



American Federation
of Teachers, AFL-CIO

AFT Teachers
AFT PSRP
AFT Higher Education
AFT Public Employees
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Professionals

555 New Jersey Ave. N.W.
Washington, DC 20001
202-879-4400
www.aft.org

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February 3, 2015

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Committee on Health, Education, Labor
and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Committee on Health,
Education, Labor and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray:

In conjunction with your hearing on innovations that meet the needs of students, and on behalf of the 1.6 million members of the American Federation of Teachers, the vast majority of whom are teachers and paraprofessionals in America's public school system, I write to offer some innovative ideas for incorporation into the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. These ideas are based on conversations I have every day with educators who tell me what their students need and what supports actually help them succeed. We don't think every innovative idea requires a federal program, but when the needs are clear and the solutions are as compelling as these are, it is an opportunity to return to an ESEA that provides help, not punishments, to schools. Our ideas are evidence-based and would help combat poverty, assist struggling students, and provide students skills to succeed in the 21st century.

Community schools and wraparound services. To combat the needs of individuals in communities with concentrations of poverty, the AFT supports the addition of a new title to address the fact that two-thirds of the achievement gap is attributable to out-of-school factors. This could be accomplished by creating grants to districts for community schools and wraparound services. Through strong family engagement, socio-emotional supports and engaging instruction, community schools help promote an environment where everyone can do their best: kids are better able to learn, and teachers can focus more on instruction, knowing their students' noninstructional needs are being met. Evidence of community schools' success across the country includes improved academic performance, increased graduation rates, increased student and teacher attendance, and decreased suspension rates. We are thrilled that Henrietta Taylor will speak to your committee on the successes of community schools in Baltimore.

Early childhood education. The AFT also supports a dedicated funding stream for school-based early childhood education programs. High-quality early

childhood programs are crucial to preparing students to meet high academic standards. These programs are an integral part of a child's education continuum and must be given the attention, resources and funds they need. Linking early childhood education and care to the public school system through ESEA will help ensure that early childhood programs benefit from the public education infrastructure of state-certified teachers, professional development, professional salaries, facilities and other resources.

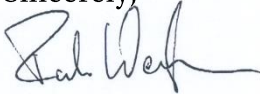
Accountability decisions should be based on multiple and varied measures, and states and districts should be held accountable for providing the core resources for learning. Teaching and learning are complex practices, and school performance cannot be evaluated adequately and properly without the use of multiple and varied measures. Accountability must involve measures of academic learning and socio-emotional learning, and it must include measures as varied as rates of attendance, suspension, expulsion, grade promotion, graduation, and school climate and safety measures. Genuine accountability rests on shared responsibility for educational outcomes. Thus, ESEA should require the documentation and provision of the core resources for learning. The federal government should require that any state that fails to make progress toward eliminating inequities for two consecutive years would not be eligible to receive competitive grant funding, and districts with documented inequities should be required to develop a plan to address such resource inequities.

Project-based learning in middle school and service learning in high school. In order to provide students "real world" experiences and skills as well as the opportunity to engage meaningfully in their communities, we recommend a grant program to districts that would allow all middle school students to participate in a project-based learning activity such as those done in the New York Performance Standards Consortium Schools. In Performance Consortium schools, students engage in performance assessments that grow directly from the curriculum and serve as an extension of the students' learning process. Students in a project-based learning experience develop skills such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking and problem solving, and they create authentic products and presentations. Likewise, such grants would support all high school students in a district to engage in projects that serve the community while building social, civil and academic skills. Service learning helps students expand learning beyond the traditional classroom, make academic content more practical, and they support problem-solving, critical-thinking and relationship-building skills.

Support over-age and undercredited students by creating individual plans for these students so that they are on a path to success in life, college and career. Research shows that once students are older than they should be for their grade, or fall behind in obtaining credits toward graduation, it is very unlikely that they will graduate, go on to college or have a successful career. We recommend that ESEA encourage school systems to work with over-age and undercredited students to create plans for them so they do not fall through the cracks and can be on a path to graduation. Such plans could incorporate innovative scheduling, "credit-recovery," externship learning, and programs that combine career and technical education with project-based learning opportunities.

Thank you for considering these innovative ideas as you work to reauthorize ESEA. I (or my staff) would be happy to discuss these with you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Randi Weingarten". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Randi Weingarten
President

RW:ct opeiu#2 afl-cio