

May 7, 2010

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chairman
Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
Committee
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Michael Enzi
Ranking Member
Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
Committee
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Harkin and Ranking Member Enzi:

On behalf of the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and 60,000 of our nation's elementary and middle-level principals, thank you for the opportunity to submit comments as the Committee begins consideration of reforms to improve our nation's schools through the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). We applaud your commitment to moving the process of reauthorization forward so that every child, regardless of circumstances, will be afforded a world-class education.

NAESP respectfully requests the committee to consider the following comments in its renewal of the law, which are discussed in greater detail below:

- **Exclude any model of school improvement reforms that cannot be substantiated by evidence-based research, particularly those requiring the dismissal of principals and teachers without regard to training, expertise, and time afforded in the school building to implement reforms. Any school improvement reform “model” must be preceded by a fair and objective assessment of their capacity, as well as the time, tools and resources necessary to institute sustainable reform in their schools.**
- **Preserve the emphasis on formula grants currently provided under ESEA. State and local administrators, especially in rural areas, will not have the capacity to fairly compete for funds that have traditionally been provided by formula.**
- **Include growth models as a measure of student success both academically and developmentally. This assessment data must be used as one of the many metrics (both formative and summative) that will be used in the local evaluation of teachers and principals.**
- **Increase professional development for principals based on research-based standards of practice that are the norm by which the fundamental and foundational skills needed to effectively lead learning communities may be judged. Provide high-quality, standards-based mentoring programs, especially for principals during their first three years of service. At a minimum, the renewed law should recognize the baseline competencies of what a principal should know and be able to do.**
- **Establish leadership immersion programs that are designed to meet the unique needs of principals and their schools through high-quality professional mentoring and coaching programs, especially for principals that need to develop specialized expertise in turning-around low-performing schools. The programs should provide for sufficient research, evaluation, and dissemination of effective "turnaround" practices.**

- **Strengthen professional development for elementary principals on strategies to provide a seamless continuum of learning by aligning programs and services to support the social, emotional, and intellectual needs of children from prekindergarten through the third grade. At a minimum, the law should include the foundational skills that elementary principals need to know to lead a learning community that recognizes the importance of high-quality early learning experiences that must extend through grade three.**

A well-established body of knowledge spanning the past thirty years proves what educators inherently know – second only to a great teacher in the classroom, a quality principal will improve student academic achievement. The most recent decade of research has focused on the 21st century challenges facing our education system and further confirmed the direct correlation between effective school leadership and student performance, as well as the increasingly complex nature of a principal's job to meet the developmental and cognitive needs of our nation's diverse student populations. Principals are no longer just building managers – they must create professional learning environments where all adults are constantly improving their skills and knowledge, and challenging one another to serve the learning and developmental needs of every student. The same research substantiates a glaring need to do a better job of preparing principals and other school leaders to meet the needs of teachers and students. We must invest in programs that will develop and support *all principals* in the profession in setting and fostering a vision that puts student learning at the center of school's culture.ⁱ

Principals are confronted with a variety of complex tasks that require diverse skills, technical capabilities, high cognitive functioning and emotional intelligence. They must function under demanding circumstances, have strong coping skills, and a thorough understanding of the complex nature of the job. Most importantly, they must understand that their expectations and actions set the tone for the school culture. Principals understand the significance of school leadership and the ability to set a vision and school culture that will positively influence student outcomes. They accept this responsibility, especially the dedicated professionals who take on the challenges of turning around a low-performing school where leadership will have the greatest impact. Principals also know that schools are the sum of their parts, and while each part is integral to the whole, changing a piece or two, even one as crucial as the principal, will not change the whole story. Our lowest-performing schools need whole-school improvement, not piecemeal approaches.

