

A Roadmap to Authentically Engage Youth Voice in the U.S. Department of Education



**Student
Voice**

Executive Summary

In the present moment, the Department of Education faces a multiplicity of both longstanding and unprecedented challenges to advance equitable learning for every student. Students are the sole stakeholder group with the lived experience of learning in the context of our world's current challenges. Therefore, we must be essential partners in developing accurate policy priorities and actionable plans to substantively impact our education. **The enclosed report outlines 5 key mechanisms to engage young people as meaningful partners in the next Department of Education.**

Student Voice's work is guided by the belief that in order to achieve equity and justice in our schools, power must be meaningfully shifted towards young people, particularly those who are most marginalized by the education system. Within this report, we provide a clear definition of student voice as recognizing and acting upon the fact that students are the primary stakeholders of our education and should be partners in shaping it. We outline specific best practices and cite examples for elevating youth leadership.

Since the presidential election was called, Student Voice has directly engaged hundreds of students through listening sessions about their hopes for the next Department of Education and fielded survey responses from thousands more in all 50 states. It is abundantly clear that young people are eager and ready to engage in the work of making our schools thriving, equitable, and life-affirming public goods. To adequately address the unprecedented challenges facing the education system, the Department of Education must meaningfully engage young people as partners.

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Introduction: Urgency of Youth Leadership

In the midst of the historic convergence of an unprecedented public health emergency, the worst economic recession since the Great Depression, widespread uprisings for racial justice, and the urgent need for climate action, young people are experiencing unprecedented strain and exercising remarkable resilience and power.

Like so much in our society, these many crises are playing out in the arena of our public school system. Dangerous and inequitable school reopenings threaten students who are most marginalized by our education system.¹ The digital divide continues to prevent universal access to learning and disproportionately impact low-income students and students of color. We've seen what happens when students lose access to the social safety nets that schools provide, and we fear a looming school funding crisis that will exacerbate inequity.

Here is where we're finding hope: Young people, particularly those most routinely marginalized by the education system, are stepping up, at school board meetings and in the streets, to demand that this distinct moment for education marks a pivotal shift for the way we think about learning. Throughout 2020, Student Voice has had the distinct honor to work alongside students who are on the frontlines of advancing justice in their schools and communities.

Our #StartWithStudents Campaign Process:

Since COVID-19 disrupted our schools in March 2020, we've talked directly with thousands of students launching rapid-response solutions to local equity crises and staking out visionary claims for how we [Move School Forward](#) in a post-pandemic society. The 9 pillars envisioned in our [Student Bill of Rights](#) are more critical and complex to achieve than ever before. Since the November presidential election results were called, we've held focused conversations with hundreds of students focused specifically on what young people need from the next U.S. Department of Education, and we've fielded student priorities through survey responses from *thousands more in all 50 states*. It is abundantly clear that young people are eager and ready to engage in the work of making our schools thriving, equitable, and life-affirming public goods.

Specifically, Student Voice calls on President-elect Biden and his transition team to:

- Involve students directly in the selection of the new Secretary and Undersecretaries of Education and listen to students' demands for leaders who have a deep understanding of our public education system and are accountable to students, teachers, and communities, not private interests.

¹ See pages 4-5 for a list of identity groups marginalized by the education system.

- Explicitly prioritize racial and social justice in all decisions and policies made regarding education in the Biden administration.
- Institutionalize student voice in the Biden administration's Department of Education by giving students a seat at the table at all commissions, working groups, or convenings that make decisions regarding our educations.
- Remain accountable to student and youth feedback on all issues that affect our educations and lives.

Through our by-students, for-students survey, 1,500 young people voiced their enthusiasm for these initial four calls and shared policy priorities and lived experiences that they want the next Department of Education to know. Among these concerns were protections against discrimination, student mental health, COVID-19, equal resources and opportunities, education that feels relevant to students' lived experiences, and more. Our team is committed to amplifying these stories as we continue to push the Department of Education to partner with students using the mechanisms outlined in this report.

