



American Federation
of Teachers, AFL-CIO

AFT Teachers
AFT PSRP
AFT Higher Education
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November 30, 2015

U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representative:

On behalf of the more than 1.6 million members of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the students they serve every day, I urge you to support the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA).

We believe that ESSA brings us closer to letting states, local districts and educators focus on students and their success and to ending the harmful test fixation that has become the predominant schooling strategy. It sends a clear signal to states that the policies of No Child Left Behind, waivers and Race to the Top should be abandoned, not replicated. By maintaining funding for the students who need it most, and not including support for private school vouchers, portability or other divisive policies, the bill also signals to states that these are unproven policies that should not be pursued.

Not a day goes by when issues related to high-stakes standardized testing are not front and center across our nation. Desperate for lawmakers to listen, parents felt they had no option but to opt their children out of tests and, in many cases, public schools. AFT members, along with our students, their parents and communities, have fought for relief from policies resulting from No Child Left Behind, waivers and Race to the Top, which have increasingly narrowed the curriculum, taken the joy out of teaching and learning, and done little to close the achievement gap.

The bill also maintains the historic commitment to children who are economically disadvantaged, which is becoming more and more important. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, 14.7 million, or nearly 20 percent, of children under age 18 live below the poverty line. Half of all public school children are poor. No nation can achieve economic and educational justice and shared growth and prosperity while ignoring gross inequality. Strong public schools with a rich curriculum should be the great equalizer that gives all students an opportunity to gain the critical thinking and analytical tools they will need to succeed.



The American Federation of Teachers is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.



The AFT has championed both fixing and reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) from the time it was clear that the balance between teaching and testing was wrong. We have repeatedly called for these basic goals: First, the reauthorized law must reclaim the original purpose of ESEA by maintaining a focus on equity, ensuring that students who need the most funding receive it. Second, it must fundamentally reset accountability principles by moving away from the counterproductive fixation on high-stakes testing and sanctions and toward a more meaningful accountability system—a system rooted in resources and well-rounded curriculum that will help maintain high standards for all students while closing the achievement gap. That means any reauthorized law must share responsibility and allow schools and districts to adopt instructional strategies that work, including comprehensive social, emotional, health and other wraparound services. Third, the reauthorization must maintain certification requirements for paraprofessionals. Finally, the reauthorized law must get the federal government out of the teacher evaluation business, as that has been one of the primary reasons for the testing fixation.

The AFT maintains some concerns with the final language that can hopefully be addressed as the law is implemented at the federal, state and local levels. However, ESSA is a good first step and provides the framework for states to develop those more comprehensive accountability systems while maintaining ESEA's historic focus on leveling the playing field for our most disadvantaged students.

More specifically, we believe ESSA meets these goals in the following ways:

Equity

The conference report maintains ESEA's targeted funding and does not include vouchers or portability provisions. ESSA protects the law's five-decade commitment to target services to districts and schools serving high concentrations of disadvantaged children by maintaining the existing Title I formula and retaining the targeting of Title II, including maintaining class-size reduction as an allowable use of funds.

In Title III, language instruction for English learners and immigrant children is also maintained as a dedicated funding stream. In addition, the program was authorized at levels that are higher than current funding and scheduled to increase each year. This was a top AFT priority. The bill addresses key issues facing this population, including allowing states to appropriately exclude test results from their accountability systems while students are first learning English. This will help give students the time they need, as will allowing four years for former English language learners to be included in the ELL subgroup.

The AFT is also pleased that the bill addresses the school-based resources needed for disadvantaged students. The language requiring states to identify gaps in core educational resources will be vital in school improvement efforts.

The maintenance-of-effort provisions included in the final bill are also vital. The proposed elimination of this requirement would essentially have let states off the hook for their share of funding K-12 education. The consequences of not requiring states and districts to fund education in exchange for federal funding would have been devastating.

