



Great Public Schools
for Every Student

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April 23, 2010

The Honorable Robert P. Casey
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Casey:

Please find below NEA President Dennis Van Roekel's detailed responses to the two additional questions for the record that you posed following Mr. Van Roekel's testimony before the HELP Committee on March 19. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

- *What are the three most important specific recommendations you would make to this Committee for reforming education through the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act?*

1. Make a decisive and immediate break from NCLB by articulating a broad purpose for the Act that encompasses the “whole student” and by creating a new accountability system that helps, rather than impedes, school communities in their efforts to address the whole student.

As we stated in our recent submission to the HELP Committee hearing on Meeting the Needs of the Whole Child, NCLB shifted the emphasis of public education from developing well-rounded individuals to testing low-level, basic skills in reading and math. The real impact of NCLB was in direct contradiction to its purported goals: it labeled our schools as failures based on crude measures yet did little or nothing to help us understand why or provide help to improve. It diminished the educational experience for millions of students by narrowing the curriculum and focusing the definition of success on two narrow, one-size-fits-all tests that were given on one day during the school year. Most significantly, NCLB failed to raise the knowledge and skills of a generation of students—in fact, it left far too many behind, in violation of its own name.

Therefore, immediate and dramatic change is needed to undo NCLB's harmful effects—to refocus our education system on developing a well-educated citizenry equipped to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

NEA is calling on Congress to pass a new bill—the Great Public Schools for All Act of 2010 or “GPSA”—that would reauthorize and amend ESEA in important and dramatic ways, beginning with a new ESEA purpose statement:

“The public education system is critical to democracy and its purpose, as reflected in this Act, is to maximize the achievement, skills, opportunities, and potential of all students by building upon their strengths and addressing their needs, and to ensure that all students are prepared to thrive in a democratic society and diverse, changing world as knowledgeable, creative, and engaged citizens and lifelong learners.”

GPSA would require schools to meet the needs of the whole child by addressing multiple dimensions, including students’ physical, social and emotional health and well-being, and ensuring that students are actively engaged in a wide variety of experiences and settings within—and outside—the classroom. Under GPSA, school curricula would address the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to master not only core academic subjects but also career and technical skills for the 21st century; effective and engaged community and civic participation; and physical and emotional health, well-being and self-actualization.

Let us be clear: Congress must help school communities best meet the needs of the “whole child” by implementing a new foundation for the public education system’s accountability system that rests on an authentic, reliable and valid system of assessments. The new accountability system must eliminate AYP and replace it with a new system designed to foster progress in student learning, close gaps in learning among students, and improve high school graduation rates. The new system must recognize and reward "exemplary" schools and individuals who are performing well above average, and it must allow the majority of schools that are "on target" to carry on without significantly increased federal requirements. This is not to suggest that the majority of schools should not continue to find ways to improve, but rather to specify that federal requirements that are prescriptive or punitive are not an appropriate way to foster that improvement. The new system must also correctly identify and foster improvements in "priority" schools (addressed further below).

As for student testing, we must improve assessment systems as well as restore assessments to their proper role in the accountability system, which is to improve instruction and enhance student learning. Assessment systems should be aligned with high-quality standards, curriculum and professional development and cover much broader curricular areas (as articulated above) as well as more complex sets of knowledge, skills and dispositions within those curricular areas. They should comprise multiple components and offer multiple ways to demonstrate knowledge beyond a single, standardized test. Assessments should be developed and designed according to principles that allow their use with students of diverse abilities and diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Finally, while state or local agencies may choose to administer their own assessments more frequently--and likely will do so in order to help improve instruction in a timely manner--standardized tests mandated by the federal government should not occur more than once in each of three grade spans (e.g., 4-6, 7-9, 10-12) during a student’s K-12 career.

