

The National Coalition *for* Public Education

January 26, 2015

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Senate HELP Committee
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Senate HELP Committee
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Re: We Oppose the Portability Provision in the discussion draft of the “Every Child Ready for College or Career Act of 2015”

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray:

The undersigned organizations write to express our strong opposition to inclusion of the provision in the “Every Child Ready for College or Career Act of 2015” that would dismantle the Title I funding formula. The current draft would provide states the option of making Title I funding “portable” by allowing the money to follow a child to a public school. This proposal would undermine Title I’s fundamental purpose of assisting public schools with high concentrations of poverty and high-need students. Furthermore, Title I portability—even when limited to public schools—is a stepping-stone to private school vouchers.

Portability Undermines Title I’s Goal of Addressing Achievement Gaps in Poor Schools.

Congress adopted Title I in 1965 to ensure that districts and schools serving large concentrations of students in poverty received a greater portion of federal funds to address the compounded impact of poverty on student learning. High-poverty school districts and schools benefit from increased federal investment by taking advantage of “economies of scale” to combine resources for school-wide services and whole school reforms targeted at economically and academically needy groups of students. However, the discussion draft of the “Every Child Ready for College or Career Act of 2015,” however, contains a portability provision that would dismantle the Title I funding formula, diluting the funds and their ability to address the needs of the very students Title I funding is intended to assist.

To fulfill congressional intent, today’s Title I dollars flow to the states, which then distribute the dollars to districts based on the number of students in poverty and the percentage of total students in poverty in each district. As a result, districts and schools within the state receive different allocations of Title I funds. This weighted formula ensures that poorer, smaller, under-resourced districts receive a greater share of Title I funds than large, highly affluent districts.

Portability would completely change the Title I formula for distributing money to districts and schools. The state would be able to fully disregard—and deny school districts the ability to address—the unique needs of schools and communities with a concentration of students in poverty when distributing Title I funds throughout the state. Under the Title I portability option in this discussion draft, every eligible child within a state would receive the same amount of Title I funds regardless of the district or school he or she attends. This ignores the unique challenges schools with high concentrations of poverty face, stretches the dollars thinner, diminishes the effectiveness of the funding, and undermines congressional intent.

Portability Would Deny Districts the Ability To Best Direct Title I Funds

Under current law, districts make local decisions about how to best use their Title I funding. This allows them to “pool” Title I funds so that the highest poverty schools in the district receive the funds. For decades, districts have also chosen to invest their Title I funds primarily in their highest poverty elementary schools because addressing student learning needs at the earliest age possible produces the greatest return on investment. Districts, working with principals and school leaders, can also further target their federal dollars toward specific students within a school based on their academic needs. Portability would divest local school districts, principals, and other school leaders of this important decision making authority, diminishing the effectiveness of the funds and creating a cumulative negative effect on learning opportunities for high-need students.

Portability Is a Stepping Stone Towards Vouchers

Even though the existing bill language limits portability to public schools, we remain concerned that passage of this provision will be a stepping-stone for an expansion of vouchers for private and religious schools using either federal or state funds, which our organizations vehemently oppose. We oppose vouchers for many reasons, including that they do not improve academic achievement; threaten religious liberty by predominantly flowing to religious schools; undermine civil rights protections; and contain virtually no accountability measures.

Our concern that this provision might lead to private school vouchers is bolstered by the fact that there were several failed attempts in the last Congress to turn Title I funding into a private school voucher by making the funds portable to both public and private schools. In addition, the main argument made by the supporters of portability—that the funds should follow the child—mimics that of voucher proponents. Furthermore, by dismantling the Title I funding formula, not only would public schools and students in poverty be harmed, but portability would also allow the dollars to be more easily transferred to private schools to either create a voucher or to be combined with existing state voucher programs.

Conclusion

There are many reasons to oppose Title I portability: (1) portability undermines the purpose of Title I to combat concentrations of poverty; (2) it denies school districts the ability to target the funds to where they are most needed; and (3) it acts as a stepping-stone towards private school vouchers. Accordingly, we oppose the insertion of Title I portability into the “Every Child Ready for College or Career Act of 2015.”

Thank you for your consideration of our concerns.

Sincerely,

AASA: The School Superintendents Association
American Association of University Women (AAUW)
AFL-CIO
American Federation of School Administrators (AFSA), AFL-CIO
American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees
American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO
American Humanist Association
Americans for Religious Liberty
Americans United for Separation of Church and State
Anti-Defamation League
Association of Education Service Agencies
Association of University Centers on Disabilities
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty
Center for Inquiry
Council of the Great City Schools
Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund
Disciples Justice Action Network
Education Law Center
Equal Partners in Faith
Feminist Majority Foundation
Institute for Science and Human Values, Inc.
Interfaith Alliance
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law
League of United Latin American Citizens
NAACP
NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.
National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)
National Association of Federally Impacted Schools
National Association of State Directors of Special Education
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Council of Jewish Women
National Education Association
National Organization for Women
National PTA
National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition
National Rural Education Association
People For the American Way
Secular Coalition for America
School Social Work Association of America
Southern Poverty Law Center
TASH