A Call to ACTION

Federal Support for Systemic Approaches to

Educator Workforce Development & Design

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AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

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The Long Arc of Teacher Education Policy

The history of American teacher education reflects the nation's ongoing effort to align its democratic ideals with educational opportunity. The movement to professionalize teaching has been both cyclical and cumulative, built through eras of reform that reveal how deeply the nation's security, economy, and democracy are tied to its classrooms.

Following the launch of Sputnik in 1957, the United States entered a period of unprecedented federal investment in education. The National Defense Education Act of 1958 marked a revolutionary turning point, channeling significant federal funding into science, mathematics, and foreign-language instruction while elevating the role of teacher preparation in maintaining global competitiveness. It signaled national recognition that a well-educated citizenry and a well-prepared teaching workforce were matters of national defense and economic strength. The policy infrastructure born of that era laid the groundwork for later legislation, such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and for the creation of the U.S. Department of Education in 1979.

By the 1980s and early 1990s, the Holmes Group, composed of deans from leading colleges of education, reimagined teacher education as a professional discipline rather than a technical occupation. Its seminal 1986 report, *Tomorrow's Teachers*, called for rigorous preparation, clinical partnerships, and continuous learning — principles that reshaped how universities and PK-12 schools collaborate.[i]

Building on that foundation, extensive research has examined teacher preparation reform, reflecting both persistent debate and meaningful progress. Scholars studying policy, practice, and systems of change have not always agreed on the best pathways forward, particularly regarding accountability, alternative certification, clinical practice, and measures of effectiveness. But the research record is clear that educator preparation has evolved beyond fragmented or ideologically driven approaches. Studies have increasingly converged on the importance of strong, rich **clinical partnerships, coherence between coursework and practice, sustained professional development, and equity-centered preparation** as critical for improving both student outcomes and teacher quality.[ii] Decades of research have demonstrated that teacher quality is the single most important in-school factor affecting student achievement.[iii] At the same time, scholars have rightly reframed teaching as a culturally and community-responsive act, challenging educators to affirm and uplift the multitude of learner identities and backgrounds in classrooms.[iv]

AACTE is grateful to the following partner organizations that have endorsed this agenda (as of 5/8/26).

- ACTFL
- American Association of School Personnel Administrators (AASPA)
- American Educational Research Association (AERA)
- American Federation of Teachers (AFT)
- Association of Independent Liberal Arts Colleges for Teacher Education (AILACTE)
- Center for Reaching & Teaching the Whole Child
- City Teaching Alliance
- Council of Academic Deans from Research Education Institutions (CADREI)
- Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)
- Deans for Impact
- EdTrust
- InnovateEDU
- ISTE+ASCD
- National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE)
- National Association for School-University Partnerships (NASUP)
- National Board for Certified Counselors
- National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD)
- National Center for Teacher Residencies (NCTR)
- National Education Association (NEA)
- Teacher Education Council of State Colleges and Universities (TECSCU)

Together, this history forms a lineage of reform stretching from the Cold War to the present, with each generation renewing the call to see teaching as both a profession and a public trust. The field's collective work has produced meaningful progress: stronger preparation programs, increased workforce diversity, and a deeper evidence base on teacher learning and student outcomes.

Yet today, that progress stands at risk. Once viewed as a pathway to stability and public respect, teaching has suffered from eroding professional status, stagnant wages, and increased scrutiny under accountability regimes that have limited educator autonomy. *The Rise and Fall of the Teaching Profession* study documents that the share of Americans viewing teaching as a high-prestige occupation has dropped by nearly half since 2010.[v] Interest among high-school seniors and college freshmen in entering teaching has fallen by 48% since the 1990s, and the number of individuals earning teacher licenses has declined by more than 100,000 per year between 2006 and 2021.[vi]

Why the Moment Demands Federal Leadership

The preceding data reveal that the crisis facing the educator workforce is not merely a matter of recruitment but of professional devaluation.[vii] Declining prestige, worsening working conditions, and economic insecurity have converged to create a feedback loop that discourages new entrants to the profession, accelerates attrition, and diminishes public confidence in the profession's long-term viability. Current trends underscore that the profession's erosion is structural, not episodic, and that deliberate federal and state investments in teacher quality, wages, and autonomy are warranted.

To meet this moment, the nation requires a coherent federal system for educator workforce development and design, not a patchwork of temporary fixes. The federal government must lead again, ensuring that every child, in every community, has access to well-prepared, well-supported, and respected educators.

