

Looking Ahead to ESEA Reauthorization: What Legislators Can Learn from LEARN

When will ESEA reauthorization occur? That is a good question that no one can answer right now. Throughout summer 2010 legislative staff members on both sides of the aisle in both the Senate and House did steady work on the difficult task of collecting and attempting to reconcile differing views about what will go into the new ESEA. LEARN, a bill that NCTE contributed to writing and has supported as it was developed and introduced in the last Congress in both houses, served as a guide to issues of literacy in ESEA. Many elements from LEARN were adopted or adapted as talks moved forward.

The election changed everything—well, almost everything. As we are all aware from the recent brush with a government shutdown, new agendas and ideological stances have altered legislative action in many areas, including education. Nonetheless, ESEA will at some point be again a scene of action; in fact, writing continues even now in some quarters. In May 2011 LEARN will be reintroduced in the Senate and again become a reference for ideas and language for ESEA reauthorization. Although it is uncertain if LEARN will be reintroduced in the House, elements from it will certainly influence the progress of ESEA.

Looking forward to ESEA reauthorization, NCTE has chosen for this 2011 Advocacy Day to highlight three elements of LEARN that are featured in NCTE's 2011 Education Policy Platform: **teaching teams, professional development, and formative assessment**. A given for all three elements, of course, is the importance of a comprehensive literacy program that aligns literacy teaching and learning across grade levels and subject areas. You may want to state right away that this comprehensive approach offers new hope for transforming literacy learning.

The following information may help you in deciding which of the three elements you want to emphasize in your conversations with legislators and legislative staff members. You may choose one element to go into in some depth, including stories from your own experience, or you may want to cover all three elements, perhaps with a story that demonstrates several elements.

Teaching teams

One plank of the 2011 NCTE Education Policy Platform reads:

Use teaching teams as the basic unit for decision making at the local and district level. Working in teams allows educators to design and share goals and strategies, strengthens the foundation for informed decision making, and contributes to participation in more broadly based communities of practice. Teaching teams bring together teachers, administrators, and other educators to:

- Develop and assess curricula
- Assess and become more knowledgeable about student learning
- Design and support activities that enhance professional practice
- Apply cross-disciplinary perspectives to curriculum design, assessment, and professional growth
- Conduct collective inquiry into the learning and teaching environment
- Connect to parents and the community

Two documents are included in this packet to help buttress your support for the use of teaching teams. First, in the *Principles for Learning* statement of the Connected Learning Coalition, of which NCTE is a part, Principle 2 states that "Learning is a social act." It further states that "teachers in every subject area learn together about

how to support student learning. . . . Their collaborative learning provides a model for students of how adults and professionals learn.” Second, a short and powerful *Introduction to Learning Teams* by Thomas Carroll, President of the National Commission on Teaching & America’s Future, successfully argues for teaching teams as a practice foundational to our ability to transform schools. In this book introduction, which stands well on its own, Carroll states, “The research reports and case studies in this book demonstrate that collaborative teams positively affect the rewards of teaching careers, they improve instructional practice, enhance teaching effectiveness, and increase student achievement.”

You might relate how being part of a teaching team—within your department, across departments in your school, with teachers throughout a district, with faculty and teachers from college and high school developing aligned curriculum, or with faculty and teachers determining assessment criteria—has made a difference in your teaching and/or your students’ learning. You might explain the conditions that make the work of teaching teams possible, such as developing common understanding about the newest research on literacy learning, integration of new teachers with veteran teachers on teams, or support from administrators who assess teacher effectiveness collectively instead of or as well as individually.

Professional development

Another plank of the NCTE 2011 Educational Policy Platform reads:

Provide for systematic professional development as an essential component of successful school reform. Teachers who have opportunities for quality professional development are best able to help students learn. Therefore, NCTE calls on policymakers to invest in state and local literacy plans that:

- Provide time in the school day for teaching teams to create, plan, and participate in sustained professional development
- Support professional development opportunities that allow for teacher collaboration within and across grade levels to share and analyze practices that improve achievement
- Address the unique needs of early-career teachers
- Include teachers when planning professional development so that it aligns with the distinctive needs of their students

NCTE’s Principles of Professional Development, adopted in 2006, are in your packet. They state NCTE’s stances on the relationship of professional development and student learning, respect for teacher knowledge, the need for both research and practice bases for PD, the need for sustained activities, and the need for review of efficacy of investment in PD. Also in your packet is a 2011 document from Learning Forward, the former NSDC, that is valued for its research on PD. Note that under key findings from recent studies Learning Forward states that “Teachers typically need substantial professional development in a given area (close to 50 hours) to improve their skills and their students’ learning,” a helpful finding when advocating for funding of sustained professional development. The document also states that “Sustained and intensive professional development for teachers is related to student achievement gains,” a useful finding when discussing how professional development relates to students’ ability to meet standards.

From your experiences, you could choose a professional development sequence of activities that worked for you in improving your teaching and/or your students’ learning. Your story will be much more likely to influence a legislator’s or legislative staff member’s thinking and action if you highlight the parts of the professional

development that contributed to its success. Also the more specific you can be about outcomes the better, especially if you can relate how student learning improved.

Formative assessment

The 2011 NCTE Education Policy Platform emphasizes the centrality of formative assessment for teaching and learning and for any acceptable accountability system. Specifically, the platform asserts that a comprehensive literacy policy “empowers teachers to design and select formative assessments that assist them in making ongoing decisions about student learning and teaching.”

The context of the two Race to the Top-funded consortia developing assessments of progress toward the Common Core State Standards necessitates NCTE’s focus on formative assessment. LEARN defines formative assessment in much the same way that NCTE’s platform does, but the assessment consortia exhibit different definitions. The emphasis on accountability that is the charge of the consortia has evolved into an emphasis on summative assessment.

Helping staff members to understand that formative assessment is something teachers do all the time in order to adjust their teaching to their students’ needs and that even more formal formative assessment must be part of the learning process and not a part of evaluation of teachers or schools is important work today.

To help make your case about formative assessment, you might cite the attached article written by a Kansas middle school teacher and published in *Education Week* on March 2, 2011. Writing about the way she does and uses formative assessment, she identifies formative assessment as “the most effective way to know which students are learning, which are stuck and where, and which students just aren’t getting it at all.” She calls her assessment techniques “little feedback loops signaling the amount of progress we’re making toward the end goal.”

You have similar stories about what works for you formatively as you and your students assess their work. On Advocacy Day you might choose to share a successful strategy as you argue for keeping formative assessment formative and for keeping teachers at the center of its development and implementation.

Whatever element(s) you choose to emphasize and whatever experiences you use as evidence, the main point to make today is: ESEA needs to establish a comprehensive approach to literacy teaching and learning through an emphasis on:

- **teaching teams as the basic unit of decision making,**
- **systematic professional development as an essential component of improved student learning and successful school reform, and**
- **teacher-generated formative assessment that supports student learning.**