

2. PROPOSED POLICY POSITION

REAUTHORIZATION OF THE ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION ACT

BACKGROUND

Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is three years overdue. The most recent reauthorization, the No Child Left Behind Act, was signed into law January 8, 2002, and instituted the most significant changes to federal education policy in decades. These changes included expansions in federal requirements for accountability and assessment, new requirements for teacher quality, increased flexibility for schools, and a new emphasis on school choice and innovation.

The impacts of NCLB have been far reaching. The Act has focused attention and resources on closing achievement gaps and reporting school progress. It also has inverted the traditional federal relationship on schools and emphasized specific mechanisms and approaches that are not universally appropriate. Moreover, as schools approach the 2014 deadline for having all students achieving at or above standards, serious reservations remain as to the practicality of such a target within the constraints of the funds available to achieve this goal.

In recent months, the Race to the Top Fund and the State Improvement Grants have signaled a shift in federal policy toward innovation and consolidated grant making, extending further flexibility to states and districts. These programs also emphasize teacher quality through changes to teacher evaluation and compensation, areas previously perceived as the purview of local systems. Recent federal actions also have expressed support for changes in school governance, specifically for charter schools. Additionally, federal backing for the development of common assessments to support the state-driven Common Core Standards project indicates an interest in uniform assessments. The administration blueprint for reauthorization of the ESEA indicates an interest in extending and expanding upon these strategies in the renewal of the federal education law.

Federal activities in education should support state efforts and priorities and not drive policy and practice. Support for state-based efforts—including the developing common standards and assessments, deploying comprehensive data systems, creating teacher preparation and evaluation systems, and crafting model approaches to closing the achievement gap—reestablishes the historical balance between federal, state, and local educational activities.

Any reauthorization must respect states' need for flexibility in improving outcomes for students. Included in this is the autonomy for states to use federal ESEA funds in a manner that most fits their needs, including the consolidation of funds from separate program sources. Additionally, any interventions outlined by the ESEA should not be tightly prescribed at the federal level, but should afford states the ability to adapt and apply measures to fit the resources, opportunities, and needs of the schools and students involved.

Federal policy should support and facilitate state established accountability systems that provide for measures of individual student progress, allow for multiple measures of success, and measure students according to their learning plans as appropriate. Federal funds should encourage and reward innovation in state efforts to improve student outcomes. Instead of selecting options for interventions for struggling schools and students, federal resources and policy should promote research and the promotion of research-based best practices. Federal policy and resources should shift to focus on those students most in need of assistance, providing resources to improve instruction, supervision, and supplemental services. Finally, any policy actions stipulated by a reauthorization of the ESEA should be predicated upon the Act being fully funded, including the full-funding of obligations related to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

RECOMMENDATION

The Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments urges the administration and Congress to support a reauthorization of the ESEA that respects the appropriate roles of federal, state and local governments.

The Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments requests that a copy of this policy position be forwarded to Southern state commissioners of education, and to the Southern Congressional delegation, and the U.S. secretary of education.