



TO: Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond, Agency Review Team Lead
FROM: Southern Education Foundation
DATE: November 24, 2020
RE: The Biden-Harris Administration's Education Priorities
CC: Jessica Cardichon

Background

Throughout its 153-year-old history, the Southern Education Foundation (SEF) has advocated for excellent educational opportunities for Black students and students from low-income families throughout the southern states.¹ SEF believes that each and every education-related policy and executive order proposed by the Biden-Harris Administration should be grounded in equity for Black, Brown, and low-income students. SEF specifically encourages the Biden-Harris Administration to uphold its campaign promises to increase funding and resources for low-income students and students of color, expand access to wraparound and mental health services for vulnerable students, provide additional funding to HBCUs, and focus on rooting out racial injustice and inequities in the United States. We respectfully submit for your consideration the following six recommendations as you assess needs, determine priorities, and assemble staff for the incoming presidential administration.

1. Prioritize efforts to close the digital divide through expanding the federal E-Rate program and access to broadband

The nearly universal shift to distance learning in 2020 has highlighted the persistent disparities in access to technology and the internet for many students of color, students from low-income families, and students living in rural and remote communities, particularly in the southern states. With its abundance of rural communities, students of color, and low-income households, the American South is profoundly affected by the digital divide; nine of the 10 least-connected states in the country are in the South.² SEF encourages the Biden-Harris Administration to:

- Work with Congress to increase funding for the federal E-Rate program to pay for household internet access in addition to internet at schools and libraries;
- Direct the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to use its authority to allow school districts' E-Rate funds to be used for home-based educational purposes;
- Advance a comprehensive and inclusive federal pandemic aid package that (1) provides sufficient support for state and local education agencies to purchase devices and develop a broadband infrastructure demanded by the 21st century and (2) incentivize public-private partnerships at the local

¹ Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia

² Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Alabama, West Virginia, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Kentucky, South Carolina; from [Closing the K-12 Digital Divide in the Age of Distance Learning](#), Common Sense Media and Boston Consulting Group, 2020.

level to assist Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in offering free or low-cost broadband to families in need. Investments in closing the digital divide should also include supporting educators in the effective use of technology;

- Support and work with Congress to pass the Supporting Connectivity for Higher Education Students in Need Act, which would provide federal support for colleges and universities to ensure students of color and low-income students can access critical internet services and devices during the pandemic;³
- Explore the creation of a federal public option for broadband access. Public options play a critical role in the market by increasing competition, raising the incentive for high-quality service among privately-operated entities, and keeping consumer costs lower.⁴ As members of the transition team know, broadband access in individual communities across the country is often characterized by a monopoly or oligopoly, and providers have fewer incentives to provide higher speeds or reduce monthly costs. Southern cities such as Chattanooga, Tennessee and Wilson, North Carolina have already successfully created public options for broadband, and the federal government can follow a model similar to the one implemented in each city.⁵ Whatever approach it takes, we urge the Biden-Harris Administration to be innovative and bold in addressing the gaping digital divide plaguing students and families across our country.

2. Support increasing federal funds for the Full-Service Community Schools program, wraparound services, and mental health resources for students

School districts across the South responded with varying degrees of effectiveness to the initial school-closing surge of COVID-19 in the spring; while many school districts attempted to piece together social, emotional, and mental health resources for students, a significantly smaller share of districts had the capacity and resources to offer the same support for teachers and other staff members.⁶ In states such as Alabama, South Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia, inadequate or unavailable wraparound services for students resulted in alarming drops in public school enrollment and cases of thousands of missing students.⁷ Evidence has shown that community schools models that provide comprehensive educational and non-academic services have positive impacts on student attendance, engagement, behavior, and academic performance.

Even prior to the pandemic, state and local policymakers in a number of southern states, such as Georgia and Mississippi, expressed a desire to strategically support the whole child with integrated academic and non-academic services. In Maryland, the historic \$1.1 billion Blueprint for Maryland's Future passed by the General Assembly included funding for community schools in the state, leading to a rapid increase in the number of community schools in the second largest school district in the state, Prince George's County Public Schools.⁸ In response to the pandemic, federal efforts to support community schools intensified, as exemplified by The Full

³ "Klobuchar, Hirono, Peters, Rosen, Eshoo, Colleagues Introduce Bicameral Legislation to Help Ensure College Students in Need Have Access to High-Speed Internet," U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar (United States Senate, May 13, 2020), <https://www.klobuchar.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2020/5/klobuchar-hirono-peters-rosen-eshoo-colleagues-introduce-bicameral-legislation-to-help-ensure-college-students-in-need-have-access-to-high-speed-internet>.

