

## **EQUITY IN EDUCATION FOR ALL STUDENTS: HOW THE HOUSE BILLS FALL SHORT**




The National Education Association, representing more than three million educators across the nation, has a long and proud history of fighting for educational equity – to ensure every student, regardless of poverty, disability, or other challenges, access to a quality education. NEA believes that all students have the human and civil right to a quality public education and a great public school that develops their potential, independence, and character. But, more than 50 years after the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, too many students are still banished to unequal schools and a lifetime of lost opportunities. The federal government must be engaged in these issues, to hold states accountable for remedying these untenable inequities.

We must remember the days before ESEA when generations of children were denied the basic educational opportunities they deserved. We must judge proposals on whether they will strengthen our educational system, or whether they will move us backward. We must find an appropriate balance of federal and state roles by refocusing on strong state accountability systems while continuing to maintain a sharp federal focus on equity across state and district lines.

The House draft bills fail to address equity issues adequately. The House proposals do not push states enough to narrow achievement gaps; provide equal access to quality education; and ensure that state standards and assessment and accountability systems work for students. The proposals also lack a comprehensive plan to address existing inequities in public education that harm students and communities, particularly students and communities of color. In particular, NEA is very concerned about gaps affecting equity, access, and opportunity in the following areas:

- **Vouchers and privatization.** The proposals inappropriately and dramatically expand private school authority over allocation and use of public funds. There is a push to privatize education by shifting control to private schools, private for-profit entities, and business.
- **Maintenance of effort.** The proposals would eliminate Maintenance of Effort. This will trigger a race to the bottom in state and local support for public education, often under the guise of fiscal distress. The driving principle behind Title I would be upended, as federal dollars would be reduced to backfilling holes in state and local support for economically disadvantaged children and those academically behind rather than augmenting those dollars to ameliorate the effects of poverty and other factors.
- **Funding.** The proposals provide significant new flexibility for districts and states to transfer money aimed at special populations—such as English Language Learners, American Indians/Alaska Natives, or neglected students—for other uses. This could undermine the historical federal role of ensuring equal opportunity for all children in these special populations. In addition, the bills offer states and local districts a trade-off – fewer programs and greater flexibility in exchange for less money. Simply put, there

would not be enough funding for the supports and resources necessary to close achievement and opportunity gaps and ensure equity for all. Programs proven to help close these gaps would remain significantly underfunded and not able to provide full services to all students who need them.

- **Annual tests.** The language continues NCLB's focus on measuring schools and students through annual standardized testing in grades 3-8, rather than focusing on the broad supports schools and students need to improve the achievement of the disadvantaged. Grade span testing would provide more time for learning, more flexibility, and more useful data to help students achieve.
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- **Teacher quality.** The proposals eliminate all focus on quality of teachers coming into the profession. In addition, they diminish targeting of Title II (teacher quality) funds to students who are in poverty, despite the fact that teacher quality should be enhanced and supported even more vigorously in schools in low-income communities. A focus on teacher quality is particularly important in high poverty communities, as too often these schools are filled with the most inexperienced and least skilled teachers.
  - **School improvement.** While the proposals wisely increase the school improvement set-aside at the state level to 10 percent and eliminate the four turnaround models; they go too far in re-balancing the federal role. The language includes no federal program specifically designed to support and help improve low-performing schools, and lacks enforcement provisions to ensure that school improvement plans are strong, robust, comprehensive, and are implemented with fidelity.
  - **English Language Learners.** The proposals merge Title III (English Language Learners) into Title I, which could lead to a loss of national focus on English Language Learners.
  - **Charter schools.** The proposals reflect a weak and inadequate approach to transparency and accountability in charter school operations. Charter schools must be held to the same accountability standards as other public schools, and should have to answer to parents and taxpayers for all of their funding sources.
  - **Class size.** The proposals limit class size reduction efforts to 10 percent of Title II (current use is about 38 percent). Research indicates that those students benefiting the most from class size reduction efforts are disadvantaged students in the early grades. If this funding is capped, local districts may not continue paying educators previously funded through federal class size reduction funds, leading to a direct decrease in services provided to students most in need.
  - **Early education.** The proposals lack a focus on early education, a proven component of closing achievement gaps and ensuring a quality education for children.
  - **Comprehensive quality education.** The proposals continue the current curricular focus on English and mathematics, and do not address concerns regarding the narrowing of the curriculum.