

February 23, 2015

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable John Kline
Chairman
Committee on Education & The Workforce
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Bobby Scott
Ranking Member
Committee on Education & The Workforce
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

RE: Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

Dear Chairman Alexander, Chairman Kline, Ranking Member Murray, and Ranking Member Scott:

Over the past decade, America's public schools have made more progress for low-income students and students of color than at any other time in a generation. That's not just good for the young people who are building brighter futures. It's good for everybody. Study after study underscores what we've long known: improving overall student performance and narrowing gaps in achievement provide an enormous boost to the economy.

In that time, we've also learned a lot about what works — and what doesn't — in current federal education law. Regardless of one's vantage point, there is broad agreement that the Elementary and Secondary Education Act needs to be updated, and we sincerely applaud your commitment to do so.

Given our collective experience as current and former district superintendents, no one understands better than we the calls for reauthorization to provide more autonomy at the local level to customize the supports and interventions our schools need to improve. It's only common sense to give the people closest to children and communities more flexibility than they have in current law to do what is best for all of the schools and families they serve.

As you move forward with that effort, however, we caution against allowing the pendulum to swing too far in the opposite direction of current law when it comes to assessment and accountability. As currently written, the House and Senate proposals for reauthorization may not do enough to provide local districts with the support they need to help all of our schools and students — particularly the ones struggling the most — move further and faster toward excellence.

We, the undersigned, may disagree on some of the finer points of these policies. But we are united in our belief that, to be effective, any reauthorization of ESEA must:

- 1. Ensure states have rigorous academic standards in place that prepare all students for college, careers and life after high school.** These standards should align with the entry requirements of the state's public higher education system so that when students graduate from high school, they have mastered the

foundational skills and knowledge necessary to choose their own paths for the future, whatever they may be.

2. **Protect current requirements for annual, statewide literacy and mathematics assessments tied to those standards and the timely public reporting of disaggregated assessment results.** Comparable, annual, transparent data is a critical tool for educators, parents and taxpayers to identify what's working in our schools and what isn't. At the same time, Congress should support the work already underway in some states and districts to eliminate any additional local assessments that are redundant, misaligned or low-quality.
3. **Maintain the core expectation of statewide accountability systems that improvement is required for ALL groups of students and greater action is taken on behalf of any school or student group that may lag.** These systems should include academic achievement and high school graduation rates as the primary drivers; meaningful expectations that all schools and students improve while those furthest behind make greater annual progress in order to catch up; and appropriate mechanisms to ensure that customized, effective, evidence-based action is taken by states and districts when any school or group of students falls behind.
4. **Allow states to implement and enforce the law, while providing the Secretary of Education with the responsibility to approve plans, ensure state implementation through oversight and enforcement and take action when states fail to meet their obligations.**

In our experience, truly well-designed accountability systems for all schools and all groups of students should be anything but blunt instruments. They can help superintendents and other educators rally the system around a common vision and make choices in the best interests of students — choices that may otherwise be tough to make, such as:

- Raising expectations and expanding access to rigorous coursework, which is among the strategies that drove Los Angeles Unified to register some of the biggest jumps in student achievement on the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress,
- Rethinking the roles and responsibilities of educators working in high-needs schools to offer them significant autonomy in exchange for results, which helped some of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools' persistently struggling campuses make significant gains, and
- Intense focus on transforming low-performing schools, which helped propel Denver Public Schools from worst to first among all major Colorado school systems in terms of annual student progress, a standing they have maintained for the past three years.

That kind of energy to improve is one of the reasons why 4 out of 5 students in this country are now graduating from high school on time, an historic high. It's a tremendous milestone, but we are nowhere near our ability to claim victory. The vast majority of those graduates are still underprepared for college and the workforce. Further, the 1 in 5 that doesn't graduate represents more than 700,000 young Americans each year whose life opportunities are dramatically diminished. The last thing we need is to create an environment that allows any school or system to lower expectations or slow up on improvement.

What we have learned from our collective experiences is that testing and transparency alone are simply not enough to fuel the gains we all seek, especially when it comes to efforts aimed at helping persistently struggling schools and our most vulnerable students. There is no denying that those who pursue the education profession

do so with the best intentions of making a real difference for young people. But the not-so-distant past tells us that when we leave policy up to best intentions, only some jurisdictions aim high. Most don't. And that isn't good for our schools or our country.

We are confident that the final outcome for ESEA reauthorization can appropriately balance the pendulum swing between too much federal involvement and what we believe would be too little. We simply cannot afford to turn back the clock to a time when too many places failed to act with a sense of urgency on behalf of all students and schools and instead aimed for the lowest common denominator. A strong ESEA can help prevent that.

Thank you for your consideration of our views. We welcome the opportunity to serve as a resource to you as you continue your efforts to strengthen federal law on behalf of the students and schools we all serve.

Sincerely,

Andrés A. Alonso, former chief executive officer, Baltimore City Public Schools, MD
John L. Barry, former superintendent, Aurora Public Schools, CO
Tom Boasberg, superintendent, Denver Public Schools, CO
Jean-Claude Brizard, former chief executive officer, Chicago Public Schools, IL
Veronica Conforme, chancellor, The Education Achievement Authority of Michigan, MI
Sharon L. Contreras, superintendent, Syracuse City School District, NY
S. Dallas Dance, superintendent, Baltimore County Public Schools, MD
John Deasy, former superintendent, Los Angeles Unified School District, CA
Patrick Dobard, superintendent, Recovery School District, LA
José Espinoza, superintendent of schools, Socorro Independent School District, TX
Lewis D. Ferebee, superintendent, Indianapolis Public Schools, IN
Howard Fuller, former superintendent, Milwaukee Public Schools, WI
Carlos Garcia, former superintendent, San Francisco Unified School District, CA
Terry B. Grier, superintendent of schools, Houston Independent School District, TX
Carl E. Harris, former superintendent, Durham Public Schools, NC
Edmond Heatley, former superintendent, Clayton County Public Schools, GA
William R. Hite, Jr., superintendent, The School District of Philadelphia, PA
Alan Ingram, former superintendent of schools, Springfield Public Schools, MA
Barbara M. Jenkins, superintendent, Orange County Public Schools, FL
Joel Klein, former chancellor, New York City Department of Education, NY
Grenita Lathan, superintendent, Peoria Public Schools District 150, IL
Cindy Loe, former superintendent, Fulton County Schools, GA
Barbara E. McGann, former superintendent, Portsmouth School Department, RI
Nancy J. McGinley, former superintendent, Charleston County School District, SC
Lynn Moody, superintendent, Rowan-Salisbury School System, NC
Jeffrey Moss, superintendent, Beaufort County School District, SC
Joseph Olchefske, former superintendent, Seattle Public Schools, WA
Jonathan P. Raymond, former superintendent, Sacramento City Unified School District, CA
Joseph Redden, former superintendent, Cobb County School District, GA
Governor Roy R. Romer, former superintendent, Los Angeles Unified School District, CA
Mark Roosevelt, former superintendent, Pittsburgh Public Schools, PA
John O. Simpson, former superintendent, Norfolk Public Schools, VA
Aaron C. Spence, superintendent, Virginia Beach City Public Schools, VA

Andre D. Spencer, superintendent, Harrison School District Two, CO
Kim A. Statham, former state administrator, Oakland Unified School District, CA
Jerry D. Weast, former superintendent, Montgomery County Public Schools, MD
Barbara Deane-Williams, superintendent, Greece Central School District, NY
Antwan Wilson, superintendent, Oakland Unified School District, CA

cc: all U.S. Senators and Representatives