In the listening sessions we conducted, students expressed succinct diagnoses of educational inequities around resource allocation, teacher professional development and support, and identity-affirming school climate. They called for the Department of Education to employ an explicit racial and social justice lens when evaluating the fairness of disciplinary practices, who is represented in curricula, and the effects of high-stakes standardized testing. They described the mental health crisis they are not only witnessing but experiencing and provided insight into how their schools could better support them. They identified the ways in which their education could be more relevant to their experiences and aspirations, noting the importance of integrating civic engagement and climate action into the classroom. In short, the students we heard from harnessed their unique positionality to articulate the present reality and future potential of public education in America; this is but a glimpse of what we have to offer to the work done by the Department of Education.

Against our current backdrop, the Department of Education faces many deep existing and yet-unforeseen challenges to advance equitable learning for every student. Students are the only stakeholder group with the lived experience of learning in this context.

Therefore, students must be essential partners in developing accurate policy priorities and actionable plans to substantively impact our education.

The Biden-Harris Administration, and particularly the Department of Education, has an important opening to lead the way in elevating young people, a core constituency that elected them, as advocates for justice in our public schools and in our nation.

Our roadmap for achieving such a goal follows.

Mechanisms to Achieve Authentic Youth Voice

Overview

This report contains 5 key mechanisms that ED can employ to achieve meaningful youth-adult partnership. ED should:

1. Ensure the next Secretary of Education prioritizes student voice
2. Convene regular listening sessions and roundtable discussions with students and stakeholder meetings with student groups across offices at the Department
3. Include students on all commissions, workgroups, and convenings across the department
4. Reinstate staff person(s) in ED focused on youth engagement
5. Establish a “Learn Back Better” federal advisory committee with student members about the intersections between COVID-19, economic recovery, racial equity, and climate change and ED’s role

Definitions and Context

In order to develop mechanisms to achieve authentic youth voice, ED actors must first have a shared understanding and definition. Our team, in conversation with many youth-led partners, **defines student voice as recognizing and acting upon the fact that students are the primary stakeholders of our education and should be partners in shaping it.**

We recognize that student voice exists on a spectrum and that tokenism of young people can occur at [every level of the youth voice spectrum](#) if relationships are not meaningful. It is critical to note that for youth voice to be a tool to achieve equity, power must be meaningfully shifted towards young people who are most marginalized by the education system. Marginalized communities of students include, but are not limited to²:

- Students of color, especially Black and Indigenous (BIPOC), Latinx, and Southeast Asian students
- Students who identify as LGBTQIA+ and/or gender non-conforming
- Students with disabilities (e.g., IEP and 504) and/or learning differences
- Students with significant needs (e.g., health, behavior, and 1:1 instructional services)
- English language learners
- Students in alternative learning programs
- Students experiencing poverty
- Students living in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty
- Students in foster care
- Students experiencing homelessness

² Especially noting that subgroups within each bullet point face marginalization and discrimination in distinct ways.

- Students who are incarcerated, court-involved, and/or have otherwise been impacted by the criminal justice system
- Students who are immigrants, undocumented, and/or living in mixed-status households
- Students who are migratory

Key Youth Voice Terms

- **Student voice:** Recognizing and *acting* upon the fact that students are the primary stakeholders of our education and should be partners in shaping it³
- **Tokenism** (in the context of youth voice work): A form of inauthentic inclusion of young people where:
 - A student is asked to represent the experiences of all students, or all those they share an identity group with; and/or
 - Young people are invited into spaces primarily to validate the perspectives of adults without being integrated into decision-making processes
- **Co-creation:** The highest, most ideal form of youth-adult partnership, where initiatives are being created and implemented by young people and adults working with shared decision making power

Best Practices

Youth leadership and youth-adult partnerships can create further pathways for change by:

- Identifying key issues from those directly impacted by the public education system;
- Fostering intergenerational learning;
- Building a *shared* strategy between all stakeholders working towards a common goal;
- Implementing a *shared* strategy in a united way; therefore,
- Creating meaningful change in schools and communities driven by the students impacted by education policy initiatives

Over nearly a decade, our organization has developed best practices for making participation in youth voice initiatives more accessible, including:

- Working with a representative group of students with diverse backgrounds, including but not limited to socioeconomic standing, ability (members of the disabled community, etc.), neurodiversity (i.e. autism, ADHD, dyslexia, etc.), race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, geography, varying academic performance, and interests, etc.