Schools and educators must have the time, ability and resources to complement assessment systems by establishing other systems critical to “whole child” development, such as:

- curricular and extracurricular expansion and development;
- parent, family and community engagement and partnerships;

- high-quality teacher and principal induction and professional development systems;
- systems that support qualified specialized instructional support personnel (i.e., school psychologists, school counselors, speech language pathologists, audiologists, school social workers, school nurses, occupational and physical therapists, music/art/dance therapists and adaptive physical education teachers and others involved in providing assessment, diagnosis, counseling, educational, therapeutic, and other necessary corrective or supportive services) who provide critical services to students;
- systems that support qualified education support staff to assist instruction, provide supplemental or wrap around services or activities, provide nutritional meals and safe transport to students, and maintain schools as vibrant centers for student learning;
- positive behavior support systems, a school-wide approach to improving safety and school behavior for all students
- student health, nutrition, sports, mentoring and counseling to foster physical and emotional health and safety; and
- construction and modernization to ensure that schools and classrooms are technologically equipped and serve as comfortable and inviting spaces and facilities that meet diverse curricular and extracurricular needs.

Finally, to avoid overlapping and conflicting accountability systems, upon reauthorizing ESEA Congress must immediately replace NCLB accountability labels and requirements with a new, strengthened accountability system as outlined in GPSA. To address the obvious need for a transition to this new system, GPSA should specify what limited, NCLB-era standardized assessments must be administered pending the implementation of new assessment systems under Race to the Top and other assessment reform efforts. Furthermore, we strongly believe NCLB-era assessment results should no longer be used for federal accountability purposes after ESEA is reauthorized. The cessation of the NCLB accountability timeline—and the all-too-often inaccurate school labels—is critical to allow states to begin developing more complete accountability systems comprising multiple measures of student learning. States will also use this time to pilot and ramp up new assessment instruments under the new accountability system so that they may be used as soon as possible.

2. Ensure equity, adequacy and sustainability in education funding and resources, including intensive assistance and supports to struggling schools to close gaps in student learning, opportunities, and college and career readiness.

Congress should restore the original intent of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to eliminate disparities in educational opportunities between advantaged and disadvantaged students. It should do this in two ways.

Adequate, equitable and sustainable funding. First, Congress should establish that the role of the federal government is to (1) investigate and research to what extent and how education funding policies and practices and other external influences and events at the federal, state and local levels lead to disparities and fluctuations in educational opportunities, quality and performance among students, and (2) close, to the extent possible, disparities and eliminate fluctuations in educational opportunities, quality and performance among students through direct federal funding and assistance and through policies designed to encourage adequate, equitable and

sustainable education funding and assistance at the state and local levels. (See our legislative specifications in GPSA regarding “equity and adequacy plans” which should be required under a reauthorized ESEA).

The current education jobs crisis has illuminated a dangerous and unacceptable ebb and tide in the continuity and stability of public education nationwide; such fluctuations also hinder education reform efforts. Just as safeguards against harmful fluctuations in financial institutions have been developed over time, so too should the education system—the engine of the U.S. economy—be stabilized through equitable, adequate and sustainable funding.

NCLB did a poor job at providing and encouraging sufficient and stabilized education funding for all schools. Even with ARRA, NCLB programs were never funded at their authorized levels and in the last eight years the per-pupil funding and resource gaps between LEAs have not narrowed or closed. The NEA proposes that Congress remedy these problems in its legislation reauthorizing ESEA by closely monitoring disparities between authorized and appropriated funding levels and requiring State plans to include improvements in adequate, equitable and sustainable funding and resources as a top priority.

For ESEA reauthorization, Congress should prioritize increases in equitably distributed funding channels such as Title I and the main portion of the ARRA State Fiscal Stabilization Fund. These programs enable districts to plan efficiently and provide adequate, equitable and sustainable funding to schools. While we support the need for innovation and improvement in education, we do not believe that increasing overall funding of ESEA programs primarily through competitive programs such as Race to the Top, Investing in Innovation, and the Teacher Incentive Fund--particularly in a time of state fiscal crisis--is a sound approach for improving education opportunities, services, and outcomes for students or for achieving equity, adequacy and sustainability of those opportunities in all 50 states.

