

What Matters Most

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AFT's pathway to student success

Last week I testified before the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee about the proposed reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). I appreciate that the committee solicited the opinions of frontline educators, and I was honored to testify on their behalf. Following are thoughts on how to provide every child with the excellent education he or she deserves.

"WE THE TEACHERS ..." Teachers don't have their own version of the U.S. Constitution, but I sometimes think we should have a similarly bold, substantive and specific document that lays out what constitutes a good education, and how we can ensure every student has access to such an education.

Too often, the policies governing public education read more like: "We the school board," or "We the Department of Education," or "We the administrators of such-and-such program." In a democratic society, each of these entities can and should play a supportive role. But it shouldn't eclipse that of classroom teachers, who know children, who understand what works in education and what falls flat, and who know how policies and mandates can directly affect what goes on in the classroom—for better or worse.

The American Federation of Teachers recently developed a document called "AFT's Pathway to Student Success: What Every Student Needs."

It details many conditions for student success, such as a well-rounded curriculum; school environments that are conducive to learning; high-quality, well-supported teachers; strong home-school connections; and addressing the specific needs of children at every stage of their learning, including those with disabilities and those who are not yet fluent in English.

As Congress prepares to reauthorize ESEA, we are reminded that teachers aren't the only ones with ideas about how to educate our children. But they are charged with carrying out education programs and policies in real classrooms.

I have had literally thousands of conversations with teachers about ESEA's impact in their classrooms, reinforcing and informing the AFT's views on federal education policy. The reauthorized ESEA should focus more on fos-

tering shared responsibility among all stakeholders and less on making educational success the sole responsibility of teachers. Along with help for persistently low-performing schools, ESEA should support the movement toward high-quality common standards that are aligned with real curricula and valid assessments. It should provide resources for the implementation of teacher support and evaluation systems that are more effective. And ESEA must maintain targeted funding for the children it was designed to serve—those in greatest need.

Of course, all this requires adequate resources. The Obama administration and Congress made an important investment in our nation and our children by enacting the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which stabilized the economy and averted disastrous cuts in education. Today, more than 325,000 teachers, professors and other education staff who were in danger of being laid off are

educating students in schools nationwide. One cannot overstate the benefit for children, who don't get a second chance at a good education.

Now, between the Recovery Act winding down, and the economy not improving as quickly as anyone would like, states face budget gaps of many billions

of dollars. And the cuts states are talking about are draconian—tens of thousands of layoffs that will lead to increased class size, four-day school weeks, and the elimination of important aspects of curriculum, such as AP classes, sports programs, teacher aides and summer school. To avert this crisis, Congress needs to quickly pass legislation such as Sen. Tom Harkin's bill, the Keep Our Educators Working Act, or Rep. George Miller's bill, the Local Jobs for America Act.

Our national responsibility is to educate every child to his or her fullest potential. This responsibility should be shared by teachers, students, parents, administrators, elected officials, and all those concerned with having our next generation well-prepared for the future and engaged in our democracy. Teachers may not have a constitution, but we do have goals, vision and ideas that guide us in our work. I invite you to read "AFT's Pathway to Student Success: What Every Student Needs," and to join what should be a robust conversation about the kind of education every child deserves.



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