



February 9, 2015

The Honorable John Kline  
Chairman  
Education and the Workforce Committee  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Kline:

On behalf of the 1.6 million members of the American Federation of Teachers, I write to express our disappointment in many of the provisions in the Student Success Act and to let you know we will be urging its opposition during markup.

The bill walks away from the commitment our nation made 50 years ago to help our country's disadvantaged children. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act was intended to provide federal education resources to public schools to help level the playing field for targeted populations of disadvantaged students—and it has been doing so for more than 50 years. That commitment is even more important today, in the aftermath of the great recession; today, half the students we serve in public schools are poor. The proposed Student Success Act radically departs from that intent, changing the focus of ESEA from closing achievement gaps to purposes not related to improving the academic achievement of disadvantaged students. Helping needy students gain access to a high-quality public education is a commitment and a responsibility that must be sustained.

AFT members had hoped that the current debate would offer long-awaited solutions to the increasing and counterproductive pressures and anxieties that high-stakes testing has caused for children, parents and teachers alike. We agree with the bill's position that teacher evaluations should revert to being a local responsibility. The federalization of evaluations, through Race to the Top and waivers, has been the prime reason for the escalation of high-stakes testing, which has not just taken the joy out of teaching and learning, but also narrowed the curriculum and hurt efforts to recruit and retain experienced teachers to help our most at-risk children.

We fully understand the impulse to stop the federal Department of Education from being the human resource department of every school district in America. Unfortunately, the Student Success Act throws the baby out with the bathwater. For example, it would allow states and school districts to redirect funds away from the specific populations of students

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they were intended to assist. Under the bill, money for English language learners or low-income students could be redirected to programs serving entirely different populations. In a period of sequestration, when key programs—including early childhood education—are being cut, the number of children living in poverty has grown (more than 50 percent of the nation’s children live in or near poverty). Now is not the time to dilute the limited resources available to at-risk populations.

The AFT also strongly opposes language included in the bill that would make Title I funding portable by allowing the money to follow a child to that child’s public school regardless of the receiving school’s poverty level. The portability provision would undermine Title I’s fundamental purpose of assisting public schools with high concentrations of poverty and high-need students, and serve as a steppingstone to private school vouchers. A recent study from the Center for American Progress found that portability ignores the fact that concentrated poverty has a significant impact on students “beyond their own economic circumstances.” It also found that portability greatly weakens the ability of the Title I program to have the greatest possible effect. The study found that districts with high concentrations of poverty could lose an average of about \$85 per student, while the most-affluent districts could gain, on average, \$290 per student.

The Student Success Act also takes a step backward in preparing students to participate meaningfully in the 21st-century knowledge economy. States could walk away from college- and career-ready standards. The AFT believes, as you do, in reforming the outdated accountability system that focuses only on high-stakes testing. That goal can and should be accomplished while still requiring states to provide all our students the opportunities they need to be prepared for life, college and career. America’s need to maintain our competitiveness, rebuild a strong and vibrant middle class, and ensure a pluralistic democracy demands this.

The bill also eliminates maintenance-of-effort requirements, essentially letting states off the hook for their share of funding K-12 education and allowing them to reduce funding for school districts without any consequence. This will serve to compound an already bleak outlook facing many districts that are still reeling from recent state and local budget cuts, and a decline in federal funding coupled with reductions resulting from sequestration. Even if a draft of ESEA strengthens the language on accountability and equity, without maintenance-of-effort in place, school districts and schools will not have the funding needed to implement any positive changes.

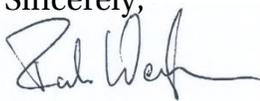
A reauthorization of ESEA should take a different approach. An ESEA that incorporates the voices of educators, parents and our broader communities would identify and address resource and opportunity gaps. We strongly urge

the federal government to require states to judge districts (as opposed to making the U.S. Department of Education serve as the human resource department of school districts), but it must be done using a comprehensive, meaningful accountability system. Such a system should maintain a federal requirement for annual tests in grades 3-8 and once in high school, but must ensure the students themselves are not eclipsed by testing that is attached to high stakes. To that end, these tests should be used to provide information about whether students are working at grade level, to inform instruction and to help teachers better assess their students' needs. But when it comes to school-level accountability, states should base their judgments on tests taken only once per grade span—once in elementary school, once in middle school and, as is done now, once in high school—and these assessments should be added to other meaningful learning outcomes, such as portfolio assessments, course accumulation, project-based learning and qualitative measures like school climate and surveys.

In addition, the AFT believes that accountability systems should measure and document the provision of core resources, and should utilize all annual data to support teaching and learning and ensure students don't once again become invisible, as they did under NCLB and its obsession with high-stakes testing. We also believe that data, informed by the collective wisdom of professionals, along with needed resources, can serve as the basis for interventions that can turn around struggling schools and help every child.

The upcoming reauthorization offers a great opportunity to fix current law and put in place meaningful changes that will enable all children to receive the high-quality education they deserve. We hope that this process will maintain the long-standing tradition of doing this work on a bipartisan basis while also including the ideas of key stakeholders who represent those closest to the classroom—educators and administrators.

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