October 19, 2011

Sen. Tom Harkin
Chairman
Senate Committee on Health Education Labor and Pensions
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Sen. Michael Enzi
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Health Education Labor and Pensions
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

RE: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

Dear Sens. Harkin and Enzi:

We appreciate your efforts to craft a bipartisan Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization package. You have worked to develop a bill that could attract support from both Democrats and Republicans. The bill contains several provisions that represent progress for students and schools, particularly the provisions related to college- and career-ready standards and assessments, and equitable funding. However, overall, our assessment is that the manager’s amendment does far too little to address what are among the most pressing issues in education today: Boosting the overall quality of our teaching force and ensuring that low-income and minority students have access to at least their fair share of our strongest teachers and that their schools, and classrooms are not overstaffed by the weakest members of the profession.

The teacher evaluation and equitable teacher assignment provisions of the manager’s amendment are weaker than these provisions of the original draft. This backward step leaves our groups unable to support the manager’s amendment, unless changes are made in these areas before Wednesday’s scheduled mark-up.

The manager’s amendment strips what were some of the most positive elements of your initial draft — the requirement that all states move to teacher evaluation systems that considered, among other things, a teacher’s impact on her students’ achievement. Under the manager’s amendment, only recipients of Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grants — a very small percentage of schools — would need to improve their teacher evaluations. This even while the vast majority of teacher evaluation systems are badly broken and cannot meaningfully differentiate between the strongest and weakest teachers. These antiquated systems do a disservice to teachers and students alike. They deny teachers what all professionals want and need: meaningful feedback that helps to improve practice. And these systems strand students with teachers who don’t have the information that they need to become stronger teachers. We agree with Secretary Duncan that “a comprehensive evaluation system based on multiple measures, including student achievement, is essential for education reform to move forward.” Thus, while not perfect, we would urge you to return to your original language on teacher evaluations.

Second, although the manager’s amendment retains an equitable distribution requirement in Title I, it is significantly weaker than was the requirement in your original draft. Given how important the classroom teacher is to determining which students succeed, we cannot hope to close our achievement gaps without ensuring that low-income students and minority students, who are too often assigned to ineffective teachers, have at least equal access to our strongest teachers. We would again urge you to return to your original language.

Everyone from the Secretary of Education to the presidents of the two national teachers unions agree that our teacher evaluation systems are broken and need to be fixed. Some 20 states have passed bills on
Educator evaluation in the past two years. They include states with Republican leadership, such as Florida and Indiana, and states with solidly Democratic leadership, such as New York and Illinois. These states are already leading the way. However, our teachers and students cannot wait decades for the remaining states to follow suit. Your initial draft struck an appropriate balance between demanding change and respecting the discretion of states and school districts to tailor policies to their unique needs. The manager’s amendment topples that balance.

Although we cannot support the bill in its current form, we are more than willing to work with you to strengthen the bill before it moves to the floor.

Sincerely,

Association of American Educators
Communities for Teaching Excellence
Democrats for Education Reform
Educators 4 Excellence
League of United Latin American Citizens
National Council of La Raza
National Council on Teacher Quality
Students First
Teach Plus
The Education Trust
The New Teacher Project