

January 30, 2015

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray:

United Way Worldwide is encouraged by the recent activity surrounding the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and looks forward to the long-overdue passage of a bipartisan update that ensures all students graduate from high school college- and career-ready. On behalf of the over 1,200 United Ways in the United States, we write to share our principles for reauthorization.

As the largest privately-funded public charity in this country, United Way works to raise, invest and leverage billions of dollars annually to create and support innovative programs aimed at improving education, income and health outcomes in local communities. As an organization that often serves as the backbone for strong and healthy communities, we believe that ESEA reauthorization is a critical opportunity to ensure that community-based organizations can collaborate with schools to meet students' academic, developmental, and social and emotional needs.

As you consider reauthorization, we ask that you make certain that the reauthorized bill maintains its original focus of targeting federal support to districts and schools with the highest concentrations of poverty to ensure all children have access to a high-quality education. With that goal in mind, and based on our work in communities across the country, we submit the following principles for your consideration:

Principle 1: Hold states and school districts accountable for graduating students who are college- and career-ready

A reauthorized ESEA should include a strong accountability system. Such a system would maintain the annual testing and reporting requirements in current law, which have been so critical in illuminating the achievement gaps that exist across the country. Additionally, it would require that states and districts report school climate data, as these factors greatly impact student achievement. A robust accountability system would also include thoughtful, evidence-based interventions to turn around low-performing and high achievement gap schools.

ESEA should also incentivize states to use data, such as early warning systems, to identify students at risk of dropping out or not meeting academic benchmarks and provide such students with intensive, specialized supports.

Principle 2: Ensure that students have access to a comprehensive system of wraparound supports

Wraparound supports are critical to ensuring that students come to school ready to learn. We urge you to maintain dedicated funding to programs and activities that support “safe and healthy” students- especially the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, which plays a vital role in the communities we serve. Additionally, a reauthorized ESEA should include programs, like Promise Neighborhoods, which incentivize partnerships that coordinate resources between schools and community organizations to address the comprehensive needs of students and provide enriching learning and development opportunities during and outside of school hours.

Principle 3: Meaningfully engage parents and families

Parents and families play a critical role in ensuring that students graduate from high school college- and career-ready. A reauthorized ESEA must ensure that states and districts meaningfully engage parents and families, including in state accountability systems and school turnaround efforts. ESEA must also ensure that parents and families have the information they need to support their children’s learning and development. In addition, states should be required to promote statewide indicators and measures focused on improving parent and family engagement.

Thank you in advance for considering our recommendations, which we are confident will result in a reauthorized ESEA that better serves students, families and communities. If you need further clarification on our principles, or if we can provide technical assistance, legislative language or additional information about United Way’s education work, please feel free to contact Steve Taylor at Steve.Taylor@unitedway.org or (703) 703-683-7817. We look forward to working with you throughout this very important process.

Sincerely,

Steven S. Taylor
Senior Vice President, Public Policy
United Way Worldwide