⁴ Ganesh Sitaraman and Anne Alstott, *The Public Option: How to Expand Freedom, Increase Opportunity, and Promote Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

⁵ *The Public Option: How to Expand Freedom, Increase Opportunity, and Promote Equality*. Harvard University Press, 2019.

⁶ Titilayo Tinubu Ali, Sujith Cherukumilli, and Mirel Herrera, "Advancing Equity in Distance Learning: Dashboard and Briefs," Southern Education Foundation, August 2020, <https://www.southerneducation.org/publications/dled/>.

⁷ Drawn from a collection of news stories from across four southern states: [Alabama Schools Missing 5000 Students from Enrollment Count, COVID-19 Likely Reason; More than 9,000 Students No Longer in West Virginia School System; School Enrollment Has Dropped by 33,000 Students across Tennessee amid Pandemic; SC Child Safety Officials Asked to Check on 7,400 Students Missing since COVID-19 Outbreak](#).

⁸ "Community Schools," Prince George's County Education Association, 2020, <https://pgcea.org/community-schools/>.

Service Community Schools Expansion Act of 2020 (S.4865), introduced by Senator Sherrod Brown and others that would fund dramatic expansion of full-service community schools.⁹ We encourage the Biden-Harris Administration to:

- Support and work with Congress to pass The Full-Service Community School Expansion Act of 2020, and to target an increase in federal K-12 funds for the Full-Service Community Schools program, wraparound services, and mental health supports for students;
- Follow through on the Biden-Harris campaign’s promise to expand the community schools model and provide additional wraparound supports to over 300,000 students and their families;¹⁰
- Issue clear guidance around what schools should do to address the needs of the whole child. Once inaugurated, President Biden and Vice President Harris can work with their Secretary of Education to develop this guidance.

3. Address disparities in funding for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and support funding to expand their capacity to increase the diversity of the teacher workforce

Unlike major public research institutions and well-funded private universities, many HBCUs have smaller endowments and operate within tight margins. With fewer high-dollar donors and enrollments that include disproportionately higher percentages of low-income students, students of color, and first-generation college students, HBCUs rely more on tuition revenue and federal and state aid. SEF has supported the creation, growth and development of HBCUs including Clark Atlanta University, Spelman College, Talladega College, Philander Smith, Jackson College, Meharry Medical College and Benedict Institute.¹¹ HBCU leaders continue to be an important part of SEF’s network, and we are eager to guide and work with the Biden-Harris Administration as President-elect Biden and Vice President-elect Harris implement their campaign promise to deliver \$70 billion in additional funding to HBCUs and Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs). We encourage the Biden-Administration to:

- Fulfill its promise to examine disparities in the amount of research and development grants and contracts awarded to HBCUs and direct funding toward developing state-of-the-art research facilities, incubators and research hubs;
- Work with Congress to ensure that a substantial portion of any additional funding for Title III of the Higher Education Act (HEA) goes specifically to Title III, Part B institutions, or HBCUs;
- Increase support for HBCUs in future pandemic relief packages and through the traditional appropriations process to address both the current, COVID-19-related needs of HBCUs and the ongoing systemic issues facing HBCUs such as affordability, infrastructure and facilities, and staffing needs;
- Work with Congress to increase funding for Augustus F. Hawkins Centers of Excellence and Grow Your Own programs at HBCUs; research has shown that all students - not just students of color - benefit from having a teacher of color in the classroom.¹² South Carolina’s Call Me MISTER (Mentors Instructing Students Toward Effective Role Models) program leverages a strategic HBCU partnership to

⁹ Full-Service Community School Expansion Act of 2020. Bill (2020).

¹⁰ “Plan for Educators, Students, and Our Future: Joe Biden,” Joe Biden for President: Official Campaign Website, October 2, 2020, <https://joebiden.com/education/>.

¹¹ Wiley J. Williams, “Slater Fund,” NCpedia, 2006, <https://www.ncpedia.org/slater-fund>; “150 Year Timeline,” Southern Education Foundation, September 18, 2020, <https://www.southerneducation.org/who-we-are-2/timeline/>.

¹² Desiree Carver-Thomas, “Diversifying the Teaching Profession: How to Recruit and Retain Teachers of Color,” Learning Policy Institute, 2018, <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/diversifying-teaching-profession-report>.

grow the state’s pipeline of diverse and highly-qualified teachers.¹³ Prioritizing increases in funding for HBCUs to create Augustus Hawkins Centers of Excellence and Grow Your Own programs will prepare HBCUs to educate our nation’s next generation of teachers and directly increase the diversity of our teacher workforce.

We are confident that President-elect Biden and Vice President-elect Harris understand the essential role that HBCUs play in our society and the potential HBCUs have for making our nation’s teacher workforce more culturally responsive, qualified, and diverse.

