May 7, 2010

The Hon. Tom Harkin
Chairman
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
U.S. Senate
Washington D.C. 20510

The Hon. Mike Enzi
Ranking Member
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
U.S. Senate
Washington D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Harkin and Senator Enzi:

Thank you for inviting comments on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. We believe that **improving the early years of the education continuum – beginning with pre-kindergarten and continuing through third grade – is essential to ensuring that every child is college- and career-ready.** The reauthorization of ESEA provides a unique opportunity to transform American education into a system that lays firm foundations during these early years and builds upon those foundations with high quality learning opportunities each year thereafter.

Research shows that high-quality classroom experiences throughout this period of a child's life can lead to significant gains in achievement.[1] Research also shows that a child who is still struggling to read by the third grade may never catch up.[2] Current policies are not enough to address this problem. Only one-third of fourth graders in this country, for example, are reading proficiently.[3]

We need education policies that 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 need policies that not only encourage elementary schools to coordinate with pre-k settings, but also encourage teachers and leaders in pre-k, kindergarten, first, second and third grades to jointly attend training meetings, plan lessons, track children's progress and align curricula. This means rewriting several sections of the law – such as those related to professional development and funding formulae – to explicitly include pre-k children and teachers (including those who teach at child care centers and other community-based programs in partnerships with local public schools). It also means reframing how the law considers education – for example, by expanding data collection from a K-12 focus to one that includes children at age 3 and 4 and follows them up to, or even through, their college years. This embraces the notion of a more seamless "P-20 pipeline" in public education.

Several of New Jersey's *Abbott* districts and the Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland are examples of sites that have employed some version of these strategies. **The result is an increase in achievement *and* a closing of achievement gaps.**

In this letter, we focus on six areas of federal education policy that could **better support children age 3 through 8** and best prepare them for college, careers and meaningful adult lives:

1. Funding
2. Teacher and school leader quality and professional development
3. Data collection
4. Accountability and assessment
5. Extended learning time
6. Family engagement

FUNDING

Increase the federal investment in education to enable and provide incentives for Title I dollars to flow more freely to early childhood and PreK-3rd programs.

Achieving Title I's purpose of improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged children requires *starting early*. And yet districts currently spend only an estimated three percent of Title I funds on "preschool" programs and it is unclear exactly what those programs consist of.[4]

Title I should include an **early learning fund** that states and/or districts can use to encourage a variety of approaches to improving early education. These should include opening high-quality pre-k programs or forming partnerships with existing community-based programs that offer high-quality early learning opportunities. The fund should be flexible enough to enable districts to offer free full-day kindergarten programs and to help districts and schools accelerate initiatives that align the efforts of teachers across grades, enabling them to use curricula, standards and assessments in ways that build on children's growth year to year. Embracing these approaches, known as pre-k through third-grade or PreK-3rd strategies, would signal that effective education programs for "college and career-ready students" start before children enter the K-12 system and emphasize the critical early elementary grades.

This early learning fund must not come at the expense of funding for current educational services to disadvantaged and at-risk students. To support a full and seamless system of education from the earliest years to young adulthood, the federal government should increase funding for high-quality, effective education programs along the "cradle to career" continuum.

Also, within this funding stream, as should be the case government-wide, some monies should be reserved to allow for on-going research and evaluation of the fund's effectiveness over time.

Ensure that Title I funding set-asides do not supplant pre-k funding where it already exists.

At the very least, Title I must be written to *protect* high-quality pre-kindergarten investments and to keep pre-kindergarten programs connected to elementary schools. As written currently, these protections do not exist. As the Center for Law and Social Policy has reported, current Title I set-asides (such as the requirement that schools in need of improvement spend 20-percent of Title I

dollars on supplemental education services and transportation to other schools) can hamper the ability of school districts to make investments in early learning programs. For example, in 2006, Peabody Public Schools in Massachusetts eliminated their 30-year Title I preschool as a result of (1) an overall reduction in their Title I allocation and (2) an elementary school moving into school improvement status. Once Peabody met its funding obligations to the elementary school and to set-aside requirements, there were no longer sufficient funds left to continue to fund preschool programs.[5] Given policymakers' focus on supporting education programs with proven results, this kind of example runs counter to the goal.

Encourage districts to embed high-quality PreK-3rd strategies as one of their priorities for turning around low-performing schools.

The nationally recognized efforts of the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) show that when officials focus on improving the early years of education, children's achievement improves. Starting in 2000, MCPS employed a PreK-3rd strategy that includes high-quality pre-k; full-day kindergarten; opportunities for teachers to share data, planning and professional development across grade levels; aligned and developmentally appropriate curriculum and standards; and shared accountability among schools, parents and communities to ensure that children can read and do math on grade level by the end of third grade.