Priority schools. Second, Congress should, through ESEA, address struggling or “priority schools” by requiring states to adopt plans that call for comprehensive internal and external review teams to study the operations and systems of priority schools and, based on the review, pursue a school transformation approach that emphasizes collaboration, capacity-building and aggressive improvements--not the rigid implementation of prescriptive intervention “models,” as currently proposed by the Obama Administration. Examples of successful transformation models may be found in the Denver Public Schools (Denver, CO), Hamilton County Public Schools (Hamilton County, TN) and Putnam City West High School (Oklahoma City, OK). For more information about successful transformation approaches, see www.neapriorityschools.org.

3. Address teacher and principal recruitment, retention and effectiveness thoughtfully and comprehensively.

Research shows that infusing the educational system with great educators requires attention be paid to each segment of the educator pipeline—from promoting education as a career to rigorous standards for entry into the profession. It also includes induction and placement, certification and licensure, mentoring, professional development, advancement, and retaining accomplished educators. Ultimately, we must develop systems to recruit legions of top undergraduate students

and professionals leaving other professions, to prepare them effectively, and to nurture and safeguard their path to careers in education.

According to some estimates, a third of our nation's public school teachers will have retired over the next several years. To compound the problem, a third of new teachers leave the profession within three years, and some districts replace half of their new staff every five years. (See www.nctaf.org.) We are also losing hundreds of thousands of teachers and other education employees to layoffs due to the ongoing fiscal crisis. (See NEA's synopsis of layoffs in 50 states at http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/State_Budgets_and_Education_50_state_chart_2010.pdf.) In short, this country needs bold ideas for how to attract and retain talented new teachers to address the looming national teaching shortage.

NEA has proposed that Congress establish a National Education Institute (NEI), a highly competitive public academy for the nation's most promising K-12 teacher candidates in diverse academic disciplines, which would allow the federal government to attract top undergraduates as well as second-career professionals and prepare them as leaders of school reform around the nation. NEI would provide an intensive one-year path (free tuition, room, and board in exchange for a seven-year commitment to service in select public schools) to full licensure, school placement, induction, along with lifetime professional development and mentoring opportunities from NEI faculty/graduates/master teachers. NEI also would partner with existing teacher preparation programs to establish a highly competitive "National Scholars" program in select universities that would foster regional and local excellence in teacher preparation, licensure and induction. Additionally, NEI would sponsor a principal or leadership development program for top candidates who have served as teachers for at least three years and wish to enter an intensive program to become a principal or school leader in a hard-to-staff school.

Teacher effectiveness begins, but does not end, at the recruitment and preparation stages. We need policies that foster continuous learning in the form of high-quality, job-embedded professional development, mentoring programs, common planning and reflection time, and timely and continuous feedback from peers and school leadership. Congress should increase funding in Title II to allow more teachers to become certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards or similar programs.

Teacher and principal evaluation systems must be reformed to become more useful avenues for improving professional practice. The recent release of the Administration's Blueprint compels us to raise with you our grave concerns about the Blueprint's call for a state-defined system to rate the effectiveness of teachers which must be based in significant part on student academic growth. First, it is not appropriate for federal policy or law to mandate the terms of an individual teacher's employment. We do not from the federal level prescribe to Governors or mayors how to evaluate other public employees. The federal government does not hire or fire public employees; therefore, instruments that impact these decisions should not be mandated from the federal level.

Second, mandating the use of standardized test scores for the assessment of teacher performance is neither psychometrically valid, nor does it accurately capture the myriad elements of instructional practice. This is not because we do not believe that assessments are potentially

useful instruments, or that teachers are critically responsible for improving student learning. As an educators' association, we do know the impact that we have on our students. We also know that assessments—especially if they are improved to test broader and deeper skills and to include multiple components and stages—can serve as useful diagnostic and instructional tools for both teachers and students to help improve instruction and learning.

Third, the Blueprint fails to address several other implementation problems. For example, how would a teacher effectiveness definition which is based substantially on “student academic growth” impact art teachers or music teachers or other instructional personnel who teach subjects not easily assessed by traditional methods? How would the system take into account the fact that children learn cumulatively—meaning that they learn skills from all of their educators—so how can we accurately identify which educator should be “credited” with specific levels of student growth?