³ Throughout this report we use student and youth voice interchangeably; youth voice provides a more expansive definition to include young people who may not currently be enrolled in the formal school system.

- Treating students as *experts in their own experiences* rather than asking them to represent all students from their school or community.
- Selecting students, not for their prior accomplishments or academic performance, but to learn how their lived experiences connect to policy conversations.
- Compensating students for their expertise and time to ensure youth engagement opportunities are available for low-income students.
- Translating jargon and policy terminology on a consistent basis and educating students on how their experiences in schools connect to larger systems.
- In situations where it is logistically challenging to co-implement solutions based on student input, following up with students on a regular basis to share how their input has been used.
- Ensuring the coordinator or coordination team of youth-voice initiatives is prepared to cede space and power to young perspectives.

We've outlined best practices specific to the mechanisms we are suggesting that ED implement throughout this document.

Research

A field of student or youth voice research has emerged in the last several decades to provide evidence that thoughtful inclusion of student voices can increase academic motivations, strengthen reports of positive school climates and boost students' overall perceptions of school.⁴ Researchers have evaluated student voice pilot programs with grant funding attached in schools and districts with demonstrated success.⁵ The Department of Education is poised to extend this field through the implementation of student voice at the highest institutional level.

1. Ensure the next Secretary of Education prioritizes Student Voice

Convening Young People Directly

For the Secretary of Education to adequately address the needs of America's students, it is necessary to be in rigorous, consistent, and authentic conversation with young people. However, the methods through which students are engaged must be thoughtfully designed and implemented in order to avoid tokenism and meaningfully uplift the experiences and expertise of those most impacted by educational inequity.

Traditional models to engage students, such as youth advisory councils, can easily undermine their stated goal by replicating inequitable practices that exist across the

⁴ Qualia Institute, "School Voice Report", 2016.

⁵ Mitra, D. (2003). Student voice in school reform: Reframing student-teacher relationships. *McGill Journal of Education*, 38(2), 289-304.

education system. Most often, traditional youth advisory council models with selective application processes only represent high-achieving students with significant privilege who are beneficiaries of the current inequities in the educational system. Especially within governmental institutions, they can become empty public relations efforts or even vehicles for political favors between well-connected adults. Without thoughtful design to bring students with specific expertise and experiences to the right decision-making tables, they can often find themselves sidelined from the heart of research and policymaking processes. Despite best intentions, elite or selective bodies are incredibly difficult vehicles to use to achieve the desired impact of meaningful partnership with a representative group of young people.

Rather than a traditional youth council, the Secretary of Education should explore other mechanisms to partner with young people who have lived experiences connected to equity issues ED seeks to address. This may look like convening:

- Students attending Title I schools to advise on addressing opportunity gaps in schools
- Students in schools where a significant number of students are demonstrating below grade level proficiency in reading and mathematics to develop intervention programs
- BIPOC students to advise initiatives dedicated to fostering anti-racist school environments
- Students experiencing homelessness advising ED's approach to securing resources for housing insecure students
- English language learners to develop programs for English literacy development and protection from language-based segregation within schools
- Students with learning differences, learning disabilities, and exceptional needs to support understanding and initiatives aimed at reducing barriers to learning
- Students experiencing food insecurity to advise ED and USDA joint efforts surrounding universal school meal efforts
- Student loan debt holders and first-generation college students to advise higher education conversation around access and affordability
- Etc.

Best Practices

- The Office of the Secretary should work with a full-time youth engagement staffer (see item #5) to recruit and convene young people as described above.
- The Secretary of Education, Deputy Secretary, Under Secretary, and Assistant Secretaries should meet with students themselves, alongside aides, but not with aides in place of themselves, as often as is logistically possible.

