



June 10, 2013

The Honorable Tom Harkin, Chairman
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

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

The Honorable Kay Hagan, Chairwoman
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
Subcommittee on Children and Families
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mike Enzi, Ranking Member
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
Subcommittee on Children and Families
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Harkin, Alexander, Hagan, and Enzi:

I am writing today to comment on the Strengthening America's Schools Act (SASA) and the Every Child Ready for College and Career Act, on behalf of the First Focus Campaign for Children, a 501(c)(4) nonprofit organization affiliated with First Focus, a bipartisan children's advocacy organization. The Campaign for Children advocates directly for legislative change in Congress to ensure children and families are the priority in federal policy and budget decisions.

As you know, the future strength of the nation's democracy, as well as its economy, is dependent upon the investments made in children and youth today. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) presents an historic opportunity to positively impact the lives of millions of children and families. While we applaud both bills for beginning to tackle tough issues that affect kids, there remains much work to be done.

In particular, we are concerned with several segments in the Every Child Ready for College and Career Act. In the area of funding flexibility, we are concerned that dramatically increased flexibility could lead to some vital investments going unfunded at the expense of disadvantaged students. Rather than increased flexibility, we need to focus on an appropriate federal role in public education that protects the investment in federal initiatives created to level the playing field for populations vulnerable to the effect of educational inequities. Additionally, doing away with "maintenance of effort" makes it more difficult to ensure fair levels of funding for populations of traditionally disadvantaged students.

We are pleased that SASA includes a "comparability" requirement that will help to ensure that teachers' salaries are the same across Title I and non-Title I schools. This provision is again meant to further level the playing field for schools serving disadvantaged students. The Every Child Ready for College and Career Act contains no such provision.

Additionally, in the area of accountability we do believe there are benefits to be gained from letting go of the punitive restrictions of Adequate Yearly Progress, but we oppose any policies that abandon accountability for the achievement and

learning gains of subgroups of disadvantaged students. We are also opposed to eliminating any requirements related to the definition of “highly qualified teacher,” which required all teachers to be fully certified by their state and have demonstrated competency in their subject matter. A wealth of research shows that high need students are most likely to be taught by teachers who have not completed their training, have not demonstrated competency in their subject matter, and are inexperienced. The Every Child Ready for College and Career Act will not change this reality.

As we analyzed both pieces of legislation, we also considered four priority areas that are important to providing equitable education for all students:

- Making Schools the Centers of Our Communities
- Increasing High School Graduation Rates and Reconnecting High School Dropouts
- Strengthening Educational Opportunities for Children and Youth in Unstable Housing
- Expanding High Quality Early Learning Opportunities

Making Schools the Centers of Our Communities

Across the country, results demonstrate that when schools become centers of community, student achievement improves. For example, by meeting the comprehensive needs of students, *Communities in Schools* has demonstrated significant gains; in 2008, 78 percent of participating students improved their attendance, 89 percent had fewer behavior incidents, 80 percent improved their academic performance, and 78 percent of eligible seniors graduated from high school. First Focus Campaign for Children is encouraged by the inclusion and prioritization of community throughout SASA. This legislation makes great progress toward making schools the center of our communities by encouraging the use of the community schools model, encouraging community engagement, and expanding opportunities for collaboration with community-based organizations.

We hope that the Committee will continue working to make schools the center of our communities so students can access important services outside of the classroom, especially by including the DIPLOMA Act. This legislation builds on the Obama Administration’s Promise Neighborhood Initiative to help communities meet the challenges influencing student achievement, including factors in and outside of school. States would receive funds by formula and would then provide competitive grants to local consortia of school districts, community-based organizations, local government, service providers, students, parents, and others. These consortia would engage families and the public in strengthening student achievement, coordinating existing services, and filling gaps in services ranging from tutoring and extended learning to health care and social supports. An independent evaluation would be conducted to measure results and identify best practices.

