



From Washington to the Classroom: How Diminishing Federal Oversight Impacts Teacher Preparation, Instructional Autonomy, and Equity in Education

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Abstract

Historically, federal oversight has functioned as the primary vehicle through which the U.S. public education system can operate in a consistent, equitable, and democratic manner. This study identifies the mechanisms by which federal oversight can create uniform expectations among states and reduce the disparate effects of geography, local capacity, and resource distribution. Using historical court decisions and federal education policies along with scholarly literature focused on equity, this study demonstrates that federal oversight has provided enhanced protection of civil rights, accountability systems, and access to educational services for students with disabilities and students from low-income communities. The study further examines how diminished federal oversight shifts responsibility to state and local governments with highly variable priorities and resources, transforming equal educational opportunity from a protected right into a location-based privilege.

Keywords: federal oversight; teacher preparation; instructional autonomy; equity; education policy

Introduction

Equal access to quality education is a right of all students in this country that the U.S. federal government has ensured for decades. The right includes the establishment of shared standards for fairness, opportunity, and professional practice in public schools, while reflecting

on the national commitment to educational equity (Learning for Justice, 2023; Cross, 2015). The federal involvement includes, but is not limited to civil rights compliance, teacher preparation expectations, equitable funding, and accountability to protect underserved communities from inequitable practices in state and local governance (U.S. Department of Education [ED], n.d.-a; Morgan, 2022; Learning Policy Institute, 2020; EPI, 2023; Darling-Hammond, 2023a). Increased educational inequity necessitated federal accountability. However, to further minimize federal reach and allow for great innovation and flexibility amongst states, federal oversight of educational accountability has increasingly decentralized to states and local education authorities (Learning Policy, 2024; Gartner, 2023; White House, 2025; Stand Together, 2025; Meoded, 2025). As a result of this increased decentralization there is now more variation as to how individual students' educational rights are protected. The research suggests that lessened federal oversight may lead to increased instability in teacher retention, unequal distribution of educational funding, weaker systems of accountability, lower quality instruction, and an increase in the risk factors associated with student safety and well-being (Nowicki, 2022a; Nguyen et. al, 2024). This article examines how declining federal involvement affects public education, teacher preparation, instructional decisions, and the impact of equity in education. The analyses center on who is advantaged and disadvantaged with a focus on historically underserved communities.

Teacher Preparation

The U.S. Department of Education sets clear rules for teacher preparation programs that receive federal funding. These rules require transparent data, strong results, accountability, quality preparation, and service to high-needs schools. For data collection and reporting, the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA) Title II and its 1998 reauthorization required states and institutions to regularly report on teacher preparation programs to address persistent concerns regarding nationwide concerns for uneven program quality, while pushing for increased accountability to improve student outcomes (Huang, 2002; U.S. Congress, 2018). The data reporting and collection supported the federal government's mandate to transparent accountability systems by requiring states to identify both effective and in-effective programs through measures such as licensure exams, job placement, and performance ratings, while ensuring this information accessible to the public (U.S. Congress, 2018).

Program effectiveness measured the teacher preparation programs' ability to prepare and prove that teachers can deliver quality instruction, cultivate well-managed learning spaces, and enhance student performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). To ensure alignment with national needs, the federal government increased support to prepare teachers for high-need schools and areas such as underserved communities, Special Education, and STEM due to the lack of quality teachers in these areas. The expectations represented the federal government's efforts to intervene and provide students with a fair chance at a strong education (Huang, 2002; U.S. Congress, 2018). While the federal government provides mandates and oversights for teacher preparation programs, the states are the primary architect of teacher preparation systems. Presently, states exercise primary authority regarding the accreditation, evaluation, and ongoing improvement of teacher preparation programs. These standards include how the program assesses students, how they will evaluate the program through continuing assessment, and how they will continue to improve their programs based on those assessments (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-b; U.S. Congress, 2018). The federal government has historically supported equity in teacher preparation by regulating performance indicators and directing financial resources. When this oversight recedes, the responsibility for defining and monitoring program quality could shift unevenly across states, which increases the likelihood of inconsistent preparation outcomes and weakened public accountability. This risk is evidenced in a 2015 federal review of seven states, which found that none fully met Higher Education Act Title II requirements for identifying low-performing teacher preparation programs. According to the Government Accountability Office (2015), failures in consistent identification of monitoring undermine national efforts to ensure that teachers enter classrooms with comparable levels of preparation and effectiveness.

Instructional Decision-Making

Federal policies have strategically promoted equity that impact instructional decisions through funding, accountability and civil rights enforcement. The U.S. Department of Education's (2017) Every Student Succeeds Act placed accountability measures on schools receiving Title I funding such as the requirement of implementing evidenced-based instructional strategies. Additionally, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), enacted into law by the U.S. Congress (2004), placed direct requirements for the development of

individualized education programs and providing students with disabilities a least restrictive environment for their educational programming. While civil rights mandates provide equal opportunities for instruction for all groups, federal research is focused on increasing the effectiveness in instruction. The U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES) provides funding for research, which has proven its effectiveness, while developing resources for instructional improvement. Resources developed by the U.S. Department of Education includes the What Works Clearinghouse to support instructional practice (NCEE, 2022). IES supports research-informed decision-making through national data collection and analysis, instructional research, and evaluations of programs supported by Title I and IDEA (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023), and other policies that affect educational practice (Mandinach & Honey, 2022). Accountability systems were established at the federal level during the No Child Left Behind era, linking instructional practices to performance measured by student assessment results in low-performing schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). While the federal government no longer requires states to establish accountability systems, it does require states to adhere to minimum standards and provide data disaggregated by subgroups of students, and IDEA requires each state to provide a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities (Education Commission of the States, 2024; U.S. Department of Education, 2020a; U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