The AFT is pleased the bill strengthens accountability for charter schools, including requiring additional transparency. Charter schools will now have to undergo financial audits, and address dropout rates and racial diversity. The bill also requires a legislative directive for the Secretary of Education to address the recent findings of the Office of the Inspector General pertaining to the operational challenges of charter schools.

While the bill rejects provisions such as portability that would undercut targeting, the pilot established allowing for up to 50 districts to use a weighted student funding formula remains a concern. This language could reduce flexibility of staffing options and limit schools' ability to provide aid to some underserved Title I schools. We are also concerned with the pay-for-success program in Title I, part D. Hedge fund managers should not profit from programs designed to help at-risk youth.

The transferability provisions in the bill that allow funds allocated for specific purposes within a title to be used for other purposes a state chooses are also a concern. We are pleased this option is limited, and that nothing can be shifted from Title I, but we remain concerned that diluting these funds, or letting states move them around, defeats the very purpose of ESEA.

Standards and Accountability

ESSA recognizes that tests—including annual assessments—have a place. Done right, they inform parents and communities as to how children are doing and provide information to support systemic improvement and instruction. But the bill also recognizes the high stakes of the current system must end and that learning should not be reduced to a test score. When combined, measures such as student engagement, project-based learning assignments, college preparation exams like the ACT or the SAT, and reasonable graduation rates are much better indicators of student and school progress.

The bill also includes a pilot for innovative (including performance-based) assessments, audits on the quantity of testing at the state and local levels, and testing transparency provisions.

We are also pleased with the collaborative language in the bill that requires states to work with stakeholders, including teachers and paraprofessionals. That is why the collective bargaining protections in Titles I and II are so important. These provisions

encourage collaboration in the development and implementation of accountability systems.

Growing up poor has lifelong negative consequences: poor health, increased likelihood of becoming a poor adult and limited odds of high school graduation. ESSA maintains Community Schools, Promise Neighborhoods and 21st-century schools as separate programs—a top AFT priority. These programs, along with reducing class size, are key components to the community school strategy that has been successfully applied in rural and urban schools across the country. We have seen how collaboration among schools systems, unions and the profit/nonprofit sectors can transform neglected and forgotten communities. Community schools, after-school and other programs will help mitigate these consequences, and these programs should be fully funded.

Support for Teachers and Paraprofessionals

The AFT is encouraged that ESSA recognizes that teacher evaluation systems are better developed and implemented at the state and local levels. Teacher induction, development, support and evaluation are obviously important, but in the last few years, as a result of Race to the Top and waivers of NCLB, teacher evaluation has become less about what is happening in classrooms and more about how to reduce education to a single data point. This has been terribly counterproductive. As a result, we fully support language prohibiting the secretary from mandating or prescribing the terms of such programs through waivers or regulation. We are also pleased that the language for states that voluntarily choose to develop such systems using ESEA funds requires collaboration and prohibits overturning any existing collective bargaining agreements.

We are also pleased that ESSA maintains paraprofessional certification requirements. These requirements will help prevent school districts from hiring paraprofessionals with little educational experience or professional training.

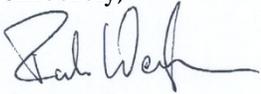
House and Senate conferees were wise to maintain class-size reduction as an allowable use of funds. However, we are concerned about the requirements for the use of funds for class-size reduction efforts as well as other provisions requiring that implementation be “evidence-based,” as the strict definition of “evidence-based” would exclude a lot of high-quality educational programming.

Finally, the language maintaining licensure reciprocity is much appreciated. Given shifting demographics and teacher shortages, this will make it easier for districts to recruit and hire certified veteran teachers.

Instead of the polarization that has become all too common in Washington, the Senate and House education leaders have listened to our country's educators and parents and have worked hard to fix ESEA. We are optimistic that the conference report has the potential to improve teaching and learning in schools and classrooms across the nation, and we urge you to approve it when it comes before the full House/Senate.

Thank you for considering our views on this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Randi Weingarten", is written over a light blue rectangular background.

Randi Weingarten
President

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