Today in the MCPS schools, students who might be typically considered at-risk are achieving near, at, or above national norms on reading, math and Advanced Placement tests.[6] The "turnaround" that became possible for MCPS low-performing schools can be achieved nationwide if state and district leaders have the tools and funding to accomplish it. Any emphasis in ESEA on turning around schools should include PreK-3rd strategies as a potential model.

This year, the guidelines for School Improvement Grants that have been made available with ARRA funds include references to early learning. Full-day kindergarten and high-quality pre-k are mentioned as "permissible" approaches for schools that choose to take the "transformational" route to improvement. Those guidelines are a good step, but the law should go one step further by prioritizing pre-kindergarten and full-day kindergarten programs that are embedded into an overall PreK-3rd grade strategy.

Reward states for creating high-quality early learning programs and aligned PreK-3rd systems.

We encourage Congress to consider ways to reward *states* for creating high-quality early learning programs that are part of well-aligned PreK-3rd systems. Every state in the U.S. is already in the process of establishing Early Childhood Advisory Councils in accordance with the 2007 Head Start Act. These councils, assuming they are adequately funded, represent an important opportunity for states to evaluate the needs of their communities and determine how to improve the quality of early learning programming for the birth to age 5 population. If Congress were to include these councils in ESEA, by providing formula-based and competitive grants distributed to state educational agencies, the federal government would provide incentives to states to strategically link their birth to 5 work with elementary education. By so doing, states can strengthen their educational systems that address the full continuum of learning from birth through third grade.

Change the funding formulae within ESEA so that they are based on communities of children age 3 to 17 instead of 5 to 17 while safeguarding current funding levels.

Given that 3- and 4-year-old children are increasingly included in public education through pre-k and special education programs, current funding formulae are out of date. They should be based on populations of 3- to 17-year-olds, rather than, as is currently the case, 5- to 17-year-olds. These amendments should be made to Title V (Section 5145, which authorizes grants to states for innovative programs) and Title I, for example. Extending the formulae so that they consider a population that encompasses 3- and 4-year-olds would send an important signal, a recognition that programs should be available to children starting at age 3. At the same time, safeguards should be put in place to ensure that local education agencies are not adversely affected.

TEACHER AND SCHOOL LEADER QUALITY AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Explicitly include early childhood teachers in professional development programs.

Teachers in federal, state- and district-funded early childhood programs should be explicitly included in all ESEA programs that seek to improve teacher quality. In the current law, sections on Improving Teacher Quality State Grants (Title II), Troops to Teachers, and the Teacher Incentive Fund are not always clear about their applicability to state-funded pre-k teachers or to teachers in child care centers that contract with local educational agencies. That should change.

These amendments should be written carefully to include *school-based and community-based teachers of children under the age of 5*. Today, many states and localities use public dollars to fund teachers who work for community-based providers (such as non-profit preschools or child care centers). In addition, Head Start teachers must be included in these revisions in concert with funding allocations through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. No teacher should be left out of professional development opportunities just because his or her work takes place off school property.

Emphasize the need for more teacher training and professional development based on the most current research in child development and the needs of young English language learners and other special populations.

Support for professional development programs should recognize the need for all teachers in pre-k through third grades to (1) gain knowledge of child development based on current science about children's needs and capacities for learning, and (2) learn appropriate practices for working with English language learners and other special populations.

Strengthen professional development for elementary school leaders to assist them in designing and implementing comprehensive, aligned systems that include early childhood programs and extend through third grade.

Now more than ever, elementary school principals and other school leaders are becoming actively engaged in early learning, leading programs in their schools and communities that are

positioning students for academic success. By partnering with early childhood programs to lay the foundation for later learning, they are taking critical steps to help disadvantaged children make smoother transitions to school-based settings to achieve greater levels of social, emotional and intellectual success, and ultimately greater academic proficiency. Yet many school leader preparation programs and school districts lack sufficient training and professional learning opportunities to help principals and other leaders design and implement programs that envision a continuum of learning from the pre-kindergarten years through third grade. All school leaders must have access to professional development that addresses the depth and breadth of early childhood issues, developmentally-appropriate learning and effective instructional practices, and assessments for young children, not to mention training on forging new relationships within the community. Professional-development policies in ESEA must strengthen programs for school leaders to provide guidance on how to implement effective alignment from pre-kindergarten through third grade.

LONGITUDINAL DATA COLLECTION

Ensure that the collection of federal longitudinal data in K-12 is more fully integrated with data collection in programs that serve children before kindergarten entry.

Despite the progress states have made in building longitudinal student data systems, many states still do not have the capacity to link information on children's involvement in pre-k, Head Start, state-funded home visiting, and other early childhood programs into their data systems. Some states, such as Florida and Oklahoma, are already working to at least integrate pre-k data into their K-12 systems.

