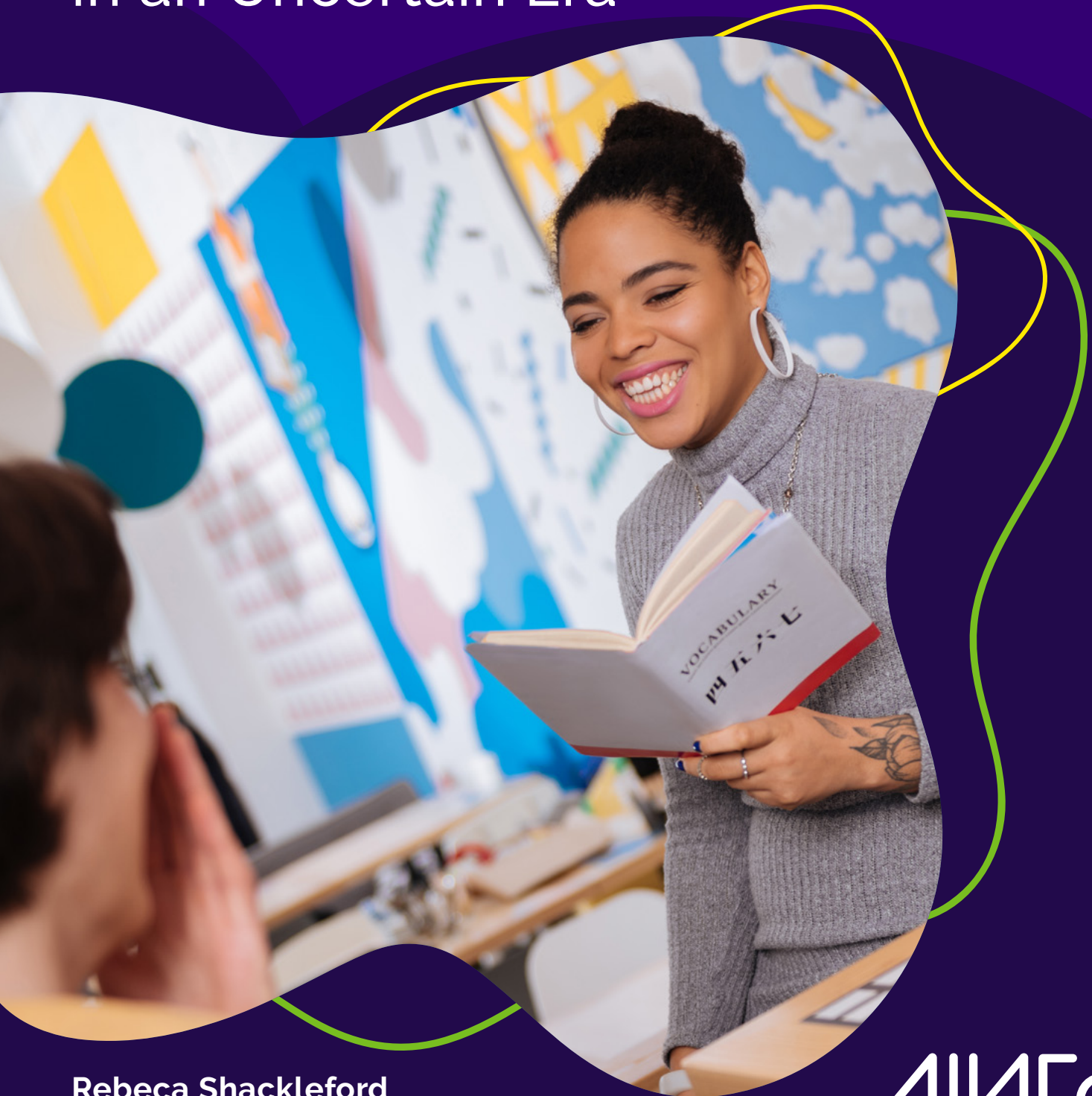


Strategic Resilience:

Leveraging Federal Funds for College and Career Counseling in an Uncertain Era



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In an ever-changing world, our nation's young people need access to experiences and opportunities that will unlock the promise of the American Dream. Meaningful pathways systems that offer deep college and career experiences are more crucial than ever. However, for many students, these opportunities and their lived realities exist behind a curtain of confusion with little guidance due to a [well-documented](#), excessively high student-to-counselor ratio. These longstanding shortages leave each counselor responsible for hundreds of students. Even in localities with more counselors per student, the demands on school counselors are such that helping students navigate pathways systems must fall to the wayside to meet students' other needs. The current landscape of college and career counseling support varies widely across the country, leaving learners in underserved communities without adequate guidance.