We must invest in educators who are fully prepared to teach, counsel, and support the whole child. Only by restoring respect for the profession, strengthening preparation systems, and aligning compensation with the complexity of teaching can we reverse these historic declines and rebuild a thriving, sustainable educator workforce.

The following are three converging crises that define the current educational landscape, each magnifying the others and threatening the stability of the nation's schools and communities. These crises call for swift action.

- **Chronic shortages:** One in eight classrooms nationwide lacks a certified teacher, leaving millions of students without access to qualified instruction.[viii] In high-poverty and rural districts, that number can climb to 1 in 4.[ix] At the same time, the teaching profession remains overwhelmingly White, failing to reflect the racial and cultural diversity of the students it serves. This shortage of Black and Brown educators deprives many students of the cultural connections and role models that research shows improve academic engagement and belonging.
- **Sustainability gaps:** Low pay, rising family-care costs, and limited opportunities for advancement continue to drive teachers from the profession. A Learning Policy Institute report found that 90% of open teaching positions are created by teachers who leave the profession, with about 2/3 of those teachers leaving due to dissatisfaction with teaching.[x] Without systemic reform, the educator pipeline cannot sustain itself or keep pace with the growing complexity of today's classrooms.
- **Accountability erosion:** The diminishing federal role threatens the infrastructure that upholds civil rights and educational equity. Students with disabilities, multilingual learners, and those living in poverty are disproportionately affected by the uneven implementation of federal protections. A weakened federal presence risks widening opportunity gaps and undermining the promise of equal access to quality education for all children.

These workforce challenges are unfolding against the backdrop of a national education and mental health crisis. The long-term effects of the pandemic, coupled with economic instability and social division, have resulted in historic declines in student well-being and academic performance. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 40% of high school students report persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, and nearly one in five have seriously considered suicide.[xi] Academic inequities across groups based on race, economic background, and "place" have widened, and absenteeism has doubled since 2019.[xii]

Schools have become the de facto centers of community well-being, where children not only learn but also receive meals, mental health support, counseling, and social connection. Teachers and school staff are now on the frontlines of addressing trauma, anxiety, and learning loss, often without the preparation, staffing, or resources to meet the magnitude of these needs.

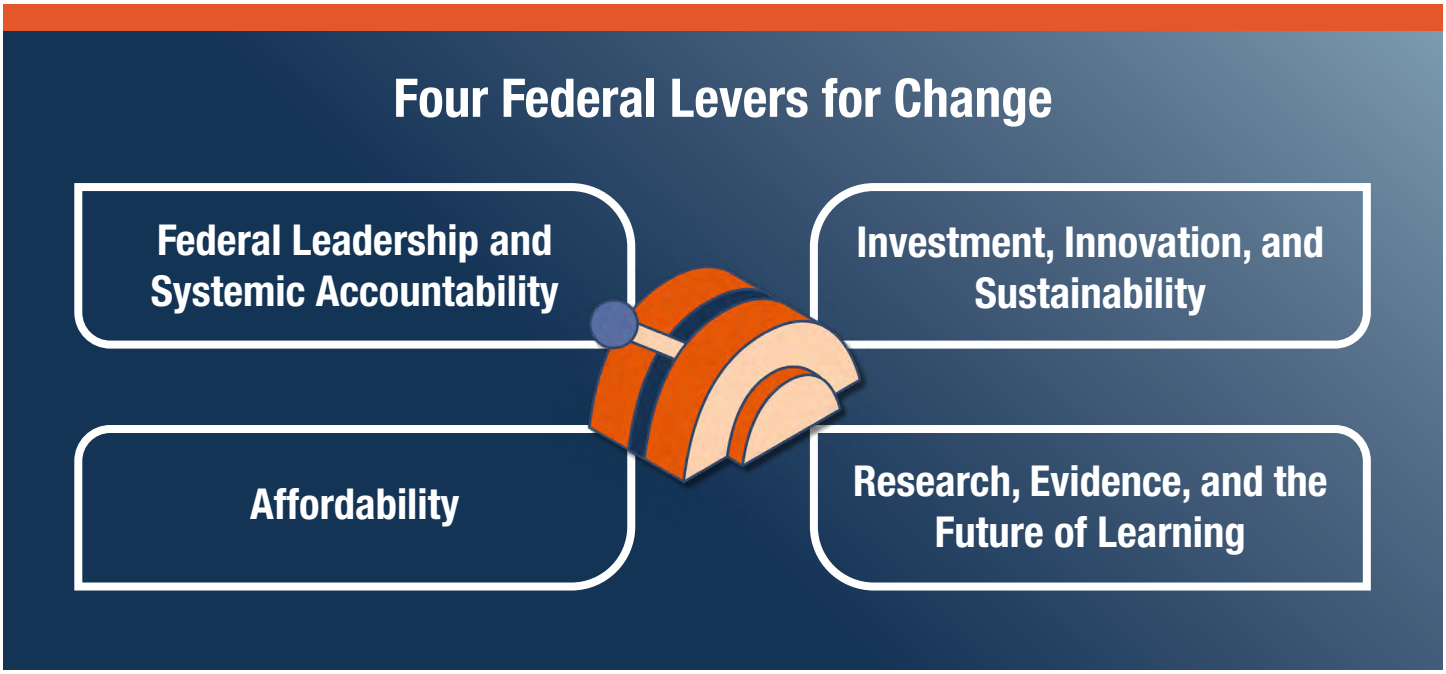
Further, education technology is a powerful tool for both teaching and learning, with "the potential to empower students to expand their learning beyond the confines of the traditional classroom, support self-directed learning, help educators tailor learning experiences to individual student needs, and support students with disabilities."[xiii] Students and educators, however, must not only understand how to use the latest technologies but also be prepared to thrive in an ever-evolving technological landscape. The president's executive order, *Advancing Artificial Intelligence Education for American Youth*, asserted that we must "equip our students with the foundational knowledge and skills necessary to adapt to and thrive in an increasingly digital society."[xiv] Because integrating effective use of technology for learning in our classrooms is a necessity, integrating technology into educator preparation is also paramount.

