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# Keeping It Together: Standing Strong and Pushing Forward

## What to Watch Part 1

For decades, we've all witnessed that almost every obstacle in American society is disproportionately more challenging for women and girls—especially women and girls of color and those with lower incomes.

The results of Election Day 2024 further put women and girls at a disadvantage, understanding that many of the policies proposed by the federal administration and several states do women and girls of color no favors—and in some cases set supportive policies back decades.

As you may know, in 2024, Advocacy & Communication Solutions (ACS) created the ACS Fund for Women and Girls to specifically support young women and girls'—particularly those of color and/or low income—access to higher education, reproductive justice, and public sector leadership. Naturally, we're watching these areas closely.

In this two-part What to Watch newsletter, we'll look at potential implications broadly and as they may affect specific issues for women and girls.

## The Big Picture

Overall, the ACS team is keeping an eye on three (3) trends we expect to see at the federal level as a new administration takes the helm. These trends are affecting multiple federal programs and policies in education, reproductive justice, women's leadership, and more.

1. The new administration has begun to **use rules and executive orders to eliminate protections related to gender and race** under Title IX and the Civil Rights Act. While legislative activity is also another viable vehicle to make such changes, the requirement of a supermajority to make some of these changes is a tough challenge for the slim majority in Congress.

2. While many sources of federal funding require Congressional action to eliminate, the new administration is already **using the power it has to chip away at the scope and size of various grants, programs, and services to minimize their funding and impact.** These might include things like women's health, services to historically disadvantaged children such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and more.

### The ACS Fund for Women & Girls

ACS Co-Founders Lori McClung and Scarlett Boudier started the ACS Fund for Women & Girls to celebrate the company's 20th anniversary. Thank you to those who contributed generously

to the fund last year, allowing us to make \$42,000 in grants to three organizations in December 2024—The Matriots, Preterm, and Say Yes Cleveland. This year, as new federal and state leadership is seated, the work of the ACS Fund is more important than ever. Please consider supporting this work with your financial contribution to the ACS Fund at its new home, The Community Foundation of Lorain County. Donate today!



3. Funding for federal programs such as Title I (**funding that provides support to schools for economically disadvantaged children and the lesser-known Secure Rural Schools program<sup>1,2</sup>, which is a lifeline for rural counties to support schools, road upkeep, and other needs**) could be distributed as block grants under the guise of “flexibility to states.” They also might include new parameters around the use of those Title funds. Look for rules associated with Title I block grants to reinforce policies such as school choice, conservative curriculum standards, reductions in educator qualifications, and weakening of unions.

It remains to be seen just how far some lawmakers at federal and state levels will push against the progress our country has made in support of women and girls. We know, however, that there are countless organizations—our clients among them—that have the commitment and knowledge to outlast proposed changes. This work is hard, but it’s never been easy, and we know without a doubt that we all were made to persevere in the work of justice, equity, and belonging.

## Take Action

Specific actions we can take will arise over the coming months and years, but there are things we can do RIGHT NOW to not only stand strong but keep pushing forward.

### Assess what is bluster and what is real.

While truth might be tough to assess, we cannot immediately assume the worst and throw up our hands. Get to know the full story. Lean on ACS content and read from reliable sources that outline the facts. At the national level, we like [The Hill](#), [Education Week](#), and [AllSides](#). (You’ll find more specific resources in the topic areas below.)

### Lead with your values, even if federal or state actions undermine them.

There is always something to fight for when it comes to women and girls. Stand up for what you believe in with courage and conviction. Others will follow and you are not alone. Learn how you can push back against regulations and when/how to take an issue to court. In addition to social justice attorneys in your area, reach out to organizations like the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#) or an [American Civil Liberties Union \(ACLU\)](#) chapter in your state.

