-based. These laws often said little about what kinds of schools should be created, where they should locate, or how many there should be. Charter programs simply created the conditions for school development and parental choice. Private-school choice programs do the same. They don't mandate the creation of certain types of programs, nor do they direct families' choices.

Politically, private-school choice is far less revolutionary today than chartering was 20 years ago. At that point, charter schools were only a few years old and only existed in a handful of states. They summarily ended America's century-long practice of having one government body per geographic area operating public schools. K-12 private-school choice programs, on the other hand, have now been operational for a quarter century, and they exist in 30 states. Chartering already diversified the range of school operators allowed to participate in a state's system of K-12 education; choice programs merely expand that range to include faith-based and private bodies—a decision approved by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* in 2002.

There are three lessons from the charter-school movement that suggest a federal role could be quite helpful, if that role is very clear and very limited. The first lesson is that Washington *did* get involved in chartering. The federal public Charter Schools Program (CSP) started in 1994. It was appropriated \$333 million in FY16; it has awarded about \$3 billion to SEAs since 1995. However, the federal government has mostly respected and followed the states' "greenfield" approach. That is, the federal government has mostly not layered its policy priorities onto chartering. It has not tried to compel states to fundamentally change their charter laws or dictate the creation of certain types of schools or prohibit certain models. Instead, through CSP, a relatively small grant competition, it has helped aspiring founders plan and then open schools of their own choosing.

So Uncle Sam provided states' charter programs more with fuel than a destination.

The second lesson is that the federal government has primarily focused its funding on the start-up of new charter schools.⁹⁰ Most CSP dollars are allocated to states through a competitive grant process, and states then subgrant funds to school founders, also on a competitive basis.⁹¹ These subgrants last only a few years, helping planning teams get through the authorization process and early operations—expensive activities for which state funds are typically unavailable.

Chartering already diversified the range of school operators allowed to participate in a state's system of K-12 education; choice programs merely expand that range to include faith-based and private bodies.

Since its inception, CSP's influence has been profound. It has provided start-up funds to more than 4,200 schools; more than 60 percent of all charter schools that have opened were supported by a CSP SEA grant.⁹² But Washington has functioned simply as an early-stage investor in a state-led process. Washington does not decide what types of charters it likes best and does not provide ongoing streams of revenue. It helps states help social entrepreneurs get off the ground. Without that support, hundreds if not thousands of today's charter schools would've never gotten up and running. But after the start-up phase, Uncle Sam backs off, allowing each school's future to be determined by its educators, authorizer, and state policy environment.

The third lesson is that the federal government (and just about everyone else) underestimated the challenges of charter-school authorizing. It is difficult to hold accountable vastly different, modestly regulated schools of choice. As a result, in the early days of chartering, too many troubled schools got started and too many stayed open for too long. Not only were thousands of students badly served, but this state-level policy innovation suffered politically. The federal investments in chartering did very little to support the development and refinement of charter schooling's new approach to accountability.

These three lessons outline a promising approach to federal support for private-school choice. Namely:

- 1** Washington should respect that these state laws seek to expand and diversify options and that they defer to the decisions of social entrepreneurs and families. Uncle Sam shouldn't try to fundamentally change these laws, accomplish his particular policy priorities through these programs, or attempt to privilege or disadvantage certain types of schools.
- 2** A federal investment should primarily comprise short-term grants to help the start-up and early operations of a diverse array of promising programs.
- 3** A portion of these federal funds should support state efforts to design and implement various accountability strategies for schools participating in these programs.

That's why the next administration should propose in its first budget submission a new initiative called the Diversity and Choice Incentive Demonstration program ("DCID," pronounced "decide"). It would aim to facilitate the creation of a diversity of high-quality, high-demand, highly accountable programs under state school-choice programs.

The program would have two competitive priorities: 1) Spurring the development of diverse, high-quality, high-demand options, and 2) Catalyzing the development of innovative approaches to school and operator accountability under school-choice programs. Applicants could craft proposals responding to one or both of the priorities.

Its annual appropriation would start at a modest \$250 million, with \$10 million reserved for federal administration and national activities. Approximately \$240 million would be granted annually. Eligible applicants would include state educational agencies (SEAs), other state-level entities responsible for or related to the state choice programs, local educational agencies (LEAs), nonprofit organizations, or a consortium of these. Faith-based organizations would be eligible, consistent with federal regulations protecting their right to participate in federal grant programs “on the same basis as any other private organization.”⁹³ Applicants would need to be located in states with a qualifying state school-choice program.

Ideally, the U.S. Department of Education would award 10 grants annually, preferably to applicants in 10 different states. Though the average award would be approximately \$24 million over three years, the department could make larger or smaller grants to reflect the size of the state, scope of the project, and other relevant considerations. Those crafting the federal application and proposal-scoring rubric should recognize that these state-level programs are designed, first and foremost, to facilitate choice. Accordingly, evaluators should give preference to applications that elevate parental demand and atypical options outside the traditional public school and public charter school system. That is, successful proposals should reflect the educational preferences and choices of families in various communities rather than the preferences of experts.

Successful proposals should reflect the educational preferences and choices of families in various communities rather than the preferences of experts.

Grant-receiving proposals under the first competitive priority might include: an existing network of private schools (including a faith-based organization, like a diocese) aiming to start new campuses; a human-capital provider training leaders to start new schools; or a new nonprofit seeking to create tutoring services purchasable with ESAs. Grant-receiving proposals under the second competitive priority might include: an SEA aiming to develop an inspectorate approach to assessing program performance; a consortium of providers collaborating to develop a set of shared performance measures; or a nonprofit aiming to create a system for publicizing information on provider performance. The thread connecting these (and other successful) proposals is the development of diverse, high-quality, highly accountable, choice-based programs.

Over the last two decades, CSP has played an invaluable role in the growth of chartering. It breathed life into state-level legislation that only *made possible* the creation of new programs and the expansion of parental choice. If Washington is able to learn CSP’s lessons—meaning, keep Uncle Sam’s ambitions modest, focus on increasing supply, and add an accountability element—the federal government could play a similarly constructive role as states embrace private-school choice.

13.

Expand Accountability in Higher Education

Michael Dannenberg

Michael Dannenberg is a former member of the Obama administration's Department of Education and a longtime former senior aide to Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA), among other elected officials. The views expressed here are his own.

Picturesque Tulane University, based in New Orleans, Louisiana, is considered one of the South's crown jewels of higher education. Its U.S. News & World Report ranking puts it among the top ten of colleges in the South every year. It has produced over 60 Rhodes and Fulbright Scholars, as well as national leaders ranging from Huey Long to Howard Baker. It has one of the best neuroscience programs in the country.

Tulane is also an engine of inequality. It ranks among the bottom five percent of all four-year colleges and universities nationally when it comes to working-class and low-income student enrollment. In 2014, less than 10 percent of Tulane students were Pell Grant recipients.

Among colleges with similar admissions standards, similar median SAT and ACT scores, and similar incoming high school student median GPAs, Tulane ranks dead last on working-class and low-income student enrollment. In 2014, Atlanta's Emory University, which has similar SAT and ACT scores and similar incoming student high school GPA numbers, had a Pell Grant enrollment rate that was 110 percent higher than Tulane's.

Tulane, though, is emblematic of just one-half of a bigger problem. There are 100-odd additional engines of inequality out there like Tulane—wealthy and indefensibly exclusive colleges and universities. But there are even more troubling types of institutional failure.

