



Large Countywide and
Suburban District Consortium

January 28, 2015

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The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Senate Committee on Health, Education,
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455 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
154 Russell Senate Office Building
Senate Committee on Health, Education,
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Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Kline
Chairman
House Committee on Education and the
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2181 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Robert Scott
Ranking Member
House Committee on Education and the
Workforce
1201 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander, Senator Murray, Chairman Kline, and Representative Scott:

On behalf of the Large Countywide and Suburban District Consortium (the Consortium), we are writing in strong support of your efforts to complete the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The 17 districts that comprise the Consortium are among the largest, most diverse, and most successful districts in the nation. Collectively, we serve 1.55 million students and their families. Approximately 55 percent of our students are non-white and 40 percent qualify for free and reduced lunch. We have come together to inform and accelerate transformative change in education.

We applaud Congress's expressed commitment to reauthorizing ESEA. Reauthorization of ESEA, which is long overdue, can return the coherence and stability to our governing regime that has been missing in the current environment of waivers. Charged with implementing federal and state policy at the local level, school and district leaders must have greater stability in the system, so they can effectively focus on improving student achievement for all students.

To advance the Consortium's transformative change mission, we met with many members of the Senate HELP Committee on October 9, 2013. At the request of that group, the Consortium created a framework that addresses ways in which accountability can better support college- and career-ready (CCR) outcomes for all students. We shared that document ("*21st Century Education Accountability: Recommendations for a New Federal Framework*," available at www.successatscale.com) with you on February 4, 2014, and have attached it again for your consideration during the ESEA reauthorization deliberations.

Building off the Consortium's framework, the remainder of this letter highlights what we believe should drive this reauthorization, with a particular focus on the timely question of the appropriate federal role in the design and development of assessment systems.

Vision and Direction: The Imperative for the Federal Government to Establish a Vision and Expectations for Advancing College, Career, and Civic Readiness

We are confident that the new ESEA can establish ***a bold vision for public education in the 21st century that is anchored in the expectation that all students will graduate from high school prepared for success in college and career, and ready to fully participate in civic life and the global economy.*** ESEA should also provide states with research- and evidence-based guideposts for the development of quality state and local systems of assessment, accountability, and support necessary to help students reach those goals, including through promoting equity and access. Furthermore, the federal government should ensure that states adopt CCR expectations and plan for how to achieve them by using research- and evidence-based strategies whenever possible.

Assessment and Accountability Systems: A More Limited Federal Role that Supports States and District Efforts to Improve Teaching and Learning – Including Support for High-Performing District Pilot Assessment Systems

To that end, we need assessment and accountability systems that support improved teaching and learning. Key to this is carving out ***a more limited federal role in these critical systems that restores more respect for the informed judgment of state and local leaders.*** The current approach under No Child Left Behind has unfortunately established a top-down, one-size-fits-all, compliance-oriented model. We urge Congress to use the ESEA reauthorization to ***move to a smarter system, focused on shared responsibility and trust, which builds the collective capacity of educators and districts to meet the learning needs of all students.*** Such a system would drive positive changes in behavior, processes, and culture through evidence-based, data-driven continuous improvement.

We agree with Senator Alexander, Secretary Duncan, and others who have recently brought attention to the negative consequences of the overemphasis on testing driven by our current accountability and educator evaluation mandates. This has resulted in a near-exclusive focus on census testing using statewide summative tests, which is not the best model for improving education. We believe ***meaningful assessments are a critical part of good teaching and learning – but only if student learning is advanced by a system of higher-quality, balanced assessments that are valid measures of what students know and are able to do.***

Whatever the federal testing mandate ends up being, the most urgently-needed changes include (1) administering higher-quality assessments, (2) restoring a balanced approach that includes formative and embedded assessments as well as summative assessments, (3) reducing the overall amount and redundancy of testing, and, crucially, (4) refraining whenever possible from using assessment results for inappropriate purposes or in ways that interfere with their primary purpose: improving student outcomes.

This is difficult, complex work, and, while the federal government can provide parameters and contribute resources (including expertise), we ultimately believe in the value of local decision-making to design assessment systems that truly work for schools, teachers, students, and families. In particular, ***high-capacity districts with a demonstrated record of significant student achievement for all students should play a leading role in developing and implementing these improved assessment systems. Accordingly, the reauthorized ESEA should encourage states, in partnership with leading districts that have the capacity for better systems of assessment and accountability, to develop and pilot such systems.*** The pilots will, above all else, demonstrate a step forward in the use of high-quality assessments that improve instruction and yield timely, relevant, and actionable information for students, parents, educators, and school leaders. Participating districts might, for example, develop performance-based assessments that allow students to demonstrate mastery within a competency-based education model; or reduce the testing burden through a smaller number of high-quality summative assessments administered at key transition points (e.g., exiting elementary school, middle school and high school), and/or through tests that use statistically valid sampling techniques (as with NAEP, the National Assessment of Educational Progress).

It is worth noting that the ***Consortium members share a strong commitment to maintaining a system of regular and ongoing assessment for all students – including, for this reauthorization of ESEA, annual statewide assessments and transparent, disaggregated reporting of the results.*** But the current federal system's overuse of those assessments for high-stakes accountability and evaluation determinations has narrowed our focus and driven disproportionate resources to those tests, too often at the expense of better measures of student achievement and growth that can be used more effectively to improve instruction. The pilots contemplated here may in fact lead to *more* measurement and reporting of student performance and growth, but with a greater emphasis on locally administered, instructionally useful assessments. If successfully implemented, these pilots could be scaled as appropriate. They may (and ultimately should) help shift the focus of statewide summative assessments to serve as a check on the quality and consistency of locally developed and administered assessments rather than as the primary measure for accountability.

With respect to Senator Alexander's January 13, 2015, draft ESEA bill related to this reauthorization, we therefore support "Option 2" – with the understanding that districts developing pilot assessment systems under subparagraph K would be able to pursue a wide range of innovative approaches, including those contemplated in subparagraph D of "Option 1."

Conclusion

Thank you for carefully considering these recommendations and for making the reauthorization of ESEA a Congressional priority. As the day-to-day leaders of high-capacity districts with a demonstrated record of raising student achievement for all students, we believe the Consortium's framework provides a model for preparing all students for success in the 21st century. We look forward to continuing this important dialogue and working together to make our shared vision a reality.

Sincerely,



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Gwinnett County Public Schools, GA



Joshua P. Starr
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Montgomery County Public Schools, MD

The Large Countywide and Suburban District Consortium is a unique network of some of the nation's most highly-regarded districts and district leaders, all of whom are committed to world-class learning for all students. Together, the 17 Consortium districts serve 1.55 million students. The makeup of Consortium districts is reflective of communities across America. Most have no majority student group; racial minorities compose 55 percent of students; and 40 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-cost lunch. Individually and collectively, Consortium districts have experienced significant success. Keys to this success include strong leadership, highly-functioning organizations, and deep investments in the continuous development of knowledge and expertise. These capacities are providing the foundation for changes in teaching and learning that are essential for preparing students for success in college, career and civic engagement.