



Opportunities for Teachers,
Results for Urban Students

January 27, 2015

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman
HELP Committee
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
HELP Committee
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Kline
Chairman
Education and the Workforce Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Robert Scott
Ranking Member
Education and the Workforce Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator Alexander, Senator Murray, Representative Kline, and Representative Scott:

Thank you for your efforts to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The reauthorization provides an opportunity to lay the groundwork for policy changes that will enable our nation's education system to better serve all students, including the students who fill the classrooms of Teach Plus teachers: low-income students and students of color. These students now comprise the majority of our public school students¹. Congress has a moral and economic imperative to ensure that the reauthorization takes their needs squarely into account as it moves forward.

Through our policy fellowship program, our teacher-designed turnaround initiative that is generating profound results for students, and our teacher-led professional development program, Teach Plus has engaged deeply with thousands of teachers across the country around issues that are at the heart of the reauthorization debate. Through our work, we have come to believe that the reauthorization should focus on modernizing the teaching profession, providing equitable opportunities for students and schools most in need, and maintaining statewide annual assessments while reducing over-testing at the district level. Our recommendations follow:

Modernize and Elevate the Teaching Profession

- **Improve the Ability of High-Need Schools to Recruit and Retain Effective Teachers** – Renewed focus is needed to ensure that high-poverty schools have access to high-performing teachers. ESEA should set-aside funds specifically for districts that want to recruit, select, train, evaluate, reward, and retain high-performing teachers to work in high-poverty, low-performing schools.
- **Encourage Teacher-Led Professional Development** – Many of the resources currently spent on professional development are not impacting teachers' instructional practice and, subsequently,

student learning. Teachers learn best from their high-performing peers and ESEA should make opportunities available for districts to leverage this resource through evidence-based, next-generation professional development programs.

- **Improve Teacher Preparation** – As a nation, we will not reach our equity goals without reforming our system of educating and preparing teachers. New and inexperienced teachers disproportionately teach low-income and minority students in high-poverty schools, so it is critical that we take steps to ensure that first-year teachers are ready from their first day in the classroom to teach all students successfully to high standards. To this end, ESEA should offer incentive grants to both institutions of higher education and non-profit organizations to establish 21st century teacher preparation programs that are selective and rigorous, as well as emphasize clinical practice and research rather than theory.

Provide Equitable Opportunities for Students and Schools Most in Need

- **Protect “Maintenance of Effort” and Title I School-wide Provisions** - The cornerstone of ESEA since its creation has been the Title I program to provide funding to serve disadvantaged students. Under the Senate discussion draft, these extra dollars could lose their power to help level the playing field for disadvantaged students. If there is a significant overall decline in financial resources for schools, which is likely without "Maintenance of Effort" requirements, the impact of Title I funding would be mitigated. It is also essential for ESEA to maintain the requirement that at least 40 percent of students in school-wide Title I programs be from low-income families in order to ensure that the funding reaches the schools most in need.
- **Maintain accountability for all students** - The Senate discussion draft does not include adequate accountability for the students in our teachers’ classrooms: low-income students, students of color, English language learners, students with disabilities, and other traditionally underserved students. The discussion draft should be revised to require states to set annual goals and targets for grade-level achievement, high school graduation, and closing achievement gaps, including accelerated progress for student subgroups. This must be coupled with strong steps to ensure that there are no disparities in access to effective teaching.
- **Invest in low-performing schools** - The core of ESEA since 1965 has been its focus on providing disadvantaged students (many of whom attend chronically low-performing schools) with fair and equal opportunities. The discussion draft does not provide sufficient support and eliminates a dedicated funding stream for school improvement. This funding stream should be restored, and provisions are needed to ensure that all students have equitable access to pre-K, core college prep courses (including STEM), and technology in their schools. An establishment of an evidence-based innovation fund could lead to real breakthroughs that would benefit low-performing schools.

Maintain Statewide Annual Assessments while Reducing Over-testing at the District Level

- **Continue annual statewide assessments** - States should be required to continue to evaluate all students annually in reading/language arts and mathematics in grades 3-8, and once in high

school. This should be done using assessments that are aligned with the state’s college- and career-ready standards and that measure each student’s progress toward meeting those standards. Limiting testing for federal accountability purposes to only three times during a child’s 13-year education lifespan (from grades K-12) would make it impossible to track progress, or growth, in student learning and take timely steps to intervene if students aren’t making gains. It would also render many teacher and leader evaluation systems – which states have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in developing in recent years – effectively useless. Lastly, it would make it impossible for parents to see how their children are doing relative to their peers in 10 out of the 13 years of a child’s schooling, and it would obscure the persistent achievement gaps that annual data allow us to recognize and address.

- **Streamline district assessments** - As noted in [The Student and the Stopwatch](#), teachers know all tests are not created equal. Some fit seamlessly into their instruction. Others don’t. As next generation assessments that better meet teachers’ needs are rolled out later this year, ESEA should set the foundation for states to work with teachers to streamline testing, including requiring states to set limits on the amount of time spent on district tests. Funding should be available for district level audits that ensure required tests are well-aligned to standards, integrated into the curriculum, and give teachers the information they need to improve their practice. To this end, we believe that the Support Making Assessments Reliable and Timely (SMART) Act, introduced by Senator Baldwin and Rep. Bonameci, should be incorporated into ESEA.

As Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellow Emanuel Harper has testified before the Education and Workforce Committee, closing the achievement gap “starts with reaffirming the right of every student to a high-quality and rigorous education. And it must end with student achievement, because despite a student’s surroundings or background, graduating from high school and college and having the power to do anything they choose will be their destiny, but only when we do everything that we can, starting today, to ensure effective teachers are in every classroom.”

Thank you for your consideration of our views. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact our Vice President for Federal and State Policy, Alice Johnson Cain, at 202-460-0229.

Sincerely,

Celine Coggins

Celine Coggins, PhD
Founder and CEO

ⁱ <http://www.southerneducation.org/getattachment/4ac62e27-5260-47a5-9d02-14896ec3a531/A-New-Majority-2015-Update-Low-Income-Students-Now.aspx>