- Trust building between the students, facilitators, and Office of the Secretary takes time and a commitment to meaningfully engaging students. Over-communicate how input and advice will be used and regularly share developments in the policy landscape to reduce information imbalances.
- At least once a quarter, convene a cross-section of students to advise on issues impacting all students, like assessment and accountability, guidance around state standards, teacher workforce, etc.
- The Office of the Secretary should rotate the students advising the Secretary on a regular basis to ensure diversity in student perspectives.
- When possible, ED should compensate students for their time and expertise.

Agenda Setting

In addition to coordinating consistent conversations with young people, the Office of the Secretary should do the following to prioritize student voice as an agenda item for states to consider in their equity work. Specifically, the Office of the Secretary should:

- Co-design a report on effective student voice with the group of students convened as described above.
- Work with young people to define and illustrate what meaningful youth voice looks like on the state and district level.
- Include student voice in the [Secretary's Priorities](#).
- Issue guidance and provide technical assistance to school districts and states about how to effectively integrate student voice into decision-making processes.
- Work with student leaders and organizations to offer workshops for states on effective student voice and youth-adult partnership.

2. Convene regular listening sessions and roundtable discussions with students and stakeholder meetings with student groups across offices at the Department

As the primary stakeholders in education, students and student groups should be regularly convened across offices. Student voice is most effective as a tool when it exists across decision making structures. For the same reasons ED regularly convenes stakeholder groups representing teachers, school building and district leaders, parents and community members, and groups across advocacy issues areas to inform decision making, so too should it include students. To advance meaningful youth voice within ED, student conversations should be regularly convened across every office, to ensure personnel across ED are in conversation with the stakeholders their policies are most directly impacting.

Young people should be convened by individual offices or in interoffice conversations on a regular basis, which we define as: **monthly advising of ongoing priorities and additional conversations as new priorities and initiatives are considered.**

Best Practices

- Youth roundtables and student stakeholder meetings should involve personnel from the Office of the Secretary and Deputy Secretary, the Office of the Under Secretary and the Offices of Assistant Secretaries, and *any office actively making decisions that impact the lives of young people.*
 - **This includes but is not limited to:** the Office for Civil Rights, the Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Office of Migrant Education, the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, and the Office of Postsecondary Education.
- Because each convening of students will represent different experiences within the educational system, roundtable discussions and stakeholder meetings should happen on a regular basis with new student perspectives consistently being brought to the table.
- **Roundtables:** When convening individual students who are not representing organizations, extra care is critical to avoid tokenism. Call on students to share their expertise in their own lived experiences to inform policymaking. Do not ask students to represent all young people in their school or within identity-based communities or subgroups they may be part of.
- **Stakeholder Meetings:** Because student groups and organizations have experience actively engaging cross-sections of students, representatives might share the perspectives and experiences of their student bases in addition to their personal experiences. They may also have policy priorities that have developed from conversations with their student networks and members. It is still critical to ensure that the stakeholder groups actively engage student members who have lived experiences connected to the roundtable or meeting topic. For example:
 - For a convening about the school-to-prison pipeline, be sure to center student organizations that actively engage and are led by youth impacted by the criminal justice system.
 - For a convening focused on the experiences of students with learning disabilities, be sure to center student organizations that actively engage and are led by youth with learning disabilities.
 - Etc.
- The goal of conversations with students should be to learn the stories and experiences of young people navigating public schools in the U.S. When facilitating

discussions, ensure students have time to develop trust with the facilitator and fellow students in the conversation.

- Provide students with knowledge of the current policy landscape their recommendations will be impacting ahead of conversations. Translate any research, policy, and jargon into language that students will understand and regularly check for understanding. Part of engaging with students as partners is equipping them with the information to successfully navigate policy spaces.
- Share with students how their input will be used within ED's work and follow up with them as it is implemented to ensure students feel like they are being meaningfully engaged.