So, on one end of the spectrum, we have elite, wealthy colleges reaping the benefits of public support despite serving an unacceptably low number of low-income students. On the other end, we have significantly underperforming and under-resourced colleges serving many low-income students, but serving them poorly.

Far away from the Tulanes of the world, there are 100-plus four-year colleges—for-profits and nonprofits—that fail to adequately serve many of the disproportionately large share of low-income and minority students they do enroll. These institutions graduate less than 15 percent of their students, even when measured six years from the date of initial enrollment. There are another 94 colleges with federal student loan default rates in excess of 28 percent. These college dropout factories and diploma mills rank in the bottom five percent of schools nationally on those metrics and combined enroll approximately 600,000 students. And while these failing institutions may try to blame their poor outcomes on student characteristics, their own data, as reported to the U.S. Department of Education, show that there are scores of colleges serving similar students with similar levels of academic preparation generating substantially higher graduation rates and higher student loan repayment rates.

So, on one end of the spectrum, we have elite, wealthy colleges reaping the benefits of public support despite serving an unacceptably low number of low-income students. On the other end, we have significantly underperforming and under-resourced colleges serving many low-income students, but serving them poorly. Both types of schools receive state and federal higher education public dollars, not to mention nonprofit status, regardless of whom they serve or how well they perform. Is there anything that can be done?

There is, and at little or no cost to taxpayers. It's time, if not past time, we shift a portion of higher education resources away from wealthy universities that are willfully bad on equity and have plenty of institutional funds to finance improvement, and toward desperately needy and underperforming colleges—particularly minority-serving institutions that still suffer the vestiges of legal racial discrimination. All colleges and universities receiving added funds should, in exchange, be held to bare minimum access and quality standards. Let's penalize unethical colleges, help under-resourced ones, and protect students from those that persistently and grossly underperform even after receiving added help.

The Obama administration looked at this same landscape and pursued a more narrow, stick-only approach directed at the worst of the worst actors—for-profit, postsecondary vocational programs that have very high costs and terrible outcomes. Those programs exist within institutions that have resources that could be devoted to students, but instead go to marketing and profit.

To push these for-profit programs to improve, the administration required via regulation that vocational postsecondary education programs prove they are successfully preparing a minimum percentage of students for “gainful employment” upon program exit. This approach mandates evidence of such as a condition for continued participation in the federal financial aid system, including the student loan program that's the lifeblood of almost all institutions of higher education, for-profit and nonprofit alike.

Despite fierce political opposition from the for-profit education community, manifesting in everything from the deployment of well-connected lobbyists to targeted campaign contributions, television ad campaigns, lawsuits, and even personal investigations into Obama personnel, the Obama administration moved forward with implementing their gainful employment standard. And following introduction of the original rule, spending on academic instruction at four-year, for-profit institutions increased by over 25 percent, graduation rates at the same increased by nearly 40 percent, and enrollment (along with profits) plummeted. Displaced students went on to attend much lower-costing community colleges and public four-year schools, or chose not to pursue higher education for which they had a very low likelihood of success. The hammer-only strategy worked.

Accordingly, there's an argument for the next president to apply a similar minimum bar of quality to institutions of higher education overall, not just for-profit vocational programs. But doing so right away wouldn't be entirely appropriate or fair. The Obama gainful employment metrics are unique to vocational programs that are designed to lead to specific occupations and earnings, as opposed to postsecondary education programs that may be geared less to occupational attainment and more toward other goals.

The diversity of institutions of higher education—two-year and four-year schools, for-profit and nonprofit, religious and non-religious—counsels for keeping three principles in mind when constructing standards of performance in exchange for federal aid eligibility. First, minimum standards should be nuanced. Second, institutions should be given time to improve. And third and most important, we should provide financial support for some under-resourced institutions of higher education to generate improved outcomes. For-profit education companies can reduce profits or shareholder payouts to produce better outcomes among students, or quickly shift resources to open and close short-term, specific vocational training programs. But the nonprofit sector has different resource levels and degrees of flexibility. In short, many colleges need help to deliver better results for students.

Perhaps the most deserving candidates for additional resources to assist in meeting new minimum eligibility standards for federal aid are minority-serving institutions (MSIs). Typically, MSIs are engines of college access. They serve very high percentages of low-income students and racial minorities whose families historically were subject to legally enforced discrimination. Is it any wonder Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have low endowments when the parents of this generation of students are the first to be protected by the Fair Housing Act of 1968? Most wealth in this country is based in property, and not the same type of slave trade property that financed Yale University's Calhoun College and other prominent institutions.

How can we pay for this? Cheaply, by leveraging a college's eligibility to participate in federal higher education programs to drive positive changes in enrollment and performance. If irresponsible engines of inequality like Tulane won't provide sufficient financial aid packages to enroll a reasonable share of low-income and working-class students—in Tulane's case, about 120 additional Pell Grant recipients—then Tulane should have to contribute the \$2.5 million in education spending those students would have received there to nearby HBCUs like Dillard University and Xavier University of Louisiana. Nationally, some \$110 million would transfer from wealthy and inexcusably exclusive colleges and universities to MSIs, and it wouldn't cost taxpayers a dime.

Tulane and other engines of inequality certainly have the resources to contribute to college access. Tulane has a \$1 billion endowment. In fact, federal tax law requires foundations to spend five percent of endowment assets each year to maintain nonprofit status, but there's an exception for colleges and universities. Tulane, like many other engines of inequality, takes advantage. Tulane's annual report says the university spends an average of five percent of its endowment each year. But its Form 990 report to the Internal Revenue Service shows it spends only 3.4 percent.

If Tulane were held to the same five percent standard as other foundations, like the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation or the Lumina Foundation, it would spend an additional \$15 million annually. That's enough to double the number of Pell Grant recipients at Tulane.

If Tulane were held to the same five percent standard as other foundations, like the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation or the Lumina Foundation, it would spend an additional \$15 million annually. That's enough to double the number of Pell Grant recipients at Tulane. It's enough to give a debt-free ride to every Pell Grant student at Tulane and contribute to Dillard University and Xavier University.

One can imagine colleges like Tulane countering that they simply can't enroll more low-income students without compromising admissions standards, but the facts tell a different story. According to ACT data, among students who score in the 90th percentile and higher on college admissions tests nationally, one in five (20 percent) comes from a working-class or low-income family—more than twice the percentage enrolled at Tulane.

So to the extent the engines of inequality choose not to change and expand access to qualified working-class and low-income students, some of their funds should be available for MSIs to improve. But Tulane and their like might take one look at the stick of decreased federal higher education aid eligibility and increase their enrollment of Pell Grant students quickly. If so, terrific! More deserving students get a top-notch education.

If we have to find another source of revenue to support under-resourced schools, we can. What we cannot do is continue to let American higher education work to calcify inequality rather than operate as a vehicle of socioeconomic opportunity. That's something the next president should agree with, and really, so should everyone else.

14.

Creating Real Second Chances for At-Risk Youth

Gary L. Jones

Gary L. Jones, Ph.D., is the chief executive officer for Youth For Tomorrow, a private alternative school serving at-risk youth in Virginia.

Joe Gibbs, the legendary NFL Hall of Fame Head Coach, is equally admired in Washington, D.C. for his selfless commitment to providing children in crisis with an opportunity to learn Christian values, become self-reliant and productive citizens in our communities around the Nation. Under his leadership as Founder, Youth For Tomorrow has served over 25,000 teenage boys and girls since 1986.

