Competing Futures: Reconfiguring Sustainability in US Education Policy from Equity to Meritocracy

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Abstract

This study examines how inclusion is discursively constructed in sustainability-oriented educational policies through a linguistic analysis of six Executive Orders issued by former President Biden during his 2021-2025 administration, and by Donald Trump during the first month of his current presidency, January 2025. Drawing upon a critical discourse perspective and employing the tools provided by Systemic Functional Linguistics, we explore representations of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in order to assess how vulnerability, participation, and exclusion are linguistically framed in the field of education. The findings will contribute to understanding how institutional discourse shapes inclusive education and sustainability, informing strategies for future equitable learning environments.
Keywords: DEI, Sustainability, Educational Policy, Transitivity analysis, Appraisal.

1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental pillar of society, shaping economic growth, social cohesion, and democratic participation. Educational policies are never created in isolation but are deeply influenced by political ideologies, historical legacies, and social agendas. Governments exploit educational frameworks to promote dominant national narratives and societal values.

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Shifts in political leadership therefore often bring about substantial changes to educational priorities and curriculum design.

In recent decades, the concept of sustainability in education has extended beyond environmental concerns to encompass institutional inclusivity, together with equitable and just access for all. Sustainability feeds into Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies (Gewirtz, 2001; Ball, 2012) which aim to create long-term systemic stability and fair representation for historically underrepresented groups. This holistic and future-oriented nexus is not always immediately evident as some policy frameworks in the United States and elsewhere do view sustainability as the expansion of inclusivity and systemic reform, while others tend to perceive it as a means of maintaining traditional structures and removing perceived ideological distortions.

The objective of this research is to examine how differing political perspectives shape the sustainability-DEI connection within education policy (Apple, 2004). The study focuses on the United States, a country where education policy has historically been a highly contested political space, often reflecting broader national debates over identity, equity, and governance. The two presidencies under examination, Joseph R. Biden (2021-2025) and Donald J. Trump (2025-present day), represent stark ideological contrasts in their approaches to DEI and sustainability in education. This sharp divergence provides a unique lens through which to analyse the shifting conceptualisation of sustainability in educational policies.

Whereas one of the aims of Biden's administration was to integrate DEI principles into federal policies in order to address systemic inequities, Trump's administration has worked to dismantle these frameworks in favour of merit-based governance and nationalistic educational models. The legislative mechanism adopted by both presidents to implement and uphold their widely divergent DEI measures is the constitutional tool exclusively adopted by US presidents: the Executive Order (EO). Functioning as official directives, EOs are issued by the President of the United States to manage operations within the federal government. Although they do not require congressional approval, they carry the force of law and can significantly shape policy directions, particularly in areas like education. EOs are legally binding on the executive branch but, unlike Congress, they do not create new legislation (Mayer, 2001). These provisions have been used extensively for policy shifts, including, over the years, civil rights, environmental regulations, and immigration policies.

This study analyses six EOs, three issued by Biden and three by Trump, that directly impact educational governance through DEI and sustainability-

related policies. Comprising our dataset, these EOs illustrate two contrasting visions of sustainability in education: one focused on structural inclusivity, the other centred on institutional continuity through the elimination of DEI frameworks.

1.1 Theoretical Foundations: Bourdieu's Capital and Educational Sustainability

Drawing upon Bourdieu's theories of capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1990), contemporary US political debates, and global policy trends, this study locates DEI policies within a wider ideological debate over access to opportunity, categories of privilege and the purpose of education itself. Whether conceived as a structural necessity for long-term institutional stability or as an ideological disruption to traditional educational values, sustainability in education remains an ever-changing and strongly contested space, reflecting the shifting power dynamics of contemporary governance. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital offers a sociological outlook on inequality, institutional structures, and power dynamics within education. According to Bourdieu, access to opportunity is shaped by three primary forms of capital, each playing a crucial role in determining an individual's educational trajectory. Economic capital, which consists of material resources and wealth, directly influences the ability to access quality education and academic advancement. Cultural capital, encompassing knowledge, skills, and institutional credentials, holds significant value in society, as it determines an individual's ability to navigate and succeed within educational systems (Lareau, 2003; Reay, 2004). Finally, social capital, derived from networks and connections, reinforces systemic privilege by providing individuals with access to exclusive opportunities and resources that are not equally distributed across social groups. These forms of capital interact to reproduce social hierarchies by means of which educational advantages are often the result of generational inheritance rather than being equally accessible to all.