As the committee considers proposals to improve low-performing schools in the reauthorization process, NAESP strongly opposes any model of school reform, even those targeting the nation's perennially low-performing schools, which require the automatic replacement of principals and teachers in the reauthorization. The U.S. Department of Education has proposed such measures in the School Improvement Grant Program, and put forward the same recommendations in "*A Blueprint for Reform*" released in March. Simply replacing the principals and most of the teachers in a school will not automatically result in dramatic sustainable reform. Growing evidence supports the need for whole school reform, not a piecemeal approachⁱⁱ. Sustainable results are achieved through capacity-building approaches that favor the transference of knowledge among educators (principals and teachers); those who have successfully turned around low-performing schools should serve as mentors/coaches working with those who are struggling to do so.

To institute the commitment required to turning around low-performing schools and dramatically improving student achievement and school performance, principals must first have significant training to acquire a deep understanding of the fundamental skills related to what they should know and be able to do to effectively lead a school. NAESP recommends that principals in the lowest

performing schools—those targeted under the school reform models—be given the opportunity for a fair and objective peer review and assessment. Upon completion of the assessment, which will be designed to determine if they have the capacity to turnaround the school, the principal would then be paired with a “turnaround” mentor or coach to implement a comprehensive school improvement program including experiential pedagogy, job-embedded learning, robust data collection and analysis, clearly articulated principal competencies, tools to measure progress against those competencies, and high-level interventions at individual school and system levels.

Principals must be continuously supported to manage and sustain the change process. Even principals with demonstrated leadership skills face conditions that prevent them from making necessary improvements. Such barriers to reform include insufficient access to the appropriate data, a workforce that is not well-trained and limited authority and autonomy to place resources where they are needed the most.

NAESP believes that the Administration's call for greater competition, especially any resources that have been traditionally provided by formula, will diminish the capacity of district and local administrators, including teachers and principals, to collectively address sustainable school improvement reforms. Teachers and principals deserve support through on-going and job-embedded professional development opportunities, and to be evaluated based on multiple measures including student academic performance. Sustainable reform can only occur once these resources have been provided over a sufficient period of time. After all is said and done, then, and only then, should the removal of a principal be considered.

NAESP also urges the committee to take into account the variety of ways in which children succeed, and how their achievements should be measured to accurately capture their emotional and social development, language fluency and comprehension, creativity, adaptability, critical thinking and problem-solving skills in addition to proficiency in the core academic content areas. Measuring these factors and the many others that contribute to improved student outcomes provides a complete picture, not the snapshot taken by a standardized test score that has no regard for the multitude of ways students progress. Assessment using a single metric produces a one-dimensional view of the child, the teacher, the principal, and the school.

NAESP’s gold standard for what principals should know and be able to do, *Leading Learning Communities*,ⁱⁱⁱ provides a ready blueprint for educating the whole child. It provides principals with a comprehensive resource on evidence-based strategies for effective school leadership:

- Lead schools in a way that places student and adult learning at the center;
- Set high expectations and standards for the academic, social, emotional and physical development of all students;
- Demand content and instruction that ensure student achievement of agreed-upon standards;
- Create a culture of continuous learning for adults tied to student learning and other school goals;

- Manage data and knowledge to inform decisions and measure progress of student, adult and school performance; and,
- Actively engage the community to create shared responsibility for student academic performance and successful development.

New policies in ESEA must support professional development for principals through high-quality leadership mentoring programs based on these standards to sufficiently equip principals with the knowledge and skills required in the profession, particularly during the first three years of service.

Mentoring programs address a number of gaps in preparation and training, including understanding *how* to use a variety of assessment and evaluation data to drive instruction. Evidence also shows that principals who engage in training and professional mentoring programs aligned to the standards of leading learning communities are more successful in setting a shared vision and school culture that leads to school improvement, particularly those leading struggling schools.

Principals also know what research now proves, that success in the elementary years begins long before students enter the classroom. Children from low-income families who attend year round, full-day pre-kindergarten programs are half as likely to need special education services in later grades. They are more likely to graduate from high school and attend college, and the odds of juvenile crime, delinquency, and teenage pregnancy are greatly reduced.