Examples

- In 2018, as part of [Boston Public Schools' Superintendent Search Process](#), student stakeholders were actively convened in the same way that parent, teacher, and neighborhood stakeholders were engaged. The Boston Student Advisory Council hosted a student forum, and the [listening session notes outline](#) how the lived experiences of young people distinctly frame a personnel conversation.
- In Washington state, [the Washington Legislative Youth Advisory Council hosts Youth Action Day](#), an annual summit of students across the state to actively share ideas and shape decision-making priorities for the state legislature. While effective student voice requires convening young people much more regularly than once a year, this model exemplifies the effectiveness of youth participation in government processes.
- During the 2015-16 school year and over the course of 2019, Student Voice went on two national tours to conduct roundtables to deepen our understanding of the landscape of schools in the United States and gather student perspectives to advise our strategy. [This story](#) is a powerful example of the experiences learned from conversations with students that otherwise go unheard.

3. Include students on all commissions, workgroups, and convenings across the Department

Meaningful student voice goes beyond active listening and should include authentic partnership. Young people are equipped to not only diagnose problems, but to identify and implement solutions in the context of all workgroups, commissions, and convenings. ED should seek to infuse student perspectives across workgroups, commissions, and convenings. Students should be appointed to *every* commission, workgroup, and convening across ED as active participants, not simply in an advisory capacity.

Possibilities for Implementation

We have outlined below ways to implement youth partnership within the highest levels of decision making. As noted above, however, young people should be included in *all* commissions, workgroups, and convenings across ED.

- Students [engaging and participating](#) in ED teams during each stage of the budget process, including 1) budget formulation, 2) budget presentation and the Congressional process, 3) budget execution, and 3) audit and evaluation.
- Students advising the Office of Civil Rights about youth stakeholder concerns related to nondiscrimination in schools, ultimately shaping updated or new federal guidance on “Non-Discriminatory Administration of School Discipline”.
- Engaging students in ensuring data collected by ED is accurate and advising how data should be used to frame student experiences within U.S. public schools.
- Students should be engaged as a primary stakeholder shaping state accountability mechanisms, particularly as ESEA is pending re-authorization.
- Students advising the development of grantmaking priorities and serving as expert reviewers in the grantmaking process for all ED grants.
- Etc.

Best Practices

- Appoint students to specific workgroups, commissions, and convenings whose lived experiences are reflective of the educational issues being addressed (as outlined in item #1).
- Include *multiple* students on every workgroup, commission, or convening to ensure nobody is the sole young person; review best practices around avoiding tokenism.⁶
- Be mindful of including both K-12 and higher education student perspectives on the issues at hand.
- Work with student stakeholder organizations and associations such as Student Voice and other youth-led partners to identify and prepare students for meaningful participation in decision-making bodies.
- Avoid asking students to represent the perspectives of all young people in meetings.
- Build relationships and mutual trust with students on workgroups, commissions, and convenings to ensure they feel meaningfully engaged in the process.
- Provide the necessary background information and breakdown policy jargon to ensure students can meaningfully participate in meetings.
- Inform students how their guidance will be used and follow up as it is used.

⁶ Tokenism defined on page 5

- For commissions, workgroups, and convenings, use video conferencing technology to include students outside of D.C.

