



January 8, 2015

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

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

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray:

On behalf of the nation's 115,500 elementary, middle, and high school principals, assistant principals, and other school leaders, the American Federation of School Administrators (AFSA), National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) congratulate you on your new positions on the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee. Our organizations look forward to working with you in the 114th Congress to pass education legislation that will improve educational outcomes for all students.

There is no room for debate when it comes to investing in our children through high-quality education programs that are proven to boost student performance, and we know that this begins by providing our nation's educators with the tools they need to help students reach their greatest potential. Great schools do not exist apart from great leaders, and strong school leadership is essential for ensuring student success. For more than a decade, the Wallace Foundation has sponsored rigorous research on school leadership, which has led to the finding that there is an "empirical link between school leadership and improved student achievement." Principals are recognized for their ability to influence a variety of factors that indirectly affect student outcomes and directly influence schools, including their ability to support teachers and create the conditions necessary for high-functioning schools. The evidence about successful schools is clear: A great teacher gets great results in a classroom, but only a principal can lead a school to success in all classrooms for each students' success and create the culture for sustaining long-term improvements.

One of the first pieces of legislation that we understand the HELP Committee will debate in the new Congress is the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. AFSA, NAESP, and NASSP support this effort and a full reauthorization of the law that will provide important guidance to states and districts to improve our nation's education system through proven programs and strategies as well as strengthen areas of ESEA that have been problematic under NCLB. In addition, while 43 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico are operating under the Administration's "ESEA flexibility" waiver plans that provide some level of regulatory relief from NCLB, the remaining seven states have schools that continue to unnecessarily face the

punitive NCLB sanctions through a one-size-fits-all accountability system, and an overreliance on standardized testing. Further, the waiver plans across states have not shown to either diminish inappropriate labeling and corrective actions on schools or reduce the dependence on standardized testing. In fact, in many of the “waiver” states, the adverse conditions created by NCLB have been exacerbated.

Principals respectfully request that Congress work to refocus the law to help put in place state and local education systems that will provide robust, meaningful accountability together with sufficient supports for educators and schools. The law is in dire need of this redirection to provide high-quality educational opportunities and improved outcomes for all students.

Recognizing that reauthorizing ESEA is a complex endeavor, AFSA, NAESP, and NASSP respectively share our organizations’ ESEA priorities and urge you to consider them as the HELP Committee begins this process.

Focus ESEA on Supporting School Leadership

The emphasis on school-level outcomes and student achievement places the school leader at the center of all school improvement efforts. Today’s principals and assistant principals are expected to be visionary leaders, instructional experts, building managers, assessment specialists, disciplinarians, community builders, and more; they are also the ones ultimately held responsible for student achievement. If principals and assistant principals are to meet the growing and evolving expectations of this demanding position, they must be provided ongoing personalized professional development to meet their individual and school needs. This is true for all school leaders, regardless of their initial preparation or their length of service. To meet these demands, ongoing mentoring and job-embedded professional development are necessary to support all school leaders.

In addition, states and districts must be directed to put in place more rigorous efforts to recruit and prepare principals and assistant principals to improve student academic achievement in high-need schools through research-based programs. Congress should support principal preparation programs that require candidates to demonstrate leadership competencies through an assessment prior to entry into a qualified principal preparation and certification program that includes partnerships between districts and local preparation and support programs. Furthermore, qualified school leader candidates must complete a one-year principal residency program under the guidance of an accomplished school leader and after completing their preparation program, as aspiring principals they should demonstrate a deep understanding of the domains of effective school leadership and related competencies through a performance-based assessment before commencing work as school leaders. This level of preparation is critical for every principal to enter the profession ready and properly equipped to improve student achievement and effectively lead schools.

College and Career Readiness Standards Implementation

The nation’s principals and other school leaders are enthusiastic about the potential of rigorous college and career readiness state standards that raise the bar for all students. AFSA, NAESP, and NASSP view implementation of these standards as a long-term improvement process that requires a rigorous shift in course content throughout all grade levels. This also requires the retraining of teachers in new ways of thinking and instruction, the integration of literacy across

content areas, helping students develop higher-order thinking and other 21st-century skills, and providing the opportunity to introduce a new generation of assessments that are better able to measure student learning and performance, migrating from paper to online assessments. Our organizations support efforts that would afford states and districts—and therefore schools—with a transition or adjustment period as they implement the new standards and aligned assessments. This requires a delay on high-stakes accountability systems, not the elimination of accountability for student outcomes, to give principals, teachers, and students time to implement and adjust to new instructional practices and assessment systems. Educators must also be supported during this adjustment period to manage what may be seismic shifts in practice and expectations of student learning, as well as deal with the acquisition and implementation of the technological infrastructure, equipment, and learning that is necessary to ensure online assessments are administered with fidelity.

