

The February 14, 2025, “[Dear Colleague](#)” letter from the Acting Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education (USED) threatens efforts to ensure every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential through individualized support and inclusive educational practices.

The letter is an attempt to reinterpret civil rights laws and redefine DEI initiatives in order to dismantle programming that is vital to the freedom to learn and to belong in our schools.

It is critical that board members and administrators know: “This guidance does not have the force and effect of law and does not bind the public or create new legal standards” (as stated in the letter’s footnote). For a detailed legal summary and analysis, we encourage you to review [this statement](#) from Art Coleman with Education Counsel, a national education consulting firm working with policymakers to significantly improve education for all students.

Instead of providing clarification, the USED letter presents one more distraction from the daily work of local educators to enable each child within their care to fulfill their potential.

### **The Real Threat: Losing Focus on Students' Individualized Needs**

While these unprecedented federal attacks on education focus on vague and confusing statements about diversity, equity, and inclusion, real barriers to learning continue to go unaddressed. Most Ohioans and Americans agree schools are struggling with:

- **Teacher shortages**, especially in high-need districts.
- **Gaps in school funding** that disproportionately affect low-income and rural communities.
- **Mental health crises**, with fewer resources for student support services.
- **Community wealth disparities**, where students of color and economically disadvantaged students are less likely to have access to preschool, experienced teachers, advanced coursework, and other essential school resources.

These are the issues that demand attention in order to ensure every child has an equal opportunity to succeed in learning and life.

### **Action Steps for School Leaders**

Honesty for Ohio Education encourages school leaders to be bold in these challenging times and prioritize students’ needs. Inclusion for each student ultimately benefits all students. We must not allow fear mongering and confusion to dictate policy. School leaders should:

- **Stay the Course on Individual Access to Learning**
  - Do not abandon DEI programs out of fear. The letter does not change the law.

- Continue implementing research-backed strategies that support all students, including inclusive recruitment, mentorship programs, and individualized interventions and enrichments that enable each student’s access to learning.
- **Educate Your Staff**
  - Clearly communicate to teachers, staff, and families that the letter is a political missive, not a legal mandate.
  - Remind staff that the administration and board diligently review and revise school policies and procedures to ensure compliance with current law.
- **Strengthen the Narrative Around Inclusion**
  - Proactively frame diversity, equity, and inclusion as an essential part of ensuring fair opportunities for every student. Supporting one child’s individualized learning does not take away from another child’s individualized learning.
  - Emphasize that student success and well-being depend on learning environments where every student from any background can thrive.
  - Push back against misinformation that labels all diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts as discriminatory—equity work is about removing barriers for each individual, not creating them.
- **Conduct a Legal Risk Assessment**
  - Work with legal counsel to evaluate DEI-related policies and ensure they align with existing federal law and the SFFA ruling.
  - Review policies to ensure they focus on equity-based student success measures, rather than explicit racial classifications.
- **Monitor and Challenge Federal Overreach**
  - Stay informed about legal challenges to state and federal government overreach. Many of the administration’s education policies are being challenged through lawsuits, and courts have blocked similar measures in the past.
  - Stay connected with education coalitions, advocacy groups, and legal experts challenging these policies in court, including Honesty for Ohio Education.

## Our Way Forward

Now is the time to work for individualized supports that we know benefit children. Now more than ever, educators must protect inclusive education for all students, **ensuring each child has access to the essential resources and individualized support they need to succeed.**

As school leaders, we must **stay strong, stay united, and keep fighting for every student.**