



JOINT STATEMENT ON THE REAUTHORIZATION OF THE ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION ACT (ESEA) March, 2010

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is an opportunity to advance the national discussion on public education that has grown over the past several years, and the momentum provided by the historic passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

The undersigned groups – representing teachers, education support personnel, principals, local administrators, and school board members throughout the nation – are deeply committed to improving student learning and closing gaps in achievement, opportunities and skills among all students. To that end, as summarized below, we advocate for fundamental changes in the ESEA, including greater emphasis on better and fairer measures of student learning as well as educator and school performance, fostering great educators, and increased access to adequate, equitably distributed and sustained federal resources and funding. These modifications are essential to driving the kinds of reforms needed to improve student achievement on a long-term basis and insure that all American students have the access, tools, and opportunity to succeed through a world-class education.

As it prepares to reauthorize ESEA, we urge Congress to draw from the experiences of local educators who know students best. Our organizations have reached consensus about the need for significant improvements that should be made to the statute during reauthorization. While each of our organizations has developed and proposed distinct recommendations to address our priorities for the reauthorization of ESEA, we have reached consensus on the following broad principles:

Accountability

A new framework of accountability is needed to accurately and fairly measure student, school, and school district performance. Secretary Duncan gave voice to this sentiment when he recently said that “[NCLB] unfairly labeled many schools as failures even when they were making progress [and] ... places too much emphasis on raw test scores rather than student growth ... it is overly prescriptive in some ways while it is too blunt an instrument of reform in others.”

We are calling for a more dynamic system of accountability that requires all stakeholders—including parents, teachers, education support personnel, principals, school administrators, school board members, business, labor and community leaders, and elected officials—to improve the public education system for all students.

An ESEA accountability system must go beyond measurements of student achievement and include multiple factors that influence student readiness and learning. The new accountability system must foster a broad and rich curriculum rather than narrowing the curriculum to address only those subjects and grades for which there are statewide tests. Finally, a revised accountability system must apply equally to all schools that receive public funding and services.

Measures of Student Learning

Measures of student learning should facilitate the improvement of achievement for each child; therefore, the measures that are used must have meaning for teachers, students, parents and school leaders. Transparency should be a primary criterion for measures of student learning in the next version of ESEA. There is a critical need for valid, reliable and unbiased measurements of student learning aligned with state-led standards, curriculum and instruction. State-led standards should be vertically aligned to measure student progress over time. The use of assessments plays an important role and must be combined with other sources of information related to outcome measures in order to adequately determine the academic progress of students and provide teachers with information on what students are learning. Formative assessments provide an opportunity to ensure that detailed student information is reaching the classroom level and therefore impacting future student instruction. All measures of student learning should incorporate, as appropriate, advances in technology and research.

States, not the federal government, must have lead responsibility and sufficient flexibility to develop standards of student learning and coordinate a broad range of evidence-based activities by which those measures are determined. Current efforts by states to develop a voluntary common core of state standards should be applauded; however, the federal government should not mandate the states' adoption of these standards. These efforts will hopefully strengthen the quality of standards across state lines and lead to the development of more valuable measures of student learning and progress.

Substantial funding and incentives must be provided by the federal government to support state and local school district efforts to develop measures of student learning. States should be required to develop appropriate assessments for all students and should ensure that alternative assessments, native language assessments, and appropriate accommodations are available for students with disabilities and English language learners who need them. Equally important, there must be clear distinctions between measures of student learning, measures of school performance and measures of school district performance, and those measures should only be used for the purposes for which they were designed, as per the measurement standards established by the American Educational Research Association, the American Psychological Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education in [1999?].

At the school level, we support the creation of a system of accountability that considers assessment data in addition to other multiple measures of student learning that include evidence of growth in knowledge and skills. Standardized assessments, properly aligned with state standards, curriculum and professional development, can offer very useful information on student progress. However, these assessments should not be the sole or predominant measure of student performance. As part of a valid and reliable assessment system, standardized

assessments must be considered in relation to other sources of information that can provide evidence of student learning, such as:

- Student performances, group work or presentations scored using a rubric;
- Writing samples;
- Student progress toward targeted learning objectives;
- Portfolios;
- Grades;
- Teacher-developed exams;
- IEP goals and objectives;
- Language proficiency goals for English language learners; and
- Student “capstone” projects (e.g., end-of-course research or thesis paper).

Improved Measures of Student Learning for English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities

Providing valid, reliable and unbiased measures of students’ learning for English Language Learners and students with disabilities constitutes the greatest challenges for states, school districts and schools.

Effective outcome-based support systems are needed to address the unique circumstances impacting how students with disabilities learn and the broad range of measures that should be available to demonstrate their academic progress. Measures of learning for students with disabilities should be determined by their Individualized Education Program team and not subjected to arbitrary caps such as the current “one percent/two percent” rule.

Additionally, school districts should have the flexibility to appropriately assess English Language Learners in English content only after they demonstrate acquisition of English. State and local education agencies should develop linguistically and culturally appropriate native language assessments and instructional methods. Instruction and assessment for ELL students should be aligned; for example, if a student is receiving math or reading/language arts instruction in a native language, then it would be valid and appropriate for that student to be assessed in that language.

