



July 6, 2015

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Harry Reid
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Reid and Esteemed Senators:

As the nation's largest volunteer child advocacy association, National PTA has significantly impacted improvements to the education and well-being of America's children since 1897. Currently, with millions of members and 24,000 local units in every U.S. state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands and Europe, 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.

National PTA applauds the leadership of Senators Lamar Alexander and Patty Murray for crafting bipartisan legislation, the Every Child Achieves Act of 2015 (ECAA), which was approved by the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee with a unanimous vote. Our association has consistently advocated for a bipartisan and comprehensive reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act – No Child Left Behind (ESEA-NCLB).

National PTA believes that this bipartisan bill is a solid foundation for the reauthorization of ESEA and we are pleased that the full Senate will soon begin debate to further improve the bill. To that end, we offer our recommendations regarding family engagement, student assessment and accountability systems, and voice our support of, and opposition to amendments we anticipate being offered on the Senate floor.

Family Engagement

Family engagement is at the core of student success and school improvement. More than 40 years of research shows—regardless of a family's income or socioeconomic background—family engagement in education is essential for student success. Students whose families are involved attend school more regularly, earn better grades, enroll in higher-level programs and have higher graduation rates.

The bill has several laudable provisions, including the inclusion of parents as stakeholders in the development of local educational agency (LEA) plans under Title I, family engagement as an allowable use in several titles of the bill, and maintaining the current LEA investment of 1 percent for family engagement. However, National PTA strongly believes the legislation must empower parents by increasing the Title I LEA resources dedicated to family engagement from 1 to 2 percent and include state-based capacity to support family engagement efforts in all school districts throughout a state. The bill that passed out of committee eliminated the Parental Information and Resources Centers (PIRCs) that provide training, resources and technical assistance to support effective family engagement strategies in schools and communities. Our association is committed to restoring this vital program.

Student Assessment

Current policies mandated by No Child Left Behind and others included in state ESEA waiver plans inappropriately stress student performance on a standardized test as a metric of teacher effectiveness and school success. These policies mandate that high stakes decisions about students and school personnel be heavily influenced by a single data point. As a result, there have been calls to implement grade span testing, or eliminate assessment requirements completely. National PTA does not support either of these options.

Rather, our association supports the proposed requirement for states to annually assess students in math and reading for grades 3-8, and once in high school. Proposals to do away with assessments assume that the problem is with the assessment itself. However, the problem is not with the assessment, but rather how it has been used in high stakes decision making. When used appropriately, formative and summative assessments provide critical data to help teachers inform and align their instruction with students' needs, and to support school wide improvement efforts.

Accountability Systems

National PTA is pleased to see that ECAA removes the overly punitive accountability mechanisms that placed too much emphasis on a score obtained on a standardized test and resulted in a narrowing of the curriculum. Additionally, we support states' ability to develop their own state assessment system and the requirement that state education agencies (SEA) set performance goals for students and specific subgroups of students, including economically disadvantaged students, students from major ethnic and racial groups, children with disabilities, and English language learners. States, districts, and schools have an obligation to demonstrate that their policies and practices are enhancing—not hindering—student learning, growth and performance. Despite many strong components of ECAA, we believe that the proposed accountability provisions need to be strengthened.

ECAA requires states and districts to identify low performing schools and provide intervention and technical support for those schools. However, there are no criteria specifying the amount of time a state can wait to intervene once a school has been identified as low performing. Without such criteria, subgroups of students could spend years in a school that provides inadequate instruction and support. Further, we are concerned that ECAA contains no requirement of specific actions that will be taken or consequences imposed when schools and districts are not making meaningful improvements toward state goals. History and current data show us that the absence of federal oversight in matters of school and student accountability systems results in inequitable schools and districts, which do not ensure that every student has access to a high quality public education. It is not unwarranted and it should not be viewed as federal overreach to require states to specify how they will address schools and districts who fail to demonstrate consistent progress despite intervention. There must be a minimum expectation of states that their plan will detail a set of consequences, including the loss of federal funding, and other state imposed sanctions for districts that fail to progress and/or comply after a reasonable period of time.

National PTA supports:

- **Statewide Family Engagement Centers (Bennet):** *Seeks to amend Title IV to provide family engagement in education programs by building state and local capacity to support effective family engagement strategies and evidence based best practices in school districts and school communities.*
This amendment text mirrors language that was included in the House Education and Workforce Committee passed Student Success Act (H.R. 5).
- **School district resources for family engagement (Blunt/Coons):** *Seeks to amend Title I, Section 1115 to increase the amount of funds available for parent and family engagement.*
- **Resource Equity (Kirk, Reed, Baldwin and Brown):** *Seeks to ensure that states measure and report on indicators of student access to critical educational resources and identify disparities in such resources, and for other purposes.*
- **Safe Schools Improvement Act (S. 311) (Casey):** *Seeks to amend Part A of Title IV to address harassment and bullying.*
- **Establishment of a committee on Student Privacy Policy (Hatch/Markey):** *Seeks to establish a committee on student privacy policy to conduct a study on the effectiveness of federal laws and enforcement mechanisms of student privacy and parental rights to student information.*

National PTA opposes:

- **Any public school portability or public or private school voucher amendments:**
National PTA is pleased to see that the bill would not permit Title I dollars to follow a student to another public school or allow federal funds for private school vouchers. The appropriate federal role in education is to promote equity and provide targeted resources to assist states and local districts that need it the most. Our association opposes any and all efforts to transform Title I funding, which is designed to assist public schools with high concentrations of poverty and high-need students, into a private school voucher or allow those funds to be portable to another public or private school.
- **Student Data Privacy Protection Act (Vitter):** *Seeks to amend section 444 of the General Education Provision in order to improve the privacy protections available to students and their parents.*
The Student Privacy Protection Act would eliminate the ability of schools and teachers to personalize learning for students, make it difficult for state policymakers to make evidence-based decisions, and frustrate schools' efforts to close equity gaps and prepare all students for success after high school graduation. Additionally, this legislation would completely restrict the majority of public schools from collecting specific types of data—including academic, behavioral, and mental health screenings—needed to enhance school improvement efforts, identify early risk factors, prevent problems before they occur and promote comprehensive school safety.

- **Title IV Bullying Prevention:** *Seeks to amend Title IV regarding anti-bullying policies.*

During committee mark-up, Senator Alexander introduced an amendment related to anti-bullying policies. National PTA did not support this amendment during HELP Committee mark-up, primarily because this amendment strips enumeration from anti-bullying policies and does not ensure that all students are protected from bullying and harassment in schools. National PTA is opposed to any effort to weaken the provisions included in the Safe Schools Improvement Act (S. 311).

If you would like to discuss any provisions or proposals related to the Every Child Achieves Act or have any questions, please contact Jacki Ball, National PTA Director of Government Affairs at 703-405-5206 or at jball@pta.org. Thank you for your commitment to ensuring that every child has access to a high quality public education and the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Sincerely,



Laura Bay
President
National PTA



Nathan R. Monell, CAE
Executive Director
National PTA