To meet this moment, the nation requires a coherent federal system for educator workforce development and design, not a patchwork of temporary fixes. We must invest in educators who are fully prepared to teach, counsel, and support the whole child.

This federal framework must respect the fundamental reality that education **has been and will always be under local control**. The federal Department of Education will continue its vital role in supporting state and local education departments and school boards as they lead the efforts to educate our nation's youth.

AACTE identifies four levers for change that can anchor this federal response and rebuild the educator workforce as the cornerstone of America's democratic, social, and economic health.

AACTE's Proposal: Four Federal Levers for Change



1. Federal Leadership and Systemic Accountability

A modern educator workforce requires a modern federal framework. AACTE calls for the establishment of the **Office of Educator Workforce** within the U.S. Department of Education with the authority and expertise to provide national leadership, inform policy across the Department and the federal government, and elevate the importance of developing and supporting a thriving U.S. educator workforce. This permanent office would do the following:

- Develop and coordinate national policy on educator recruitment, preparation, professional development, retention, and advancement;
- Provide guidance and technical assistance to help states, local school districts, and educator preparation programs build their capacity to ensure a well-prepared and supported educator is present in every classroom;
    - Administer educator workforce programs, including a new $1 billion **Quality Educator Partnership Program** to address educator workforce development and design, to create a unified system of investment in the educator workforce;
    - Evaluate large-scale and cross-state initiatives and disseminate best practices on educator workforce programs such as *Grow Your Own programs*, residencies, and registered apprenticeships;
    - Maintain a national educator workforce data system, reporting annually to Congress on educator supply, demand, diversity, and outcomes;
    - Serve as the federal focal point for collaboration among states, higher-education institutions, and local districts.

Complementing this new structure, Congress must act decisively to restore and expand the **Office of Educational Technology**, which is essential to ensuring that schools and preparation programs are equipped with the tools and expertise to integrate emerging technologies effectively. At the same time, **civil rights enforcement** must remain central to federal education policy, safeguarding the principle that every student, regardless of race, income, language, or disability, deserves a high-quality education. Finally, Congress should modernize the nation's education **data infrastructure** so that information on educator preparation, placement, and performance can be directly linked to student learning outcomes. Together, these actions would establish a lasting federal infrastructure for accountability, innovation, and equity — a structure capable of guiding the educator workforce into a new era of excellence and public trust.

2. Investment, Innovation, and Sustainability

The second lever expands investment in the educator pipeline and a redesign of the profession while tying the investment to measurable outcomes. Accordingly, AACTE calls on Congress to authorize the $1 billion **Quality Educator Partnership Program** to systemically address both educator workforce development and design.

