

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 14, 2015

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

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member, Committee on Health,
Education, Labor & Pensions
United States Senate
428 Senate Dirksen Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray:

Thank you for your leadership in strengthening the nation's education system by advancing the long overdue reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Congress has reauthorized ESEA seven times since 1965, and meaningful education reform has historically been a bipartisan process. We are pleased that your negotiations over the past few months have produced a strong, bipartisan starting point: the Every Child Achieves Act of 2015.

The most recent reauthorization of ESEA, No Child Left Behind, brought unprecedented attention to the achievement gaps that still persist among disadvantaged students and students of color. It highlighted the perpetual challenges some school systems face in delivering a world-class education to our children. However, the law provided little in the way of programmatic flexibility to respond to the needs of these students in a comprehensive and locally-driven way, and it introduced an outsized federal presence within the nation's classrooms.

We believe that an ESEA reauthorization must recognize the leading role of teachers, school leaders, parents, and local districts in preparing our children to succeed in an ever-changing global economy. At the same time, we must also make improvements to the bill to prevent our education system from reverting to a time when our country would allow some group of students to persistently underperform. As the Committee moves to mark-up the Every Child Achieves Act, we offer the following recommendations in order to produce an even stronger, bipartisan bill:

Expand Access to High-Quality Early Childhood Education: Simply put, there is no better investment we can make than investing in our children before their first day of kindergarten. Congress should listen to governors from across the country and leverage federal resources to expand access to high-quality early learning programs that allow children in low-income households to enter school ready to learn.

Support Great Teachers and School Leaders: No education reform would be successful if we do not improve our system for recruiting, training, supporting, retaining, and paying high-quality teachers and school leaders. We specifically urge the Committee to ensure that teachers and school leaders are offered robust and ongoing professional development opportunities.

Promote Next Generation Assessments: Many states are experimenting with new assessment systems that are tied to competency-based learning models. These tests are rigorous and designed to provide timely information to students, educators, and parents about the individual needs of learners. We encourage the Committee to provide a more clearly defined and timely application process for states to pilot dynamic assessment systems.

Encourage Coordination between Education and Workforce: Education or training beyond high school is no longer just a pathway to opportunity, but a prerequisite. This ESEA reauthorization should harmonize federal funding to provide every student with pathways to high skill, high wage, high demand industry credentials. Our success in adapting to new labor market realities depends increasingly on our ability to break down the silos between our education and training programs, job openings, and career pathways.

Fund Innovation: The federal government should encourage innovative state and local efforts to improve student learning and develop new solutions to meet critical needs. Today, the federal government spends less than 0.2% of our total national spending on education innovation. This lags far behind other sectors. Through the reauthorization, federal, state, tribal, and local governments have an incredible opportunity to redesign what public education looks like in our country. We must all do a better job of identifying, investing, and bringing these innovative and effective practices to scale.

Invest in Wraparound Services: Many factors affect student achievement, including factors outside of the classroom. We should do more to ensure that all children have access to strong family and community support services to meet students' academic and non-academic needs. ESEA should incentivize communities to bring all of their assets and capabilities to bear in improving the educational and developmental outcomes of children in our most distressed communities.

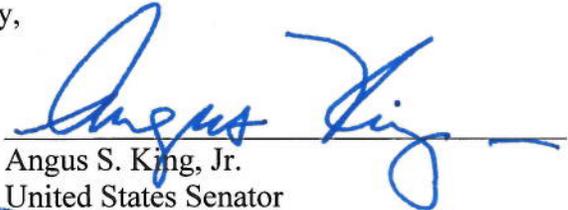
Ensure Transparency Around Regulations: As recent history suggests, the time between ESEA reauthorizations can be longer than anticipated. Under No Child Left Behind, regulations accumulated with little attention to their overall benefit relative to their cost in time and resources. We urge the Committee to use the reauthorization process to provide additional clarity around regulations and guidance documents in the event that this law is not reauthorized again in a timely manner.

A strong education is the building block for success for every child and the foundation for our country's long-term economic strength. The goals expressed above are a necessary, but not sufficient, part of ensuring that every child receives a high-quality, well-rounded education that prepares him or her for college and career. There is much more that we must do. We have no illusions that the road to education reform will be free of obstacles—but we hope that you will look to us as partners as Congress works toward that goal. We look forward to working with you and the Administration in the weeks and months ahead to provide all stakeholders with a stable and flexible federal law for a K-12 education system that serves all students.

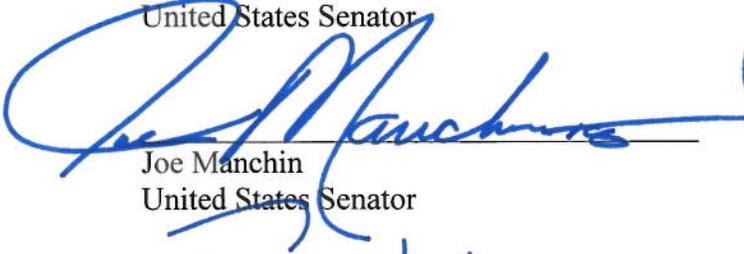
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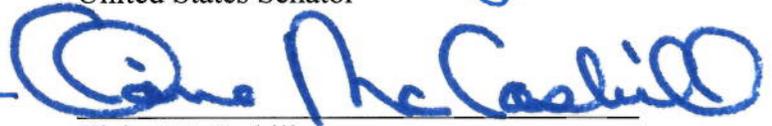
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