



February 2, 2015

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman, Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

RE: National PTA Comments on “Every Child Ready for College or Career Act of 2015” Discussion Draft

Dear Mr. Chairman:

On behalf of National PTA’s more than four million members, we thank you for your work to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). We also wish to thank you for the opportunity to comment on the “Every Child Ready for College or Career Act of 2015” discussion draft, released on January 13, 2015. As the nation’s largest volunteer child advocacy association, National PTA continues to be a powerful voice for all children by advocating for federal policies to improve educational equity and opportunity for all children and their families.

Title I; Section 1112: Local Educational Agency (LEA) Plans

As noted in the discussion draft, in order to receive Title I dollars an LEA must submit an education plan that is then approved by their State Educational Agency (SEA). National PTA is pleased to see that this education plan must be developed in consultation with teachers, principals, administrators, school personnel and *parents* of children served in the schools. We strongly support the inclusion of parents as stakeholders. Recognizing the importance of family engagement in ESEA is a critical first step toward ensuring sound partnership among families, schools and the community to increase student success. Parents must be considered valuable stakeholders if we are serious about accomplishing meaningful and sustainable education reform.

Also noted, the education plan must include the strategy the LEA will use to implement effective parental involvement under section 1115. **National PTA strongly encourages the inclusion of improvements to family engagement strategies as laid out in the Family Engagement in Education Act of 2013, S.1291.** The Family Engagement in Education Act includes research-based best practices for family engagement that drive individual student success and school improvement. The inclusion of this language would continue to maintain local flexibility to identify and implement what works and while promoting responsible use of federal dollars to meet statutory intent.

Further, the discussion draft maintains the current one percent set-aside for family engagement at the LEA level. **National PTA strongly suggests that the legislation empower parents by increasing local education agency resources dedicated to family engagement from 1 percent to 2 percent of Title I funding.**

Removal of Title V, Part D

By striking Title V, Part D the discussion draft repeals the Parent Information Resource Center (PIRC) program, found in Subpart 16 of current statute. The original intent of the PIRC program was to empower SEAs and LEAs with access to expertise on implementation of proven programs. If SEAs were well-positioned to demonstrate expertise in family engagement, there would be no real need for this program. However, we know from US Department of Education reporting and from administrator and Title I administrator feedback that the vast majority of state educational agencies lack capacity for coordination of statewide efforts in family engagement.

The National PTA proposes language from the Family Engagement in Education Act of 2013, S. 1291, which would shift funding from a standalone authorization for the PIRC program (as is current statute and proposed last Congress in S. 1094, the “Strengthening America’s Schools Act of 2013,” introduced by former HELP Committee Chairman-Senator Harkin) to a mandatory set-aside of no less than 0.3% of Title I dollars at the state level for family engagement activities – which would include a statewide family engagement center and a local family engagement center. Please note that certain small states would have an exemption if the 0.3% set-aside is not adequate to establish state and local family engagement centers. This shift in funding represents the best policy to improve family engagement in education in the long-term, as the marginal set-aside of Title I dollars represents a more sustainable source of funding for schools. While the preference would be a set-aside of Title I dollars, in its absence PTA remains strongly supportive of the current maintenance and improvement of the PIRC language found in last year’s Harkin bill – as the PIRC program remains current law and represents the sole federal program dedicated to family engagement in education.

Additionally, PTA would like to see the Arts in Education program, found in Title V, Part D, Subpart 15 of current statute, reinstated. This program provides a variety of awards to strengthen arts programs and has supported over 200 model grant programs over the last decade. Research shows that teaching the arts improves academic engagement and overall achievement and PTA recommends including this small, yet important, program in a final ESEA-NCLB reauthorization bill.

Title I Portability


The discussion draft permits Title I dollars to follow the student to another public school. **National PTA is opposed to Title I portability and contends that it is in direct conflict with the fundamental purpose of Title I, which was written to assist schools with high concentrations of poverty and high-need students.** Allowing for the portability of Title I funds would directly dilute the ability of these limited resources to achieve this intent.

Private School Vouchers

Finally, while the current draft remains silent on the topic of private school vouchers, **National PTA stands opposed to the inclusion of vouchers in any reauthorization of ESEA**. Instead of directing funds to increase academic achievement and provide access to high-quality education by encouraging states to set high standards and implement meaningful accountability, voucher programs create opportunity for only a select few students. Additionally, vouchers have been proven to be ineffective and to lack accountability to taxpayers. Vouchers also deprive students of the rights and protections they are awarded in public schools. Despite receiving public money, private schools that participate in voucher programs are not subject to all federal civil rights laws, and do not face the same public accountability standards that all public schools must meet, including those in Title IX, IDEA, and ESEA—contained in the very law the Committee seeks to reauthorize.

In conclusion, we commend your leadership on the reauthorization of ESEA and the ongoing debate surrounding meaningful education reform. Accordingly, we ask for your consideration of our aforementioned concerns and recommendations. We look forward to working with you and your staff in the 114th Congress.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Otha E. Thornton, Jr.".

Otha E. Thornton, Jr.
President
National PTA