Bourdieu's framework is particularly relevant when analysing how DEI measures function as an integral part of sustainability narratives, thereby seeking to redistribute cultural and social capital, and ensuring that historically excluded groups gain access to the institutional mechanisms that grant both power and legitimacy. Resistance to such measures often framed as preserving neutrality or meritocracy can be seen as an attempt to protect the reach of dominant groups over educational capital, maintaining traditional hierarchies (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

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This theoretical approach also aligns with European Union (EU) legislation, where sustainability in education is linked to social inclusion and equity-driven policy reforms. The EU's Education and Training 2020 Framework[1], explicitly integrates Bourdieu's concept of social capital, highlighting the need for policies that reduce social stratification and foster economic mobility. Albeit the US lacks a centralised educational governance model similar to the one present in the EU, the contrasting narratives on sustainability and DEI reflect broader global debates regarding education as a lever of social reproduction or social transformation.

The contemporary political divide over DEI and sustainability in education is rooted in broader historical debates over race, class, and access to opportunity and privilege in the US education system. In the mid-20th century, the civil rights movements led to landmark policies such as affirmative action and federally enforced desegregation, in an attempt to redress historical inequalities in education and employment (Orfield, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Over the years, these policies have been increasingly contested, with critics arguing that they introduce new forms of discrimination by prioritising group identity over individual merit.

More recently, polarisation in US political discourse has moulded educational policies, particularly regarding the role of the federal government in ensuring equity and inclusion. Indeed, on March 20th, as this study goes to press, President Trump signed Executive Order 14151 directing the dismantling of the Federal Department of Education (Samuels, 2025). Whereas Biden's DEI policies were conceived as core components of educational and workforce sustainability, Trump's recent administration has framed such policies as antithetical to meritocracy and economic efficiency.

In light of the numerous and diverse aspects that characterise this study, research will be carried out on the basis of the following questions:

1) To what extent do linguistic choices in policy discourse, analysed using the tools provided by Critical Discourse Studies and Systemic Functional Linguistics, reflect broader ideological and political shifts in the framing of sustainability and educational governance?

2) How do US Executive Orders issued by the Biden and Trump administrations discursively construct sustainability in education, and what role does DEI play in shaping these constructions?

3) Can sustainability in education be considered a politically and ideologically malleable concept, subject to reinterpretation based on

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[1] European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, ECORYS and SportsEconAustria, Education and training 2020 – Highlights from the ET 2020 Working Groups 2018-2020, Publications Office, 2021.

shifting power structures, historical legacies, and competing visions of equity and meritocracy?

2. Dataset

The dataset for this study comprises six EOs promulgated by two US administrations, those of President Joseph R. Biden (2021-2025) and President Donald J. Trump (2025-present day). These EOs serve as legally binding policy instruments that reflect the ideological stance and policy priorities of each administration, particularly in relation to sustainability in education and DEI initiatives. The dataset includes three EOs from each administration:

Biden Administration Executive Orders:[2]
1. Executive Order 14031 (May 2021). Focuses on advancing equity for Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) communities, emphasising inclusivity in federal education policies and workforce representation.
2. Executive Order 14035 (June 2021). Establishes diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) policies within the federal workforce, reinforcing DEI as a foundational principle for sustainable and inclusive governance.
3. Executive Order 14041 (September 2021). Strengthens federal support for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), positioning them as key institutions for economic and educational sustainability.

Trump Administration Executive Orders:[3]
1. Executive Order 14151 (January 2025). Ends federal DEI programs, dismantling previous efforts to institutionalize diversity-based policies in education and workforce sectors.
2. Executive Order 14173 (January 2025). Eliminates DEI-based preferences in hiring and education, framing meritocracy as the primary means of ensuring fairness and sustainability.
3. Executive Order 14190 (January 2025). Targets DEI in K-12 curricula, prohibiting perceived ideological indoctrination and reinstating a nationalist educational framework.

