

March 10th, 2015

*The Honorable Senator Lamar Alexander
455 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510*

*The Honorable Senator Patty Murray
154 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510*

Dear Senator *Alexander*:

The National Network of State Teachers of the Year is a professional organization of State Teachers of the Year. Focused on assuring that every student has access to excellent teachers, we are committed to bringing the voice of teachers into policy making and to advocating for the profession. Towards that end, we would like to offer our perspective on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

As you move forward in reauthorizing ESEA, you have a heavy responsibility. It is not hyperbole to say that tens of millions of children are counting on you to get it right. To help with that, we urge you to heed the voices of educators in this process. We know from firsthand experience who will be helped and who will be hurt by the changes made—and not made—in the next version of ESEA.

While this bill is multi-faceted, we would like to call attention to several points:

1) Equity

Reauthorization must be strongly based in the original tenants of ESEA, addressing the needs of students who are economically disadvantaged. The current epidemic of children living in poverty requires a response of epic proportions. We must give our children every advantage by providing universal access to free early childhood education, ensuring that students come to kindergarten ready to learn. We know that this is an investment in success that yields tremendous economic and academic advantages.

The responsibility for funding our classrooms lies at the national, state and local level. Unfortunately, in many states and communities, this means a reliance on property taxes, a [funding formula](#) ripe for disadvantaging children living in areas of poverty.

A reauthorized ESEA must include the Maintenance of Effort provision to ensure that states uphold their responsibility. States must also be required to target funds

towards those schools with the highest concentrations of poverty, providing the greatest resources to those with the greatest need.

Funding must be increased and then maintained at a level that will ensure equitable opportunity of programs, technology and resources for all children.

2) Teacher Leadership

For the first time, America has a burgeoning, nationwide consensus that the goal of its education systems must be to ensure that *all* students graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in college, career, and life – and the ability to achieve their full potential and live the lives they dream of living. This is essential to the success of every child and of our nation itself in terms of both succeeding in the global economy and contributing to an increasingly diverse democracy. The gap between our nation's current outcomes and our new goals is substantial, particularly with regard to poor and minority students. And what will matter most to the success of every student, is our ability to ensure high-quality teaching and learning for every child.

The research base tells us that the most significant school factor in advancing a quality education is the teacher. Yet, we are losing our teachers – including our great teachers – at an alarming [rate](#). Various studies tell us that a critical factor in their [leaving](#) is lack of career advancement opportunity, career continuum structures, and [opportunities](#) to lead.

Advancing teacher leadership requires creating [systems](#) in which teacher leaders can thrive and building the ranks of highly effective teachers to become teacher leaders. We must own and advance both of these responsibilities simultaneously.

This means informing efforts to improve the recruitment, preparation, development, evaluation, retention, and advancement of teacher leaders. To frame this effort, NNSTOY has identified [five key structures](#) to transform the profession, including the need for guiding principles of excellence in the profession, support for collaborative practice in the school day, provision of actionable feedback to every educator, creation of distributed leadership models, and establishment of a professional career continuum.

3) Accountability

We believe that the only meaningful accountability is that shared by all stakeholders in student success. As professionals, we understand that this must begin with us, in our classrooms. Accountability must be based upon proven practices that build expertise, not formulas designed upon a deficit model. Teacher evaluations must take into account multiple points of evidence of student learning as well as direct and multiple observations by peers and administrators. Professional development must be targeted to the needs of the individual teacher so that they in turn can meet the myriad of student needs in their classrooms.

4) Testing

Formative and summative assessments are essential tools for educators to determine student progress on a learning path. The current ESEA did a service to our students by requiring the disaggregation of data and shining a light on achievement gaps. But the severe punitive consequences, to both individuals and systems, that have been associated with testing results, have impeded rather than promoted improvement.

One powerful example is the story of a Finalist for National Teacher of the Year, who, because he taught a non-tested subject in a high-poverty, high-needs inner-city district – his preferred place to teach – received a Value Added Measure score that was the average of his failing school. This score constituted over 50% of his total effectiveness score. As a result, he was deemed ineffective and was not eligible to mentor, coach, or provide professional learning for other teachers. This was in spite of the fact that he was selected as his state's Teacher of the Year and a Finalist for National that year.

Eventually, by the end of the year in which he was selected, his school was designated a failing school, was taken over by the state, and all of the teachers – including this one – were fired. How does this make sense? The foremost purpose of testing should be to determine student learning progress. The tests were not designed as an indicator of educator or system effectiveness, so they should not be used inappropriately.

At NNSTOY, we honor the job with which you have been tasked. We know that you value the jobs that we do, educating our nation's children, as well.

We stand ready to work with you to craft a law that is worthy of that goal and worthy of our students. We know their names. We know their families. We know their hopes. Pass a law that frees and empowers educators to inspire our students and instill the love of learning that will carry them forward.

With appreciation for your consideration,