

March 10, 2015

The Honorable John Kline
Chairman
Committee on Education and the Workforce
United States House of Representatives

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
United States Senate

Dear Representative Kline and Senator Alexander,

As Congress prepares to take up reauthorization of NCLB, our concerns about this iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act – which emphasizes the importance of standards while neglecting the need for supports to reach them – have been affirmed. In the 2013-2014 school year, students of color represented the majority of the U.S. student body for the first time, highlighting both the growing diversity of our nation, and the increasing need for education strategies to reach every student. This year, we met another, more troubling milestone – for the first time in at least fifty years, a majority of all public school students are eligible for free-and-reduced price meals, meaning that their families struggle to provide them with even the basics that research shows are critical drivers of academic, and life, success.

Evidence continues to mount that the current approach embedded in ESEA, which strays from its original civil rights orientation of compensating for funding inequities, and which focuses on testing as the key means of accountability, is failing to produce the progress necessary, and is causing real harm. Data show a lack of any substantial progress in closing achievement gaps since NCLB's inception. At the same time, we see narrowing of curricula and loss of instruction in subjects important for a 21st century education, growing evidence of student stress due to over-testing, and teacher morale at an all-time low, while teacher churn continues to rise.

In this context, we urge Congress to make comprehensive supports for disadvantaged students the highest priority in a reauthorized ESEA. While we strongly endorse the importance of setting high, meaningful standards for all students, we assert that reaching them requires, first, laying the right foundation, and supporting schools and states as their students strive to meet the standards. We also caution that failing to lay that foundation or offer that support is more likely to widen current gaps than to narrow them. Indeed, many of the requirements of NCLB, which the Department of Education and others insist on maintaining, have resulted in the over-testing that they increasingly acknowledge, in the misuse of those tests, the loss of valuable instructional time, and pernicious other consequences for the very disadvantaged students that they seek to lift up.

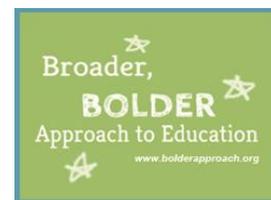
These five principles represent the original spirit and intent of the law, and they give states, districts, and schools the flexibility they need to address their specific concerns and meet the unique needs of their students. We propose that they be at the center of a reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act:

- 1) Disparities in opportunity, and the achievement gaps they cause, begin long before kindergarten, so a reauthorized ESEA must include funding and incentives for universal access to high-quality early childhood education and family supports.***

- 2) *Disparities in opportunity continue through K-12 school years, so ESEA must include provisions that help states, districts, and schools narrow those gaps through a supports-based approach. This includes funding and incentives for states, districts, and schools to provide nutrition, health, wellness, counseling/guidance, and mental and emotional health supports.*
- 3) *Increased focus in recent years on Extended Learning Time has drawn much-needed attention to the large gaps that open up in the hours before and after school and over summers as a result of disparities in the kinds of enriching out-of-school opportunities wealthier students enjoy. A reauthorized ESEA must ensure sufficient, quality time for all students to learn in creative, engaging ways while protecting teachers' time to plan, prepare, and collaborate.*
- 4) *With a large and growing proportion of US children facing significant barriers to their education outside the classroom, effective accountability measures must be structured, aligned, and implemented in a way that leverages all the tools needed to improve their odds of success. Given the substantial role played by outside-of-school factors, failing to make accountability multi-dimensional is inadequate to ensure equity because it presents a distorted picture of what contributes to student achievement.*
- 5) *Assessments can and should play important roles, but they should be designed and implemented to support the improvement of instruction and education, and their misuse and abuse must be stopped.*

A reauthorized ESEA that embodies the principles above would mark a return to the original intent of the law. At a time when students of color outnumber white students, and more than half of all children qualify for free or reduced price school meals, a law that makes supports front-and-center is imperative for the future success of this nation.

Sincerely,





Horace Mann League of the USA

*Kevin Welner, Director of NEPC and Professor at CU Boulder**

*indicates that affiliation is for identification purposes only, and does not indicate institutional sign-on