



National Council of Teachers of English

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The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chairman
Senate Health, Education, Labor
and Pensions Committee
428 Dirksen Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Michael Enzi
Ranking Member
Senate Health, Education, Labor
and Pensions Committee
835 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Harkin and Ranking Member Enzi:

<<Sent via email: ESEAccomments@help.senate.gov>>

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), which represents over 50,000 teachers, appreciates this opportunity to provide comment on the upcoming Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization, with special reference to the Department of Education's Blueprint for Reform. Our comments highlight five key components of ESEA that are critical to the success of K-12 education in our country.

ESEA must support investment in literacy instruction and learning from birth through grade 12.

Comprehensive literacy plans in every state will enable coordination and collaboration across academic levels and subject areas. Being literate is at the heart of learning in every subject area. Because students engage more deeply with those subjects as they progress through school, they must be taught by teachers who know the substance of their subject area and the ways in which knowledge in their subject area is represented. An integrated and sustained approach to literacy will assure a learning progression for all students that prepares them for college, career, and civic life.

We are encouraged that the Blueprint states that it will provide funding to assist "states in strengthening their literacy programs and providing substantial support to high-need districts in implementing high-quality literacy instruction" and ". . . to develop comprehensive, evidence-based, preK-12 literacy plans" with goals "to improve literacy instruction statewide" and to improve "teachers' knowledge and skills in effective literacy instruction." While we welcome recommendations for essential investments in the sustained implementation of literacy improvement models over time, we harbor concerns about essentially unproven school turnaround approaches that appear to require radical realignment or replacement of staff and administrative personnel in the lowest performing schools in certain circumstances. We are aware of little research demonstrating that interventions such as these produce positive results for students and their families.

ESEA must support teaching as a profession through defining teacher effectiveness as professional practice.

The definition of teacher effectiveness must not only reference student learning outcomes, but also encompass engaging in professional practices that have been shown to have a powerful influence on student success. Those practices include:

- Applying deep content knowledge
- Using teaching and assessment strategies that enable diverse students to meet learning goals
- Participating in teacher learning communities to plan, assess, and improve instruction
- Growing as a professional by continuing to learn about content and pedagogy across a career span
- Incorporating current technologies in learning and teaching
- Engaging families and community members as partners in educating students
- Using evidence about student learning to improve instruction

While supporting individual teacher growth is important, real progress is made when teacher teams have the opportunity to work together to support student learning. These teams need common planning time and time to reflect on improvements made based on new content and pedagogical knowledge in their fields. Their collaborative learning, in communities of practice, can be a model for students of how adults and professionals learn. The Blueprint should include a more explicit focus on supporting learning and improvement among cross-disciplinary teams of teachers as an important step toward school improvement and providing a complete education for every student.

ESEA must support professional teachers through job-embedded, continuous opportunities to continue their own learning.

Just as doctors and lawyers must keep up with new developments in their fields, teachers must learn what is newly known about their increasingly diverse students, about cognition, about research findings in their field, and about the science of learning. To set the circumstances for such professional growth, ESEA should support and invest in

- Providing time in the school day for teacher and school leaders to examine student work and share best practices
- Establishing communities of practice that bring early-career and more experienced teachers together for sharing and enriching teaching practice
- Enhancing teachers' understanding and use of assessments and related data to differentiate instructional approaches to reach every learner

The Blueprint makes important gestures toward supporting the improvement of teacher quality. Its section on "Ensuring a Well-Rounded Education" states that grants will be given to support "new, promising instructional practices or the expansion of instructional practices for which there is evidence of improving student performance" in various fields. The section "Developing Effective Teachers and Leaders" suggests that funds can be used for building "instructional teams of teachers, leaders, and school staff." The Blueprint also calls for more career ladders for teachers and those are needed.

The Blueprint as yet, however, does not recognize as explicitly the need for teachers to have time to become more and more knowledgeable in their own subject (content) areas. Although professional development in general is rightly supported, professional development that supports teachers in continuing to build their professionalism through reading and writing in their own subject areas needs to be included. Professional development is a requisite for being a highly effective, professional teacher.

ESEA must support assessments that both foster learning and better describe student achievement, teacher effectiveness, and school performance.