<sup>1</sup>[calmatters.org/education/k-12-education/2024/06/rural-schools/](https://calmatters.org/education/k-12-education/2024/06/rural-schools/)

<sup>2</sup>As of December 23, 2024, the US House had failed to reauthorize the Secure Rural Schools Act. [oregoncapitalchronicle.com/2024/12/23/u-s-house-fails-to-reauthorize-20-year-old-bipartisan-bill-to-fund-rural-schools-communities/](https://oregoncapitalchronicle.com/2024/12/23/u-s-house-fails-to-reauthorize-20-year-old-bipartisan-bill-to-fund-rural-schools-communities/)

**Plan what you can offer to the conversation that is unique and provides greater insight to decision makers or community members.**

Every issue has multiple facets, and presenting different ways of looking at a question or challenge can diffuse polarizing rhetoric and bring more perspective into the discussion. It's not only disarming but also can lead to better decision making.

Below we provide more detail about specific areas and policy changes to watch in **K-12 and higher education**. In Part 2 of What to Watch, we'll look at **reproductive justice and women's leadership**.

## ISSUE: K-12 Education

When President Jimmy Carter established the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) in 1979, he created a platform for federal leadership and oversight of one of our country's most prominent shared values—that of a free public education. That value traces back to our nation's founding fathers, who knew that education would be essential to maintain an informed citizenry that could engage in and protect our democracy.

Since the day USDOE was created, however, conservative lawmakers have called for its undoing.

North Carolina Rep. David Rouzer introduced the States' Education Reclamation Act ([H.R. 202](#)) in 2023, and South Dakota Senator Mike Rounds introduced the Returning Education to Our States Act ([S.5384](#)) in November 2024. Both bills propose to greatly diminish the power of USDOE, moving many of its oversight roles to other federal agencies.

### Implications

If passed, S.5384, would scatter the USDOE's roles across multiple agencies that may be less likely to address them in a consistent and coherent manner. This could make it more cumbersome for schools to connect to, provide, and find funding for the services their students need. It also may weaken accountability measures for services and programs.

The remaining federal K-12 funds currently administered by USDOE could be distributed by the Department of the Treasury to the states via block grants. States could allocate additional state funds to education at their discretion, meaning students in well-resourced states would have an even larger advantage than they do under the current system.

## Federal Departments and USDOE Roles They May Assume

*Proposed legislation would spread many of the USDOE’s oversight and roles across other organizations that may not be able to handle them in a consistent or coherent manner.*

### Department of the Treasury

- Student Loan Programs (Direct Loan, FFEL Loan, and Perkins Loan Programs)
- Federal Pell Grant Program
- Health Education Assistance Loan Program
- Education Sciences and Data

### Health & Human Services

- Special Education Grants
- Services for Individuals with Disability In Education
- American Printing House for the Blind
- Helen Keller National Center for Deaf Blind Youths and Adults

### Department of Labor

- Career, Technical, and Adult Education Programs
- Vocational Rehabilitation Programs

### Department of the Interior

- Native American-Serving Programs
- Tribal Controlled Education Programs

### Department of State

- Fulbright-Hays Program

### Department of Justice

- Office of Civil Rights

Senator Rounds' bill would require a [supermajority of 60 votes](#) in the Republican-controlled Senate to pass. Notably, Rounds believes he can pass the bill with 50 votes, according to the [Argus Leader](#). That feat would happen through reconciliation, a congressional loophole which allows the enactment of legislation on taxes and spending with only a majority. Despite Rounds' ambition, reconciliation does not look promising as margins in the House and the Senate have tightened.

At the federal level, USDOE may become a mechanism for enacting new education policies that support increased privatization of public education, reduce protections for marginalized populations, and mandate religious (Christian) education. Watch for:

- ▶ Legislation that encourages and expands private school vouchers or tuition assistance with public funds, such as tax credits or deductions for Educational Savings Accounts.
- ▶ Measures to curb or eliminate requirements for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) measures in public schools, thereby removing protections for students who have been historically marginalized. This could include an effort to weaken Title IX, which prohibits discrimination based on gender, particularly as it applies to transgender students.
- ▶ Curriculum guidelines that include “patriotic” education and mandate inclusion of the Bible as part of history coursework. This could also include texts that emphasize “traditional” roles for women and girls that prohibit their pursuit of opportunity and self-sufficiency.

