

February 14, 2008

Dear Senator:

We, the undersigned education policy, civil rights and advocacy organizations, strongly urge you to immediately reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and include vital provisions in the law that will positively impact schools and their students. In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was created on the principle that regardless of a student's background, he or she would have equal access to a high-quality education. The 2001 reauthorization of that law, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), helped to focus the nation's attention on the unacceptable achievement gap and the imperative of improving outcomes for all students, especially those who are the most disadvantaged.

Despite the good intentions of the law, NCLB has come under criticism since its passage for issues ranging from insufficient funding to its one-size-fits-all approach to school improvement. While opinions on the effectiveness of the law vary, we all agree that it is imperative for Congress to take action this year on a reauthorization. First, if no action is taken, the current law and its shortcomings will remain in place for years to come. Second, there are many important proposals under consideration that will improve greatly the education of all students. We call on you to act now to improve free, public education—one of the cornerstones of our democracy.

We believe it is critical that Congress maintain NCLB's focus on ensuring that all students are making learning gains and have access to quality schools, while also making critical improvements to the law. Some of the positive changes to current law that are being considered and should be included in reauthorization are:

- Allowing the use of “growth models” to give credit for student learning gains;
- Investing in adolescent literacy so that students receive continued literacy support as they go from “learning to read” to “reading to learn”;
- Utilizing state-designed systems of differentiated school improvement based on key indicators instead of one-size-fits-all interventions;
- Creating new funding streams to turn around low-performing middle schools and high schools and investing in innovation in secondary schools;
- Establishing meaningful graduation rate accountability;
- Investing in high-quality data systems to better inform teaching and learning and to target reforms through differentiated school improvement;
- Supporting the alignment of standards to the skills and knowledge necessary for college and work readiness so our nation's students are better prepared for the twenty-first century;
- Ensuring higher quality assessments and services for all students, particularly English language learners and students with disabilities;
- Improving access to a stable education for the most disadvantaged, including homeless and foster students; and

- Strengthening student achievement by meeting the needs of students both inside and outside of the classroom through stronger partnerships among schools, families, and communities.

Action this year by Congress to reauthorize the statute would not represent rubber-stamping current law. Rather, it offers Congress the opportunity to examine the law, maintain the aspects of the law that are working to improve education for all students, and, most importantly, change what is not working and recognize areas in which it is critical that federal action be taken. Secretary Spellings has indicated that if Congress does not act, she will take action unilaterally, without Congress, to make the changes she deems most important, using the regulatory process.

The stakes are high for our nation and our students. Inaction by Congress will leave our schools, educators, and students with the status quo. Therefore, we strongly urge you to make these recommended changes in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act necessary to improve our educational system for all students, and to reauthorize the law, this year.

Sincerely,

ACT, Inc.

Academy for Educational Development (AED)

Alliance for Excellent Education

American School Counselor Association

Association for Career and Technical Education

Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights

College Board

Cuban American National Council

Education Development Center, Inc.

First Focus

International Reading Association

Knowledge Alliance

Leadership Conference on Civil Rights

League of United Latin American Citizens

MALDEF

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth

National Association of School Psychologists

National Association of Secondary School Principals

National Council of La Raza

National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform

National Middle School Association

Project GRAD, USA