



American Federation
of Teachers, AFL-CIO

AFT Teachers
AFT PSRP
AFT Higher Education
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July 8, 2003

U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative:

On behalf of the more than 1.2 million members of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), I write to share our views on H.R. 2211, the Ready to Teach Act of 2003, and H.R. 438, the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Act of 2003. These bills, amending Title II of the Higher Education Act (HEA), will help in our efforts to not only recruit and prepare, but also to retain, highly qualified teachers in our nation's public schools.

Ready to Teach Act (H.R. 2211)

The AFT supports efforts initiated under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA) to guarantee a highly qualified teacher in every classroom. Provisions of H.R.2211 should further this objective with its assistance for teacher preparation activities.

We are pleased to see that H.R. 2211 keeps the structure of Title II, which has functioned productively in many respects. Additional efforts to align Title II with NCLBA, where applicable, as well as the inclusion of the reauthorization of the Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers to Use Technology program, are also positive steps.

We also support the new program to address the growing need to recruit and prepare minorities for the teaching profession. The Centers of Excellence would provide funds to minority-serving institutions to further develop and strengthen their teacher preparation programs and to ensure that teacher candidates have the adequate supports to be successful in the classroom.

The AFT is further encouraged by the identification of community colleges as a vital partner in the preparation of teachers. Community colleges can play a key role in the preparation of potential teachers by providing a solid liberal arts education that would prepare a student to enter into the final years of teacher preparation at a four-year institution.

In contrast to these strengths, the AFT has specific concerns about H.R. 2211's other proposed changes in current law. It includes a structural change in regrettable and counterproductive provisions of current law relating to the removal of teachers for incompetence. In addition we are concerned about the inclusion of "a public or private educational organization" as an eligible partner for Partnership Grants. While the other partners have clear and specifically defined eligibility criteria, this new addition has none. Further we are concerned with such an undefined entity serving as a fiscal agent. This language should have more specificity or be struck from the bill.

The AFT is also concerned about new language in H.R. 2211 that mandates states to create an evaluation system to measure the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs and professional development activities within the state. Although we believe that the objectives of this requirement are laudable, we believe that the development of data and execution of such an evaluation system would be unworkable. We hope that this section could be recrafted as a more realistic approach to assessing the teacher preparation and professional development programs being funded by the legislation

Additionally, the accountability provisions in Section 207, which the AFT supports, should be further clarified to make reporting more uniform. Finally, although we encourage innovation and support alternative routes to certification, we believe that the new language on alternatives to state certification and charter colleges of education lacks sufficient criteria to ensure the viability and effectiveness of these programs.

The AFT also believes H.R. 2211 would benefit from additional emphasis on assistance for teacher induction, criteria for alternative routes to certification, the development of a core pedagogy for teacher education, and the inclusion of a strong mentoring program for new teachers. We support the amendment expected to be proposed by Rep. Mike Honda to include mentoring programs for teachers. We believe that these additions to current law would be vital to the future of education as we face an impending teacher shortage through teacher retirements and increased student enrollment.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention Act (H.R. 438)

The AFT strongly supports provisions of H.R. 438 making loan forgiveness an entitlement, ensuring that the program benefits are real rather than subject to appropriations. The current program and efforts similar to it in many states have helped alleviate the tremendous loan burden of many AFT members who choose to work and remain in our inner-city schools teaching in high-need fields. We strongly support any efforts to further alleviate the loan burden for teachers.

The student loan forgiveness program currently provides the benefit to individuals who choose to teach in designated “high-need” areas, including shortage areas of special education and math and science. We urge you to support amendments to expand eligibility for loan forgiveness to those who are teachers in high-poverty schools or who are early childhood educators, including Head Start teachers. Expanding loan forgiveness eligibility in these ways will help attract and retain highly qualified teachers to serve our most needy students--a necessary ingredient to the future success of these children. Finally, we recommend providing the loan forgiveness over a five-year period instead of the end of the five years.

We look forward to working with you as the HEA progresses. If you have further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me or Gabriella Gomez of our staff at 202/879-4452.

Sincerely,

Charlotte J. Fraas
Director, Legislation Department

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