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‘Engaging in Education Equity’ to Ensure Every Student Truly Succeeds

New toolkit from NAACP Legal Defense Fund, Opportunity Institute and the Dignity in Schools Campaign gives communities resources to impact their schools

No Child Left Behind was widely criticized for leaving huge numbers of children behind and further marginalizing low-income communities and communities of color. But a toolkit out today hopes to reverse that trend by empowering parents, caregivers, and communities with tools and resources to advocate for their students and be actively involved in making decisions that impact their schools.

Engage for Education Equity: A Resource for School Communities on the Every Student Succeeds Act — released by a coalition of education policy advocates, including the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF), Opportunity Institute’s Partners for Each and Every Child program, the Dignity in Schools Campaign, and more — includes a primer on equity and engagement, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which replaced No Child Left Behind two years ago, and local impacts of ESSA. It also provides resources, fact sheets and tools for families, organizers, school staff and students on how to get involved.

“The federal government has illustrated that we cannot depend on them to ensure that low-income children of color have equal access to educational opportunity,” said [Elizabeth Olsson](#), LDF’s Senior Policy Associate. “Parents and students need to advocate for the positive changes they want to see in their communities that will lead to a high-quality education for all children. Engaging in Education Equity provides a blueprint to help all community stakeholders participate in decisions that impact their schools and to hold schools accountable for ensuring that every child has a positive educational experience.”

Many engagement efforts have not effectively reached community members with the highest need, including students, families and teachers of color; representatives of students in low-wealth or low-income families; and students and families that speak a language other than English.

“Failing schools not only failed our students, but failed our communities,” said Kedda Williams, deputy director of the Opportunity Institute’s Partners for Each and Every Child program. “Our neediest students and communities are desperate for the support they need to succeed, prepare them for college and careers, and lift them out of the cycle of poverty. We must ensure that doesn’t happen under ESSA. We need to meet parents and families where they are and give them the tools so that they have a seat at the table where the policy decisions are being made that will impact their students — and their students’ futures.”

The Engage for Education Equity toolkit is available to everyone online, but will also be distributed through community outreach efforts in districts with schools likely to be identified under state law as in need of improvement.

“ESSA is a handoff and our parents need to be prepared to be catchers,” said Marika Pfefferkorn, director of Midwest Center for School Transformation and a Dignity in Schools Campaign member. “Equipping parents, youth and community members with the tools necessary to understand and hold their school and districts accountable to the new education law of the land is critical. We all have a role in decision-making and advocating for the improvements necessary for our schools to serve the needs of their students.”

Background

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is the most recent version of our country’s primary federal law for K-12 education, called the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). From 2001 until ESSA became law, it was known as the No Child Left Behind Act. Congress first passed the ESEA in 1965, signed by President Lyndon Johnson as part of his war on poverty agenda. This was the first time the federal government provided comprehensive education funding to states - specifically to support students from low-income families. With federal funding came requirements for how to use that funding. Congress has revised those requirements several times, most recently by passing ESSA in December 2015.

ESSA gives state governments more flexibility about how they are allowed to use federal funds. For example, ESSA requires that all states adopt “challenging academic standards,” but allows states to design or choose what those standards will be. In exchange for that flexibility, ESSA requires that state and local government leaders engage with their communities to make decisions that best fit their needs.

ESSA has kept in place a number of important policies and opportunities that matter to our country as a whole, including tracking how students are doing academically, looking at the gaps in performance among groups of students, and making sure that those who need support receive it.

Resources

- [Engage for Education Equity overview](#)
- [Engage for Education Equity toolkit](#)
- [Equity, Engagement, and the Opportunity for Communities to Lead](#), by Kedda Williams, Opportunity Institute

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About the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.

Founded in 1940, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) is the nation's first civil and human rights law organization and has been completely separate from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since 1957—although LDF was originally founded by the NAACP and shares its commitment to equal rights. LDF's Thurgood Marshall Institute (TMI) is a multi-disciplinary and collaborative hub within LDF that launches targeted campaigns and undertakes innovative research to shape the civil rights narrative. In media attributions, please refer to us as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund or LDF.

About the Dignity in Schools Campaign

The DSC challenges the systemic problem of pushout in our nation's schools and works to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. As a national coalition, the Dignity in Schools Campaign builds power amongst parents, youth, organizers, advocates and educators to transform their own communities, support alternatives to a culture of zero-tolerance, punishment, criminalization and the dismantling of public schools, and fight racism and all forms of oppression. We bring together our members through direct action organizing, public policy advocacy and leadership development to fight for the human right of every young person to a quality education and to be treated with dignity.

About the Opportunity Institute

The Opportunity Institute is a non-profit organization that promotes social mobility and equity by improving outcomes from early childhood through early career. We focus on education and the related social policies that make true educational opportunity possible. For more information, please visit theopportunityinstitute.org.