Though alternative education has evolved over time, “alternative schools” generally serve students who are at risk for school failure within the traditional educational system. Alternative education is not a new concept—it has been a part of the nation’s public school system for more than 40 years. Yet it remains on the periphery for many policymakers even though it is central to the lives of many young people.

Many traditional public schools, and even many public alternative schools, are not equipped to provide the intensive treatment required to successfully serve the growing numbers of specialized populations, such as students with autism spectrum disorders, those with serious mental health issues, and adjudicated youth being diverted from juvenile detention centers. With a growing number of young people with these more intensive needs, demand for specialized private alternative schools (i.e., day treatment schools, residential schools, etc.) is increasing.

These specialized schools integrate effective support services—including counseling, medication management, case management, and more—into a caring and supportive learning environment. Effective programs work to ensure the learning environment offers physical and emotional safety for students who are striving to overcome challenging life events and the stigma of being labeled “at-risk.” These types of schools provide opportunities for students to develop their academic potential while receiving individual support to address their complex needs. And for many of these students, a private alternative school can be the last opportunity to earn a diploma before dropping out or being expelled, both of which come with lifelong consequences.

Founded in 1986 by former Washington Redskins head coach Joe Gibbs, Youth For Tomorrow (YFT) has been a leader in the field of specialized private alternative education for children whose behavioral, emotional, and mental health difficulties significantly impede their progress in school, at home, and in the community. Students referred to the YFT school typically have histories of suspension, expulsion, substance abuse, learning disabilities, mental health disorders, juvenile offenses, sexual and physical abuse, sexual exploitation, and academic failure.

YFT and most private alternative schools like it employ highly qualified and specialized staff to address each student’s individual therapeutic needs through an array of intensive clinical services during the regular school day. Licensed therapists conduct weekly group therapy with students, along with weekly, and sometimes daily, individual therapy. A staff psychiatrist provides evaluation services and medication management when necessary, and case managers develop individualized service plans for both students and their families. This holistic approach includes training for all staff in trauma-informed care and behavior intervention modalities that help students identify and address their problems while working toward personal and academic goals. This array of services is often simply not available in public schools because providing these services at the intensive level required is costly, requires specially trained personnel, and frequently involves students who cannot be adequately served in general education settings. YFT’s model, for instance, averages between \$24,000 and \$28,000 per student per year, more than double the average expenditure per student in Virginia’s public schools, where YFT is located.⁹⁴

Research shows that students attending high-quality alternative schools frequently earn more credits and achieve higher rates of graduation than many of their peers who continue to struggle in mainstream schools.

The success of private alternative schools like YFT is due in part to the tolerant and inclusive social environment they create for nontraditional students. Students perceive the environment as reasonable and fair because policies are equitably enforced and teachers treat students with dignity. Teachers also help solve personal, emotional, and family problems while promoting academic progress. These schools emphasize vocational and life skills, along with self-regulation. Students play an active role in their learning, which leads to feelings of belonging, academic confidence, and hopefulness about the future. Research shows that students attending high-quality alternative schools frequently earn more credits and achieve higher rates of graduation than many of their peers who continue to struggle in mainstream schools.⁹⁵

Surrounded by three of the largest school districts in the nation, YFT receives weekly requests from parents struggling with their children following a suspension, expulsion, hospitalization, incarceration, or other incident. Most parents seek YFT’s educational services because the local school is challenging re-enrollment, or because they realize the resources in mainstream school settings cannot support their child’s emotional and behavioral needs. Even though YFT offers scholarships to many families, these are limited in number. And because of the intensive and holistic services YFT provides, tuition costs are out of reach for many families of at-risk students.

Cost issues affect not only the ability of schools like YFT to meet demand from parents, but also the ability of private alternative education providers to contract with school districts to serve the most at-risk students. At one time, YFT was asked by a local school district to work with 40 rising 9th-graders who were the most at risk for failure. However, the school system was only prepared to allocate 70 percent of its per-pupil cost to YFT, which would not cover costs of even a portion of the YFT service model.

And when students are referred by school districts to YFT or similar programs, federal formula grants through programs like Title I and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), for which many at-risk students qualify and that would be granted to a traditional school district, do not flow equitably to private alternative education providers. Instead, most often when these funds are received by the private providers, they flow through a school district intermediary that retains a percentage for administrative overhead, reducing the total allocation of funds per student to the private entity.

American education needs high-quality alternative schools to create customized options to better serve more students and ensure that students have an option between the traditional schoolhouse and the jailhouse. To help achieve this, the next administration should amend federal formula grants to ensure that private alternative education providers receive 100 percent of federal grants tied to the students they serve. In addition, to address both the inadequate supply of high-quality alternative education providers and the cost barrier for families, policymakers should create a targeted grant program within the Charter Schools Program to spur the creation of new, public charter schools providing holistic service models to meet the needs of students at greatest risk.

Amend Federal Formula Grants

When parents or localities enroll high-risk students in educational settings that offer holistic services, policymakers should mandate that 100 percent of the federal funds for the education of these students flows directly to the institutions that serve them—whether district, charter, or private school—without passing through a school district intermediary. These dollars should follow the children they are intended to serve. This methodology should apply to any formula funds provided under the Every Student Succeeds Act, any funds for special-education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and any other federal formula funds tied to these students.

American education needs high-quality alternative schools to ensure that students have an option between the traditional schoolhouse and the jailhouse.

Create Grants to Provide New Public Schools for the Highest-Need Students

For over 20 years, the federal Charter Schools Program (CSP) has provided grant funds to states to support the creation and expansion of high-quality charter schools. Under the program, eligible grantees receive support for planning and initial implementation of new charter programs, and it supports research and evaluation efforts across the charter sector.

Policymakers should create a targeted subgrant within the CSP specifically to support the creation of charter schools that provide holistic services within education settings to the highest-risk students. Applicants could be public or private providers who have a proven track record of working with the most vulnerable at-risk students, like those served by YFT, and eligibility should be limited to those serving this population of students. In addition to a proven record of academic outcomes, approved instructional models should include intensive support services, such as case management, service planning, and individual and group therapies; psychiatric supports should be carried out by credentialed or licensed and trained staff. Entities seeking funding must show they have the professional and organizational capacity to offer such services in an educational setting.

The program could be similar to the existing CSP in the planning and implementation phases. But unlike the CSP, which ceases funding once schools begin to generate state and local funds through state school finance formulas and doesn't aim to influence those funding levels for ongoing support, these grants would require states to demonstrate a plan to ensure per-student revenues reach a minimum level associated with the actual cost of services in their region, equivalent to about \$24,000 to \$28,000 per student per year under YFT's model. Enabling proven providers to form new charter schools dedicated to serving the most at-risk students would increase access for families both by creating greater capacity in communities to serve them and by creating a high-quality public option that can be provided to families free of cost.

YFT's school, which can serve as a model for this type of holistic approach to serving high-risk students, operates with a budget of about \$4 million per year to serve 150 students. Currently, only 20 percent of the school systems across the nation provide supplemental services to students like those provided under the YFT model, and then only if the student has a current Individualized Education Program (IEP).⁹⁶ Based on YFT's model, a grant program of about \$200 million per year could create opportunities to ensure at least one high-quality alternative program exists in every state, which could begin to address the problem.