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[2] https://www.federalregister.gov/presidential-documents/executive-orders.
[3] https://www.federalregister.gov/presidential-documents/executive-orders.

This dataset allows for a comparative discourse analysis that is both linguistically and politically significant. By examining how each administration's EOs frame sustainability, DEI, and educational governance, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of how language in policymaking reflects and reinforces broader ideological debates. The dataset thus serves as a critical resource for analysing the evolving discourse on sustainability in education within the US policy landscape.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach, integrating Transitivity and Appraisal analysis to investigate the linguistic and ideological construction of sustainability and DEI policies in US EOs. The framework is particularly well-suited for uncovering power relations, ideological positioning, and rhetorical strategies within policy documents, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how language is used to frame, legitimise, or contest policy decisions. Developed by Halliday (1985), SFL is a linguistic theory that focuses on how language is structured to serve different communicative functions. SFL serves this study well because it enables a systematic and detailed analysis of linguistic structures in EOs, revealing how policy language constructs authority, inclusion, and exclusion.

Within SFL, Transitivity analysis (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) examines how processes, participants, and circumstances are represented in discourse. It identifies who acts, who is affected, and how actions are framed, making it an essential tool for analysing government policy documents that shape social structures.

Transitivity analysis distinguishes six main process types: material processes (action verbs) highlight who is responsible for change in a policy framework; mental processes (cognition, perception) reveal how policies interpret social realities; verbal processes (speech acts) indicate who has authority in decision-making; relational processes (being, attributing) define how concepts such as DEI and sustainability are categorised; existential processes (statements of existence) assert the legitimacy or presence of policy concerns; behavioural processes (human actions and reactions) illustrate how policy measures are enacted or resisted. By applying Transitivity analysis, this study identifies how agency and responsibility are assigned in Biden and Trump's EOs, determining whether DEI and sustainability are framed as active government interventions, passive obligations, or ideological burdens.

The second framework employed is Appraisal analysis, developed within SFL (Martin and White, 2005). It examines how evaluation, stance, and alignment are encoded in discourse. This is particularly relevant for understanding how policy documents use persuasive and ideological language to frame issues such as DEI and sustainability. Appraisal consists of three key dimensions: attitude examines how emotions, judgments, and values are expressed in policy language (e.g., framing DEI as a "moral responsibility" vs. a "radical agenda"); engagement analyses whether discourse is monoglossic (authoritative, presenting one view as fact) or heteroglossic (acknowledging alternative viewpoints); graduation identifies the intensity and amplification of language, revealing how strongly policies emphasise their positions.

This combined methodological approach is grounded in Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) and therefore particularly useful for this research for several reasons. Adopting a critical stance allows us to move beyond superficial descriptions of policy language and instead investigate how discourse constructs social realities, reinforces dominant ideologies, and influences public perception. By situating our analysis within a CDS framework, we critically examine how linguistic choices in policy texts serve to justify, challenge, or obscure specific political agendas, revealing the deeper sociopolitical implications of educational governance.

4. Analysis and Findings

The following section analyses the discursive construction of sustainability and DEI in education within EOs issued by the Biden and Trump administrations. As previously stated, this analysis reflects a CDS perspective, specifically focusing on Transitivity and the Appraisal framework, to examine how the language of educational policies encodes power, agency, and ideological positioning.

After a close reading of the EOs, carried out individually by the two authors in order to ensure inter-rater reliability (Armstrong et al., 1997), key themes pertaining to the selected EOs were identified and agreed upon, thereby providing a comparative outlook upon how each administration frames educational governance, sustainability, and DEI. In support of these thematic strands, transitivity and appraisal analyses were carried out so as to provide the necessary linguistic evidence to highlight the ideological contrasts embedded in policy discourse. The analysis is structured to first examine the EOs issued by the Biden administration, followed by those issued under the second Trump presidency, ensuring a clear and

comprehensive exploration of the competing conceptualisations of sustainability in education. For the purpose of clarity and ease of identification, the linguistic evidence deriving from both the Transitivity and the Appraisal analyses is underlined in the original quotation and further explained in the parentheses that follow.