Why Counseling Matters More Than Ever



Access to opportunities: Comprehensive counseling bridges gaps between learners from different socioeconomic backgrounds, locations, exceptionalities, and more, ensuring all learners can pursue various postsecondary options.



Economic impact: Effective counseling contributes to a more skilled workforce and a stronger economy by helping learners find suitable educational and career paths.



Informed decision-making: With proper guidance, learners make better informed choices about their futures, aligning educational and career paths with their passions, abilities, and the need to have a career that leads to a family sustaining wage.



Personal development: Beyond academic and career guidance, counseling supports learners' personal exploration, growth, and development.

Current Federal Funding Climate: Challenges and Uncertainties

Recent Disruptions to Federal Education Funding

Fiscal Year 2025 (FY25) brought the following significant challenges to federal education funding.

Major Funding Freezes

In July 2025, the Trump administration withheld previously approved federal education grants, including funding for teacher professional development, English-learner support, migrant education, and after-school programs. This unprecedented action occurred just one day before the traditional July 1 release date, creating immediate budget disruptions for school districts nationwide. Although this funding has since been released, the impact of the interruption is still reverberating in and across districts. Moreover, the threat of another freeze or rescission looms large for districts.

Proposed Program Eliminations

The administration's Fiscal Year 2026 (FY26) budget proposes eliminating Federal TRIO Programs (TRIO) and Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) entirely, which would remove support for first-generation and disabled learners, as well as learners from low-income families. These cuts would directly affect college counseling resources.

Broader Education Budget Cuts

The Department of Education (the Department) faces a proposed budget reduction, with cuts spanning K–12, higher education, and special education programs. Additionally, many research and education grants were terminated, creating challenges for educational institutions.

Impact on School Districts

The funding instability created several challenges:

- Budget planning difficulties: Districts that already approved budgets based on expected federal funding face potential shortfalls.

- Program uncertainty: Rural schools and those serving low-income populations are disproportionately affected, as federal funding formulas target districts with high-need student populations.
- Staff and service reductions: Some districts may need to cut counseling positions or services if federal funding does not materialize.

Optimizing Federal Funding Resources

Despite the challenging environment, several federal programs continue to provide opportunities for supporting college and career counseling, though their future stability varies.

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Programs

Title I: Schools can use Title I funds for counseling services that support college and career readiness for disadvantaged students.

Title II: This program traditionally supports school counselor professional development, though Title II funds were among those withheld in July 2025.

Title III: Funds meant to help English learners develop language skills were withheld in July 2025, affecting counseling services for this population.

Title IV-A: Title IV funds supporting student academic enrichment, including mental health and counseling services, were part of the frozen funding.

While FY25 funding for Title II, Title III, and Title IV-A funding was eventually released, it remains to be seen whether these programs will continue to exist in the future. President Trump asked the U.S. Congress to eliminate each of the three programs in FY26.

Career and Technical Education Funding

Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins V)

Career and technical education programs under Perkins V were not specifically addressed in recent budget cuts. However, the administration eliminated the contract for the National Evaluation of Career and Technical Education under Perkins V (NECTEP), which provides crucial data for program improvement.

Perkins V continues to provide funding for the following:

- Career exploration and development activities
- Industry-focused counseling and guidance
- Work-based learning experiences that require counseling support

Higher Education Act Programs

GEAR UP and TRIO Programs

Both programs face proposed elimination in the FY26 budget, despite serving more than **880,000** students from low-income families, first-generation students, and students with disabilities nationwide. **Bipartisan opposition** from lawmakers, including Senate TRIO Caucus cochair Susan Collins (R-ME), may protect these programs.

