

April 13, 2015

The Honorable Lamar Alexander, Chairman
Health, Education, Labor & Pensions Committee
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray, Ranking Member
Health, Education, Labor & Pensions Committee
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray:

On behalf of National PTA's three and a half million members, we thank you for your work on, and commitment to, a bipartisan reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). 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. In response to the negotiated bill that has been put forward for mark-up, we would like to provide comments concerning the Every Child Achieves Act of 2015.

While the bill has several laudable provisions, including the inclusion of parents as stakeholders in the development of local educational agency plans under Title I, National PTA is deeply concerned regarding the lack of improvement in family engagement provisions over current law in the bill. Recognizing the importance of family engagement in ESEA is a critical first step in ensuring sound partnership among families, schools and the community to increase student success. Our association is committed to securing improvements to the bill during markup and on the Senate floor. We firmly believe that several provisions, as currently written, need to be strengthened:

- The legislation maintains the current 1 percent set-aside for family engagement at the LEA level. National PTA believes the legislation must empower parents by increasing local education agency resources dedicated to family engagement from 1 percent to 2 percent of Title I funding.
- National PTA strongly encourages the inclusion of the following principles and standards at the LEA level for family-school partnerships: 1) welcoming all families to be active participants in the life of the school; 2) ensuring regular two-way, meaningful communication between family members, schools, school districts and educators; 3) supporting student success by fostering continuous collaboration among all stakeholders; 4) speaking up for every child and empowering family members to be advocates; 5) ensuring that family members, school staff and the school district are equal partners in family engagement in education decision-making; 6) collaborating with community organizations and groups to have the school as a hub of community life; 7) creating a continuum of family engagement in education in student

learning and development from birth to young adulthood, and 8) training and supporting superintendents, principals, and teachers to fully engage families in the education of their children.

- National PTA urges the Committee to include language from the Student Success Act (H.R. 5), that authorizes Statewide Family Engagement Centers (SFECs) as a replacement to Parental Information and Resource Centers (PIRCs). This updated authority makes several key improvements that will drive more impactful and better-quality parental and family engagement while leveraging and improving the work of states, school districts and other entities in this area.
- Our association also requests that the bill establish a Family Engagement and Responsibility Fund as a State Education Agency (SEA) reservation of Title I funds, as outlined in the Family Engagement in Education Act of 2015 (S. 622).

National PTA supports a number of other provisions contained in the negotiated bill that we hope will remain part of the final, Senate-approved version, including:

- The update in the distribution of LEA Title I funds for family and parent engagement activities from 95 percent to 85 percent. This change allows for more parental and family engagement capacity building and programs at the district level that also serve parents in local schools, and increases the resources available to the highest need Title I schools.
- Parameters around the use of an LEA's Title I set-aside funds to carry out activities and strategies consistent with the LEA's parent and family engagement policy.
- The absence of a provision to transform Title I funding—which is designed to assist public schools with high concentrations of poverty and high-need students—into a public or private school voucher through “portability.”
- The continued annual disaggregation of subgroup data and reporting.
- Replacement of Adequate Yearly Progress with appropriate, state-driven accountability systems with growth and performance goals.
- Inclusion of a 1 percent cap on the number of students with significant cognitive disabilities who can take alternative assessments for accountability purposes.



- Preservation of Maintenance-of-Effort requirements.
- Clarification that ESEA funds can be used to better coordinate and provide early-education programs

We look forward to working with you, and all Committee members to ensure the bill makes improvements to family engagement and preserves the critical federal protections of current law and builds on the lessons of the past to ensure greater academic progress for all students. National PTA is committed to ensuring that all children have access to a well-rounded education and a diverse range of supports necessary for them to reach their full potential.

We appreciate the work of you and your staff, and look forward to working with you throughout the reauthorization process. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Jacki Ball, National PTA Director of Government Affairs at 703-518-1243 or at jball@pta.org.

Sincerely,

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

Otha Thornton, Jr.
President
National PTA

Cc: HELP Committee Members