ESEA reauthorization should mandate and support the integration of early childhood data into state longitudinal data systems. This not only would provide an integrated view of children's growth starting with their enrollment in early childhood programs on up through their post-secondary years, but also would help teachers track students' progress and intervene with more intensive instruction when appropriate. Further, this would allow policymakers and researchers to track the long-term results of early childhood investments. America COMPETES and Race to the Top already foster efforts to spur and support the development of state longitudinal data systems that cover the prenatal-to-college years. The proposed Early Learning Challenge Grants would also require states to develop data systems for measuring and tracking child outcomes. Adding this element to ESEA would help to build on and integrate those initiatives.

Require districts to report how Title I funds are used for children under age 5.

As the law currently stands, districts are not required to report Title I expenditures on early education to the Department of Education. This makes it difficult to get clean, unduplicated data on how Title I dollars are spent on children under age 5.

Local education agencies should be required to report how Title I dollars are spent per age of child (e.g., *x* dollars on programs for 3-year-olds, *y* dollars for programs for 4-year-olds). LEAs should also be required to provide details on the nature and extent of these programs (e.g., are

they center-based educational programs like pre-k? "Transitional" programs for children moving to kindergarten? Social services programs for families?) We recommend that these reporting requirements extend to all Title I-funded early childhood programs for children from birth to age 5, and that lawmakers consider similar reporting requirements by age throughout the "P-20" system.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND ASSESSMENT

Ensure that schools and districts are rewarded for creating and sustaining high-quality classroom experiences throughout the preschool years and early grades.

Research shows that classroom instruction in the primary grades is of critical importance to children's long-term educational outcomes: Children who do not learn to read proficiently by the end of third grade are unlikely to catch up.[7] New studies also show how much children's mathematics skills could benefit from stronger instruction in the early grades.[8] States and school districts should be encouraged and funded to create and sustain better instruction in the early years. Districts and schools that establish and sustain high-quality classrooms – according to valid, reliable measures of classroom quality – should be rewarded and recognized.

Spur the development of valid and reliable measurement tools that are appropriate for young children and the classrooms in which they learn.

The law's current accountability mechanisms do not assess outcomes for children in the early grades – rightly so given that the tests called for by No Child Left Behind are inappropriate for young children.[9] Yet we have to recognize that the absence of accountability measures in the early years has also left a void. NCLB's narrow focus on third through eighth grade creates incentives for schools and districts to focus their energies and resources on short-term triage for struggling students in these tested grades, rather than reforming the PreK-3rd grades to provide all children with a solid foundation.

Existing models demonstrate that it is possible to hold schools and providers accountable for how well they serve children in the primary grades and to drive ongoing quality improvement in early education programs, without subjecting children to inappropriate testing. For example, New Jersey has implemented a particularly thoughtful approach in which a variety of information is collected and used at different levels (including portfolio assessments of children's learning, observations of classroom quality, and statewide program evaluation by independent researchers) to ensure the quality of providers in its *Abbott* preschool program. This approach has driven major improvements in the quality of *Abbott* preschool classrooms in a relatively brief period of time.[10] Similarly, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), a validated, reliable measure of classroom quality[11], is already being deployed in Head Start centers across the country to evaluate teachers' interactions with children and to provide ongoing training to help them improve. And in Maryland, data from a customized version of an observational tool called the Work Sampling System are giving teachers, principals, districts and the state a much clearer picture of how subgroups of children are doing -- and what additional interventions and services should be made available to ensure children's needs are met.[12]

These kinds of approaches could be implemented in pre-kindergarten and the K-3 grades to provide much-needed information on instructional quality along the early learning continuum.

ESEA's accountability mechanisms should encourage school districts, in alignment with state-wide efforts, to embrace this kind of research-based, quality-focused evaluation of teacher practice and classroom environments. Federal research grants should make room for studies on how to both develop and conduct developmentally appropriate assessments of young children.

EXTENDED LEARNING TIME

Recognize high-quality early childhood programs as an eligible use of funds designed to extend learning time.

"Extended learning time" and "increased learning time" are specifically mentioned as turnaround strategies in the Administration's "Blueprint" and its guidelines for Race to the Top, the competitive grant program funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. But pre-k, Head Start, other programs for 3- and 4-year-olds, and full-day kindergarten are not explicitly mentioned, even though their role is precisely that – to increase learning time.

If a version of Race to the Top becomes part of ESEA, high-quality early childhood programs should be included as an option for meeting those guidelines. The law should be flexible enough to count the following as extended learning time: pre-kindergarten programs; full-day kindergarten; and full-year programs in prekindergarten, kindergarten, and the primary grades.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Redefine "parental involvement" to reflect a shared responsibility of "family engagement."