The Every Child Ready for College and Career Act, on the other hand, makes no additional effort at making schools the center of our communities and includes no provisions that engage a school’s community to offer important services to our students.

Increasing High School Graduation Rates and Reconnecting High School Dropouts

In order to remain competitive in the global economy, safeguard our national security, and preserve equity in opportunity, we must ensure that all students graduate from high school with the necessary skills to succeed in college, in the workplace, and as productive citizens. Unfortunately, the United States is far from reaching this goal and the number of youth dropping out of school grows by the day.

The renewed focus within SASA on graduation and dropout rates is vital to ensuring all students are successfully completing high school. SASA also correctly asks schools to focus not only on preventing dropouts in the first place, but reconnecting with students who have dropped-out but want to re-enter school to finish their studies.

However, SASA could still go further as there is still at present no system to identify young people who have dropped out of high school, assess why they left, and connect them to the supports they need to succeed in school and work. More work needs to be done in creating community based drop-out recovery systems at the local level that encourage collaboration between local governments, educational agencies, the juvenile justice system, parents and families, the business community, and non-profit groups. These recovery systems could focus on education, job training, and wraparound support services.

Unfortunately, the Every Child Ready for College and Career Act does not require schools to focus on dropout prevention or recovery and misses an opportunity to help disconnected youth.

Strengthening Educational Opportunities for Children and Youth in Unstable Housing

Research shows that, generally speaking, homeless children and those in foster care are more likely to suffer from health/mental health problems, developmental problems, and are more likely to perform poorly in school than other children and youth with stable housing. A study from the Government Accounting Office found that third-graders who have changed schools frequently are more than twice as likely to repeat a grade as their permanently housed peersⁱ. Others have found that high mobility can reduce the chances of high school graduation by more than 50 percentⁱⁱ.

The reauthorization of ESEA should include a reauthorized and strengthened McKinney-Vento program as well as the authorization of a parallel program for youth in foster care.

SASA makes great strides toward strengthening the McKinney-Vento provisions in current law. The bill includes provisions that would promote school stability, enhance school districts' ability to identify and serve homeless children and youth, and increase access to preschool programs for young children who experience homelessness. SASA also recognizes the unique challenges youth in foster care often face and asks school systems to address these issues. While we appreciate this recognition, we believe the bill could have gone even further to ensure that local education agencies are meeting the needs of youth in foster care and that these youth are afforded the same opportunities and protections afforded to homeless students.

We are disappointed that the Every Child Ready for College and Career Act does nothing to strengthen the McKinney-Vento program and calls for flat funding through 2018, despite the growing need of homeless students across the nation. The bill also does little to address the needs of youth in foster care.

Expanding High Quality Early Learning Opportunities

The pipeline to high school and college completion, gainful employment, and successful adulthood begins at birth. As Dr. James Heckman succinctly summarized, "skill begets skill." The earlier we invest in our children's education, the greater return we will see on that investment. Research has shown that children from low income families who participate in high-quality early learning programs are more successful in elementary school, more likely to graduate from high school and less likely to commit a delinquent offense or crime than children who did not have access to these crucial early experiencesⁱⁱⁱ. These programs are also very cost effective, saving substantive taxpayers dollars. In fact, estimates suggest that every dollar spent on high quality early learning programs saves as many as ten dollars in averted costs related to special education, health care, welfare, and crime^{iv}. And high quality early learning has received much attention this year, from a bold new plan

announced by President Obama to the mention of early learning programs in the state of the state addresses of 27 governors across the country.

ESEA reauthorization presents a chance to improve the early years of the education continuum – beginning with pre-kindergarten and continuing through third grade – to ensure that every child is college and career ready. Research shows that high-quality classroom experiences throughout this period of a child’s life can lead to significant gains in achievement^v. Research also shows that a child who is still struggling to read by the third grade may never catch up^{vi}. Current policies are not enough to address this problem. For example, only one-third of fourth graders in this country are reading proficiently^{vii}. Education policies at the federal level must help districts improve and expand pre-kindergarten programs for 3- and 4-year-olds, expand full-day kindergarten for 5-year-olds, and improve instruction and alignment in the early grades.