Examples

- States such as Washington and Kentucky also have successfully implemented this model. In Washington, students were actively involved in the [Reopening of Washington Schools for 2020-21 workgroup](#), the School Safety and Student Well-Being Advisory Committee to the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, the drafting of the Washington Youth Sexual Health Plan, and more. In Kentucky, a student was [appointed](#) to the state School Safety Working Group.
- States also show how student-designed, conducted, and analyzed research can inform action on various issues. For example, the Kentucky Student Voice Team's by-students for-students [Coping with COVID-19 Study](#) analyzed the effects of school closures on students' social and emotional health to influence statewide decision-making.
- States also [show](#) that there are many different models to engage students through research and policy-focused groups, such as:
 - Inviting students to serve directly on specific working groups and task forces
 - Inviting students to give presentations on and contribute directly to ongoing research efforts
 - Hosting regular youth listening sessions with stakeholder groups
- There is [precedent](#) for meaningful youth involvement at the federal government level across Departments, yet there is a conspicuous absence of youth engagement work within the Department that most directly impacts young people: ED.
 - The Children's Bureau (CB) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration on Children, Youth, and Families (ACYF) pays young adults aged 18-26 with lived experience in the foster care system as consultants to provide technical assistance to all of their work.
 - The National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) hosts the National 4-H Conference, where high school students work to create a Youth Perspective Briefing for staff representing 16 federal agencies. From the briefings, multiple agencies such as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) have created long-term working relationships with students to provide further expertise.

4. Reinstate staff person(s) in the ED focused on youth engagement

For the U.S. Department of Education to have the capacity to meaningfully engage with student stakeholders, there must be staff dedicated to youth engagement. We believe the current [Family and Engagement team](#), “an interoffice group dedicated to strengthening the voice of families,” should be remodeled to include students as a primary stakeholder group in education. In addition to prioritizing an interoffice approach to youth engagement, the new ED team should prioritize one or multiple full-time youth engagement personnel positions.

We believe the past responsibilities accompanying the Youth Liaison title should be reinstated and made a full-time role. This position cannot just be a title tacked onto a staff person with other responsibilities; it must be instead a distinct role solely dedicated to engaging students, with the robust skillset and expertise necessary to do so meaningfully. Youth engagement needs to be a forethought, not an afterthought, in ED’s approach to policymaking, and having full-time staff ensuring conversations happen *with* students, not simply *about* them, is critical.

Youth Liaison Selection

Qualifications: Because youth voice initiatives can easily become tokenizing without intentional relationship building, the selection of ED’s Youth Liaison should not be taken lightly. Students believe the staff person(s) filling this role should:

- Be someone who attended public school in the United States during their K-12 years.
- Have a background in youth organizing, youth engagement, teaching, or other fields directly related to building meaningful relationships with young people.
- Commit to developing a deep understanding of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, intersectionality, and how norms surrounding “professionalism” and “leadership” are [rooted in whiteness](#).
- Hold a deep understanding of both the research and practice surrounding student voice, meaningful youth-adult co-creation, and how tokenism can often prevail in youth voice initiatives.
- Possess knowledge of the education landscape in the United States and how student experiences differ across lines of geography and school type.
- Believe in youth leadership as an essential component of achieving education equity.

Hiring: To ensure that the youth liaison is prepared to meaningfully advance youth voice within the Department, they should be hired in consultation with K-12 and higher education students attending public schools.

Youth Liaison Role and Responsibilities

In addition to being the primary person coordinating the practices outlined in the above four sections, the Youth Liaison should also be a mechanism to the public for accountability around how ED is engaging young people. The Youth Liaison should:

- Publish a monthly public report about how ED engaged youth voice, including through the mechanisms outlined in this report and all other initiatives.
- Lead active storytelling around the power and effectiveness of youth voice to develop public understanding and support for student engagement initiatives, including through coordinating student blog posts, media engagement opportunities, features of youth voice initiatives, and more.
- Develop and maintain relationships with student stakeholder organizations, such as youth organizing groups, student-led nonprofits, student government associations, and more.
- Make education action more accessible to young people by working with External Affairs personnel to offer training, webinars, and resources for young people interested in affecting ED's work.
 - For example, develop and circulate a digital training on how students can review and comment on regulation notices within the 90-day period.
- Work with personnel across ED offices to ensure that youth voice influences all aspects of decision-making and offer trainings and coaching for colleagues on youth engagement best practices.
- Seek regular feedback from young people about the effectiveness of ED's youth voice initiatives.
- Remain accountable to students and student groups, ensuring ED has an effective and meaningful approach to student voice.