In sum, we object to the Blueprint's mandated linkage between student assessments and teachers for evaluative purposes for two reasons: (1) because research does not bear out that measuring teacher performance through his or her student's standardized test score growth is accurate or reliable, to make such a link would have a devastating impact not only on teacher instruction and practice but on teacher recruitment, retention and morale nationwide; and (2) using standardized tests in this manner would perpetuate and exacerbate the effects of NCLB because they would increase the unwarranted premium and emphasis placed on such tests—which has been perhaps the most frequent criticism of NCLB voiced by our members—and divert attention and resources away from developing the “whole child” through offering a more complete curriculum as well as other activities and services. Instead, a reauthorized ESEA should foster high-quality teacher and principal evaluation systems that are locally and collaboratively agreed upon built upon sound principles of professional practice—i.e., the essential knowledge, skills and dispositions a quality teacher or principal should possess. (See the document entitled “Ensuring Every Child a Quality Teacher” in our HELP submission on Teachers and Leaders for more information on professional practice principles.)

Furthermore, we will never cease to point out that learning is a process influenced by many people and factors in a child's life. As noted conservative education historian Diane Ravitch recently noted, “It would be good if our nation's education leaders recognized that teachers are not solely responsible for student test scores. Other influences matter, including the students' effort, the family's encouragement, the effects of popular culture, and the influence of poverty.” (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/diane-ravitch/first-lets-fire-all-the-t_b_483074.html) We will continue to highlight the reams of studies and evidence that supports this conclusion and urge—as we have throughout our association's 150 year history—that federal, state, and local policies must acknowledge that the entire education system as well as communities, parents, and policymakers have a shared responsibility to address the multitude of factors that impact learning.

Teaching and learning conditions must be addressed as a key component of increasing teacher recruitment and retention as well as teacher effectiveness. Congress must take additional steps in reauthorizing ESEA through school construction and modernization funding, Title II funding and other “whole child” reforms (see above) to ensure that teachers and paraprofessionals receive

sufficient resources, manageable class sizes and the support of other professionals to address student health, safety, well-being, nutrition and parent and family engagement.

Finally, we must ensure that school principals and other administrators—as well as teachers and education support professionals—receive adequate preparation, mentoring, and continuous professional development and support to improve their craft. They must receive timely and useful feedback from school staff as well as other administrators and be evaluated fairly and comprehensively. And they must have the resources and the staff necessary to create and maintain a successful school.

- **Of all the ideas and recommendations for education reform, where do you believe there is consensus among education professionals, policymakers, academics, business leaders, and other stakeholders?**

There is broad consensus that we need to identify and learn from exemplary schools that are successful at sustaining high levels of student learning, graduating high rates of students, and closing gaps between student subpopulations. There is also widespread agreement that we must rally together as a community and provide intensive support to address our "priority" or lowest-achieving schools. While the ideas on how to showcase exemplary schools or help priority schools may differ, we agree that NCLB has done little to benefit either end of the school performance spectrum. Therefore, we ask Congress to reauthorize ESEA by devoting substantial attention to supporting and recognizing achievement and progress in both exemplary and priority schools.

We also agree that none of the improvements needed to create world-class centers for learning is possible without great educators and education support professionals who staff our public schools. That's why NEA is calling on Congress to stanch the current tide of layoffs and to establish policies through ESEA reauthorization that will stabilize education funding and resources and attract and retain millions of new, talented educators and education support professionals to serve the next generation of American students.

Sincerely,



Kim Anderson
Director of Government Relations

Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Hearing
“ESEA Reauthorization: The Importance of World-Class K-12 Education
for our Economic Success”
Tuesday, March 9th, 2010
Additional Questions for the Record

Questions for Dennis Van Roekel

Senator Casey’s Questions:

- What are the three most important specific recommendations you would make to this Committee for reforming education through the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act?
- Of all the ideas and recommendations for education reform, where do you believe there is consensus among education professionals, policymakers, academics, business leaders, and other stakeholders?