

AERA Open Special Topic Call for Proposals
“Centering Civil Rights Protections in Schools in the US”
Special Issue Editors: Maithreyi Gopalan and Erica Frankenberg

This is an open call for a special issue of the open-access journal *AERA Open*, exploring the importance of re-centering civil rights protections in education given this polarized, political climate that is fundamentally attempting to dismantle the federal role in education. A key goal of Congress when establishing the U.S. Department of Education (ED) in 1979 was “to strengthen the Federal commitment to ensuring access to equal educational opportunity for every individual” (US Commission on Civil Rights, 2019, p. 160). Although ED has remained one of the smallest federal agencies and has a limited role in PK-higher education, it enforces several federal laws and collects data as part of its mission to protect students’ civil rights. The federal role in education is facing unprecedented challenges, which makes the focus of this special issue all the more urgent and instructive for the field.

For decades, the Office for Civil Rights (OCR), now within ED has a unique role in facilitating equitable educational opportunity structures that include all students and foundationally shape student experiences across the country.¹ As one example, in the 1960s, when OCR issued guidelines for desegregating schools to enforce the 1964 Civil Rights Act, it dramatically transformed student experiences in southern schools within a decade, especially opening opportunities to better resourced schools for Black students (Cascio et al., 2010; Frankenberg & Taylor, 2015).

Yet, despite OCR's significance for millions of children, education policy researchers have, until recently, paid limited attention to the various enforcement activities of the office even as it has expanded its efforts to meet the civil rights challenges of the 21st century (Gopalan & Lewis, 2022; Lewis et al., 2018). In particular, the OCR is responsible for a periodic civil rights data collection from K-12 schools and universities that contains unique data elements about students’ educational experiences and access to opportunity that originated in 1968; yet the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) remains vastly underutilized in educational research.

This special issue is intended to showcase the importance of centering civil rights protections

- ~~MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR, FBI (100-432641) FROM SAC, NEW YORK (100-1471) (NY 100-1471) (P)~~

- Background/Context
- Purpose/Objective/Research Questions/Focus
- Research Design/Methods/Data
- Fit with special issue call
- Preliminary Findings/Results
- Conclusions/Implications

Publication Timeline

The guest editors have secured funding from the American Educational Research Association to organize a research conference, which is tentatively scheduled for late summer 2025/early Fall 2025. Author(s) of high-quality structured abstracts from the first round of editorial review will be invited to attend the conference and present their draft manuscript and receive feedback so that their manuscripts can be strengthened prior to submission and peer-review. Additional experts on the topic will be present at the conference to help provide formative feedback to authors. Following the conference, all manuscript submissions will go through peer review and meet the publication standards of *AERA Open*. Please consult the [AERA Open website](#) for general guidelines on manuscript submission. An invitation to participate in the conference, and to submit a full manuscript for consideration, is not a guarantee of acceptance.

- Call for Structured Abstracts Released: April 1, 2025
- Deadline for interested contributors to submit structured abstracts: May 15, 2025 (submit to mgopalan@uoregon.edu)
- Invitations sent out for authors to submit complete manuscripts: June 1, 2025
- Draft Manuscripts due for conference discussion: Aug 1, 2025
- Conference held late summer/early fall 2025
- Revised manuscripts due to *AERA Open* for peer review after conference: Dec 15, 2025
- Articles published as completed: Spring 2026 onwards

We expect this special issue will begin a specific conversation about how the federal role in enforcing civil rights in schools forms the fundamental backbone on which a federal right to education in the US can be built especially in this politically polarizing moment. Please direct questions regarding the special topic issue to Maithreyi Gopalan (mgopalan@uoregon.edu) and/or Erica Frankenberg (euf10@psu.edu).

References

- Cascio, E., Gordon, N., Lewis, E., & Reber, S. (2010). Paying for progress: Conditional grants and the desegregation of southern schools. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *125*(1), 445–482.
- Frankenberg, E., & Taylor, K. (2015). ESEA and the Civil Rights Act: An Interbranch Approach to Furthering Desegregation. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, *1*(3), 32–49. <https://doi.org/10.7758/RSF.2015.1.3.02>
- Gopalan, M., & Lewis, M. (2022). *K-12 Civil Rights Complaints: Nationwide Data (1999-2019)*. , 2022-12-13. <https://doi.org/10.3886/E176682V2>
- Lewis, M. M., Garces, L. M., & Frankenberg, E. (2018). A Comprehensive and Practical Approach to Policy Guidance: The Office for Civil Rights' Role in Education During the Obama Administration. *Educational Researcher*, 0013189X18801549. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X18801549>
- U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (2019).