



April 10, 2015

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Committee on Health, Education, Labor
and Pensions
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Committee on Health, Education, Labor
and Pensions
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
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Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray:

On behalf of the nation's elementary school principals and state board of education members, we are writing to thank you for recognizing the importance of high quality early learning in the Every Child Achieves Act of 2015. As the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization process unfolds, we hope Congress will use the next ESEA to expand high quality, voluntary preschool opportunities for low-income families, and includes policies – within and in addition to Title I, that specifically support a learning continuum for all children from preschool to grade three, or Pre-K-3.

The latest research in learning and early childhood education substantiates the need for ESEA to provide access to high-quality early learning experiences. During the 50 years since the ESEA's inception, breakthroughs in child development and cognitive research show that early learning programs must now be part of the law's focus on promoting educational equity. In addition, now more than ever, educators understand the significance of early childhood education and the need to support a seamless continuum of learning for children coming from high-quality early childhood learning setting into the early grades, particularly through grade three, to improve student achievement.

Federal investment in early childhood education as part of the nation's K-12 education system is essential to ensure that all children, especially from low-income or disadvantaged backgrounds who are at-risk of beginning their primary education years behind their peers, have a chance to learn on equal footing. Further, investments in early childhood education will enable the nation to better compete in a global economy by increasing the number of children that are prepared for success in school, career and in life. While programs have immediate effects that help children, such as reading readiness and social and emotional well-being, investments in early education or Pre-K-3 will improve the nation's education system overall. The rate of return for investment in high-quality early childhood education has been documented at seven to ten percent annually through better outcomes of all children by a reduced burden on schools in remediation, a reduction in crime rates, and enhanced college attendance and workforce productivity. The new ESEA could be a powerful tool for helping more low-income students and their families accrue these benefits, and must be a national priority in any ESEA law.

Further, more than sixty percent of practicing elementary principals report that their schools include prekindergarten, that they are leading programs serving three and four year olds or have some connection to early childhood programs in their district or school. Greater assistance is needed, however, to significantly strengthen program quality and expand high quality opportunities for low-income families.

Promoting quality includes building the early learning capacity of school leaders and educators based on the latest research about how young children learn, ensuring that they are able to align standards and provide developmentally appropriate curriculum, and set strong pathways through programmatic support from Pre-K- into the early elementary school. Recent federal investments, including the Preschool Development Grants program and the Early Learning Challenge grants programs, started the process of strengthening the nation's early learning systems, and states must now be supported through ESEA to continue their work to provide access to early learning opportunities for all children.

Elementary principals and state board of education members recognize the importance of high quality early learning that is necessary to lay a foundation for learning and student success that happens in later grades. They also know the ramifications that occur if children are not fully prepared for kindergarten or are not on reading at grade level by grade three. As a result, they are also working to deliver a more seamless continuum of learning for children from preschool to grade three by navigating and coordinating two separate systems. In addition to providing greater support for expanding high quality preschool, the new ESEA must encourage and support ongoing Pre-K to grade three alignment and coordinating efforts by ensuring the law's major programs and requirements reflect a child-centered focus and early learning's deep connection to later elementary education.

Thank you for strengthening early learning in your compromise ESEA bill and for carefully considering our request to ensure the final package reflects a strong commitment to the nation's young learners. We appreciate your leadership on behalf of the nation's students and look forward to continuing our work with you as the process to reauthorize ESEA continues.

Sincerely,



Gail Connelly
Executive Director
NAESP



Kristen Amundson
Executive Director
NASBE

cc: Senate HELP Committee Members