Enabling proven providers to form new charter schools dedicated to serving the most at-risk students would increase access for families both by creating greater capacity in communities to serve them and by creating a high-quality public option that can be provided to families free of cost.

Today, public schools often lack the resources to provide the continuum of services needed to assist students with intensive behavioral, emotional, and mental health needs, but private alternative settings are often too few and too costly to serve the population of students who could most benefit from their service model. As a result, students with these needs often flounder in public school settings, even public alternative school settings, exhibiting high rates of academic failure, suspension, expulsions, and dropout. Policymakers can begin to address these issues of access and cost by creating opportunities for private providers with a proven track record to form new, public schools with the resources to provide equivalent, high-quality services.

15.

Give Education Power to Families

A Limited Right of Action

Ben Austin

Ben Austin is a board member for Students Matter, a nonprofit organization promoting access to quality education through impact litigation, communications, and advocacy.

Most parents and voters assume federal education law already elevates the needs of children above all other interests. After all, why else would America spend over half a trillion dollars per year on public education? But shockingly, nowhere in the thousands of pages of federal law does it declare that the purpose of public education is explicitly to serve children. Equally important, nowhere in federal law does it empower parents to hold the bureaucracy accountable to serving the interests of their children.

Instead, American public education is largely captured by powerful adult special interests, relegating parents to organize bake sales and watch from the political sidelines. Teachers' unions in California spend more money on lobbying than all the oil companies and all the tobacco companies combined. And they aren't alone. When I served on the California State Board of Education, a phalanx of lobbyists for charter schools, testing companies, textbook companies, and administrators' unions, as well as teachers' unions, monopolized the front row of every meeting.

Obviously no special interest group was organized explicitly to lobby against children. And often the interests of adults and children would align on various issues. But no interest group and no lobbyist was pressuring me to always vote for kids, no matter what—especially for low-income children and children of color. When the interests of adults and kids clashed, the kids would always lose.

The bottom line is that no government initiative or campaign proposal will succeed in transforming American public education by relying solely on bureaucrats who are beholden to adult interests, rather than parents dedicated to serving the interests of their children.

Recent state-level court actions suggest an innovative new theory of change empowering parents with a voice to compete with the cacophony of special interest voices in the politics of public education. Parents in a few states are testing this new idea to take back our schools for our kids and our communities.

In California, eight families brought a civil rights lawsuit against the state to force the education system to serve the interests of all children. They claimed in *Vergara v. California* that the laws governing teacher tenure, teacher dismissal, and teacher layoffs serve powerful adult interests at the expense of children, and are therefore unconstitutional. The families, who won in Superior Court but later lost in appeals court, are appealing to the California Supreme Court.

Meanwhile families in New York and Minnesota are also using the courts to advocate for their children and address disparities in the quality of education between low-income students and their more advantaged peers. Every state has different constitutional and statutory language defining a high-quality education along with the rights of students and their parents.

While public education is a local issue, the disparity between the quality of schools serving affluent children and those serving low-income children is a national crisis. A child obviously cannot choose where to live based on whether or not the laws of their state serve their interests.

But these inequities are not confined to California or the other states where parents have filed civil rights lawsuits. While public education is a local issue, the disparity between the quality of schools serving affluent children and those serving low-income children is a national crisis. A child obviously cannot choose where to live based on whether or not the laws of their state serve their interests.

In 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 5-4 in *San Antonio vs. Rodriguez* that there is no federal constitutional right to a quality education. The result of that decision has been that, with few exceptions, claims related to public education have been litigated exclusively in state courts, and students who happen to live in the vast majority of states without a legal framework to support such a civil rights claim are simply out of luck.

Since *Rodriguez*, the world has changed, but our public education system has not. My daughter's kindergarten classroom looks pretty much the same as my own kindergarten classroom. A generation ago, a federal right to a quality public education may not

Our nation's leaders should amend the Every Student Succeeds Act to include a federal right, enabling every public school parent in America to challenge in court an education-related law or regulation that they believe is systematically harming children.

have been necessary. America's student population was less diverse, and the economy children were graduating into was more egalitarian and localized. Many good jobs didn't require critical thinking or even a post-secondary or college education. Those days are long gone.

That's why Congress and the president should amend federal law to state what is patently obvious to every parent in America: The purpose of public education must be to serve children. And they should empower America's parents—whose only interests are children—to hold the bureaucracy accountable.

Last year President Obama signed into law the first update to federal education law since 2001, called the Every Student Succeeds Act. In order to fulfill the name of that new law, our nation's leaders should amend it to include a federal right, enabling every public school parent in America to challenge in court an education-related law or regulation that they believe is systematically harming children. If they prove that systematic harm, they would win injunctive relief, a court mandate declaring the law or regulation invalid and requiring that it be changed.

If public education laws inequitably fund low-income children, parents should have the power to change them. If public education laws ensure that all children, or all low-income children, are statistically less likely to receive a quality education, parents should have the power to fix them.

It is worth noting that while policy gets formulated at the federal and state level, it often gets lost in translation in the classroom. What seems like smart policy in theory may have unintended and problematic consequences in practice. The notion of a kids-first agenda not only needs to evolve over time, but also will differ from state to state and community to community. While it's easy to see how parents could utilize this new right to advocate for equity in funding, teacher quality, and other policy issues with national implications, parents could also use this new right to advocate for innovative policy that national leaders aren't yet talking or even thinking about. It's easy to forget that fancy job titles and shiny degrees don't translate into a monopoly on good ideas. Low-income parents, parents of color, even undocumented parents are often the real experts when it comes to the kind of policy change our kids need.

Congress and the president could craft reasonable guardrails around this statutory right:

- It should be restricted to systemic problems only, not encompassing individual problems with individual children or individual school employees, and
- It should stipulate that parents could only win injunctive relief to invalidate laws that harm children, not monetary damages.

Under this structure, a parent would not be able to sue because their child had an ineffective teacher. But a group of parents could file a civil rights lawsuit if they could prove that a particular law or regulation made it more likely that all children, or all children of color, or all children in a particular school district or ZIP code, would be assigned an ineffective teacher.

The goal isn't more work for lawyers—these sensible safeguards would protect against frivolous or idiosyncratic lawsuits. Instead, the endgame is obvious: reorient the incentive structures of America's laws and school bureaucracies to serve the interests of children by empowering parents with legal and political leverage in decisions regarding the educational destiny of their children.

Establishing a new North Star for American public education rooted in what's good for children—and empowering America's parents to interpret and enforce this new right—has the potential to chart a new course out of the false choices of the past that have contributed to today's broken status quo. Charter schools vs. district schools, reformers vs. teachers' unions, even Democrats vs. Republicans are false choices rooted in 20th-century ideology. For a parent trapped in a failing school embedded within a broken bureaucracy, all they want is a better school and a brighter future for their child. Why not include them, and that obvious but vital ambition, in federal policy?

Parent Powered Schools

RiShawn Biddle

RiShawn Biddle is editor of Dropout Nation, the leading commentary website on education reform, and an award-winning editorialist, speechwriter, and consultant.

We know that expanding school choice and empowering parents can be key to improving student achievement. We understand that parents are clamoring for more and greater varieties of school options and for more power over the education of their children. And it is clear that the federal government has, and continues to play, a prominent role in expanding choice and parent power, encompassing all options from homeschooling to traditional public schools.

Yet the federal government can do much more to help parents regardless of where their children are schooled.

