



FOR GENDER JUSTICE



STATE POLICY AGENDA

PROMOTE OPPORTUNITY FOR YOUNG WOMEN AND GIRLS IN YOUR STATE

Young women and girls, including trans and cisgender women and girls, as well as gender-nonconforming people are students, workers, and parents. As such, they face unique barriers—from school pushout to inability to access health care to unfair wages—that make it harder for them to succeed. Unfair and discriminatory policies can keep these young people from making the best decisions for themselves about their education, health, jobs, families, and futures. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed inequities that already existed in these systems for Black, Latinx, and Native American communities—leading many young people to feel like the system is rigged against them. According to an [October 2020 Ipsos/Vice News poll](#), nearly two-thirds (65%) of young adults ages 18 to 30 say that “politicians don’t care about people like me.”

Young people know it doesn’t have to be this way. They are looking for policymakers to show 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, Latinx, 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 schools are more likely to disbelieve and punish women and girls of color (especially Black women and girls), LGBTQ students, pregnant and parenting students, and students with disabilities. Additionally, 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 members.

Schools, health care providers, and employers should not get in the way of young people working to secure their futures, and government should help eliminate these barriers—centering the young people of color for whom barriers are often the greatest. Policymakers 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 girls to be suspended from school, even though they are no more likely to misbehave nor is their misbehavior more severe. Instead, these girls are more likely to be suspended for minor offenses like [dress code](#) violations or subjective offenses like “defiance.” These practices keep girls out of the classroom, making it harder for them to succeed and increasing their chances of being pushed out of school or being involved with the juvenile legal system. States can reverse this trend by passing laws that ensure educators have the tools to identify and address

their implicit biases as well as the underlying problems that contribute to perceived misbehavior in the classroom. States can also pass laws that end suspensions and expulsions for minor or subjective offenses and that replace exclusionary discipline with alternatives that keep students in the classroom while building positive social and emotional connections to school.

Investing in Counselors, Not Criminalization: In the wake of a nationwide reckoning with racism and police violence coupled with a pandemic that has highlighted the educational inequities that have long existed in school districts with significant populations of Black, Latinx, and Native American students, many youth advocates have pushed school districts to divest from resources that criminalize students and instead invest in resources that allow students to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. For example, [3 million students](#) attend schools with police but no school nurse. [Six million students](#) attend schools with police but no school psychologist. At the same time, a growing body of research has [not found any evidence](#) that school-based police make schools safer; instead, the presence of school-based police has been shown to [increase the likelihood](#) that children—[especially Black children](#)—will be arrested for normal childlike behavior. For example, while [Black girls](#) are only 16% of girls in elementary and secondary schools, they make up [39% of girls arrested on campus](#). During this time especially, when students are not only disconnected from school but also wrestling with the emotional toll of living through a pandemic and recession that has disproportionately affected Black, Latinx, and Native American communities, policymakers should not only replace school-based police with mental and other health professionals, but also solicit and include the input of students, parents, and community advocates on how to invest in better, safer schools for all students.

Addressing Sexual Assault in K-12 & Higher Education: Violence starts early. [One in five girls](#) ages 14 to 18 report being kissed or touched without their consent—similar to the rate of women who report being 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 require schools](#) to teach all students about consent and healthy relationships, train all staff how to recognize and address sexual harassment, and conduct regular climate surveys to gauge whether students feel safe in school. In addition, states should require schools to provide supportive measures to all students who report sexual harassment and prohibit schools from disciplining those who break a school rule in connection to their own victimization. Furthermore, students who want a school-based resolution should be able to choose, without pressure, between a prompt and equitable disciplinary investigation or non-disciplinary proceeding, such as a restorative justice process, that is conducted by trained individuals.

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. The shift to online learning during

the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the digital learning gap and revealed biases hostile to student parents, such as teachers not allowing students to turn off cameras to nurse or penalizing students for tending to child care needs. States can implement basic protections that enshrine and improve upon federal requirements by requiring schools to explicitly outline lactation accommodations, inform students of their right to have pregnancy-related absences excused, as well as excuse absences for parenting students to care for children who are ill. States can also provide technology supports to help parenting students navigate learning from home. 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. These barriers have been exacerbated further by the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying economic crisis, and also by anti-abortion politicians who have attempted to exploit the pandemic to block patient access to time-sensitive, essential abortion care. States can use their authority to regulate self-funded student health insurance to require coverage of comprehensive reproductive health care, including birth control, abortion, prenatal 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 10% of the working people who would benefit if the federal minimum wage rose to \$15 by 2025, [nearly two-thirds of all teens who work would get a raise if the minimum wage went up to \\$15](#) by 2025, 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. Black and Latinx workers, in particular, are more likely than their white counterparts to be [paid low wages](#) and to [experience volatile work schedules](#). 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 schedules and more predictable and stable work hours.