

January 29, 2010

Greetings and thanks to Dr. Jones, Asst. Sec. Melendez and Asst. Sec. Martin:

On behalf of the New America Foundation, I am Lisa Guernsey, Director of the Early Education Initiative. Thank you for giving us a chance to provide input on the reauthorization of ESEA.

We applaud the steps that your department has taken to expand young children's access to high-quality early learning experiences. Thank you for initiating the Race to the Top program, which is catalyzing state reform efforts to improve public education. We are also encouraged by the proposed Early Learning Challenge Grant program.

But we see a need to bridge these two separate reform strands to promote the creation of *seamless* educational systems that span the early childhood years up through secondary school. The reauthorization of ESEA presents a unique opportunity to make that happen.

Here are our recommendations:

First, reauthorization must recognize the reality that a large and growing number of preschoolers are in our public schools. They are also in community-based preschool programs that, through virtue of their inclusion in state-funded pre-K, have become part of the public education system. Provisions throughout ESEA must be updated to reflect this. For example, funding formulas, as well as programs to improve teacher quality, need to include preschoolers. When age ranges are mentioned, let's not start with 5-year-olds. Let's start with 3-year-olds.

Second, the Department of Education should use ESEA reauthorization to spur states to create systems that hold districts and schools accountable for how well they serve young children. Research shows that these years – from

pre-K up to 3rd grade -- are critically important to children's long-term educational success. Children who do not learn to read proficiently by the end of 3rd grade are unlikely to catch up. New studies are also showing how much children's math skills could benefit from stronger early instruction.

What do we mean by accountability? We DO NOT mean extending NCLB-style measures down to the early grades. We agree with child development experts that NCLB-style tests are inappropriate for young children. *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 unfortunate incentives for schools and districts to focus on short-term triage. Some principals stack their 3rd grades with their strongest teachers and leave the early years behind. Others turn the third grade year into little more than "drill and practice." It is a shame that ESEA has put pressure on a narrow band of children's schooling, instead of reforming the PreK-3rd grades to provide all children with a solid foundation.

What we need to realize is that it *is* possible to hold schools and providers accountable for how well they serve young children -- and help teachers make quality improvements -- without subjecting children to inappropriate testing.

For example, New Jersey has implemented a particularly thoughtful approach -- due in no small measure to efforts by Jacqueline Jones in her tenure there. To evaluate quality in the state's *Abbott* preschool program, New Jersey uses a variety of types of information, including portfolio assessments of children's learning, observations of classroom quality, and evaluations by independent researchers who look at the system state-wide. These measures have driven major improvements in a relatively brief period of time.

Another option to consider is the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, or CLASS. As a validated, reliable measure of classroom quality, CLASS is already being deployed in Head Start centers across the country.

Both of these models could be implemented in grades K-3 to provide much-needed information on how well children are taught in elementary schools. Other models surely exist as well. Since we do not yet know of "one best way" to monitor quality and outcomes in the PreK-3rd grades, we believe that ESEA should provide incentives for state-level innovations on this front. The law should spur new ideas for evaluating PreK-3rd quality that are valid, reliable, and developmentally appropriate. Such incentives could be integrated

into the extended Race to the Top competition that the administration has proposed or into the State Assessment Grants program.

Our written remarks include other suggestions about particular points in the law, and we would be happy to serve as a resource for you in the coming months. Thank you again for your consideration of these recommendations.

-- Remarks presented at the U.S. Department of Education by Lisa Guernsey on January 29, 2010