Both out of concern over the quality of schools serving their communities and a desire for schools that reflect their values, families around the country are using school choice options to give their kids a chance at a better education. Some 2.7 million children were enrolled in charter schools in the 2014–15 school year, a 49 percent increase from five years earlier.⁹⁷ Another 1.8 million children were homeschooled in 2012–13, a 17 percent increase from five years earlier.⁹⁸ And 308,000 children were enrolled in 39 school voucher and tax credit scholarship programs in 2013–14, a 54 percent increase over 2010–11.⁹⁹

Parents are clearly onto something. Charter schools in 41 urban communities, on average, increased student achievement compared to traditional public schools by 40 additional days in math and 28 additional days in reading, according to research from Stanford University’s Center for Research on Educational Outcomes.¹⁰⁰ In addition, students receiving vouchers from the District of Columbia’s Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) graduated at rates 21 percent higher than peers in traditional public schools.¹⁰¹

Parents are demonstrating a desire for a more active role in their children’s education—and are dissatisfied with the unresponsive governance structures of traditional districts.

Meanwhile parents are demonstrating a desire for a more active role in their children’s education—and are dissatisfied with the unresponsive governance structures of traditional districts. Parents in California districts such as Adelanto Elementary School District and Los Angeles Unified used the state’s “parent trigger law” to take over and turn around low-performing schools and as leverage to negotiate with districts for additional resources and autonomy. Homeschooling parents have taken a different approach, forming cooperatives for families to share resources, collaborating to provide instruction in specific areas, and even forming their own sports teams. Even parents who opt their children out of annual standardized testing, who many reformers view with disdain because of equity concerns, are basically saying they want more power and choice.

Traditionally the federal government has played a part in expanding choice and empowerment. For example, following enactment of the Race to the Top grant program under the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (2009), over 1,365 new charter schools opened between 2010-11 and 2014-15.¹⁰² Democrats and Republicans alike credit President Clinton for sparking an expansion of public charter schools during the 1990s through a combination of federal policy, dollars, and the White House bully pulpit.

Yet big gaps in the federal government's role remain.

Through the Charter Schools Program (CSP), the federal government provided \$239.2 million in 2014-15 to launch new or expanded charter schools either through state education agencies or established charter programs. However, none of CSP's grant programs support the efforts of families and other community groups to launch independent charters or other kinds of "autonomous public schools" in their communities, even though federal law allows for it. State education agencies aren't required to set aside for that purpose even one dollar of the \$154 million received for funding new charter school openings. Changes implemented by the Obama administration five years ago to ensure the creation and expansion of high-quality charters, which are now codified in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), also ensure that already well-resourced existing charter management organizations (CMOs) receive the bulk of CSP funding.

As a result, families and community-based groups, which usually have no established track record to prove their ability to succeed in launching schools and lack resources to support their success, are increasingly left out. They are unable to form and control charters that serve the particular needs of their children, or even to seek out the technical assistance needed to successfully launch such schools. This means that parents seeking to flee their traditional public schools are limited to CMO-operated charters, where they may have few opportunities to shape the schools' direction.

Race to the Top played a prominent role in parent empowerment, spurring the passage of parent trigger laws in California and six other states. But it never specifically required states seeking funds to pass parent trigger laws, enact other legislation to empower parents, or strengthen existing family engagement policies. So few states addressed parent empowerment. Meanwhile districts failed to properly utilize Title I's one-percent set-aside for family engagement activities, effectively discouraging parents and family engagement groups from playing strong roles in school decision-making.

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Families want to be on equal footing with the district bureaucracies, teachers' unions, and state policymakers who were long in charge of shaping education.

One reason the federal government hasn't done more to advance choice and parent power is that policymakers have failed to understand that the paradigm of education has shifted from a collection of monopolistic school districts to an array of options. Because of these changes, families, regardless of whether their children are homeschooled or in public schools, want to be more than passive players in education. Families want to be on equal footing with the district bureaucracies, teachers' unions, and state policymakers who were long in charge of shaping education.

The next administration can build on existing programs to genuinely empower parents and foster the creation of more diverse schooling options. At the heart of this effort is a comprehensive approach to choice that acknowledges that all families should have power over their children's education regardless of educational setting.

One avenue to address this is through the existing CSP, which funds charter and other independent schools. The next administration should create a Parent-Run School Grant Program. The program could provide three-year planning and development grants of at least \$608,000 (or the average size of a three-year grant currently given to charters under the CSP) to coalitions of families and community groups with sound business plans to launch (and get technical assistance in starting) new charters or other forms of independent public schools. If at least 20 Parent-Run School Grants are given, that would be \$12.2 million for starting new schools, funded either from new funds or by diverting a portion from existing sources.

Another step could require state education agencies (SEAs) receiving CSP funding to set aside at least 10 percent to assist families and community groups in launching new charters. These dollars would be substantial. During 2014-15, for instance, just 10 state education agencies shared in the \$125.1 million in new funding for charter school startup grants; a 10 percent set-aside would have meant \$12.5 million for launching new family- and community-led charters. As with other set-asides, the biggest challenge will be bureaucratic inertia. But the president can get SEAs to act by making effective implementation of the set-aside a condition for a CSP grant—and bar SEAs from future participation in CSP if those requirements aren't met.

The next president can also work with Congress to pass a law creating an "educational empowerment zone" program similar to enterprise and empowerment zones originated by former congressman Jack Kemp in the 1980s or the Promise Neighborhoods initiative launched by the Obama administration. In these zones, which can be implemented in rural as well as urban communities, a portion of Title I funding that would otherwise go to districts can be used to launch new community-based schools run by families, community groups, and faith-based organizations. Family- and community-controlled charters receiving startup funds from CSP could immediately take advantage of those additional dollars. So could homeschool cooperatives, especially those which have

already been certified by state departments of education, as well as charter schools that provide online and distance learning programs to homeschooling parents, as in California and a few other states.

The federal government could use Washington, D.C.'s Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) as a vehicle for an educational empowerment zone. A new grant program within OSP could be created to provide parent-, community-, and faith-based groups with grants to build capacity for launching new schools. As with the Parent-Run School Grant, these groups could receive funding for three years as they launch new schools in D.C. to serve low-income students, including those already receiving OSP vouchers.

Finally, the president can work with Congress to amend ESSA for the creation of a grant program funded by the one-percent Title I set-aside. Unlike the current approach, districts would no longer be in charge of deciding how those funds are spent. Instead, parent groups and family engagement advocates would directly access those funds, either through educational empowerment zones or through community foundations selected by state education agencies. Funds could be used to facilitate parent trigger petitions, or support negotiations with districts and autonomous public schools in matters such as placement of teachers or even determining whether school attendance can be open enrollment or restricted to school zones. This way, these funds enable families to take their proper roles in school decision-making.

The next president has several opportunities and tools under federal law to expand choice and parent power. In doing so, the next administration can help federal and state governments embrace a new vision of the role of families in education that is already becoming reality.

16.

Democratize Data

Aimee Rogstad Guidera

Aimee Rogstad Guidera is the president and CEO of the Data Quality Campaign, a nonprofit organization focused on increasing the public understanding of the value of education data, ensuring stakeholders' timely access to useful information, and improving the capacity of teachers and schools to use data for the betterment of student learning.

This year, the Los Angeles Unified School District graduated at least 6,000 students whom the district, long before handing them diplomas, knew weren't prepared for college or a career.¹⁰³ The district cheered these students as successes, while at the same time admitting that they had barely passed their classes and lacked the skills and knowledge necessary for success outside the school doors.