GEAR UP and TRIO traditionally provide the following:

- College counseling and career exploration
- Academic preparation and support
- Financial literacy and college application assistance

Additional Federal Programs

Several other federal programs have historically provided opportunities to support college and career counseling, though their current status reflects the broader instability in federal education funding.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

Reauthorized within Title IX of ESSA, the McKinney-Vento Act addresses the needs of children experiencing homelessness and includes requirements for college counseling support. It requires that funds be used for college counseling services to help students experiencing homelessness navigate postsecondary options and overcome barriers to educational access.

Education Innovation and Research Program

The Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program provides competitive grants to support innovative educational practices, including pathways counseling and college and career navigation programs. Schools and districts use EIR grants to develop creative solutions for supporting students' navigation through college and career programs, ranging from new technological tools to unique partnership models. However, the program has been



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severely impacted by the Trump administration's grant terminations, with the Department **cancelling** numerous EIR grants since the change in administration. In early 2025, the Department also **ended** its contract with the organization that provided evaluation support to EIR recipients, creating additional challenges for grantees who now must find alternative evaluation services. These actions are part of broader cuts that eliminated nearly \$900 million in Department contracts, with many projects being halted despite ongoing work.

Career Connected High School Grant Program

Launched in August 2023 as part of the "Raise the Bar: Unlocking Career Success" initiative, the Career Connected High School (CCHS) Grant program provided \$25 million in grants to consortia of local educational agencies and higher education institutions. The program aimed to increase integration and alignment between the last two years of high school and the first two years of postsecondary education, with career advising and

navigation as one of its four key pillars. Grantees could use funds exclusively for college and career advising activities. However, the Department terminated all CCHS grants on July 29, 2025, stating that “continuation of the project is not in the best interest of the Federal Government” and that the Department was “exercising discretion to reallocate available funding towards projects more aligned with the current priorities of the Administration.” This termination eliminated a dedicated source of pathways counseling funding and exemplifies the broader uncertainty facing education programs.

Strategies for Navigating Funding Uncertainty

Given the current federal funding environment and strained state education budgets, schools and districts should adopt resilient approaches to sustaining college and career counseling programs.

Diversification Strategies

Rather than relying heavily on any single federal program, schools and districts should develop counseling programs that draw from multiple funding streams. This multisource approach could include combining ESSA Title I funds with state education grants, partnering with local workforce development boards for WIOA resources, and seeking private foundation grants and corporate partnerships. By diversifying funding sources, programs become more resilient to changes in any single funding stream.

Some states and localities are making significant investments in their own education budgets, such as North Carolina's recent investment in a [Career Coach](#) program and Oakland, California's [Measure N](#), also known as the Oakland College and Career Readiness for All Act. Schools and districts should advocate for state-level investments in counseling services, demonstrating the critical role these programs play in student success and workforce development. Building relationships with state policymakers and education agencies ensure counseling services are prioritized in state funding decisions.

Districts are increasingly passing local taxes and ballot measures to secure additional revenue for critical programs. Engaging local communities in understanding the value of college and career

counseling will build support for these funding mechanisms, particularly when federal resources are uncertain.

Program Design Considerations

Schools and districts should design counseling programs that can adapt to changing funding availability. This includes creating modular programs that can be scaled up or down based on resources, developing partnerships that provide in-kind support during funding shortfalls, and training counselors in multiple program models and funding streams. Flexible programming allows schools to maintain core services even when specific funding sources become unavailable.

Focus on programs with deep research support to make the strongest case for continued funding. This involves implementing data-collection systems to demonstrate program impact, aligning programs with state and federal accountability measures, and documenting success stories and outcomes for advocacy purposes. Evidence-based approaches help programs survive budget scrutiny and demonstrate their value to stakeholders.

Developing regional consortia and partnerships can help share costs and resources during challenging funding periods. Multidistrict counseling cooperatives, shared professional development initiatives, and regional career exploration programs allow schools to pool resources and maintain high-quality services even when individual district budgets are constrained. Groups across the nation—from [Colorado](#) to [Texas](#) to [California](#)—have created these initiatives.