Title I, Portability, Vouchers and Accountability

The appropriate federal role in education is to promote equity and provide targeted resources to assist states and local districts that need it the most. Our organizations oppose any and all efforts to transform Title I funding, which is designed to assist public schools with high concentrations of poverty and high-need students, into a private school voucher. Many portability proposals would clearly lead to vouchers as they allow the funds to move to both public and private schools. Some Title I portability proposals have been limited to public school portability, but they are designed to make it easier to implement private school vouchers as a next step. Accordingly, we oppose attempts to include any provisions supporting Title I public school portability in a reauthorized ESEA—even if it limits portability to public schools.

Additionally, AFSA, NAESP, and NASSP strongly oppose tuition tax credits and education voucher plans that divert public monies to private institutions. Our organizations believe that the welfare of this nation is dependent on a strong public education system. Tuition tax credits reduce gross tax revenues designed to support public education for all. Furthermore, we oppose the diversion of public monies to private institutions which are not bound to the same public accountability standards that all public schools must meet, including those in Title IX, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and ESEA.

While federal policies must require that states set high expectations of student performance through college and career readiness standards, they must also support differentiated accountability systems that capture how the schools are performing so that the curriculum and instruction can then be aligned to best meet the needs of the students. Further, federal policies must encourage the development of state and local assessments, and the use of growth models that are proven successful. ASFA, NAESP, and NASSP support the use of multiple measures of student performance (both formative and summative) to accurately gauge social and emotional development, language fluency and comprehension, creativity, adaptability, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills. Assessment data should be used to inform instruction, be fair, flexible, authentic, and should reflect student progress toward academic proficiency. Measuring the many factors that contribute to improved student outcomes will provide a complete picture of school and student performance, not an up or down, pass-fail, standardized test score prescribed by NCLB. Title I must provide states and districts with

direction to this end and provide a balanced approach to the frequency and quality of assessments and their outcomes related to accountability.

School Improvement

ASFA, NAESP, and NASSP have long been concerned about the capacity of states and districts to intervene in the nation's lowest performing schools, and their ability to work with schools on effective intervention strategies under the current School Improvement Grants (SIG) program. Our organizations support a reauthorization that **excludes** any model of school improvement that is not substantiated by evidence-based research, particularly those requiring the dismissal of principals and teachers as the first step without regard to training, expertise, resources provided, and time that has been spent in the school building to implement improvement strategies and initiatives. Any school improvement "model" must be preceded by a fair and objective assessment of the school leader's capacity, as well as the time, tools, and resources necessary to institute sustainable reform in his or her school. Evidence has shown that school improvement, or "turning around" a school takes, at a minimum, three to five years. And most successful, sustained schoolwide improvement efforts need seven years before the effects are fully realized.

Principal Evaluation

NAESP and NASSP issued a report in September 2012, "*Rethinking Principal Evaluation: A New Paradigm Informed by Research and Practice*," which offers a reliable framework for states and districts to consider when establishing principal evaluation systems—one that reflects the complexity of the principalship and measures the leadership competencies required for student and school success. Principals are concerned about the new evaluation systems that are being developed by states and districts that were a condition for receiving ESEA flexibility waivers, SIG funds, as well as Race to the Top. Congress has a responsibility now to provide guidance to state and local efforts in ESEA in order to support effective principal evaluation systems that will lead to improved performance within the six domains of effective school leadership: student growth and achievement; school planning and progress; school culture; stakeholder support and engagement; professional qualities and practices; and professional growth and learning that are within their direct control in schools. We support an ESEA reauthorization that addresses the issue of principal evaluation in order to course-correct systems that are in place in many states and districts. Principals are supportive of evaluation systems in states and districts that have models consistent with the recommendations contained in the NAESP and NASSP research that outlines the components of an effective, locally designed principal evaluation system. An effective evaluation system is collaboratively developed; provides meaningful feedback to the individual principal; is based on multiple measures; and takes into account student growth as well as evidence of effective school leadership practice. According to the latest research related to principal evaluation, our organizations recommend that no more than a quarter of a principal's evaluation be based on student achievement. Further, any principal evaluation system must be tied to professional improvement plans for principals and a strong focus on six key domains of leadership responsibility within a principal's sphere of influence as stated above. Many states are initiating pilot principal evaluation systems and will need significant assistance to ensure that they will lead to improved leadership and school performance. We respectfully ask that ESEA address principal evaluation in a meaningful way as described.