Now more than ever, elementary school principals understand the significance of early childhood experiences, and the importance of creating a seamless continuum of learning from early childhood settings to their school buildings. High-quality early childhood education and learning experiences are crucial to an elementary level principal's shared vision to shape the school culture and instructional leadership. Principals must partner with locally-based early childhood programs that are working hard to lay the foundation for later learning, and create an aligned system that particularly provides supports for low-income children. The aligned systems spanning from prekindergarten through grade three call for a myriad of programs and services that help children achieve higher levels of social, emotional and intellectual success, and ultimately increase academic proficiency. For instance, in a recent study^{iv}, recess was found to have a positive impact on achievement and learning. The importance of play in the age-appropriate development of young children is especially critical to their success in school and beyond^v. Elementary principals must be knowledgeable in the latest research related to developmentally-appropriate practice to address the needs of early learners.

Building successful prekindergarten through grade three alignment systems that effectively interface with comprehensive programs and services is an essential investment to ensure that children who are at-risk of beginning their primary education years behind their peers have a chance to learn on equal footing. However, principal preparation programs and school systems lack sufficient training and professional development opportunities to help principals effectively design and implement practices that support this continuum of learning. In communities where prekindergarten programs are not typically part of the school system, principals must know about and have access to best practices in early childhood education; developmentally appropriate learning activities (including play), teaching practices, and assessments; and, skills for forging meaningful relationships with the early childhood community.

NAESP recommends that ESEA now recognize the important role of elementary principals in providing support for a continuum of learning from prekindergarten through grade three in their schools and communities, and provide them with the guidance and support to expand the capacity to invest in the future of every child's academic success.

In 2005, NAESP issued a landmark publication to outline the standards that principals must know and be able to do, *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities*,^{vi} to provide guidance for principals in designing aligned PK-3 systems, and implementing high-quality early childhood programs.

The standards focus on helping principals rethink the connection between early childhood and elementary schools. Indicators of effective early learning alignment rely on six standards of what principals must be able to master and demonstrate:

- Support for an expanded continuum of learning that includes children from age three through age eight or prekindergarten through grade three;
- Engagement of families and the school learning community in understanding early learning development;
- Promotion of school environments that are developmentally and age appropriate and address individual ways of learning;
- Provision of high-quality curriculum and instructional practices that foster young children's learning and development;
- Use of multiple developmentally-appropriate assessments to create experiences that strengthen student learning; and,
- Balance of leadership and management roles to incorporate quality early learning programs into the school culture.

NAESP firmly believes new policies strengthening school leadership should also include standards and program strategies for principals to create comprehensive early childhood programs. The standards provide direction to effective alignment strategies which include:

- Working with families directly to provide bridge programs and services to the elementary school;
- Creating coalitions with community organizations to support children in their home environments;
- Providing facilities and settings for early learning experiences that are developmentally-appropriate and informed by cultural differences;
- Including those that promote health and safety;
- Leading instructional activities; and,

- Providing professional learning opportunities for teachers so that they have the tools needed to implement high quality early learning classroom practices.

Principals and school leaders who engage in professional development designed to enhance their proficiency in implementing these activities will ensure that high-quality early learning programs are a part of every school system and community.

Thank you for your consideration of the recommendations included herein, and your efforts to build the capacity of our nation's elementary and middle level principals so that every child may have access to an excellent education.

Sincerely,



Gail Connelly
Executive Director

cc: The Honorable Christopher Dodd, Chairman, Subcommittee on Children and Families
The Honorable Lamar Alexander, Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Children and Families

ⁱ *Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning*, 2003. Tim Waters, Robert J. Marzano and Brian McNulty.

ⁱⁱ *Large scale reform comes of age*. Michael Fullan (2009).
http://www.michaelfullan.ca/Articles_09/LargeScaleReform.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ *Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do*. National Association of Elementary School Principals, Second Edition, 2008.

^{iv} *The State of Play*. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2010). <http://www.rwjf.org/pr/product.jsp?id=55249>

^v *The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds*. American Academy of Pediatrics (2007).
<http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/content/abstract/pediatrics;119/1/182>

^{vi} *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do*. National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2005.