4. Support expansion of Title I funding and advance research-based school improvement methods that support teaching and learning

The South educates 56 percent of the nation’s Black students and is demographically diversifying at an extremely rapid pace, and a disproportionate share of our nation’s Black, Brown, and low-income students are in under-resourced schools with inexperienced teachers.¹⁴ Access to experienced teachers for students of color is particularly low for students in Delaware, Georgia, Maryland, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Tennessee. Southern states also spend, on average, the lowest amount per-pupil of any region in the country, further exacerbating resource inequities. In the South, low per-pupil funding levels, inexperienced teachers for the most vulnerable students, and an abundance of antiquated funding formulas that fail to account for the changing and growing needs of students of color are not only resource equity issues - they are also racial equity issues. SEF is encouraged by the Biden-Harris Administration’s campaign plan to significantly increase funding for Title I. However, as members of the transition team know, many students from low-income families attend schools that do not receive substantial Title I funding, and students of color and low-income students may have other unmet needs despite their schools receiving adequate Title I funding. Therefore, we encourage the Biden-Harris Administration to:

- Direct any additional education funding - both for Title I and for other purposes - toward research-based school improvement methods, supporting teaching and learning, and closing gaps in access to advanced coursework between Black and white students;
- Work with Congress to provide incentives to states that choose to implement weighted per-pupil funding formulas that better target funds to schools serving students with the greatest need.

5. Incentivize and encourage state and local education agencies to develop goals and competencies that prioritize culturally responsive teaching and learning

Many states have taken the lead on revising curricula to incorporate ethnic studies and racial justice education. In Connecticut, for example, the state’s Department of Education is adding a Black and Latinx history course to all public schools in the state – the first course of its kind in the country.¹⁵ In Virginia, the governor-created Commission on African American History Education recently recommended the creation of state standards specific to African American history and the revision of existing social studies content standards to create and

¹³ “Call Me Mister,” Welcome to Call Me MISTER® (Clemson University), accessed November 23, 2020, <https://www.clemson.edu/education/research/programs/callmemister/>.

¹⁴ Jessica Cardichon et al., “Inequitable Opportunity to Learn: Student Access to Certified and Experienced Teachers,” Learning Policy Institute, February 12, 2020, <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/crdc-teacher-access-report>.

¹⁵ Staff, “State Education Department to Review Black and Latinx History Curriculum,” Connecticut Public Radio, November 12, 2020, https://www.wnpr.org/post/state-education-department-review-black-and-latinx-history-curriculum?utm_source=ECS+Subscribers.

sustain culturally responsive pedagogy.¹⁶ The Texas State Board of Education recently approved a Mexican American Studies course for all public schools in the state.¹⁷ In order to reverse the deleterious effects of the Trump Administration’s harmful rhetoric and actions toward ethnic studies and racial justice education, we urge President-elect Biden to:

- Issue a strong statement in support of ethnic studies curricula and to revoke President’s Trump’s executive order restricting cultural competency training in federal agencies and for contractors;
- Issue guidance to states and school districts on how to support identity-safe and inclusive learning environments for students, including how to sustain efforts toward delivering culturally-responsive instruction and addressing unconscious bias;
- Improve and re-issue guidance around school discipline from the U.S. Department of Education;
- Work with Congress to allocate discretionary funds toward social and emotional learning (SEL) programs, restorative justice initiatives, and positive behavioral interventions and supports.

Conclusion

Throughout SEF’s history, we have maintained a steadfast commitment to serving the South’s most vulnerable students and advocating for the establishment and maintenance of high-quality public schools. Much like in past periods marked by turbulence in our history, our nation has both an opportunity and responsibility to heal and improve in this moment. As SEF’s first fellow W.E.B. DuBois said, “Education and work are the levers to uplift a people.” In the wake of COVID-19 and multigenerational systemic discrimination, a great deal of America is in need of uplifting.

SEF appreciates the opportunity to provide input as the transition team determines priorities, assesses staffing needs, and prepares the president-elect and vice president-elect for their first term in office. We expect that the Biden-Harris Administration will hear from civil rights and education equity organizations on a consistent and ongoing basis, and we hope that SEF will have a seat at the table in those conversations.

Sincerely,

Southern Education Foundation

¹⁶ “Commission on African American History Education in the Commonwealth Presents Recommendations to Governor Northam,” Virginia Governor Ralph S. Northam (Office of the Governor of Virginia, August 31, 2020), <https://www.governor.virginia.gov/newsroom/all-releases/2020/august/headline-860154-en.html>.

¹⁷ “SBOE Gives Final Approval to Ethnic Studies: Mexican American Studies Course,” Texas Education Agency, 2019, <https://tea.texas.gov/about-tea/news-and-multimedia/news-releases/sboe-news/sboe-newsletter/sboe-gives-final-approval-to-ethnic-studies-mexican-american-studies-course>.