



NEW AMERICA FOUNDATION

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Jacqueline Jones, Ph.D.
Senior Advisor to the Secretary for Early Learning
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Dr. Jones,

Thank you for requesting input on early learning in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act passed in 2009, the administration and Congress have already taken important steps to expand young children's access to high-quality early learning experiences in the preschool and early elementary years, by investing in early childhood programs and, through Race to the Top (R2T), catalyzing state reform efforts to improve public education. The proposed Early Learning Challenge Grant (ELCG) program, included in the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act currently before Congress, will further support states in building comprehensive birth-to-five early childhood systems.

On behalf of the New America Foundation's Early Education Initiative, we applaud these efforts. However, we see a further need to bridge the two separate reform strands in R2T and ELCG to promote the creation of *seamless* educational systems that span the early childhood years up through secondary school. Federal policies must support states in creating a genuine P-20 pipeline in which educational programs and opportunities that are aligned on multiple levels – from the collection of data on children's educational growth to the implementation of standards and assessments. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act presents a unique opportunity to make that happen.

First, ESEA reauthorization must recognize the reality that a large and growing number of preschoolers are in our public schools and in community-based preschool programs that, through virtue of their inclusion in state-funded pre-K programs, have become part of our system of public education. Provisions throughout the law must be updated to reflect this reality. For example, teachers in state- and district-funded pre-K programs should be included in all ESEA programs and provisions that seek to improve teacher quality, including Improving Teacher Quality State Grants (Title II), Troops to Teachers, and the Teacher Incentive Fund. Title III of ESEA should explicitly include preschoolers in programs to support English language acquisition. And Title I funding formulas should be based on populations of 3- to 17-year-olds, rather than, as is currently the case, 5- to 17-

year-olds. These are just a few examples of ways in which ESEA must better reflect and support the integration of preschoolers into our public education system.

Second, the Department of Education should use ESEA reauthorization as an opportunity to spur states to create systems to hold districts and schools accountable for how well they serve children in PreK-3rd grades. Research shows that these years are of critical importance to children's long-term educational outcomes—children who do not learn to read proficiently by the end of 3rd grade are unlikely to catch up.ⁱ New studies are also showing how much children's mathematics skills could benefit from stronger instruction in the early grades.ⁱⁱ But NCLB's current accountability mechanisms do not assess outcomes for children in the early grades—rightly so given the inappropriateness for young children of the tests states currently use for NCLB purposes.ⁱⁱⁱ 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 grades 3-8 creates incentives for schools and districts to focus their energies and resources on short-term triage for struggling students in these tested grades, rather reforming the PreK-3rd grades to provide all children with a solid foundation that will sustain lasting gains in achievement.

Existing models demonstrate that it is possible to hold schools and providers accountable for how well they serve children in pre-K and the early 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 types of information are 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. Similarly, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), a validated, reliable measure of classroom quality, is already being deployed in Head Start centers across the country. Both of these models could also be implemented grades K-3 to provide much-needed information on instructional quality in elementary schools.

Because there is no clear “one best way” to monitor quality and outcomes in the PreK-3rd grades, ESEA should incentivize and support state-level innovations that develop valid, reliable, and developmentally appropriate approaches to evaluating PreK-3rd quality. Such incentives could be integrated into the extended Race to the Top competition that the administration has proposed including in the reauthorized ESEA, or the State Assessment Grants program. And any changes to Adequate Yearly Progress that allow states to determine AYP using multiple measures should require the inclusion of appropriate measures of pre-K as well as quality and outcomes measures in the primary grades.

Beyond these two areas, the administration and Congress have a number of opportunities to including in ESEA reauthorization policies that support the development of a more seamless P-20 education system:

- **Increase the use of Title I funds for pre-K.** Research shows that one-third to one-half of the achievement gap for African American students exists before children enter first grade, and similarly large gaps exist between poor and affluent children at school entry. Thus achieving Title I's purpose of improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged children requires *starting early*. Districts currently spend only 2 percent of Title I funds on pre-K programs. ESEA reauthorization should increase the percentage of Title I funds that are used for pre-K, either through a set-aside or by creating new incentives for school districts to use Title I funds for pre-K.
- **Fully integrate early childhood data into seamless P-20 state data systems.** 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 longitudinal data system. ESEA will likely build on America COMPETES and Race to the Top efforts to spur and support the development of state P-20 longitudinal data systems, and the proposed Early Learning Challenge Grants will also require states to develop data systems for measuring and tracking child outcomes. ESEA reauthorization should mandate and support the integration of early childhood data into state longitudinal data systems. This would provide an integrated view of children's growth starting with their enrollment in early childhood programs on up through their post-secondary years and allow policymakers and researchers to track the long-term results of early childhood investments.
- **Support the adoption of validated and reliable observational measures to identify highly effective teachers in grades PreK-3rd.** The administration has indicated a desire to move away from NCLB's "highly qualified teacher" requirements and focus instead on whether teachers are "highly effective," as measured in part by value-added measures of student learning gains. But value-added measures of student learning gains are typically not available for teachers in grades PreK-3rd. Instead, effectiveness of PreK-3rd teachers should be assessed using validated and reliable observational measures, such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, that have solid evidence that the behaviors they measure actually improve student learning. Efforts to catalyze states or districts to create effective educator-evaluation systems should mandate use of validated and reliable observation measures of instructional quality in pre-K through third grade classrooms. Changes to section 1119 of ESEA should also define highly effective or highly qualified for PreK-3rd teachers in terms of their ability to demonstrate quality instruction on validated and reliable observational measures.
- **Address school readiness gaps of children in communities that feed into chronically underperforming elementary schools.** Because we know that achievement gaps begin long before students enter school, states that receive School Improvement grant funds to turn around low-performing schools should be required to demonstrate that they have a strategy in place to provide high-quality learning

opportunities to children in communities that feed into these schools. States could leverage a variety of funding streams and programs, including state pre-k, CCDF funds, ELCG, and Title I, or coordinate with Head Start and private child care providers to improve quality and alignment with school improvement efforts.

- **Tilt literacy efforts to ensure reading proficiency by grade 3.** The LEARN Act introduced in Congress, and increased funding for comprehensive literacy programs in the Fiscal Year 2010 appropriations bill, are important steps to improve literacy. Research shows that reading by 3rd grade is a critical predictor of children's later academic success, and the PreK-3rd years are of critical and unique importance to children's literacy development. Literacy initiatives in a ESEA must recognize this importance, by separately addressing and funding the PreK-3rd years, rather than grouping grades K-5 together. The initiatives should also allocate at least half of federal literacy funds to foster the development of emerging literacy and language skills in the birth-to-5 years and to build proficient reading skills in the PreK-3rd grades.

We hope that this input is valuable as the administration considers new provisions to ESEA. We appreciate your consideration of these ideas and look forward to continuing a dialogue with the administration in the months ahead.

Yours sincerely,

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ⁱ 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.); *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).

ⁱⁱ 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).

ⁱⁱⁱ 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).