

A Vision for Education in 2025 & Beyond

Educational Opportunities in a Changing Federal Landscape



by Morgan Craven, J.D. • December 2024

IDRA believes in the inherent value of all children, the power and promise of public education as a critical public good, and the right of every child living in this country to attend an excellent public school. We are committed to achieving equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to succeed in college and life.

Much of education policy and practice is shaped in states and local communities. But the federal government plays a critical role in ensuring all children have access to an excellent public education.

Though a shift in presidential administrations and congressional leadership can result in changes to the policies and procedures of the federal government, it does not change the core rights and protections guaranteed to every student in the United States.

The U.S. Department of Education is not a service agency that simply administers programs and hands out funding. Its functions are not easily diminished, dissolved or shifted to other departments or to states.

Among the most important responsibilities of the department are to:

- implement policies and support innovative programs that improve teaching and learning;
- distribute targeted funding, particularly for programs designed to level the playing field for all children and ensure fair access to education;
- collect data that give an accurate picture of student needs; and
- protect the rights of all children by investigating potential violations and enforcing federal laws.

The U.S. Department of Education is designed and uniquely positioned to add value and provide oversight to the work of local and state education agencies. We must all hold it and other federal entities accountable to achieve these mandates. When adequately resourced and staffed by professionals and experts, the department can serve its important purpose.

As we enter into a new presidential administration and Congress in 2025, IDRA will continue to pursue a vision for public education that values the academic and social well-being of all students, particularly those who are disproportionately impacted by harmful education policies, including Black and Latino children, emergent bilingual students, immigrant students, and poor students.

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We will push for strong partnerships between schools, families and communities. We will support relevant and rigorous academic and extracurricular opportunities. And we will fight for full resources for public schools.

To achieve this vision, we will work to advance research-based, community-centered policies and protect students' rights at the federal level, including in the following areas.

Ensure Public Schools Have the Resources they Need to Serve Every Student

All U.S. public schools should receive enough funding to provide every student an excellent education. But many schools are chronically under-resourced, leaving students without access to high-quality curricula and instructional materials, technology and equipment, extracurricular activities, qualified teachers, and safe physical spaces that enable them to learn and thrive.

Although public schools receive the majority of their funding from state and local sources, federal funding provides critical support to schools. This is particularly true for those in poorer communities – rural, suburban and urban – and in states that do not allocate sufficient resources to meet the costs of educating all students.

Federal funding, and the federal oversight and protections tied to that funding, help to support evidence-based programs and supplement resources for poor children, English learners and students with disabilities.

For example, federal Title I funds are meant to ensure poor children in this country have the same access as their peers to a high-quality education that expands college, career and life opportunities.¹ Other programs, including Title III and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) provide essential support to schools to serve English learners, immigrant students and students with disabilities.

Additionally, the COVID-19 federal emergency relief funds enabled schools to support student learning and well-being and shined a spotlight on some of the greatest areas of need for additional targeted funding for public schools. The use of the relief funds revealed the need for increased resources for mental health support, teacher and learning aide positions, and tutoring and after-school programs, among other initiatives.²

These major funding programs are distributed and monitored by the U.S. Department of Education to ensure appropriate use, accountability, and transparency across all states and school districts. The department is tasked with making sure states and school districts that receive these funds comply with federal laws, like anti-discrimination laws, that provide important protections for children and families.

For more than 50 years, IDRA has engaged in ground-breaking research, training and policy advocacy to ensure schools have the funding they need to serve all children. IDRA urges the new administration and Congress to continue the important work of providing targeted funding to support student learning and well-being, including the following.

- **Increase federal financial support for public schools**, specifically targeted at evidence-based strategies, STEM initiatives, teacher workforce initiatives, and college-oriented coursework and instructional practices;³
- **Focus public dollars on the public schools that educate the vast majority of our children**, not on programs that funnel public money toward or provide tax incentives to a few families to send their children to private schools. Voucher schemes, including education savings accounts and tax credit initiatives that

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benefit “scholarship granting organizations,” are only accessible to a small number of families,⁴ and are an inefficient and ineffective way to ensure we meet our shared goal of excellent public schools for all children; and

- ◆ Strengthen and fully fund federally-operated programs that provide resources and support to U.S. public schools to level the playing field for all children and ensure fair access to education;

Strengthen Pathways to College for All Students

A college education expands learning, career and life opportunities. Attending a two-year or four-year college is increasingly necessary for all young people to live the fulfilling lives that are the promise of this country. People with bachelor’s degrees earn 1.6 times more than those with only a high school diploma.⁵ Those who attend college are better able to pursue opportunities for themselves and their families, weather economic downturns, and confront unexpected challenges without breaking the bank.