### What ACS is Doing

ACS is working to keep the benefits of the USDOE—and of public education in general—at the forefront of policy conversations at the state and local levels by:

- Facilitating conversations between local districts, local public officials, and state legislators.
- Engaging in direct advocacy and lobbying for K-12 public school districts.
- Facilitating media relations between school districts and the press to ensure that broader narratives about public education are shaped by educators and anchored in facts.

### What You Can Do: Resources for Action

- Learn more about how federal actions will affect public schools in your state and local community.
- Contact your state or local teachers' association or union.
- Volunteer at a local school to get a deeper understanding of the challenges they face.
- Attend school board meetings and speak up for actions that protect or expand efforts to welcome all students, preserve DEI measures, and fully fund public education.
- Speak out against the use of public funds for private schools and the hijacking of local curriculum in the name of “patriotic” agendas.

## ISSUE: Higher Education

Completing a higher education degree is a game changer for women and girls, both in terms of career opportunities and income-earning potential, but also in terms of increasing women’s autonomy and self-esteem. In 2022, there were roughly 8.3 million women enrolled in undergraduate programs as compared to 6.1 million men. Women are also more likely to remain in college and graduate on time.<sup>3</sup>

### Implications

With public colleges and universities being the most accessible option for most college-going women and girls, changes to policies or procedures surrounding federal scholarships, grants, or low-interest loans for students could have a significant effect on an individual woman or girl’s decision to attend a higher education institution and her ability to complete her degree. State-level actions to curb curriculum offerings could limit what women and girls are allowed to study, which can hamstring their career choices.

Eliminating or minimizing the U.S. Department of Education (see above), and the continued actions of several state legislatures will result in an uphill battle for higher education institutions, the students who attend them, and their families. The new administration is highly unlikely to do anything to help ease the cost of higher education, such as continuing student loan debt elimination programs or increasing grant or loan programs. Watch for:

- ▶ Attempts by the USDOE and state legislatures to regulate DEI policies at public higher education institutions, reflecting the ongoing impact of the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision banning affirmative action at both public and private institutions.
- ▶ Federal and state-level attempts to influence (if not regulate) what is taught in public higher education institutions. This potentially threatens topics such as Black history, specific religions, and even some sciences and “liberal” arts, and puts greater emphasis on conservative values and workforce development. For example, the University of North Carolina announced in 2024 that it will strip philosophy, religion, drama, ancient Mediterranean, and some language

<sup>3</sup>[bestcolleges.com/research/women-in-higher-education-facts-statistics/](https://bestcolleges.com/research/women-in-higher-education-facts-statistics/)

courses from its Asheville campus—known for its “liberal arts” offerings—in the name of budget cuts.<sup>4</sup>

- ▶ Continued attacks on DEI initiatives. As of January 2025, 12 states had signed into law bills weakening or cancelling DEI actions, and many more states are moving bills through their legislatures.<sup>5</sup>

## What ACS is Doing

To support the next generation of women, ACS is donating to organizations that make higher education more accessible for first-generation students through its [ACS Fund for Women and Girls](#). Through grants made by the Fund, organizations are helping women—especially women of color—when applying to or attending an institution of higher education with expenses not covered by most scholarships or grants such as application fees, transportation, book fees, tuition deposits, and room and board fees.

## What you can do: Resources for Action

- Women, and especially women of color, have access to a growing number of resources and opportunities to pursue higher education and thrive in academic spaces.

- Organizations like the [American Association of University Women \(AAUW\)](#) and [The United Negro College Fund \(UNCF\)](#) provide valuable information and information on how to advocate for equity in education.

- Foundations like the [Gates Millennium Scholars Program](#) or the [Asian & Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund \(APIASF\)](#) can help with scholarships and funding. And many colleges and universities host women’s centers and diversity offices to support female students.