4.1 Executive Orders under Biden

As can be seen in the analysis that follows, the Biden administration appears to have framed DEI as a key principle within educational governance, embedding it within broader sustainability initiatives through systemic interventions that, in all likelihood, aim to ensure equitable resource allocation, institutional support, and workforce inclusivity. The three recurring themes that strengthen the nexus between DEI and sustainable educational practices in Biden's EOs are the following:

1. Institutional Commitment to DEI as a Pathway to Educational Sustainability
2. Structural Reform and Federal Responsibility in Advancing Equity
3. Economic and Workforce Development Through Inclusive Educational Policies

4.1.1 Transitivity analysis

Each thematic strand, numbered 1, 2 and 3, is substantiated by linguistic evidence obtained from transitivity analysis as can be seen in the examples that follow.

1. Institutional commitment to DEI as a pathway to educational sustainability.
   "The federal government shall <u>expand</u> access to resources for institutions that serve underrepresented communities" (material process expanding access positions the government as an active agent in fostering DEI);
   "Agencies must <u>ensure</u> that hiring practices reflect the full diversity of the nation" (material process ensuring institutional accountability in equitable hiring).

2. Structural reform and federal responsibility in advancing equity.

"We recognize systemic barriers that hinder equitable educational access" (mental process acknowledging systemic inequalities as a first step toward reform);

"Programs will be redesigned to increase participation among historically underrepresented groups" (material process active restructuring of policy frameworks).

3. Economic and workforce development through inclusive educational policies.

"Investment in HBCUs ensures a sustainable and diverse workforce" (relational process framing sustainability as an economic and educational imperative);

"Colleges and universities play a vital role in the country's long-term prosperity" (relational process attributing national sustainability to educational institutions).

4.1.2 Appraisal analysis

The following examples under each of the three strands demonstrate how Biden's EOs would seem to reinforce DEI as a moral, economic, and social necessity:

1. Institutional commitment to DEI as a pathway to educational sustainability.

"Ensuring that all communities have access to quality education is essential to our nation's progress" (attitude: positive evaluation of inclusivity as a national imperative);

"Strengthening institutional partnerships fosters a more equitable society" (graduation: intensified language reinforcing systemic change).

2. Structural reform and federal responsibility in advancing equity.

"Federal agencies must take decisive action to eliminate inequities" (engagement: monoglossic stance that positions equity as non-negotiable);

"This administration remains unwavering in its commitment to education for all" (graduation: reinforced intensity of commitment to DEI).

3. Economic and workforce development through inclusive educational policies.

"Equity-driven policies promote long-term economic resilience" (attitude: explicit connection between DEI and national sustainability);

"A diverse workforce is not only a <u>moral</u> obligation but a <u>strategic</u> advantage" (engagement: alignment of ethical and economic arguments in favour of DEI).

The linguistic and discursive patterns identified in Biden's three EOs seem to illustrate how DEI is framed as an essential mechanism for educational sustainability. The recurring themes of institutional commitment, structural reform, and workforce inclusivity appear to reflect an underlying policy logic that brings together sustainable national development, equitable educational access, and participation. Through transitivity analysis, we have observed that agency is consistently assigned to federal institutions, reinforcing the notion that active government intervention is required. The policies outline education as a transformative force, capable of addressing systemic disparities through policy restructuring, funding allocation, and institutional accountability. The appraisal analysis would appear to further highlight the ideological positioning of DEI as a national priority, where inclusivity is framed not only as a moral obligation but also as an economic and strategic need. The use of graduation and engagement markers serves to strengthen the seemingly imperative tone of these policies, presenting educational equity as non-negotiable in sustaining long-term institutional resilience. These EOs suggest a vision of sustainability that transcends environmental concerns, embedding educational inclusivity as a mainstay of national progress. According to this representation, sustainability would appear to transcend the static preservation of institutions, thus ensuring that they meet the needs of an increasingly diverse and interconnected society. This framing stands in direct contrast to meritocratic, eliminative approaches, positioning equitable access to education as a prerequisite for economic and social stability.

4.2 Executive Orders under Trump

The Trump administration's EOs on education and DEI would seem to reflect a rather different ideological stance compared to those implemented under the Biden administration. These policies do not embed DEI as a structural pillar of sustainability, but instead prefer to represent it as the preservation of meritocratic principles, economic efficiency, and national stability.