While much of the accountability lies within the states, the relinquishment of federal requirements could severely diminish transparency and nationwide alignment in the oversight process. Federal accountability authority would cease to exist resulting in the elimination of collection and data reporting within ESSA with a major impact on the ability to identify inequities and inconsistencies across states. Increased state authority in the development of their accountability systems will lead to the reduction of federal support for research that uses evidence-based instruction for the Institute of Education Science and the What Works Clearing House (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2023; Mandinach & Honey, 2022). Moreover, this may hinder states' ability to intervene in failing schools, which can exacerbate achievement gaps (Darling-Hammond, 2023a; U.S. Department of Education, 2017b). In addition, if the federal government eliminates its authority over how it distributes funds tied to accountability measures, then potential risks could occur on federal funding allocated through Title

I, Title II, and IDEA that protect civil rights and ensure equal access to education (Darling-Hammond, 2023c; U.S. Department of Education, 2020b).

Educational Equity and Justice

For decades, educational efforts have targeted the reduction of academic achievement gaps with the basis of respect for human dignity. The landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which ruled that segregation was unconstitutional, and *Lau v. Nichols* (1974), which ruled that states and local districts failed to remove barriers to discrimination, but rather perpetuated inequities (Kluger, 2019; Orfield & Eaton, 1996). To counteract these historical inequities, federal programs such as the Individuals with Disabilities Act, Every Student Succeeds Act, and Title I were developed to provide greater protection and supplemental support to historically disadvantaged student populations (Braun & Bryan, 2024). For example, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was influenced by landmark court cases such as *Mills v. Board of Education* and *PARC v. Pennsylvania*, which legally established education as an entitlement for students with disabilities (Martin et al., 2023). Other landmark court decisions, including *Plyer v. Doe* (1982), *Abbott v. Burke* (1985-2011), and *Serrano v. Priest* (1971) documented the inequities in funding and access to education that existed due to wealth disparities among school districts (Learning Policy Institute, 2024b; Orfield & Pfleger, 2024). Those inequities prompted Congress to pass ESEA and Title I legislation, in order to create greater equity in education beyond the limits of a district's ability to fund its own school (U.S. Department of Education, 2023b). Thus, the reduction of federal oversight increases the risk of creating inequitable funding models, reducing protections afforded to students under the law, and creating greater variability in how each state responds to the needs of their students, ultimately risking the equitable distribution of high-quality educational opportunities (Darling-Hammond, 2023b; Nguyen, 2024b; Nowicki, 2022b; Baker & Corcoran, 2023).

Building on broader concerns of educational inequity, students in high-poverty and under-resourced schools face the likelihood of being taught by inexperienced teachers when federal protections are weakened. The reduction of federal oversight could widen disparities in teacher quality particularly in rural, special education, and low-income settings. Therefore, federal involvement is an effective tool in reducing disparity in teacher quality between schools through shared expectations among all public schools, the funding of teacher training and

development programs, and the use of objective, empirical data to assess labor market needs for educators (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Learning Policy Institute, 2025). This results in access to qualified teachers increasingly depending on geography and demographics rather than students' educational rights (Darling-Hammond, 2023a). Other areas of concern for educational justice and equity relate to the reduction of federal oversight including discretionary accountability by states, deeper teacher shortages, increased risk of educational rights becoming privileged rather than guaranteed for all students (Nguyen, 2024c; Nowicki, 2022b).

Conceptual / Theoretical Framework

This conceptual framework examines how policy is viewed as an opportunity for educators to act morally and thus provide fair and equitable access to education when grounded within three distinct theoretical frameworks: Critical Pedagogy, Distributive Justice Theory, and Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Pedagogy (Freire, 2018; Rawls, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Paris & Alim, 2017). The collective scholarly work of each of these theoretical frameworks demonstrates that providing educational equity requires creating structural supports to assure all students have equal access to participation, resources, and high-quality instructional support (Darling-Hammond, 2023b; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Paris & Alim, 2017; Freire, 2018). Federal oversight has historically been used to create consistent expectations for school and school districts, which limits the degree of variability among states and school districts and promotes equitable outcomes for students (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Reduced oversight will apply increased political pressure of teachers to narrow their practice to focus on providing compliant instruction, while also limiting opportunities for critical and inclusive instruction (Freire, 2018). In addition, according to the Distributive Justice Theory, the lack of equitable funding and access represents a failure to uphold an individual's rights under the theory of distributive justice (Darling-Hammond 2023b; Rawls, 2020). Research on Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017) indicates that when equity protections weaken, the reduction in culturally affirming instructional practices and the inclusion of diverse student populations occurs. The results of weakening federal oversight are anticipated rather than speculative.

Overall contribution to the Field and Conclusion

Many reasons exist as to why federal oversight is necessary in achieving fairness and equity in public education. The executive order on March 20, 2025 proposed to close the U.S. Department of Education and reduce its workforce highlighting the speed at which federal protections may weaken as new priorities emerge (Reuter, 2025; Brown, 2025). When funding and special education oversight transitions from the federal level to state or local levels, it becomes challenging to ensure that all students have an equal chance to succeed due to the likelihood of uneven standards and accountability across states. Therefore, if federal oversight is significantly reduced or totally diminished, the quality of education will become highly dependent on where one lives and what local resources are available. In other words, the evidence is clear: reducing federal oversight would transform equal opportunity from a collective national and public commitment to a privilege based on circumstance.

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