School Improvement

Successful school reform requires evidence-based strategies and significant resources for implementing systemic improvement and raising individual student and schoolwide performance levels. School improvement resources should target the lowest-achieving schools. Districts should have the flexibility to implement differentiated school improvement interventions that are data-driven and designed to meet the specific needs of target populations. Assistance and interventions should build local capacity and empower schools to analyze and define the problems a school is facing; collaborate with community partners, parents, and students to develop a long-term improvement plan with measurable outcomes; work with the school leadership team, consisting of principals, teachers, and other school staff, to implement proven reform strategies; work with community organizations to address students’ non-academic needs;

provide ongoing job-embedded professional development for educators; and collect data to determine the success of schoolwide interventions.

There are excellent public schools around the country that are diverse and high-poverty and are still beating the odds every day by closing achievement gaps and improving curriculum, instruction, and assessment in an environment that is personalized for each student. Each of these success stories provides evidence that turning around a school requires three to five years of continuous, resource-intensive, and hard work.

Educator Quality, Distribution and Professional Development

There is a consensus that great, well prepared educators are pivotal to the success of students. Criteria for determining the qualifications of principals, teachers, and other education professionals are the responsibility of states and local school districts. The federal government must facilitate research and provide resources to help education professionals reach and maintain their peak performance levels. The next version of ESEA should provide funds for and foster ongoing, high-quality professional development throughout the careers of principals, teachers, and other school staff, including mentoring and training that are tailored to their respective positions in a school.

To address the shortage of qualified principals and/or teachers, the federal government should provide resources for the development of programs to recruit, prepare and retain excellent education professionals particularly in struggling schools where they are most needed. Incentives and decisions to improve educator practice and distribution must be determined at the local level in collaboration with affected school leadership and personnel. Educator evaluation systems should be developed at the local level with the affected educators and include multiple indices of performance that are designed primarily to improve instruction and leadership.

School and Community Partnering

There is growing interest in and commitment to schools partnering with communities and families to maximize the benefits they can provide our neediest students to eliminate barriers to learning. If properly implemented, schools and communities partnering together can positively change the lives of students and communities. The next version of ESEA should take this concept to scale by providing comprehensive services at public schools through community-based organizations and through public and private partnerships. The list of services may include: early childhood education, remedial education and enrichment, primary health and dental care, mental health counseling, parent involvement and family literacy, GED programs, English language instruction, mentoring and youth development, parenting education, child care, community service and service learning opportunities, and job training and career counseling. Priority should be given to schools serving the highest percentages of low-income students in order to improve students' educational outcomes and general well-being.

Graduation Rates

States should be required to use a uniform and accurate method of calculating graduation rates that recognizes the unique circumstances that can impact a student's ability to graduate in a pre-determined timeframe. This will counter the confusion and inconsistencies in current graduation-rate calculations that make it impossible to compare state performance and blur any views of a nationwide graduation rate. Success after high school must include the variety of experiences

available to graduates including four-year institutions, community colleges, apprenticeships and the workforce.

Designating a strict four-year timeframe within which students must exit and graduate from high school goes against what we know about student learning and circumstances, especially for some English language learners and students with disabilities. In fact, we should be moving in the opposite direction by allowing students additional time to graduate if they require it without penalizing the school, or by encouraging less time if they already have reached proficiency. The next version of ESEA should also give credit to schools that graduate students in fewer than four years—which could encourage excellence—rather than simply acknowledge minimum proficiency.

In order to improve graduation rates and ensure that all students graduate with the skills, both academic and career and technical, they need to be successful in college and the workforce, the federal government must play a strategic role in improving our nation’s middle level and high schools by providing adequate resources to supplement improvement efforts at the state and local levels.

Improving the Effective Use of Data

The ESEA must foster the effective collection and appropriate use of data that facilitate student learning and professional growth.

Federal, state and local data collection must be coordinated to meet the instructional needs of teachers and principals as well as the need for information and transparency among policymakers, parents and community members. The ESEA must invest not only in state longitudinal data systems but also in local data systems as school districts work to come into compliance with state systems.

Data can have a profound impact on student instruction but only if it is accompanied by professional development for the teachers and principals in the use of the data. Educators at all levels must receive extensive professional development on how to interpret and use student achievement data gathered from multiple indicators. Further, data must be accessible to educators in a timely fashion, and educators must be provided time to analyze and interpret the data and develop future lesson plans in collaboration with other teachers, including master and mentor teachers.

The ESEA should acknowledge the impact of data collection on particular communities, including small school districts. The administrative burden of gathering data disproportionately impact small school districts that often have limited administrative staff to comply with such requests. Moreover, we caution against the use of small data sets, which may lead to inaccurate or misleading interpretations.

Federal policy should include protections that prevent the dissemination of data that could lead to the inappropriate identification of individual students or school employees or violate federal, state or local privacy or labor laws.