

Education-Related Policy Recommendations to Ensure Children Thrive in Supportive Schools Free from Violence and Trauma



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In the last decade, there has been intense debate within the education community and among policymakers on how best to improve our nation's public schools so they effectively educate all students. On one side, education "reformers" have advocated for increased test-based accountability for student academic outcomes, more competition through charter schools, and improved teacher effectiveness by measuring performance based on student achievement. On the other hand, school boards, school administrators, and teacher organizations have advocated for smaller class sizes, increased resources, improved teacher preparation and professional development, and up-to-date curricular materials.

One critical area that has largely been overlooked, and one that both sides of the education debate can and should embrace, is the challenge of childhood exposure to violence and the effects of trauma on educational success. An estimated 46 million American children – almost two out of three children in this country – will be affected by violence, crime, abuse, or psychological trauma.ⁱ Students traumatized by exposure to violence or other factors have lower grade-point averages, more negative remarks in their cumulative record, and more reported absences from school than other students.ⁱⁱ This is a crisis that educators can no longer afford to ignore, and indeed must effectively address.

Futures Without Violence convened a multi-disciplinary working group to develop a comprehensive set of recommendations focused on the federal government that are designed to reduce violence, minimize the effects of trauma on youth, and ensure that children and families receive the services they need as soon as possible and in the most effective manner possible. Many recommendations are also directed to states and communities as the federal government cannot and should not go at it alone.

The following summarizes our key education-related recommendations:

Use the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to Support Positive School Climates

Promoting positive school climate is increasingly recognized as a key to improving academic success. Broadly defined as how it feels to be in school, positive school climates keep children engaged, staff motivated, and parents connected. For traumatized children, it is even more important. Schools help them create meaningful and supportive relationships, which enable them to feel safe and connected to adults and school, and improve educational outcomes. A positive school climate also promotes school safety, and increases students' trust in adults.

ESEA serves as the primary vehicle by which the federal government influences education policy and funds schools. As Congress works to reauthorize ESEA, we suggest the following: Title I of ESEA funding should be restored to FY 2010 levels, which would require about a 10 percent increase when accounting for inflation and enrollment. The federal government should also make clear that ESEA funding under Title I can be used for activities that support positive school climates. Finally, the Department of Education (ED) should have states seeking waiver renewals from ESEA requirements document the steps they are taking to assess and improve school climate.

Support the Creation of Trauma Sensitive Schools

Becoming a trauma sensitive school is an effort that requires the whole school and not just teachers and guidance counselors. It is not a call for more mental health services alone, but instead to apply a trauma sensitive framework to the policies, procedures, and behaviors of the whole school staff. Staff are uniquely positioned to notice if a child is in distress and see that distress as a signal for help, not simply bad behavior – and to get them the help they need.

We need to support schools and take advantage of their unique position and potential to help millions of children who may be suffering silently. The federal government should provide sufficient funding to dramatically increase the creation or expansion of trauma-sensitive schools. ED should fund a technical assistance center dedicated to assisting states and school districts by sharing training, policies, and other information on how to create trauma-sensitive schools. The center should design and disseminate a practice guide that discusses how various federal laws can support particular populations that may be more likely to experience trauma, such as homeless students or students in foster care.

Create Inclusive School Discipline Policies


According to the federal government, research shows that the use of harsh disciplinary sanctions “creates the potential for significant, negative educational and long-term outcomes, and can contribute to what has been termed the ‘school to prison pipeline.’”ⁱⁱⁱ There have been numerous recommendations on improving school discipline practices from the government, advocates, researchers, and others. We do not duplicate those recommendations here. We do want to emphasize the need to reconsider school safety strategies to prioritize investing resources in students’ emotional health and social connections, and to ensure that there is community involvement when districts develop discipline policies.

Reduce Bullying

Research shows that students who are bullied suffer a host of academic and social challenges. ED, working with other federal agencies, should institutionalize and coordinate anti-bullying prevention and response programs within all of their safe schools/healthy students and school-related violence and prevention initiatives.

Train and Build a Skilled Workforce

None of the policy recommendations we are making will achieve their full effectiveness without a skilled and trained workforce in our schools. To that end, all educators should receive pre-service and in-service training and

professional learning so they can appropriately respond to the particular educational, mental health, and developmental needs of students experiencing violence and/or trauma. Fully staffing schools with education support professionals who are trained to address the multiple dimensions of student need must be a priority. These include providing a sufficient number of mental health treatment providers, counselors, psychologists, nurses, and specialized instructional support personnel that teachers and administrators can turn to in order to meet the needs of students who may benefit from extra support. To facilitate these efforts, ED should make clear that districts can use Title II funds under ESEA to fund this type of professional development. This should also be explicit in any bill passed to reauthorize ESEA. Title II, Part A funds must also be restored to at least the Fiscal Year 2010 level, which is 25 percent higher than the Fiscal Year 2015 level. 

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ENDNOTES

- ⁱ Listenbee, R. et al., “Report of the Attorney General’s National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence.” U.S. Department of Justice. 2012. pp. 3. Web. <<http://www.justice.gov/defendingchildhood/cev-rpt-full.pdf>>.
- ⁱⁱ “The Effects of Trauma on Schools and Learning.” The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Web. <<http://www.nctsn.org/resources/audiences/school-personnel/effects-of-trauma-q7>>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Dear Colleague Letter: Nondiscriminatory Administration of School Discipline.” U.S. Department of Justice and Education. 8 Jan. 2014. pp 4. Web. <<http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/edu/documents/dcl.pdf>>.

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