Professional Development Designed Specifically for Principals

AFSA, NAESP, and NASSP call for states and districts to provide professional development for principals on effective instructional leadership skills to lead our nation's schools. An investment in principals is an investment in learning. Professional development for principals has been largely overlooked by states and local districts because NCLB or current statute "bundles" teachers and principals together in a lengthy "laundry list" or "use of funds" under Title II. As a result, a 2013 Department of Education survey recently found that districts use only an average of 4 percent of these dollars for principal professional development, falling far short of what states and districts should be doing to support principals to meet the increased demands as instructional leaders of schools. Research and evidence over the past 10 years substantiate the role of principals and prove that they have an impact on student performance, second only to teachers in the classroom. Given their importance as the key catalysts for school improvement, ESEA and Title II funds must be refocused on providing professional development for principals and assistant principals in a manner that effectively supports their role as instructional leaders, particularly those serving in high-need schools so that they have the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to improve school and student performance, and support and improve the instructional practice of educators in the classroom. Furthermore, the law must afford principals proper training on conducting meaningful teacher evaluation in order to differentiate teacher performance accurately; provide useful feedback; and use evaluation results to inform decision making in their schools.

We respectfully encourage you to include robust provisions in a reauthorized ESEA that will support principal professional development, including a requirement that districts who receive Title II funding allocate no less than 10 percent of the funds available for professional development for elementary, middle, and high school principals to improve instructional leadership. This must be a separate section of the reauthorized law to ensure that principals are afforded the recognition and proper support in executing their leadership role in schools successfully.

Literacy

AFSA, NAESP, and NASSP are supportive of a comprehensive approach to literacy programs in the renewal of ESEA. Specifically, we recommend authorizing the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy program to continue to support states and LEAs to develop, improve, and implement comprehensive literacy programs from birth to grade 12. A renewed focus on comprehensive literacy education is necessary for all students to be college and career ready. Higher and more rigorous standards will require the reorientation of literacy instruction as a systematic progression of skills across all grades. Specifically, college and career readiness standards will require increased text complexity and inclusion of informational text, which will require more literacy instruction and support from birth throughout all levels of education.

PreK–3 Education and Leadership

Research shows that achievement gaps appear early and widen over the years when children are in school. Strengthening our education system from prekindergarten to the third grade will pay enormous dividends over the lifetime of a child. In addition, such investments pay off much more when compared to efforts in later grades to remediate children if they are not learning early on what they need to know. As education and community leaders, principals are deeply troubled

that, as important as early learning is, too few children get off to a good start. This is particularly true for children who live in poverty and for immigrants and other children learning English as a second language in the early grades. Principals are supportive of connecting and coordinating services between early childhood education programs, such as Head Start and Early Head Start, and elementary education in Title I. This can be accomplished by acknowledging leadership of early childhood education programs by principals given that more than 60 percent of practicing elementary school principals report a connection to or leadership of an early childhood education program. They must also be provided joint professional development opportunities with teachers and other educators across the early childhood care and education spectrum through grade three. Provisions related to the principal's role in coordinated services in Title I are essential to ensure that every school is able to put in place a continuum of learning that will support students' transition from early childhood to the early elementary grades.

Improving Secondary Schools

In addition, we are very supportive of including provisions to provide low-performing middle and high schools with the necessary resources to implement innovative and effective improvement strategies. We are especially supportive of including language in ESEA reauthorization allowing local education agencies to use funds to implement an early warning indicator system to help high schools and their feeder middle schools identify struggling students and provide them with necessary supports to get on track to graduate from high school and be college and career ready.

Support for Digital Learning

AFSA, NAESP, and NASSP also support provisions to emphasize the use of technology to improve instruction as well as helping educators learn how to use education technology that will lead to improved student outcomes. Principals are enthusiastic about the potential of education technology to support the personalization of student learning and improve academic achievement. However, they desperately need additional resources to purchase hardware, software, and digital devices as well as access professional development opportunities so that teachers know how to best incorporate technology into their instruction and principals know how to lead and support digital learning in their schools.

AFSA, NAESP, and NASSP look forward to working with you both to include these critical issues in the reauthorization of ESEA. Our goal is to help promote legislation that will meet the current needs of schools and students through a balanced, fair, and appropriate federal role in education. We thank you again for your efforts to accomplish this goal on behalf of the nation's educators and students.

Sincerely,



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CC: Senate HELP Committee Members
House Education and Workforce Committee Members