Why was there no public outcry from the community, public officials, or taxpayers?

Because this information hadn't been shared broadly or used to make sure every student stayed on track for success after high school.

Our education system is failing these and countless other students around the country by not providing their families with timely and complete information about student learning and school performance. Nationwide only about a third of American high school students graduate from high school prepared for college, yet nearly 90 percent of parents believe their children are on track to succeed in college.¹⁰⁴ Our students, their families, and our country deserve better.

Every state, as a result of significant federal and state investment, has the ability to provide richer information on student and school achievement than ever before. And yet, as of 2014, only 17 states reported that parents had access to any information about their students' progress over time.

While the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to publicly report data on aggregate student performance and school success, it does not go far enough to truly empower families with valuable information. Parents need more complete and valuable data about their own children. Educators need the tools to both interpret and use data to drive instructional decisions and to communicate with families about data. And families need more complete information about the schools serving their communities.

Using data to empower families to make informed decisions at every point in their child's education journey must be a priority of the next administration. We can and must change how we use data to serve every child and family in this country and prepare them for success in school and in life.

Every state, as a result of significant federal and state investment, has the ability to provide richer information on student and school achievement than ever before. And yet, as of 2014, only 17 states reported that parents had access to any information about their students' progress over time.¹⁰⁵ So in many cases, the data exist, but the information is not being communicated to those in a position to help students—namely, teachers and parents. If doctors had valuable information that could improve the health and well-being of a child and withheld it, that would be grounds for medical malpractice.

First, federal policy should address this untapped potential by ensuring that individual students and families receive timely, useful, and complete information on individual students' academic progress and achievement. Second, educators must be trained in data literacy—the ability to interpret and use data effectively and ethically and to communicate with parents about it. Finally, every family in every community should receive more complete information about how well their local schools are preparing their youth for success in life beyond high school.

Enabling Every Family to Access Their Own Child's Data

Students benefit when they and their parents have a full picture of how well they are doing in school, presented in a timeframe that allows them to take action, make decisions, and partner with teachers, school leaders, and other providers in support of their success. Tools like dashboards and portals allow parents to securely access timely, useful, complete, and contextualized information on their own child's academic progress and achievement all in one place. And while many districts offer data dashboards that give parents access to information on their child's growth, performance in different subjects, and even tailored lesson recommendations and reports, leading states are beginning to develop data "backpacks" that also put parents in control of sharing their child's education data.

Parents can use these secure, portable electronic data backpacks to share information with tutors, afterschool programs, or healthcare providers to better coordinate and customize services. They can also facilitate the transfer of student records, enabling

rapid and appropriate academic placement in a new school. These tools not only provide data that support parents as informed advocates for their child, but they also increase understanding of how and why data are collected, shared, and protected because parents can review all data collected and stored in the backpack and help make decisions about access to their child's information.

Federal leadership can spur this innovation by providing grants for states and districts to develop and expand portals, dashboards, or data backpacks to allow families access to their children's data in a secure and private manner. The funding could flow through ESSA, the Education Sciences Reform Act (ESRA), or the federal appropriations process. Focusing these grants on states and districts allows for customized approaches and innovation around the country to inform broader efforts.

A recent survey of parents across the country found that the criterion parents found most valuable about a school was information on how well the school prepares students for the future.

In addition to accurate, timely, and useful information on individual students, families and communities need a richer picture of how well their local schools are preparing youth for success in life beyond high school. A recent survey of parents across the country found that the criterion parents found most valuable about a school was information on how well the school prepares students for the future. In addition, 95 percent of parents who didn't have information on how their schools' graduates performed in postsecondary schooling and careers wish they did.¹⁰⁶ Information on the real-world outcomes of students from their local schools helps parents contextualize their child's progress and performance.

To give families a more complete picture of their schools, the next administration must build on new public reporting provisions in ESSA and create additional incentives and opportunities within the law to encourage states to report additional postsecondary indicators. The next president should work with Congress to strengthen the law to require states and districts to include aggregated postsecondary enrollment, remediation, and completion information for all students in school report cards, and should encourage states to also include employment and wage information for those going directly into the workforce or military.

Building Educators' Capacity to Use Data Effectively

Parents are not the only education stakeholders who need to access and understand data. A critical component of empowering families with the ability to access and share their own child's data is ensuring that their education partners (school leaders, teachers, and specialists) understand how to use data to communicate with parents about their child's progress and to improve and tailor instruction. This training is sorely lacking today, so the next administration must take steps to ensure that all educators are data literate.¹⁰⁷

By embedding requirements for data literacy training and skills in the Higher Education Act's (HEA's) educator preparation, induction, and selection provisions, the next administration can help ensure all new teachers are taught how to use data well. In addition, the next administration should update HEA Title II's definition of "Teaching Skills" to include a direct reference to using data to support instruction and decision-making, while also safeguarding student privacy and confidentiality.

These are obviously not the only policy actions needed to ensure that student data is high quality and well used. But both are key steps to help parents and educators understand the power and potential of high-quality data and effective decision-making based on it.

About the Authors

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Ben Austin is a board member for Students Matter. From January 2014 to July 2016 he served as the organization's policy and advocacy director, where he coordinated the legislative, political, grassroots, and policy development related to the Vergara v. California civil rights litigation, which established California's new constitutional right to a quality education for children. Ben came to the Students Matter team from Parent Revolution, a nonprofit organization that he founded and led for seven years. Parent Revolution focused on transforming underperforming public schools by empowering parents to advocate for their children through grassroots community organizing.

Previously, Ben helped run the successful teacher organizing campaign to transform Locke High School from the most violent and lowest-performing high school in Los Angeles into a high-performing neighborhood college prep charter school. He served as a deputy mayor of Los Angeles under Mayor Richard Riordan and was a senior adviser to Rob Reiner and First 5 California. He served on the California State Board of Education and in the Clinton White House and has worked on five presidential campaigns. Ben graduated from UC Berkeley in 1991 and graduated cum laude and on law review from Georgetown Law School in 1998.

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Chad Aldeman is an associate partner at Bellwether Education Partners, where he has worked on the Policy and Thought Leadership team since 2012, advising clients and writing on teacher preparation, teacher evaluation, and college- and career-readiness. He also serves as editor for TeacherPensions.org. Previously, Chad was a policy adviser in the Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development at the U.S. Department of Education, where he worked on waivers for Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 requirements, teacher preparation, and the Teacher Incentive Fund. Chad has published reports on state higher education accountability systems, the potential of improving high school accountability by incorporating outcomes data, the school choice process in New York City and Boston, teacher pensions, teacher and principal evaluations, teacher salary schedules, and teacher preparation. His work has been featured in the Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, New York Times, Inside Higher Ed, Newsday, and the Des Moines Register. Chad holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Iowa and a master's of public policy degree from the College of William and Mary.

RiShawn Biddle

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Tom Colicchio

Tom Colicchio is a chef, restaurateur, and host of Bravo’s “Top Chef.” His rise to prominence in the food industry began in New York City, where he and his business partner co-founded Gramercy Tavern in the 1990s. The winner of five James Beard Awards for culinary accomplishments, Tom is the founder of Crafted Hospitality and ‘wichcraft. Tom’s interest in food policy led him to serve as executive producer of “A Place at the Table,” a documentary about food insecurity that appeared at the Sundance Film Festival in 2012, and to co-found Food Policy Action, a 501(c)(4) advocacy organization that aims to hold policymakers accountable for policies affecting food and farming.

