



What Role Should the Federal Government Play in Education Policy?



Between now and November 5th, NEPC is running a series of 10 Q&As with NEPC Fellows about education issues relevant to the 2024 federal election. The goal of the series is to inform readers about the education-related stances of the nation's two major political parties, drawing upon the [Republican](#) and [Democratic](#) parties' national platforms and on [Project 2025](#), the Heritage Foundation's blueprint for a second Trump administration.

Project 2025 is not formally connected to the Republican Party or the Trump campaign. However, the Project is staffed by his former appointees and in 2022, when the Project was getting off the ground, Mr. Trump gave a keynote address where [he said](#) of the Heritage Foundation and this effort, "They're going to lay the groundwork and detail plans for exactly what our movement will do." (For additional insights on Project 2025, we recommend this recent [publication from Brookings](#).) Education is addressed in [Chapter 11](#) of the Project 2025 report.

Q&A participants were selected on the basis of their research expertise on the topics they have been asked to address. In addition to describing the parties' positions, each expert will also be providing background information, with a focus on summarizing any relevant research findings.

We are launching the series today with [Elizabeth DeBray's](#) look at the federal role in education policy. DeBray is Professor of Educational Administration and Policy in the Mary Frances Early College of Education, University of Georgia. She's a nationally recognized expert

on federal education policy and author of the book, *Politics, Ideology, and Education: Federal Policy During the Clinton and Bush Administrations*. Accordingly, we asked her to look at the education platforms of the two major parties (including Project 2025) and explain the different approaches to the federal government's role in education funding and policy.

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

Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was originally passed as a part of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty in 1965. Over the course of its existence, it has provided compensatory funding to high-poverty schools and districts, and in the 1960s and 70s, it was used as leverage to cause school desegregation in the South. ESEA also contains provisions and funding for English Language Learners. The U.S. Department of Education plays an important role in funding research, collecting statistics, administering the programs of the ESEA and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and in some eras, has incentivized various priorities like national standards and assessments.

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

Federal funding, administration, and leadership has helped considerably over the past 60 years: by enforcing civil rights protections, funding research on a wide range of topics pertinent to equity, and administering many important programs to foster school integration, such as the Magnet Schools Assistance Program. For instance, a newly released [Title IX rule](#) from the Biden administration has sought to protect LGBTQ students at school. (Note that this rule is currently [enjoined](#) in some states, pending a final decision on a legal challenge.) Programs to support English Language Learners, students with disabilities, and Native American education have also been part of the Department of Education's mission. And Title I funding, which has included school-wide instructional programs in the highest poverty schools, has been a vital source of compensatory funding. My colleagues' and my [research](#) showed, however, how the Trump administration rolled back some vital civil rights protections and indicates how harmful it would be for students if that agenda were reinstated.

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

Title I can be better targeted to the neediest students, [as it was](#) in the pandemic-era Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund, known as ESSER. We also need national leadership via ESEA to better recruit and retain effective teachers, likely through incentive grants and loan forgiveness; and to continue to incentivize reforms like [magnet schools](#) that foster school integration across district boundaries. In the aftermath of the pandemic, a decreased focus on testing in the states and an increased focus on student mental health and adequate funding of [counseling services](#) is warranted.

4. *Please briefly explain how Project 2025, the RNC national platform and the DNC national platform address this issue. (If this issue is not addressed by Project 2025, the RNC platform, or the DNC platform, please note that.)*

Project 2025 calls for the abolition of the U.S. Department of Education and the block-granting of Title I to the states. Project 2025 and the [GOP platform](#) call for “universal school choice,” so it appears that the idea is to shift federal funding away from programs like Title I targeted at supporting marginalized students and shift funds toward families with children in private schools, using vouchers funded through a federal tax credit.

The Democratic platform [calls for](#) “free, universal preschool for four-year olds,” fully funding the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), “working to provide every student with a pathway to multilingual education,” buttressing literacy programs and social and emotional supports at schools, “providing intensive tutoring; extending the school day and school year; expanding community schools; and helping schools to lift student achievement, rather than punishing them based on state standardized tests.” The 2024 Democratic platform also states an opposition to “the use of private-school vouchers, tuition tax credits, opportunity scholarships, and other schemes that divert taxpayer-funded resources away from public education.” It adds, “Public tax dollars should never be used to discriminate.”

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

The pandemic’s effects were unequal across communities. Accordingly, rather than decentralizing and contracting out services to families, as some have called for via an “[assembly](#)” model, the next reauthorization of ESEA is an opportunity to reaffirm the national commitment to public schools as a cornerstone of our democracy. My colleagues and I have argued that we ought to be moving toward a focus on restoring civil rights via an [evidence-based, equitable, ecological](#) policy strategy including a focus on combatting school segregation by race and income to the degree permissible by law. The DNC (2024) platform supports such targeted interventions, increased investment in schools, and ecological approach to reform. The RNC platform and Project 2025, in stark contrast, abandon federal protections for economically disadvantaged students, jeopardizing practically every advance in reducing disparities over the past 60 years—not to mention abdicating national leadership on the key issue for the thriving of our future citizens and democracy.

NEPC Resources on Politics

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