



Remarks of Alice Johnson Cain

To the U.S. Department of Education on ESSA Implementation

January 11, 2016

Good morning. I'm Alice Johnson Cain, Executive Vice President of Policy and Partnerships at Teach Plus. I'm also a former GED and ELL teacher, and the parent of two public school students. Teach Plus is a national nonprofit that empowers effective, experienced teachers to become leaders in policy and practice issues that affect their students. Since 2009, we've grown from working with a handful of teachers in Boston to now working with tens of thousands of teachers in cities across the country. Our teacher leaders are all high-performing and all teach in high-poverty schools. Their students arguably have the most at stake as the new law is implemented.

I'd like to cover two things today: 1) share some themes I have heard from our nearly 4,000 teachers who were involved in ESSA advocacy last year; and 2) make a few suggestions that I think can make a difference in ensuring implementation is successful for as many students as possible. I should add Teach Plus is a proud partner in the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights' ESEA coalition and we support the comments shared earlier today by Liz King.

Our teachers spent significant time sharing their expertise with the policymakers who wrote ESSA. This included testifying before the House and Senate, participating in Congressional briefings, Hill Days,

Flash Polls, and dozens of meetings with policymakers both in DC and in Members' Congressional districts.

Our teachers focused on four key issues: assessment, accountability, resource equity and teacher leadership. They are strong proponents of continuing annual statewide assessments because they believe these assessments can and should be used to improve the quality of education and the effectiveness of interventions. In the words of [Alexandra Fuentes](#), one of our teacher leaders who is an ELL biology teacher in Virginia, "You cannot separate assessment from teaching... I need to know what [my students] do and do not understand... State tests give me data on how my students are doing relative to other students. I need that reality check."

She adds, "State tests provide data that states and districts can use to develop and refine teacher evaluation systems that recognize and reward excellent teaching, helping to keep the most effective teachers in the classroom."

Strict enforcement of the 95% requirement also matters to Teach Plus. Our teachers have seen what happens when their students are excluded from assessment and accountability systems. States cannot be permitted to go backwards when it comes to ensuring that all students matter.

Our teachers also generally support meaningful accountability connected to action. We conducted a [Flash Poll](#) of over 1,000 teachers last May that found nearly three-quarters of our teachers support requiring states to intervene when schools don't demonstrate growth for needy students. It is imperative that teachers have a seat at the table when decisions are made about new accountability systems, including decisions on both the weighting of indicators and the selection of interventions.

Our teachers, who helped develop and advocate for the SMART Act provisions, see a strong connection between assessment, accountability, and resource equity. In the words of one of our Chicago teacher leaders, [Micah Miner](#), “the annual testing data must [must be] used to allocate resources and re-evaluate practices and programs that help improve learning outcomes. This is not to make teachers exempt from accountability, but rather approach this with the idea of improvement based on capacity-building and innovation... Help us as a nation to give all students the same chance to succeed.”

In thinking of data as a tool that can inform decisions about resource distribution, I think it is important to remember that our most important resource in schools is excellent teachers. I hope that during the regulatory process you will do all you can to support steps that ensure the students who need it most have access to great teaching.

The final thing I want to comment on is teacher leadership. We are thrilled by the provisions supporting teacher leadership as well as the new Secretary’s desire to make elevating the teaching profession one of his top priorities. I have some advice here on what NOT to do: whatever you do please do NOT think of this as a separate, add-on activity. Instead, **please think explicitly about the connection between teacher leadership and your other policy goals. Getting teacher leadership right is a means to the end of better policy implementation and, ultimately, better results for students.**

Elevating teacher voice at the state level as the law is implemented will make ALL the difference in its ultimate success or failure. States that include teachers in a meaningful way in decisions – including key decisions about their new state accountability systems and interventions, decisions about which assessments to eliminate, and decisions how to allocate resources based on data – will be more

successful in closing the achievement gap than the states that don't include teachers in a meaningful way. And asking teachers, at the end of the process, to rubber stamp decisions that are made throughout the process by others does NOT count as including teachers in a meaningful way. I hope the Department will do everything possible to ensure teachers have a seat at the table in states from the beginning of the implementation process.

We are particularly excited about the new Title II provisions designed to assist states and LEAs in retaining effective teachers, including opportunities for effective teachers to lead evidence-based professional development for their peers; providing training and support for teachers who are part of instructional leadership teams; and promoting professional growth through career paths that incorporate hybrid roles that allow instructional coaching and/or mentoring while remaining in the classroom with a reduced load.

I hear over and over from teachers across the country that they want more hybrid roles like this. One of our DC teacher leaders, [Megan Dunne](#), is participating in a DCPS initiative that enables teachers to spend part of the day teaching and the other part engaging in leadership activities like coaching and mentoring colleagues or analyzing data to determine which students need more support. Initiatives like this are essential to improving student outcomes and extending great teachers' commitment to and time in the classroom. I hope you will do everything possible to ensure as many teachers as possible across the country have the opportunity to grow professionally in similar ways.

Thank you.