Research has demonstrated that engaging the families of young children is critical to children's success later in life. Leading researchers, expert practitioners, and advocates, including the National PTA, define family engagement in education as: *a shared responsibility of families and schools for student success, in which schools and community-based organizations are committed to reaching out to engage families in meaningful ways and families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development. This shared responsibility is continuous from birth through young adulthood and reinforces learning that takes place in the home, school and community.*

Increased participation by families in pre-kindergarten programs has been linked to greater academic motivation and stronger social and emotional skills among young children. Family members also benefit as they develop a sense of collaboration early on in the educational process that can endure throughout a child's life.[13] By adjusting the law to favor family engagement as opposed to simply requiring parental involvement, schools and districts will be better supported in their efforts to reach out to families before pre-kindergarten or kindergarten and throughout children's years in school.

We urge you to update the ESEA to reflect the indisputable evidence that the early years of children's education – those from pre-kindergarten through third grade – establish essential skills and behaviors that support college- and career-readiness.

Further, we hope the recommendations herein provide you with meaningful changes for ESEA's reauthorization. Given what we know about the individual, economic and societal benefits of high-quality early education, our government has an obligation to ensure that all children have the opportunity to experience high-quality pre-kindergarten, full-day kindergarten, and grades K-3. This will take the work of, and collaborative partnerships between, school districts, state educational agencies and the federal government (and, of course, the efforts of parents and communities).

ESEA provides the opportunity to establish both a vision and a plan for an American education system that starts early and maintains rigorous attention to the quality of each subsequent grade-level. We hope that this letter compels you to infuse PreK-3rd strategies throughout the law. An approach that does so would equal true education reform.

Yours sincerely,

Association for Children of New Jersey

The Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL)

Children's Defense Fund

First Focus Campaign for Children

FirstSchool-FPG Child Development Institute

Foundation for Child Development

Generations United

Montgomery County Public Schools

National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS-SDE)

National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE)

National Black Child Development Institute

National PTA

New America Foundation

Pre-K Now, a Campaign of the Pew Center of the States

Voices for America's Children

ENDNOTES:

[1] 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. Burchinalm 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).

[2] 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.)

[3] *2007 Reading Assessment*, National Assessment of Educational Progress, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

[4] The U.S. Department of Education's Program Description of Title I, Part A. says that of all the allocations of Title I dollars in the 2006-07 school year, "60 percent were in kindergarten through fifth grade, 21 percent in grades 6-8, 16 percent in grades 9-12, three percent in preschool, and less than one percent ungraded." Accessed on March 9, 2010 at http://www2.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/index.html

[5] Testimony of Danielle Ewen, Director, Child Care and Early Education, Early Learning Stakeholders Meeting, U.S. Department of Education, January 29, 2010.

[6] See "Student Performance on the 2009 Assessment Program in Primary Reading (Kindergarten to Grade 2)," "2009 Advanced Placement Exam Participation and Performance for Students in Montgomery County Public Schools, and Public School Students in Maryland and the Nation," and other reports on assessment scores broken down by racial and socio-demographics at http://sharedaccountability.mcpsprimetime.org/reports/list.php?Topic=Tests

[7] Snow, Burns and Griffin, 1998; *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching children to read: an evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction.*(Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

[8] Christopher T. Cross, Taniesha A. Woods, and Heidi Schweingruber, eds., *Mathematics Learning in Early Childhood: Paths Toward Excellence and Equity* (Washington, D.C.: Committee on Early Childhood Mathematics; National Research Council, 2009).

[9] Catherine E. Snow and Susan B. Van Hemel, eds., *Early Childhood Assessment: Why, What, and How* (Washington, D.C.: Committee on Developmental Outcomes and Assessments for Young Children; National Research Council, 2008).

[10] Sara Mead, *Education Reform Starts Early: Lessons from New Jersey's PreK-3rd Reform Efforts* (New America Foundation, December 2009).

[11] For more information on CLASS, see *Effective Teacher-Student Interactions: Measuring and Improving Classroom Practice*, at http://class.teachstone.org/docs/research_papers/CLASS_PolicyBrief_single.pdf.

[12] For a description of how the Work Sampling System works in Maryland, see the 2009-10 Maryland School Readiness Report, *Children Entering School Ready to Learn*, at http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/NR/rdonlyres/BCFF0F0E-33E5-48DA-8F11-28CF333816C2/23495/2010_MMSR_Exec_Summ_Final.pdf

[13] Pre-K Now, *Engaged Families, Effective Pre-K* (February 2010). For more information on the research base behind family engagement in early education, see endnotes: http://preknow.org/documents/FamilyEngagement_Feb2010.pdf