5. Establish a “Learn Back Better” federal advisory committee with student members about the intersections between COVID-19, economic recovery, racial equity, and climate change and ED's role

As outlined in the Federal Advisory Committee Act, “Advisory committees are to:

- Provide advice that is relevant, objective, and open to the public;
- Act promptly to complete their work; and
- Comply with reasonable cost controls and recordkeeping requirements.

Advisory committees may be established in one of three ways:

- By law—statutory;
- By executive order of the President; and
- By agency authority.”⁷

While youth voice should be institutionalized throughout offices in ED, as outlined throughout this report, this specific moment in education calls for particular attention. A federal advisory committee should be established, either by executive order of President-elect Biden or by agency authority through ED, to address President-elect Biden’s four key priorities and the specific learning challenges young people are facing within that context.

The federal advisory committee should be made up of:

- K-12 students
- Higher education students
- Public schools teachers
- Community college and university faculty and educators (with attention to representation from HBCUs, HSIs, TCUs NASNTIs, AAPISI, ANSI, NHSI)
- Parent, family, and community stakeholders
- School building leaders
- District leaders
- Policy practitioners
- Researchers

In accordance with the guidance outlined in item #1, students selected for this committee should have lived experiences connected to the equity issues it seeks to address and should not be selected through an application process that favors academic performance. The committee as a whole should be diverse across lines of race, gender, socioeconomic status, region, and more.

The federal advisory committee should exist to:

- Broadly explore and ideate possibilities for shifts in national education policy priorities and guidelines to meet the needs of stakeholders in this unprecedented moment.
 - Issue federal guidance for safely reopening schools and providing recommendations to Congress for stimulus funding to support states and

⁷ “Federal Advisory Committees,” Federal Advisory Committees (U.S. Department of Education, June 21, 2019), <https://www2.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/com.html>.

- districts.
- Issue federal guidance for protecting students' digital safety in online learning environments.
- Prioritize, incentivize, and lead research on how states and districts can build racially just school environments, including addressing rising disparities in school discipline and building anti-racist school curriculums.
- Investigate how the federal government can support states and districts in offering wraparound services and establishing community partnerships that support low-income families with the resources students need to thrive
- Explore how schools can be engines for [climate action](#) and how educational policy can use an environmental justice lens for decision making.
- Foster cross-stakeholder collaboration to build shared understanding around the issues facing the public education system and the potential solutions, priorities, and goals that ED should adopt throughout the new administration.
- Ultimately, produce public-facing guidance geared towards the role of ED, Congress, and the federal government in collaborating to achieve educational equity in this specific learning context.

Closing

Institutionalization

One of the greatest barriers to institutionalizing youth-adult partnerships at the federal level is that the vast majority of the mechanisms outlined above depend on the Department of Education personnel acting in good faith to elevate youth leadership. To ensure that ED advances student-adult partnership for the long-term, we need a stronger mechanism for institutionalization. Student Voice calls on ED to work with Congress to attach formula grants for states and districts to implement student voice initiatives. Furthermore, ED should use its platform to lead the way in shifting power towards young people by asking Congress to appropriate funds for youth engagement initiatives across the federal government.

Interagency Collaboration

Youth engagement should not be limited to the Department of Education. Rather, young stakeholders should be meaningfully involved in all research and policy decisions that affect their lives. In the context of historic youth-led action across issue areas, ED should lead the way in elevating youth leadership across the federal government. Student Voice supports [calls](#) from youth-driven partners, such as creating a Task Force on Young Americans at the White House and including members of Generation Z on the Domestic Policy Council. In addition, Student Voice supports both ongoing and future youth engagement efforts across all federal agencies.

Continued Partnership with Student Voice

Through nearly a decade of work, Student Voice has developed deep expertise in best practices and methodologies for youth engagement work. Student Voice's network of students is fully willing to remain in regular communication with the Department of Education to provide any of the necessary technical expertise needed to implement the proposals in this report. We know that meaningful partnerships between adult experts and student stakeholders can improve decision making on education policy and research across the board, and we are prepared to collaborate to advance our shared vision for educational justice.