Michael Dannenberg

Michael Dannenberg is director of Strategic Initiatives for Policy at Education Reform Now and a longtime senior adviser to various public officials, including U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA), and Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-RI). While in the executive branch, Michael crafted the Obama administration's teacher education reform strategy, a series of major student aid budget proposals, and the Department of Education's "College Completion Tool Kit." With senators Kennedy and Pell, he played a lead role in developing and drafting two Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorization laws, the Education Finance Incentive Grant program, the Taxpayer-Teacher Protection Act, and numerous provisions in higher education and appropriations law. The National Journal named him to "The Hill 100" list of Congress' most influential aides. In between government stints, Michael has run policy programs at other advocacy groups and think tanks, including Education Trust, where he was director of Higher Education Policy, and the New America Foundation, where he founded and managed the PK-16 Education Policy Program and Federal Education Budget Project. He and his work have appeared in The Washington Post, The New York Times, Chicago Tribune, The Boston Globe, and The American Prospect. He has degrees from Boston University, Stanford University, and Yale Law School.

Courtney Gaskins, Ph.D.

Dr. Courtney Gaskins has spent most of her professional career developing and implementing programs for at-risk populations. She joined Youth For Tomorrow (YFT), a private alternative school, in 2004 as a special-education teacher. She became the vice president of programs in 2015. In this role, Courtney provides oversight and guides program implementation for YFT's 12 program areas. Prior to joining YFT, Courtney was a special-education teacher for four years at public schools in Virginia and a youth development specialist for the preceding 10 years.

Courtney was recently appointed by the governor of Virginia to the State Executive Committee, which provides oversight to human services within the Commonwealth. In addition, she has served on the boards of the *Virginia Association of Independent Specialized Education Facilities*, the *Virginia Coalition of Private Provider Associations*, the Northern Virginia Human Trafficking Task Force, and the Virginia Department of Education's *Advisory Board on Teacher Education and Licensure*.

She earned her bachelor's in psychology and doctorate in education from George Mason University and a master's in education and a certification in education leadership from the University of Mary Washington. Courtney has been an adjunct lecturer at George Mason University and the University of Mary Washington. She is the recipient of numerous awards, including the 2010 George Mason University College of Education and Human Development Service Award.

Aimee Rogstad Guidera

Aimee Rogstad Guidera is the president and CEO of the Data Quality Campaign (DQC), a national, nonprofit organization leading the effort to empower educators, students, parents, and policymakers with the information they need to make the best decisions to improve student outcomes. Aimee believes that data has the power to transform education to ensure every child in this country is prepared for success in college and careers. Before founding DQC, Aimee served as the director of the Washington, D.C., office of the National Center for Educational Achievement. She previously served as vice president of programs for the National Alliance of Business (NAB), worked in the education division of the National Governors Association's Center for Best Practices, and taught for the Japanese Ministry of Education. Aimee and her husband are the parents of two school-age daughters. She is an active supporter of her daughters' public schools and has served as a classroom volunteer, parent-teacher organization leader, and advisory committee member.

Eric Hansen

Eric Hansen leads the National Young Farmers Coalition's (NYFC) federal policy work, where he focuses on improving young farmers' access to credit, training, and land. He helps young farmers understand the resources available at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and advocates on behalf of NYFC's members to Congress and the USDA. He has presented on young farmer policy at the Food Tank Summit and Stone Barns Center's Young Farmers Conference and has been quoted in national media, including *The Atlantic*, *MarketWatch*, *Agri-Pulse*, *Brownfield Ag News*, and *Modern Farmer*. Previously, he was a project associate at the Meridian Institute, a nonprofit environmental consulting firm. At Meridian, Eric supported multi-stakeholder problem solving around issues involving agriculture, food security, and community resilience. He holds a master's in environmental management from Duke University, where he studied agriculture policy and community-based environmental management.

Alex Hernandez

Alex Hernandez is a partner at the Charter School Growth Fund (CSGF), a nonprofit that supports the growth of the nation's best public charter schools. He leads the Impact Team, which supports charter networks in the CSGF portfolio to build infrastructure, develop new innovations, and share best practices so they can reach their goal of serving one million students in world-class public schools. Alex also built CSGF's Next-Generation Schools practice, where he helps education entrepreneurs rethink school.

Alex is a former area superintendent at Aspire Public Schools, where he managed schools in the California Central Valley region. He taught high school math in South Los Angeles and later served as a Broad Fellow at Portland Public Schools. Before that, Alex worked for several years with JP Morgan and Disney's venture capital arm, Steamboat Ventures. He is a graduate of Claremont McKenna, has a master's in business administration and master's in education from Stanford University, and is a Pahara-Aspen Fellow for leaders dedicated to transforming public education. He is a board member of DSST Public Schools, 4.0 Schools, and Rocketship Education.

Gary L. Jones, Ph.D.

Dr. Gary Jones became CEO of Youth For Tomorrow (YFT), a private alternative school, in 1996, having previously served for eight years as a consultant to the board of trustees. In addition to his leadership at YFT, Gary also serves on the boards of the Virginia Association of Independent Specialized Education Facilities, Virginia Coalition of Private Providers Association, the Virginia Council for Private Education, and Leadership Prince William. Prior to his service with YFT, Gary served as the U.S. Undersecretary of Education from 1982–1985 and as acting secretary in early 1985. From 1985–1988, he served as the executive director of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation, a nonprofit organization created to build and sustain the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum. A Northern Virginia resident, he also served seven years on the Fairfax County School Board and was its chairman from 1992–1995. He served two terms on the Virginia State Board of Education. A Michigan native, Gary graduated from Albion College and received his master's in education administration in 1969 and doctorate in administration and higher education from Michigan State University in 1975.

Andrew P. Kelly, Ph.D.

Until August 2016, Andrew P. Kelly was a resident scholar in education policy studies and founder of the Center on Higher Education Reform at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), where he focused on higher education policy, innovation in education, financial aid reform, and the politics of education policy. Andrew's findings have appeared in the American Journal of Education, Education Next, Educational Policy, Policy Studies Journal, and Teachers College Record. He has also been published in popular outlets such as The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Atlantic, the Chronicle of Higher Education, Education Week, National Affairs, and National Review. He has edited many books on higher education, including "Matching Students to Postsecondary Opportunity: Expanding College Choice, Access, and Quality" (Harvard Education Press, forthcoming), "Reinventing Financial Aid: Charting a New Course to College Affordability" (Harvard Education Press, 2014), and "Stretching the Higher Education Dollar: How Innovation Can Improve Access, Equity, and Affordability" (Harvard Education Press, 2013). In 2011, Education Week's Policy Notebook blog named Andrew one of its 16 Next Generation Leaders in education policy. Andrew has a doctorate and a master's in political science from the University of California, Berkeley, and a bachelor's degree in history from Dartmouth College.

Sara Mead

Sara Mead is a partner with Bellwether Education Partners. Since joining Bellwether in 2010, she has written and conducted policy analysis on early childhood education, charter schools, teacher quality, education innovation, and state and federal education policy issues and has provided strategic advising support to foundations, advocacy organizations, and early childhood operators. She also leads Bellwether's early childhood work across a range of service areas. Sara serves on the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board, which authorizes charter schools in Washington, D.C.

