

To: Biden-Harris U.S. Department of Education Agency Review Team
From: National League of Cities
Re: Policy Areas of Importance to Cities, Towns and Villages
Date: January 11, 2021



As the voice of America’s cities, towns and villages, representing more than 200 million people across the country, the National League of Cities (NLC) looks forward to working with the Biden-Harris Administration and with the team at the U.S. Department of Education. While some local leaders have direct control over their schools, most do not. However, even when city officials do not play a direct role in governing their school systems, they have a strong influence to support public schools, expand alternatives for students who struggle in traditional settings, expand and enhance learning through afterschool and summer programs, provide services to children and families in community schools, and increase postsecondary success. Local leaders are working hard to drive forward stronger, comprehensive, learning and development ecosystems in partnership with schools and various community stakeholders. In the face of COVID-19, this role has become more critical than ever.

City leaders hope that the next Education Secretary will understand the balance between early childhood education, K-12 education and postsecondary education, and the important role cities play in this conversation. As cities look to partner with the Administration in the first 100 days and beyond, we hope that the following areas will be taken into consideration:

Direct Fiscal Relief to Cities, Towns and Villages

Cities are the engine of our nation’s economy and essential to America’s economic recovery. From infrastructure like roads and water to libraries and schools, to workforce development centers and afterschool programming, cities towns and villages create the conditions that drive new business, spur innovation, and attract talent and investment. However, America’s communities are hurting. As the findings of NLC’s 2020 [City Fiscal Conditions report](#) reveals, America’s cities are experiencing the fiscal consequences of the coronavirus pandemic-downturn at an unprecedented speed – and like recent recessions, it will take years for municipal budgets to recover from the impact of COVID-19. Cities, towns and villages across our country need direct fiscal relief to communities of all sizes to ensure that essential city services and important community-anchoring programs can remain in operation.

Regular Communication with Stakeholders

Local leaders are committed to intergovernmental partnership, through federalism, requiring a cooperative partnership among local, state and federal governments that must be strengthened through all levels of government. Local leaders look forward to working collaboratively with the Biden-Harris Administration and in a manner that recognizes the importance of a federal-local partnership. As such, we hope that the Department of Education will institute regularly scheduled stakeholder meetings, as well as include cities at the table when rules are being crafted to provide their important perspective and to ensure that rules are effective, implementable, offer local flexibility, avoid a “one-size-fits-all” approach and avoid any unfunded mandates.

Address Digital Equity

With over 15-16 million youth lacking adequate access to broadband and technology, and over 400,000 teachers also lacking adequate access to high-speed broadband, city leaders are working to fill this gap and providing much needed short-term access but seek to address these challenges holistically. The reasons for the digital divide in communities vary widely, from lack of modern infrastructure, to digital redlining, to unaffordable offerings from monopoly providers. In the face of COVID-19, local leaders are distributing technology, negotiating contracts with Internet Service Providers and providing supports and programs to increase digital literacy. City leaders realize that broadband is not a luxury but a utility. However, state preemption, limited federal oversight, and lack of investment limits the tools local leaders must tackle these challenges. NLC hopes that the Biden-Harris Administration will work

with them to close the digital divide in all neighborhoods, support access to devices for all students and support enhancement of digital skills for students and parents.

Support Community Learning Hubs

With school closures having impacted 74 million youth in cities, towns and villages across the United States, the essential roles that schools play in the nation's recovery has never been more apparent. In addition to the critical role that schools play in educating our nation's children, they also serve as providers of childcare, health/mental health services, food and nutrition, technology & broadband access, etc. However, schools alone cannot bear the cost – youth spend only [about 20% of time](#) in schools. Cities can and do play key roles in the development of greater enriching learning experiences alongside schools, but in the absence of federal relief, cities are deeply constrained. NLC has been working with cities to rethink these collaborations by leading efforts to strengthen partnerships between schools & communities through models such as [Community Learning Hubs](#). Over 60 communities so far have implemented the community learning hubs model in various forms based on resource availability. Cities look forward to advancing this model with the Administration, non-profit, community-based and faith-based leaders to respond to critical student need for in-person instruction, childcare, and technology/internet access.