Over the past decade, disproportionate emphasis has been placed on assessment as an accountability measure, with disastrous results for students, teachers, and schools. Teachers must be supported in guiding student learning through the use of formative assessments that they develop or choose. Specifically, the ESEA must:

- Fund the development of a balanced assessment system that includes and validates the use of formative assessment, performance-based assessment, growth models, and summative assessment to create a more in-depth portrait of student learning for the purposes of determining accountability and fostering student growth
- Create accountability measures that are developmentally, linguistically, and culturally sensitive to the particular needs of English Language Learners and students with disabilities

NCTE believes that assessing is a component of learning that helps students and teachers alike improve and advance in their work. Rather than simply an accountability tool, assessing can be a planned, productive part of intentional learning processes in our schools. We were pleased to read in the Blueprint that “new assessment systems will better capture higher-order skills, provide more accurate measures of student growth, and better inform classroom instruction to respond to academic needs.” But as we read on, the credibility of this statement was called into question because of the countermanding abundance of language in the Blueprint that deals with accountability measures, repercussions, and competitiveness. Accountability is essential, especially in setting policies that ensure wise governmental investments; but when accountability gets the preponderance of attention in policy, teachers are justifiably concerned that the value of assessment for learning will be eclipsed.

Because assessing progress is part of learning, the notion of formative assessment in the hands of teachers and students on a day-to-day basis to guide learning needs to be highlighted in the Blueprint and ESEA reauthorization. Teachers need to engage in formative assessment of their own practices so that they can continue to become better and better teachers. Similarly, teachers need time to design and implement formative assessment of student learning and modify approaches based on what they discover. Presently, assessing for learning and assessing for accountability are far out of balance, with catastrophic consequences. We urge that the balance be restored in favor of assessing progress as a part of learning.

ESEA must support teaching and learning practices that prepare students for success in a global society.

For the past decade, accountability measures in the ESEA have focused on measurement of discrete student skills, and have provided no incentives to help schools prepare students for success with emerging communication tools, or to engage in the kinds of problem-solving and decision-making that will enable them to adapt in a fast-changing world.

As mentioned in the Blueprint, students need to learn to use and evaluate digital tools and resources; but even more, they need to use technology for communication, research, and creation of new ideas in all content areas. When students themselves are familiar with and have access to tools that enable them to work at solving problems and being critical thinkers, they become deep learners. Similarly, teachers must keep current about digital tools and applications that are useful to their own learning and to the learning of their students. They must incorporate tools and applications best suited to their subject areas and continue their learning as new technologies open access to multiple ways of knowing and learning. In the section “Activities to Strengthen a Complete Education,” the Blueprint indicates that the Secretary will set aside funds for such activities as teachers’ “creation of high-quality educational digital content” and states’ “development and improvement of their capacity to use technology to improve instruction.” The Blueprint’s section “Ensuring a Well-Rounded Education” states that in grant-making “priority will be given to applicants proposing to integrate teaching and learning across academic subjects and to use technology to address student learning challenges.” These are good first steps but do not capture the full potential for expanding student learning in a digital age.

Learning from and with diverse classmates helps prepare students for the global context in which they will operate as adults. Teachers must adopt pedagogies that ensure participation by all students in learning in their classrooms. In the Blueprint’s section “Meeting the Needs of English Learners and Other Diverse Learners,” commitment to serving the needs of diverse students is evident through the identification of numerous groups of students. The focus, however, is almost exclusively on educating those students so that they can graduate and be ready for college and the workplace. Little attention is given to bringing their perspectives—whether from living with a disability or without a permanent home, or from acquiring fluency in multiple languages or language traditions—into the classroom as a source of learning for all students.

The National Council of Teachers of English welcomes the opportunity for a continuing dialogue with you during the coming months about these and other components of ESEA. NCTE can contribute research findings, evidence from practice, and the reach of an organization with members in every state. Please contact Barbara Cambridge, Director of NCTE’s Washington office (bcambridge@ncte.org), with specific requests for participation in discussions or materials that can be helpful in your work. We appreciate your bipartisan efforts and will be pleased to contribute to them in any way we can.

Sincerely,



Kent Williamson, Executive Director
National Council of Teachers of English