

NOW IS THE TIME TO INVOLVE STUDENTS IN THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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Can you imagine going to school during a global pandemic, the [worst economic recession since World War II](#), and escalating political uncertainty? If you're not a student right now, you can't begin to understand what learning in this historic moment is like. That is why institutionalizing youth engagement in our new federal government, and in the next Department of Education in particular, is critical right now.

Just as President Joe Biden is convening experts to tackle [COVID-19](#), [the economy](#), [the environment](#), and other pressing issues our country is facing, he and his incoming Department of Education must also consult students on our educational experiences. Better than anyone, students understand the ongoing process of reimagining education during COVID-19, the obstacles we face to learning effectively, and the inequities being exacerbated by the current crises. Students are experts on schooling in this moment, so engaging us is essential to developing accurate policy priorities and appropriate solutions to the issues we are facing.

Many state and local governments have already found students' expertise invaluable across all levels of the policymaking process. In Washington, which was the first state in the U.S. to be heavily impacted by COVID-19, students like myself served on the [Reopening Washington Schools 2020 Workgroup](#). Alongside teachers, administrators, legislators, and researchers, we were able to offer unique advice on the problems we were facing, considering everything from an appropriate grading scale for the spring semester to the steps needed to guarantee access to virtual learning for every student. In response to schools closing in March, Kentucky's Student Voice Team [surveyed almost 9,500 students](#) from across the state on their educational experiences during the pandemic. Using their data, they then [pushed lawmakers](#) to take urgent action on issues like mental health, food instability, and more.

Other agencies have already modeled what effective youth engagement initiatives within the federal government can look like. The Children's Bureau within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration on Children, Youth, and Families [hires young adults previously involved in the foster care system to serve as consultants](#) on planning conferences, creating resources, and developing foster care-related policies. The National Institute of Food and Agriculture [hosts the National 4-H Conference](#) each year, where they convene students from across the country to propose policy solutions to concerns raised by different federal agencies.

The extensive body of successful examples at both the local and federal levels prove that there are [easy, actionable models](#) to engage students in the Department of Education as well.

The most intuitive solution is for the Secretary of Education and other important department officials to stay in consistent, rigorous, and authentic communication with students. By keeping in regular contact with diverse groups of students, especially students from marginalized groups who face the worst effects of educational inequities, the Department of Education can ensure that they are keeping their finger on the pulse of what learning actually looks like in schools today. This is especially important now, as students' educational experiences shift rapidly due to public health concerns.

In addition, the Department of Education should also take steps to institutionalize student voices in more formal ways by involving them in all the work they do. For instance, the Department of Education can reinstate the [youth liaison staff position](#) that existed under the Obama administration but was removed under Trump Education administration Secretary DeVos. The department can also ensure students are able to leverage the department's [extensive grantmaking powers](#), all the way from creating standards for evaluation to selecting applicants. In all of the many workgroups, commissions, or convenings that they are involved in, the department can advocate for student members to be brought to the table.

President Biden [has already committed to appointing a former public school teacher to be Secretary of Education](#). Just as he has proven to value teachers' insights about our educational system, he must value students' advice as well. We are our education system's primary stakeholders, and thus the foremost experts on how it operates. It's time that the Department of Education treats us like it.

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