**Advocating for women to pursue higher education will require a combination of direct support, raising awareness, and systemic advocacy efforts. To make a difference, consider:**

- Providing financial support by contributing to scholarships, grants, and initiatives, like the ACS Fund for Women and Girls.

- Serve as a mentor or sponsor women interested in higher education through national networks (e.g., the [Latina Researchers Network](#)) or local women’s centers.

- Advocate for and support policies that improve access to affordable education (e.g., funding for institutions supporting those who are marginalized, more opportunities at historically black colleges, expansion of scholarship programs, and equity in college admissions and financial aid).

- Use your personal social media platforms to highlight the barriers women of color face in higher education.

- Get involved in your local community college; you will find that most offer preparatory programs for women (e.g., helping with applications and test preparation).

<sup>4</sup>[new.unca.edu/asheville-2030/](http://new.unca.edu/asheville-2030/) <sup>5</sup>[bestcolleges.com/news/anti-dei-legislation-tracker/](https://bestcolleges.com/news/anti-dei-legislation-tracker/)



- ▶ More complications and difficulties in accessing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which is required for receiving federal grants, work-study funds or loans and influences need-based financial aid that colleges provide. Other student support programs also may become harder to access.

The issues above are only part of potential challenges that loom on the horizon for K-12 and higher education. We all must remain vigilant and ready to speak up and push back on behalf of women and girls. In Part 2 of What to Watch, we'll look at how women and girls may be affected by possible policy impacts in reproductive justice and public sector leadership. Keep an eye on your inbox!

## WANT MORE?

Want to learn how communication, strategy development, advocacy, or capacity building can move your organization forward?  
 Need an expert for training sessions or conference presentations?  
 Contact one of our team members, call toll free at 1-877-372-0166,  
 or visit our website at [advocacyandcommunication.org](http://advocacyandcommunication.org).

Lori McClung, CEO

Scarlett Boudier, President

Lauren Sogor, Vice President

Jennifer Judkins, Senior Communication Manager

Allison Marker, Senior Strategist

Amber Hill, Executive Administrator

## IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

### Fall 2024 Newsletter



Cooperation ACS  
 USIA Foundation (USIA)  
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 The Canada Health Network  
 The Rights for  
 Women and Girls  
 CSJ Engagement Unit  
 CSJ/CSJ/CSJ/CSJ  
 CSJ/CSJ/CSJ/CSJ  
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### Don't Just Stand There... Do Something!

#### How Being a Civically Engaged Citizen Helps Shape Our Communities and More

Civic engagement (sometimes called civic participation) is the backbone of a thriving democracy. It allows citizens to be active participants, not just spectators, in shaping the public and decisions that affect their lives, and contributes to building stronger, more resilient communities. At its core, civic engagement involves being informed and understanding how one's actions (or lack thereof) impact the broader political system.

What exactly is civic engagement? According to the National Endowment for Democracy, civic engagement is a process that empowers citizens to influence public policy and government action. Civic engagement can take many forms, from attending public meetings to participating in community organizing.

### Summer 2024 Newsletter



When the Crisis Gets Tough,  
 Make Sure Your Organization is Tougher!  
 News from ACS  
 Don't Know Where to Start? Contact  
 Planning Today for the 2025 Summer

### Mastering Crisis Communication

#### When the Going Gets Tough, Make Sure Your Organization is Tougher!

Crisis is inevitable for any organization. But how you respond can mean the difference between recovery and reputational damage. Being prepared for a crisis is not just a "nice to have" (it's necessary whether facing a natural disaster, a data breach, or any unexpected event); an effective crisis communication plan provides a clear roadmap to navigate turbulent times, helping your organization emerge stronger and more unified—and safeguarding its reputation and ensuring swift recovery.

A crisis won't wait for you to be ready. By working through the six phases of crisis communication—Identify the Crisis, Isolate, Mitigation, Resolution, Evaluation, and Post-Crisis—your organization can prepare now and stay resilient to get you through the toughest times.