Steve Mesler

Steve Mesler is the co-founder, president, and CEO of Classroom Champions, an international education and mentorship organization. A three-time American Olympian, Steve led his team to gold at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games in four-man bobsled. This was the U.S.'s first gold medal in the event in 62 years. Steve is also a member of the board of directors of the United States Olympic Committee. Under Steve's vision and leadership, Classroom Champions has grown from Steve being the only athlete working with 200 students, to now more than 50 Olympians and Paralympians who have mentored more than 11,000 students across the U.S. and Canada in less than five years. As a finalist for the International Champion for Peace award, Steve was also named one of Sports Illustrated's "Athletes Who Care." Steve is also a member of the National Jewish Sports Hall of Fame and the Buffalo Sports Hall of Fame.

Ashley LiBetti Mitchel

Ashley LiBetti Mitchel is a senior analyst with Bellwether Education Partners' Policy and Thought Leadership team. Ashley has deep expertise in early childhood education and has done extensive research, analysis, and writing on state pre-k, Head Start, maternal and infant care, and early childhood workforce issues. Since joining Bellwether, she has co-authored the first ever national survey of charter school pre-k programs, published recommendations for improving the use of data in Head Start, and provided early childhood advising support to foundations, nonprofits, and advocacy organizations. Her work has been featured in U.S. News & World Report, Huffington Post, The Washington Post, The 74, Hechinger Report, and RealClearEducation, among others. Prior to joining Bellwether, Ashley worked for the U.S. Department of Education, Baltimore Education Research Consortium, Baltimore City Public Schools, Urban Teachers, and City Year Los Angeles. Ashley has a bachelor of arts with honors from McGill University and a master's of public policy from Johns Hopkins University.

Leigh Parise, Ph.D.

Leigh Parise holds a doctorate in educational and social policy from Northwestern University, with a specific focus on teacher quality and professional development. Having earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Pennsylvania and a master's in teaching from Pace University, she has spent more than ten years teaching and researching educational policy, teacher professional development, and school leadership in public school systems. Prior to that, she was a public school teacher in New York City.

Leigh is a mixed-methods research associate at MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization focused on improving the lives of low-income individuals, families, and children. Her work at MDRC has led her to working with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and school districts across the U.S. analyzing the effectiveness of programs and policies for various ages and populations. In addition, together with her brother Steve Mesler, Leigh co-founded Classroom Champions in 2009 with the goal of inspiring kids and helping them realize their potential by pairing Olympic and Paralympic athlete mentors with teachers and students. As head of education at Classroom Champions and a member of the international board of directors, Leigh helps guide the team's education planning and priorities.

Victor Reinoso

Victor Reinoso is a senior adviser to Bellwether Education Partners. He advises on a range of projects involving public sector work, innovation, and finance. Victor is also co-founder of Hopscotch Ventures, a mission-driven investment and advisory firm, and Decision Science Labs, a K-12 analytics platform linking school-level spending to outcomes. At Hopscotch, Victor has invested in and advised a portfolio of ventures involved in smart cities, real estate, and technology, including Rex Mercury, a Kenyan-U.S. Bitcoin startup that won the MIT "Next Billion" prize at Bitcomp 2014 and delivers zero-cost payments between the U.S. and Africa.

A private and public sector entrepreneur, Victor has played many roles in K-12 and higher education. He was senior adviser to the president of Georgetown University, where, among other things, he helped develop the university's Massive Online Open Course (MOOC) strategy, launch the Edunomics Lab, and create a new executive master's in leadership program for public school leaders. Victor was the District of Columbia's first deputy mayor of education, where he led the mayor's takeover of District of Columbia Public Schools, oversaw the city's \$1-plus-billion education budget, and helped put in place important reforms, including the expansion of early childhood programs. Before becoming deputy mayor, Victor was an elected member of the D.C. Board of Education.

Lindsey Lusher Shute

Lindsey Lusher Shute is the executive director of the National Young Farmers Coalition (NYFC). With a background in organizing and state policy, Lindsey co-founded NYFC as a platform for young, progressive farmers to have a meaningful influence on the structural obstacles to their success. Lindsey is a respected speaker and an expert on the issues facing family farms and was the lead author on NYFC's 2011 report "Building a Future with Farmers," which has been widely cited by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, news outlets, and other government agencies. She also co-authored the report "Farmland Conservation 2.0" and "Keep Farmland for Farmers," an op-ed published in The New York Times. In 2014, she was named a "Champion of Change" by the White House. Lindsey and her husband run Hearty Roots Community Farm in the Hudson River Valley.

Andy Smarick

Andy Smarick is a partner in Bellwether's Policy and Thought Leadership practice, joining the organization in 2012. Andy is a member of the Maryland State Board of Education and the author of "The Urban School System of the Future." He served as New Jersey's deputy commissioner of education, where he helped lead initiatives including the state's successful Elementary & Secondary Education Act waiver and Race to the Top 3 applications, the launching of a new teacher evaluation system, and an overhaul of the department's charter school authorizing. Andy served as deputy assistant secretary at the U.S. Department of Education and at The White House Domestic Policy Council and has worked for Congress and the Maryland state legislature. Other roles include Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, Adjunct Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, and co-founder and past COO of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. Andy also helped launch a college-preparatory charter school for underserved students. He writes regularly for the Flypaper blog, and his articles have appeared in the nation's leading newspapers and journals. He is a former White House Fellow, member of the 2010-11 class of Pehara Fellows, and founding board member of 50CAN. He earned a bachelor's degree, summa cum laude and with honors, and a master's degree in public management from the University of Maryland. Andy lives in Maryland with his wife and three kids.

Juliet Squire

Juliet Squire has been an associate partner in the Policy and Thought Leadership practice area at Bellwether Education Partners since 2013. She most recently worked at the New Jersey Department of Education, where she directed strategies for advancing technology-driven innovation and oversaw the state's Race to the Top program.

Previously, she managed school board relationships and new business development for education management organization National Heritage Academies, providing support to school leaders and helping to launch new charter schools in Louisiana, New York, and Wisconsin. Juliet began her career as a researcher and manager of the education policy studies program at the American Enterprise Institute, where she studied a wide range of issues in K-12 and higher education policy. Her work has appeared in publications such as *Education Finance and Policy*, *Policy Review*, *American School Board Journal*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. She received her bachelor's degree in political science from Yale University.

James Willcox

James Willcox is a senior adviser to Bellwether Education Partners. Prior to that, he was Aspire Public Schools' CEO from 2009-2015. During James' time at Aspire, the organization grew from 17 schools serving just under 6,000 students in California, to 39 schools serving over 15,000 students in California and Tennessee. During this expansion Aspire continued to be one of the highest-performing high-poverty school systems in the state, and widely known for its collaborative partnerships with states, districts, and other charter school organizations across the country. James also remains on the board of two independent organizations that were co-founded by Aspire during his tenure as CEO. Schoolzilla, an ed-tech company, now serves over one million students nationwide and brings powerful data analysis tools to charter and district schools alike. Aspire University is expanding Aspire's highly effective Teacher and Principal Residency program and replicating it to serve other school systems. Prior to Aspire, James served as COO for Education for Change, principal at NewSchools Venture Fund, a consultant at Bridgespan, and over seven years as a U.S. Army officer and Blackhawk helicopter pilot. He holds a bachelor of science degree from the United States Military Academy at West Point, as well as a master's in education and a master's in business administration from Stanford University.

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