Despite these and many other clear benefits, many K-12 schools are not preparing all students to graduate and succeed in a two- or four-year college. Some push students into courses and programs that do not prepare them or even prevent them from meeting college admission and financial aid requirements. While some students may choose other career and life paths, it is not a policymaker’s or a school’s job to make that decision for them. Rather, K-12 schools must ensure every child in this country is well-prepared and graduates college-ready.⁶

IDRA has engaged in research and policy development and worked with families, schools and education agencies to identify initiatives and programs that expand access to college.⁷ Many of these can be supported through strong federal policy, agency guidance, targeted federal funding, and technical assistance, including programs and initiatives that do the following.

- ◆ Expand access to **high-quality, rigorous curricula** that prepare all students for college, including coursework that emphasizes problem-solving and critical thinking, higher-level math courses, and programs that develop STEM skills;⁸
- ◆ Grow **district-wide early college high school programs** to promote college-going cultures, expand dual credit opportunities, provide college-focused counseling across grade levels and develop school district-college partnerships;⁹
- ◆ Increase **school partnerships with families and community-based providers** to design and implement college-going activities and practices that build on the assets of students and their families;
- ◆ Strengthen **diploma seals and distinctions** to ensure they align with college credits;¹⁰ and
- ◆ Support pipeline programs, funding and training resources for **academic counselors and support staff** to have the capacity to focus on supporting students’ access to college and meaningful post-college career opportunities.¹¹

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Support Schools to Proactively Address Absenteeism and Dropout Challenges

In 1986, IDRA developed a ground-breaking research methodology to understand the extent and impact of school attrition in Texas.¹² Attrition rates are an indicator of a school's ability to keep students enrolled in school and learning until they graduate.

Now in its 38th year, IDRA's annual public school attrition study has helped to reveal the magnitude and nature of the student dropout problem.¹³ In Texas, for example, the study found that one in five freshmen will not remain enrolled in high school by their senior year. The study has also highlighted policy and programmatic changes that schools can implement to help students stay in their classrooms and on pathways to college and life success.

The findings of this decades-long research are particularly relevant today when many schools are reporting issues of rising chronic absenteeism among students and are searching for effective programs to keep students in school.

Schools need federal resources, federal technical assistance and federal policy support to adopt research-based strategies. IDRA has developed proven student support programs and training for teachers, school leaders and school district staff to enact findings from the IDRA attrition studies, including many that federal leaders can support.

- ◆ Strengthen teacher pipeline, training and recruitment and retention strategies to ensure all students have **highly qualified and engaged teachers**;
- ◆ Invest in research-based dropout prevention, intervention (for students who have already left school) and college readiness initiatives that increase **student engagement** with academic learning, leadership opportunities and extracurricular activities;¹⁴ and
- ◆ Support research-based **family engagement programs** that encourage strong, authentic partnerships between schools and all families in the school community.¹⁵

Promote Safe, Welcoming Schools for all Students

Our schools must feel safe and welcoming for all students. They should be places that center student learning and relationship-building, take a proactive approach to protecting the safety of all students, and limit the use of practices that push young people out of school and off pathways to college.

To achieve this shared vision, we must equip schools to respond to bullying and harassment appropriately and take deliberate action to prevent it. Reports of bullying and harassment are increasing, especially for children who are targeted because of their race, gender, religion or other personal characteristics.¹⁶

Ensuring holistic school safety requires protecting the individual safety of every student, creating welcoming environments where every student feels valued, and using systems of appropriate and meaningful prevention and intervention when students' well-being is compromised.

Additionally, we must help schools move away from punitive and exclusionary discipline practices and "zero tolerance" cultures that exclude children.¹⁷ These practices fail to change behaviors. They fail to respond to underlying problems many students encounter – like bullying, mental health issues, abuse, or hunger – and may even make them worse.

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Exclusionary discipline practices discourage the use of simple corrections for small behaviors, many of which are age appropriate. They deny parents the opportunity to engage with schools to support their children and instead compromise academic achievement and college access, social and extracurricular participation, and overall well-being.¹⁸ And, because exclusionary discipline practices focus on quick fixes, they fail to equip teachers with the skills and support they need to respond to their students and effectively manage their classrooms.