The EOs issued under Trump put sustainability into effect through exclusionary rather than inclusionary mechanisms. Following the same procedure adopted previously, the linguistic analysis of these policies reveals

three recurring themes that illustrate the ideological disconnection between DEI and sustainability:
1. Sustainability as the Preservation of Meritocracy and Individualism.
2. The Rejection of DEI as an Unsustainable and Ideologically Driven Agenda.
3. Education as a Mechanism for National Identity and Economic Efficiency.

4.2.1 Transitivity analysis

As previously, each thematic strand, numbered 1, 2 and 3, is substantiated by linguistic evidence obtained from transitivity analysis as can be seen in the examples that follow.

1. Sustainability as the preservation of meritocracy and individualism.
   "All hiring and educational policies shall be based strictly on merit" (relational process defining sustainability as a function of meritocracy);
   "Government funding must not be allocated based on race, gender, or identity" (material process denying DEI as a legitimate criterion for resource distribution).

2. The rejection of DEI as an unsustainable and ideologically driven agenda.
   "Federal agencies are directed to eliminate race-based hiring policies" (material process removing DEI as a structural component of policy);
   "Institutions shall discontinue programs that promote racial or gender-based advantages" (material process mandating the dissolution of DEI-driven initiatives).

3. Education as a mechanism for national identity and economic efficiency.
   "Our schools must teach American values and historical accuracy" (relational process positioning education as a vehicle for national ideological coherence);
   "A competitive economy depends on a workforce selected through skill and merit" (relational process linking sustainability directly to economic productivity and merit-based selection).

4.2.2 Appraisal analysis

Sustainability and education would appear to be viewed through a lens of rejection and ideological certainty in the following appraisal analysis of Trump's EOs.

1. Sustainability as the preservation of meritocracy and individualism.
   "True fairness can only be achieved when identity is no longer a factor in education" (attitude: negative judgment of identity-based policies);
   "Merit-based hiring ensures the most qualified individuals lead our nation forward" (engagement: monoglossic assertion reinforcing individual achievement over structural intervention).

2. The rejection of DEI as an unsustainable and ideologically driven agenda.
   "DEI initiatives introduce inefficiencies and distort fairness" (attitude: negative evaluation of DEI as an unsustainable burden);
   "Federal education policies must correct course and restore ideological neutrality" (graduation: intensified language asserting DEI as an ideological deviation).

3. Education as a mechanism for national identity and economic efficiency.
   "American education must prepare students to contribute meaningfully to the economy" (attitude: aligning education with economic utility);
   "Our students deserve an education that instills national pride and historical truth" (graduation: reinforcing education as a nationalist imperative).

The linguistic and ideological patterns in Trump's three EOs bring forth a very different perspective on sustainability in education (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). In this case, DEI would appear to hinder meritocracy and economic efficiency. Indeed, these themes illustrate a vision of sustainability defined by the endurance of traditional structures. Transitivity analysis suggests that agency is assigned to federal institutions that stand as enforcers of ideological correction. The appraisal analysis further emphasises the evaluative stance of such authoritarian bodies in terms of rejection and ideological restoration. The language employed throughout these EOs reinforces the notion that sustainability hinges upon the dismissal of DEI, thereby aligning educational priorities with economic competitiveness and national cohesion. The perspective which emerges from the analyses of Trump's EOs seems to contrast with DEI-driven sustainability models pertaining to the Biden administration.

4. Discussion

This section brings together and contrasts the two policy provisions,

highlighting their distinct discursive, ideological, and structural approaches to educational governance. The comparative analysis of Biden and Trump's EOs on DEI and sustainability in education would appear to expose two opposing conceptualisations of sustainability and equity. Whereas Biden's policies frame sustainability in terms of institutional inclusivity and structural intervention, Trump's EOs, conversely, convey a view of sustainability that upholds highly conservative principles in the fields of educational legislation, economic efficiency, and ideological continuity.

The analysis highlights three major areas of contrast, listed below, which clearly define the oppositional viewpoints of the two administrations. These viewpoints are not merely limited to the educational arena and DEI but further encompass other systems of governance.

