

ENHANCING EDUCATION BEFORE, INSIDE, AND OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM



FIRST FOCUS

MAKING CHILDREN & FAMILIES THE PRIORITY



Upward mobility and opportunity have long been the hallmarks of American society, as generation after generation surpassed their parents' achievements. But declining high school graduation rates threaten this progress, especially for young Americans of color. First Focus believes the United States can improve graduation rates and restore access to the American Dream by strengthening policies and programs to meet the needs of students before, inside, and outside of the classroom.

BEFORE THE CLASSROOM:

Early Childhood Education and Child Care.

Ensuring that all children enter the classroom ready to learn is a central element of First Focus's mission to graduate every child from high school ready for college and the workforce. First Focus also believes that affordable, high-quality child care is essential to supporting the healthy development of children. Both approaches require a comprehensive approach, where children from birth to five, have access to high-quality educational opportunities and a safe environment in which to thrive.

INSIDE THE CLASSROOM:

Graduation Completion Rates. Over one million youth fail to graduate from high school every year. The proportions are particularly concerning among students of color. First Focus is working to strengthen federal accountability requirements to promote graduation and completion rates, including advocating for standard graduation benchmarks, extensive wraparound supports for students and strengthened federal support for high schools.

Equity for English Learners. While English Learners (EL) in the United States come from over 400 different language backgrounds, now

more than ever is it critical to address their academic needs to help narrow the achievement gap.

Regarding the education of English Learners, First Focus advocates for policies that are research-based, culturally competent, engage parents, and promote high quality instruction and ethical assessments.

Standards and Accountability. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has strengthened accountability in education. First Focus works to ensure that parents and the community have the information and tools they need to play a meaningful role in the accountability process. First Focus also ensures that all children, including those who are learning English, are appropriately included in accountability and assessment systems.

Ensuring Student Access to Fully Prepared and Effective Teachers Under ESEA and HEA Title II. Research indicates that teacher quality is the most important school factor impacting student achievement. Yet, students in low-income and minority schools are far less likely to have access to well-prepared and effective teachers, as are students with disabilities and English learners. In many communities, students experience a revolving door of untrained and under-supported novice teachers who cannot sustain a high-quality education. To promote educational equity by supporting the creation of a stable supply of qualified, effective educators for all communities, First Focus supports principles for ESEA and HEA Title II reauthorization that focuses all students being entitled to teachers who are qualified (fully prepared and fully certified), as well as effective. Furthermore, ESEA comparability provisions should be strengthened to ensure equitable resources and equally qualified teachers across schools serving different populations of students, making certain that low-income students, students of color, English learners and students with disabilities, do not experience disproportionate numbers of uncertified, inexperienced, or out-of-field teachers.

For Additional Information Contact:

Roberto Viramontes

Vice President

Education Policy

RobertoV@firstfocus.net

202.657.0677



OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM:

School–Community Partnerships. The challenge of educating our students must not fall on schools alone; the whole community must be engaged. First Focus works to create policy incentives for closer and strategic collaboration between schools and community entities. First Focus believes that Federal policy should continue to prioritize school connections with community organizations (non-profits, local government agencies, businesses, health centers, human service centers, youth development programs) that can play a strategic role in fostering academic success. In order to further address teaching and learning needs in a comprehensive fashion, these partnerships will effectively leverage community resources and coordinate support services to meet students’ needs inside and outside the classroom.

Transition Programs for Middle School and 9th Grade.

When a student progresses from elementary school to middle school and then on to high school, it represents more than a change in grade level; it also encompasses a significant change in their learning environment. For students who have specific learning needs, their transition should be accompanied by targeted programs and services to help foster academic success. First Focus promotes the importance of having strong transition programs (summer learning strategies, camps, and bridge programs) that are research-based and utilize student data in order to strategically address student needs. Schools and students will benefit from the investment in support mechanisms during critical transition periods.

Student Mobility and Homelessness. Over a decade ago, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that one in six of the nation’s third-graders moved schools three or more times since the first grade. Further, GAO found that excessive mobility negatively impacts student achievement. First Focus works with housing, education, and child welfare advocates to reduce homelessness and student mobility in an effort to increase educational opportunities and academic achievement for this student population.

Dropout/Push-Out Recovery and Multiple-Pathways for Disconnected Youth. Children and youth do not develop according to the silos in which they are served by federal

programs. First Focus is working to strengthen federal policy to more effectively leverage public-private partnerships in order to meet the comprehensive needs of young people. In partnership with other youth organizations, First Focus advocates for the establishment of re-engagement programs that offer a multi-faceted approach to meet the diverse needs of dropouts/push-outs while developing new accountability mechanisms that will incent public schools to re-enroll dropouts as well.

Parent and Family Engagement. Of all the elements that compose the daily fabric of a child’s life, parents play a tremendous role in their educational achievement. Therefore, First Focus believes in the value of family involvement in education. First Focus works to promote home-school partnerships that provide parents with the knowledge and skills necessary to become strong advocates for their children’s education. By promoting parent engagement, schools gain a better sense of the needs of the student and family thus being better able to provide an equitable education for them.

CROSS-CUTTING PRIORITIES:

Funding Equity for Education. Particularly in recent years, federal policy-makers have failed to fully equip states and school districts with the resources needed to achieve federal education goals, particularly those established by NCLB. First Focus works with allies in the education community, as well as non-traditional partners, to support increased investment for children in the federal budget, including education.

Children of Immigrants. Children of immigrants make up 20 percent of the U.S. population. This figure includes undocumented and legal immigrants, as well as the U.S.-born children of immigrants who make up the majority of these children (61 percent). Moreover, immigrants make up nearly 30 percent of America’s dropouts. First Focus’s approach to education recognizes the changing demographics of our nation’s children and strives to ensure that all children in America, regardless of immigration status, have access to high-quality educational opportunities before, inside, and outside of the classroom.