Continue to Support Afterschool and Summer Learning Programs

New data released in December 2020 from the Afterschool Alliance shows that for every child in an afterschool program three are waiting to get in, equaling almost 25 million students. City leaders have taken a strong leadership role in programs that support learners after school, during the summer and during important transition times. Afterschool programs are critical towards ensuring that young people are safe and engaged in educational opportunities while their parents and caregivers are working. These programs simultaneously support the local workforce while also strengthen the educational fabric of the community. NLC has long supported the Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Center program and we look forward to continuing to partner with this Administration on this important program with hopes of its expansion to meet the ever-growing need for afterschool and summer learning programs.

Incentivize the Community School Model

A Community School is a strategy that coordinates relationships and resources through a public school to accelerate equitable outcomes in health, education and employment. City leaders are uniquely positioned to help schools provide expanded learning opportunities during the school day, after school, and in the summer; offer essential health and social supports and services; and engage families and communities as assets in the lives of their children and youth. Such strategies promote education success and serve as an efficient and cost-effective strategy to ensure that students and their families have access to the services and supports available in the community that they need to thrive. The key piece to the community school model's success is the role of a community school coordinator based at the school building whose role it is to manage partnerships and bring in community services aligned with the needs of the students and their families. The community school model has grown and thrived over the past decade as a proven strategy with results showing higher student attendance, strong family and community engagement, and improved academic outcomes. NLC has long been a supporter of the Full Service Schools Act and the more recent Full Services School Expansion Act proposal. NLC looks forward to working with the Biden-Harris Administration and the new Education Secretary to encourage and incentivize school leaders to consider using the community school model as a school improvement strategy that puts students and their community first.

Support Student Reengagement and Dropout Recovery

The Department of Education should resume its key role to foster the spread of city- and district-wide dropout recovery strategies including the establishment of Reengagement Centers. In addition, in view of the substantial numbers of students who have lost contact with schools since the advent of the pandemic and the turn toward online and hybrid learning environments, the Department must work with cities, local and state education agencies,

in part through the Regional Education Labs, to assess the scale and dynamics of the student reengagement issue; and support cities, schools, and partner organizations to seize opportunities and overcome barriers to reengagement.

Partnering with the U.S. Department of Labor to Address Workforce Continuum

The Department of Education, in close partnership with the Department of Labor (DOL), has an important role to play in promoting and supporting local connections between the K-12 system and higher education institutions and the public workforce system, as well as programs under the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act. City leaders look forward to working with the Administration on local efforts to scale apprenticeship, work-based learning and other career-focused programs that marry education and job training as well as support wrap-around services that enhance student success and credential attainment and reconnect dropouts with educational pathways. This includes programs like Summer Youth Employment, that provide important opportunities to our nation's youth each summer and in some cases year-long and supporting the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education resume its partnership role with DOL in strengthening education pathways for Opportunity Youth. Expanding investments in local initiatives as well as federal technical assistance must also prioritize serving workers with barriers to employment.

Expand Pell Grants to Include High-Quality, Shorter-Term Programs

Expand Pell grants and other financial aid programs to cover workforce skills training connected to strong labor-market demand and outcomes, such as short-term programs leading to in-demand credentials. Many higher education and short-term certificate training programs are not covered by financial aid, but they are often the stepping-stone to workforce re-entry, a better job and a meaningful wage.⁶ The Department of Labor, in partnership with the Department of Education, can also promote stackable short-term credentials that connect to degree programs that provide long-term opportunities for career progression. We strongly encourage the department to focus on program quality and equity.

Key Documents to Highlight (APPENDIX):

- 1) [Community Learning Hubs](#)
- 2) [Afterschool Alliance America After 3pm survey report](#)
- 3) [Community Schools Playbook](#)
- 4) [Community Schools: An Evidence-Based Strategy for Equitable School Improvement](#)
- 5) [Addressing Student Reengagement in the Time of COVID-19](#)