A. We recommend Congress authorize a **$500 million competitive grant program designed to systemically address educator workforce development**, integrating key components of educator development programs such as the Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP), Hawkins Centers of Excellence (Hawkins), Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED), IDEA Personnel Preparation (Part D), and Teacher and School Leader Incentive (TSL) grant programs. This new investment, administered by the new Office of Educator Workforce, would serve as the nation's primary incubator for innovation in educator preparation. The program would do the following:

- **Support Model Demonstration Projects** that define, evaluate, and scale proven practices, including residencies, apprenticeships, Grow Your Own programming, and AI-enhanced training;
- Require **formal partnerships** between universities and PK-12 districts, ensuring that preparation programs are responsive to local labor needs;
- Dedicate funding to **Hispanic-Serving Institutions and other Minority-Serving Institutions, Tribal Colleges, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities** to diversify the educator pipeline;
- Fund **state and local research networks** to evaluate program effectiveness using rigorous, comparable metrics.

B. Recruitment and preparation will succeed only if teaching itself becomes a sustainable, respected career. Accordingly, AACTE recommends that Congress authorize an additional **$500 million competitive grant program** to states to address educator workforce design and support strategic staffing and other approaches that promote new career redesign initiatives. Key priorities include the following:

- **Team-based school structures** pairing novice and expert educators, paraprofessionals, and specialists;
- **Career-lattice systems** that reward mastery without requiring departure from the classroom;
- **Family-sustaining supports**, including the replication of **child-care vouchers** and housing assistance;
- **Compensation reform** supported by federal-state partnerships;
- **Embedded professional development systems** linking educator growth to student outcomes.

These funding strategies would prioritize **community-based collaborations** among universities, districts, unions, community organizations, and state agencies. Every funded project would be required to develop shared metrics of success, data-reporting systems, and sustainable professional-learning infrastructures. When teaching is designed as a modern, team-oriented profession with viable career progression and family support, it will again become one of the nation's most desirable careers.

3. Affordability

Evolve the TEACH Grant — currently limited by complicated post-graduation requirements — to a simplified, expanded scholarship program modeled on the National Health Service Corps. This program would offer full tuition and fees for shortage-area teacher candidates who commit to work at eligible schools, with service years linked to assistance received. It would include paid clinical residencies as well as child-care and other living expense stipends to attract and retain educators who might otherwise leave the profession.

With FY24 funding of $965 million for the Health Service Corps, an initial $500 million is recommended to launch the National Educator Service Corps, eventually increasing to at least $1 billion.

4. Research, Evidence, and the Future of Learning

The fourth lever centers on evidence and technological innovation.

AACTE proposes establishing a **National Center for Research and Technical Support on Educator Workforce Development and Design** within the Institute of Education Sciences.

The center would do the following:

- Conduct longitudinal studies on educator preparation, retention, and staffing models;
- Provide technical assistance for state and local evaluation of new workforce designs;
- Manage a dedicated *What Works Clearinghouse* channel focused on educator workforce initiatives;
- Partner with the Office of Educational Technology and the new Office of Educator Workforce Development to expand federal funding for research on Artificial Intelligence, simulation, and immersive technologies in teacher preparation.

Promising practices already demonstrate the potential of AI-driven tutoring platforms, virtual-reality classroom simulations, and avatar-based coaching tools to improve candidate readiness and reduce training costs. Federal grants should enable state and local groups to rigorously test these innovations, building an evidence base for effective use while maintaining ethical safeguards and data privacy.

Furthermore, high-impact tutoring, a research-validated strategy for accelerating student learning, should become a required clinical component of teacher preparation. Candidates who lead or co-deliver tutoring programs gain practical, data-driven instructional experience, strengthening both their competencies and student outcomes.

This integrated research and technology agenda ensures that innovation serves educators and students alike, transforming the field through continuous learning and evaluation.

A Community-Based Systems Approach

The above levers must be rooted in collaboration with diverse stakeholders and communities across the country. Every federal grant described in this paper — whether for preparation, redesign, or research — should **prioritize community-based programming** that binds universities and PK-12 districts together in shared accountability.

Such grants would require the following:

- Joint governance structures linking educator-preparation faculty with school-based mentors;
- Local advisory boards including parents, students, unions, and community organizations;
- Shared data systems for tracking teacher performance and retention;
- Continuous professional development frameworks connecting preparation to in-service learning.
- An intentional commitment and plans for teacher and other educator engagement with families and communities

This approach enforces the principle that educator workforce development is a **shared civic responsibility** — federal in investment, local in implementation, and national in impact.

Conclusion: A Renewed Federal Compact for Education

This new federal approach builds on the significant progress made in teacher preparation, emphasizing the importance of continuous improvement to meet the evolving needs of education. Classrooms of the future require that teacher education incorporate new technologies, innovative teaching methods, and program designs, ensuring teachers are well-equipped to lead in tomorrow's learning environments.

Notes

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