Advocacy and Policy Engagement

Bipartisan support exists for many education programs, as evidenced by [Republican](#) and [Democratic](#) senators urging the restoration of withheld FY25 funding. Schools and districts should engage with federal representatives to educate them about the importance of federal funding by sharing specific examples of how these programs benefit students and communities. Building relationships with congressional staff and participating in advocacy coalitions amplify the voice of individual districts.

Working with state education agencies and legislators to develop state-level funding protections for counseling services provides another avenue for securing stable support. State policymakers often have more direct experience with local education needs and may be more responsive to advocacy efforts from their constituents.

Building broad community support for counseling programs by demonstrating their economic and social benefits creates a foundation for sustainable funding. This includes engaging local employers who benefit from well-prepared graduates, higher education institutions that receive better-prepared students, and community organizations that share workforce development goals.

Looking Ahead: Building an Equitable Pathways System

While navigating current uncertainties is crucial, the broader goal should be creating a more stable, predictable funding environment for college and career counseling. This requires moving beyond crisis management toward building comprehensive systems that ensure every student has access to high-quality guidance and support.

As highlighted in All4Ed and EdTrust's recent report [*A Vision for Equitable Pathways*](#), we must recognize that "there are many pathways to a successful career, and every student should have access to postsecondary education and career opportunities and support to allow them to pursue degrees and certificates that align with their interests and career aspirations." However, the current reality is that "while some well-resourced school districts offer supports for students, including high-quality advising and college and career exploration opportunities, many students, particularly students in underfunded school districts, students from low-income backgrounds, and students of color, lack access to the same level of support."

The vision for an ideal pathways system includes several critical elements, as shown below.

- **Clear choices:** A clear understanding of all their options
- **A smart start:** Early outreach before entering high school
- **Access for all:** Information that is accessible and in multiple formats
- **Guided beginnings:** Regular touchpoints with a navigator
- **Final preparation:** Dedicated and targeted support in high school

A cornerstone of this system is "offering navigational support and tools for transitions. In our vision, every high school nationwide would have pathways counselors to provide standardized tools and personalized support for students."

Federal Leadership Is Essential

The federal government must act now. As stated in [*A Vision for Equitable Pathways*](#), "absent a comprehensive, coordinated federal response, states and districts will continue to struggle with limited resources, competing priorities, and inconsistent quality. Students will face a lottery of opportunity, with their futures dictated by the luck of their birthplace rather than their innate talents and aspirations." The economic and social costs of inaction are simply too high as automation and globalization reshape the labor market.

Coordinated Action At All Levels

While federal leadership is essential, states and local communities must also take greater responsibility for ensuring all students have access to quality counseling services. This includes building stronger connections with employers, higher education institutions, and community organizations to share the investment in student guidance.

States can develop innovative funding mechanisms, create regional consortia to share resources, and implement policies that prioritize counseling services. Local communities can support ballot measures for education funding, build public-private partnerships, and advocate for the resources their schools need.

A Moral Imperative

Ultimately, creating an equitable pathways system is not just an educational or economic imperative; it also is a moral one. As a nation, we must ensure that every child has the chance to pursue their dreams and contribute their talents to society. The current federal funding landscape for college and career counseling presents challenges, but these challenges also illuminate the urgent need for systematic change. By building more resilient funding strategies, demonstrating the clear value of counseling programs, and securing comprehensive policy action, schools will continue serving students effectively while working toward a more stable, supportive policy environment. The time is now to

build an education-to-workforce ecosystem that leaves no one behind—an ecosystem that provides every student, regardless of background, with the support they need to identify their passions, develop their skills, and chart a course to a fulfilling career and life. Success in achieving this vision will require multilevel leadership, innovation at the state and local levels, creative problem-solving, strong partnerships, and an unwavering commitment to equity. The goal remains unchanged: ensure every student, regardless of their background or zip code, has access to the guidance and support they need to navigate their path to success. Together, we can transform pathways counseling from a privilege for some to a right for all.



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