1. Sustainability as structural inclusivity vs. sustainability as meritocratic continuity;
2. Governmental responsibility in advancing or eliminating DEI;
3. Education as an inclusive economic resource vs. education as a nationalist and competitive institution.

The first controversy frames the sustainability measures enforced by Biden as dependent on inclusivity and on the attempt to break down systemic inequities. By contrast, Trump's EOs reject any form of inclusivity-driven legislation, thus positioning sustainability as the maintenance of a neutral, meritocratic, and economically efficient educational system. The following examples serve to illustrate this contrast in a salient manner:

Biden: *"Federal agencies shall implement policies to expand access for underrepresented communities"*

<div align="center">vs.</div>

Trump: *"Race-based hiring and admissions shall be discontinued"*

Biden: *"Equitable education is essential to national prosperity"*

<div align="center">vs.</div>

Trump: *"True fairness is only achieved through identity-neutral policies"*

The second key area in which contrast emerges concerns how each administration assigns responsibility to government institutions. Biden's policies position the federal government as an active agent in promoting DEI, Trump's EOs, on the other hand, frame government-led DEI initiatives as bureaucratic overreach, requiring elimination to ensure sustainability. Some examples are:

Biden: *"Federal agencies must ensure that DEI policies are implemented at all levels"*

<div align="center">vs.</div>

Trump: *"Agencies shall eliminate programs that prioritize race or gender"*

Biden: *"Sustained investment in HBCUs is critical to an inclusive economy"*

vs.

Trump: *"Diversity mandates impose unnecessary burdens on American institutions"*

A final critical divergence is the function of education in sustaining national growth. Biden's policies position education as a tool for economic empowerment and equity, while Trump's EOs reinforce education as a mechanism for nationalist ideological continuity and economic competitiveness. This is exemplified as follows:

Biden: *"Investing in inclusive education strengthens national economic sustainability"*

vs.

Trump: *"American schools must prioritize skills that advance our global standing"*

Biden: *"A diverse workforce is key to innovation and progress"*

vs.

Trump: *"Education should prepare students for productive, ideologically neutral citizenship"*

The comparative analysis therefore reveals that sustainability in education is not a fixed concept but an ideologically flexible construct, shaped by competing political narratives about equity, governance, and national development. The Biden administration advances a progressive sustainability model, in which DEI stands as a structural necessity, conversely, the Trump administration upholds a conservative sustainability model, positioning DEI as an unsustainable deviation from meritocratic principles. These differing interpretations of sustainability highlight the broader ideological struggle over the role of education in shaping national identity and institutional governance (Schmidt, 2007).

6. Conclusion

The comparison between the two sets of EOs investigated throughout this study reveals that sustainability in education is not an absolute, universally

agreed-upon framework but a concept that is ideologically contingent and subject to redefinition. Indeed, the 'bending' (Bhatia, 2004) of sustainability occurs when political administrations reshape the discourse to align with their broader ideological goals, whether that implies viewing inclusivity as a structural necessity or eradicating identity-based policies to restore a perceived neutral baseline. Moreover, the temporal dimension of sustainability plays a crucial role. At different historical moments, sustainability in education has been framed as a progressive expansion of access, a reinforcement of economic priorities, or a return to nationalistic and meritocratic ideals. What one administration defines as an essential reform, another may see as an unsustainable deviation from tradition.

Given the contrasting interpretations of sustainability and DEI in educational policy, future research should focus on how these competing discourses influence policy implementation at institutional levels, particularly in higher education, public schooling, and workforce training. All stakeholders, be they policymakers, educators, researchers or advocacy groups, play a vital role in shaping the future of sustainability in education. Their engagement in policy development, institutional practice, and legal provisions will determine the long-term impact of these executive directives.

The authors firmly believe that by disseminating these findings through academic conferences, policy reports, and public engagement initiatives, a broader discourse on how sustainability and DEI are operationalised in national education systems can be broached. This research underscores the need for continued interdisciplinary analysis of how educational sustainability is shaped by today's shifting political landscapes. Future comparative studies could extend beyond the US context to examine global policy trends, assessing whether similar ideological tensions emerge in international approaches to sustainability and DEI in education.

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