Finally, we must ensure that federal laws and regulations that protect access to public education and prohibit discrimination against students and families are enforced. No presidential administration has the power to abdicate or undermine these duties.

The research on what works to create safe and welcoming schools is clear.¹⁹ IDRA urges federal support for research-based, prevention-focused practices that promote student safety, learning and well-being, including the following.

- ◆ Provide **resources and technical support to schools to use best practices** to ensure safety, limit punitive discipline and keep students in their classrooms learning with their teachers and peers;
- ◆ Support legislation to **ban physically abusive practices in schools**, including corporal punishment and seclusions and restraints;
- ◆ Provide **guidance and resources to schools on how to prevent and address bullying and harassment**, particularly bullying that is based on students' backgrounds or identities; and
- ◆ Ensure **complaints of discrimination** – including discrimination based on students' race, gender, religion, national origin and disability status – **are treated seriously**, investigated, and resolved swiftly and meaningfully; and
- ◆ Ensure **all public schools comply with federal laws and regulations that prohibit discrimination**, including laws that protect access to public education for every child living in the United States, regardless of citizenship status.²⁰

At IDRA we have never been more certain of the necessity of our mission and the strength of our vision for excellent public schools. We believe every child is valuable and none is expendable. We trust in research and are guided by evidence. We rely on the wisdom and assets of our diverse communities. And we welcome the opportunity to collaborate with partners to advance these values.

For more information about IDRA's education policy work, including our federal research, policy, advocacy, and legal work, please contact National Director of Policy, Advocacy, and Community Engagement Morgan Craven, J.D., at morgan.craven@idra.org.

IDRA is a non-profit organization. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.

Endnotes

¹ NCES. (2024). Title I Fast Facts. National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=158>

² Craven, M. (September 2024). *What You Need to Know About the ESSER Funding Cliff – How Schools Will Be Impacted by the End of Federal COVID-19 Relief Funding*. IDRA. <https://idra.news/ESSERcliff>

³ IDRA has developed a number of research-based strategies for schools, many of which are detailed below. For example, with **Transitions to Teaching** programs, originally funded by the U.S. Department of Education, IDRA partnered with universities and more than 55 public school districts across Texas to prepare a new generation of hundreds of skilled, effective teachers in the math, science, bilingual/ESL and special education fields. <https://www.idra.org/services/transitions-to-teaching/>

⁴ For more information, including maps, issue briefs, and articles about the harmful impacts of vouchers and similar school privatization efforts, see IDRA's **Stop Vouchers** resources. https://www.idra.org/education_policy/stop-vouchers/

⁵ NCES. (May 2024). Annual Earnings by Educational Attainment. National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cba/annual-earnings>

⁶ In 2022, the immediate college enrollment rate (the percentage of students enrolled in a two- or four-year college in the fall immediately after high school graduation) was 74% for Asian American students; 64% for white students; 61% for Black students; and 58% for Latino students. [NCES. (May 2024). Immediate College Enrollment Rates. National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cpa/immediate-college-enrollment-rate>]

⁷ For more information about IDRA's College for All resources, including reports and administrator and teacher supports, see <https://www.idra.org/services/college-for-all/>

⁸ IDRA's work with the Alamo STEM Ecosystem and our Defense STEM Education Consortium helps to put students on pathways to college that prepare them for future careers, including through exposure to rigorous coursework and elevated teacher training. See **STEM Initiative Opens Pathways for San Antonio Students**. (October 23, 2024). IDRA. <https://www.idra.org/resource-center/stem-initiative-opens-pathways-for-san-antonio-students/>

⁹ Early college high school programs enable students to earn college credits or even associate degrees while still in high school, reducing or eliminating the need to pay for many college courses. By accumulating credits before graduation, students can save thousands of dollars in tuition, fees and textbook costs, which is particularly beneficial for students with limited means who might otherwise struggle to afford higher education. Additionally, these programs open new economic opportunities by equipping students with valuable credentials early on. This head start allows them to enter the workforce sooner or qualify for higher-level positions, enhancing their earning potential and creating pathways to career advancement that might otherwise have been

inaccessible. IDRA supports an expansive model of early college high school programming that focuses on developing college-oriented pathways and supports at every grade level and for students who have dropped out of school. The impacts of this approach are described in IDRA's report **College Bound and Determined**, available at <https://idra.news/College-Boundw>