We are pleased with the inclusion of a number of provisions in SASA that help build a continuous pre-K to grade three system of education with a focus on the growth and development of young children. By including early learning guidelines and early grade standards in state plans, improving coordination among school districts and preschool programs, including the improvement of preschool programs in school improvement strategies, as well as a number of additional provisions, the bill makes progress toward a creating a continuum of learning from birth to grade 3 where each year builds on the growth, development, and academics of the previous year. We look forward to working with the committee to strengthen these provisions to ensure that pre-K and the early grades put students on a path of lifelong learning and academic success, including limiting the use of assessments from pre-K through grade 2.

It is disappointing that the Every Child Ready for College and Career Act does not include the important early learning provisions that are included in SASA. This is a missed opportunity to put students on a path to academic achievement through improved academic and developmental alignment in the early grades.

We urge you to update and strengthen ESEA and hope that this input is valuable as you debate and consider these proposals. As you know, the long term viability of our economy is dependent upon the education we provide our children and youth. We urge you to make significant improvements to current law for the benefit of millions of children and families across the country.

Sincerely,



Bruce Lesley
President

CC: Republican and Democratic HELP Committee Members

ⁱ Government Accounting Office (1994). Elementary school children: Many change schools frequently, harming their education. GAO/HEHS-94-45. Washington, DC.

ⁱⁱ Rumberger, R. (2003). The causes and consequences of student mobility. *Journal of Negro Education*, 72, 6-21.

ⁱⁱⁱ Heckman, J.J. & Masterov, D.V. (2007). The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children. Invest in Kids Working Group working paper available at: http://jenni.uchicago.edu/Invest/FILES/dugger_2004-12-02_dvm.pdf

^{iv} Reynolds, A. J. & Temple, J. A. (2008). Cost-effective early childhood development programs from preschool to third grade. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 4, p.109-139.

^v William Gormley, Jr., and Deborah Phillips, “The Effects of Universal Pre-k in Oklahoma: Research Highlights and Policy Implications,” *Policy Studies Journal*, (February 2005) 65–82; Ellen Frede, Kwanghee Jung, W. Steven Barnett, and Alexandra Figueras, *The Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study (APPLES) Preliminary Results through 2nd Grade: Interim Report* (New Brunswick, .NJ.: National Center for Early Education Research. June 2009); Lawrence J. Schweinhart, Jeanne Montie, Zongping Xiang, William S. Barnett, Clive R. Belfield, and Milagros Nores. *Lifetime effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool study through age 40* (Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press, 2005); A.J. Reynolds, J.A. Temple, D.L Robertson, and E.A. Mann, “Age 21 cost-benefit analysis of the Title I Chicago Child-Parent Centers,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 24, 4 (2002) 267-303.; Reynolds, Arthur J., "Effects of a Preschool Plus Follow-On Intervention for Children at Risk," *Developmental Psychology*, 30, 6 (1994) 787-804; F.A. **Campbell**,, **E.P. Pungello**, **S. Miller-Johnson**, **M. Burchinal** and **C.T. Ramey**, “The Development of Cognitive and Academic Abilities: Growth Curves from an Early Childhood Educational Experiment,” *Developmental Psychology*, 37, (2001) 231-242; Eric Dearing, Kathleen McCartney and Beck A. Taylor , “Does Higher Quality Early Child Care Promote Low-Income Children's Math and Reading Achievement in Middle Childhood?” *Child Development* (Sept/Oct 2009).

^{vi} See Catherine E. Snow, Susan Burns and Peg Griffin, eds. *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. (Washington, DC: Committee on the Prevention of Reading; National Research Council National Academy Press, 1998.)

^{vii} 2009 Reading Assessment, National Assessment of Educational Progress, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).