



FOR GENDER EQUITY

# PROMOTE OPPORTUNITY FOR YOUNG WOMEN AND GIRLS IN YOUR STATE

Young women are students, workers, and parents. As young women, they face unique barriers—from school pushout to inability to access healthcare to unfair wages—that make it harder for them to succeed. Unfair and discriminatory policies can keep young women and girls from making the best decisions for themselves about their education, health, jobs, families, and futures. That's why for many young people, it can feel like the system is rigged against them. According to a March 2018 NBC News/GenForward survey, a majority of young adults aged 18 to 34 says that the country is currently on the wrong track (70% of Black, 62% of Asian, 62% of Latinx, and 62% of white people polled).

Young people know it doesn't have to be this way. They are looking for policymakers to stand up for them and enact policies that will help them succeed and create a more just and fair future.

## Young Women and Girls Need Policies that Will Work for Them

Starting as early as preschool, Black and Native American students of all genders are subject to harsh and discriminatory discipline policies that can force them out of school and have long lasting effects on their futures. Sexual harassment and violence is also a pervasive issue for students starting in grade school and continuing into college. And pregnant and

parenting students—whether in secondary school, college, or grad school—may face discrimination or be denied simple accommodations that would allow them to remain in and succeed in school. Many young people also face particular barriers to accessing health care, including college students who may be unable to access necessary reproductive health care services. Young people need fair pay to help support themselves and their families, yet many states allow them to be paid a wage that is lower than the minimum wage and many employers subject them to unpredictable work hours incompatible with school or training or caring for themselves or family.

Schools, health care providers, and employers should not stand in the way of young people working to secure their futures, and government should help eliminate these barriers. Lawmakers and advocates who want to support young people must put forward a progressive policy agenda that tackles these issues to help young people get a good start in life rather than deny them opportunities.

Policies that will work together to support opportunities for young women and girls include:

**Ending Discriminatory Discipline Policies:** Discriminatory discipline policies can push girls out of school with long lasting effects on their education. Black girls and Native American girls, for example, are more likely than white

For help crafting legislation, talking points, fact sheets, and for state-specific policy research and data, please contact us at [playbook@nwlc.org](mailto:playbook@nwlc.org).

girls to be suspended from school, even though they are no more likely to misbehave nor is their misbehavior more severe. Instead, these girls of color are more likely to be suspended for minor offenses like dress code violations, or subjective offenses like “defiance.” This keeps girls out of the classroom, making it harder for them to succeed and increasing their chances of dropping out or being involved with the juvenile justice system. States can reverse this trend by passing laws that urge educators to learn to identify and address the underlying problems that contribute to perceived misbehavior in the classroom, end suspensions and expulsions for minor or subjective offenses, and replace exclusionary discipline with alternatives that keep students in the classroom while building positive social and emotional connections to school.

#### **Addressing Sexual Harassment and Assault in K-12**

**and Higher Education:** Violence starts early. One in five girls age 14 to 18 report being sexually assaulted—similar to the rate of women who are sexually assaulted in college. Thus, waiting until college to talk to students about sexual harassment and violence is too late. To ensure all students have a safe and healthy learning environment, states should enhance legal anti-harassment protections for students. States should also require schools to teach consent and healthy relationship behavior and conduct climate surveys to gauge whether students feel safe in school or on campus.

**Supporting Pregnant and Parenting Students:** Students who are pregnant or parenting often encounter hostile schools and teachers who punish them for missing class because of their pregnancy or because of their child’s illness. States can implement basic protections that enshrine and improve upon federal requirements by requiring schools to excuse pregnancy-related absences and absences to care for children who are ill. This will ensure that pregnant and parenting students are able to take care of themselves and their children while continuing to succeed in school.

#### **Ensuring Access to Reproductive Health Care on College**

**Campuses:** Students should be able to make decisions about their education, careers, and family planning on their own terms and timelines. Yet, students continue to face

significant barriers to accessing many reproductive health care services. States can use their authority to regulate self-funded student health insurance to require coverage of comprehensive reproductive health care, including birth control, abortion, pre-natal care, childbirth, and post-partum care. States can also ensure access to comprehensive reproductive health care services at campus health centers, or referrals to these services when appropriate. Coverage of and access to reproductive health care facilitates the decision-making that empowers college students to take charge of their health, education, and future.

#### **Raising the Minimum Wage and Ending Abusive Work**

**Schedules for Students and Young Workers:** While young people represent a relatively small share of the low-wage workforce overall, most young people who work receive low pay. For example, while teenagers represent just under 10 percent of the working people who would benefit if the federal minimum wage rose to \$15 by 2024, nearly 80 percent of all teens who work would get a raise if the minimum wage went up to \$15 by 2024, because their current wages are so low. Many young people are working to help support their families or to pay for college—but teens and students are often subject to carve-outs that allow employers to pay them even less than the minimum wage. They are also more likely to work in jobs that have unpredictable work schedules, which can lead to unstable income and make it incredibly difficult to succeed in school, participate in extracurricular school activities, or pursue post-secondary education or training. States can improve economic security for young people and their families by raising the minimum wage and eliminating the lower minimum wages applicable to youth, students, tipped workers, and other groups; and by implementing baseline protections to give working people a voice in their schedule and more predictable and stable work hours.