¹⁰ Diploma seals and distinctions allow high school graduates to show potential employers and colleges that they have demonstrated academic achievement in a particular skill or subject. For example, Seals of Bilingualism demonstrate academic achievement in English and another language. Policies and guidance around assessments, seal requirements, and college credit agreements can strengthen the power of seals and distinctions. See Latham Sikes, C., & Piñon, L. (2024). *The Path to a Stronger State Seal of Bilingualism and Biliteracy – Advancing Texas Student Success through Bilingualism and Biliteracy*. IDRA. <https://idra.news/BiliteracySealBriefw>

¹¹ IDRA conducted a qualitative study of Texas middle school counselors to glean their insights into how policies and practices, including academic pathways, and counseling practices impact students' college readiness. The findings of the two reports in this study have implications for federal policy and funding to support college pipeline programs. See IDRA's **Ready Texas** resources at https://www.idra.org/research_articles/ready-texas/

¹² IDRA's original methodology was designed to calculate the numbers of students leaving school prior to graduation at a time when the state did not report any data on school dropouts. In addition to measuring attrition, the study also evaluated the efficacy of dropout-prevention programs in schools and the economic impact to the state in foregone income, tax revenue, state services, and criminal justice costs. Because the study defines attrition as the change in cohort size between the student population's freshman and senior years, the research provides a more comprehensive view of the school dropout issue, giving insight into students lost across the four years of high school rather than those that leave their senior year. See Quintanilla-Muñoz, C. & Sánchez, J. (October 2024). **Schools Struggle to Hold on to Students: Preview of IDRA's 38th Annual Texas Public School Attrition Study**. IDRA Newsletter.

¹³ Access IDRA's annual public school attrition study reports and supplemental resources at https://www.idra.org/research_articles/idra-attrition-studies/

¹⁴ For more information about IDRA's innovative **student engagement and leadership** programs in schools, see <https://www.idra.org/support/student-programs>

¹⁵ For more information about IDRA's research-based **family engagement programs and frameworks** see <https://www.idra.org/families-and-communities/>

¹⁶ Identity-based bullying has been shown to have particularly negative impacts on individual students and school climates, threatening access to educational programs, extracurricular activities, and campus social culture. See Duggins-Clay, P., & Lyons, M. (April 2023). *Identity-based Bullying in Texas*

Schools: Policy Recommendations. IDRA. <https://idra.news/MPbriefBullying>

¹⁷ Punitive and exclusionary discipline practices include suspensions, expulsions, placements in alternative schools, corporal punishment, and other tactics that focus on punishing and pushing students out of classrooms rather than addressing underlying challenges or providing meaningful consequences and learning opportunities. "Zero tolerance" refers to policies that automatically punish without considering the causes of behaviors or any mitigating circumstances that could explain behaviors, including a child's disability. These approaches are bad for everyone – the student who struggles with unaddressed trauma, the valedictorian who made a mistake, or the pre-kindergarten student who is learning classroom expectations for the first time can all be victims of these policies. Each of these students is valuable and deserves to have trusting adults in their lives who guide rather than punish them without question.

¹⁸ Punitive and exclusionary discipline practices can harm students in many ways, including missed classroom learning time, lower graduation rates, missed socialization opportunities with teachers and peers, trauma, and feelings of mistrust and detachment from school. These effects are experienced by the entire school and felt most keenly by the students who data show are most likely to be punished, including Black students, Native students and students with disabilities. See Craven, M. (2022). *What Safe Schools Should Look Like for Every Student: A Guide to Building Safe and Welcoming Schools and Rejecting Policies that Hurt Students*. IDRA. <https://idra.news/SafeSchoolsIBw>

¹⁹ See Craven, M. (2022). *What Safe Schools Should Look Like for Every Student: A Guide to Building Safe and Welcoming Schools and Rejecting Policies that Hurt Students*. IDRA. <https://idra.news/SafeSchoolsIBw>

²⁰ Public schools, by law, must serve all children. The education of undocumented students is guaranteed by the *Plyler v. Doe* Supreme Court decision, and certain procedures must be followed to avoid violation of their civil rights. For more information about these protections, see IDRA's resources on **education for immigrant children** at https://www.idra.org/education_policy/immigrant-children-education