

Support Reform of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Assessments and Accountability Systems

From: The Honorable Gwen Moore

Sent By: steffany.stern@mail.house.gov

Date: 6/10/2010

Dear Colleague,

We have a unique and historic opportunity in the 111th Congress, as we work together to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which was last reauthorized as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002. In the coming months, we will be having an ongoing discussion about our recommendations and priorities for the revision of ESEA. I hope you will join me in encouraging Chairman Miller and Ranking Member Kline of the Education and Labor Committee to implement key reforms to some of NCLB's most-debated provisions: its singular reliance on state standardized assessments to gauge student success, and direct links between these assessments and accountability measures.

One of No Child Left Behind's worthy and laudable goals was to use required state assessments to provide a useful tool for analyzing the performance of our schools and our students. Unfortunately, NCLB has led to some unintended consequences; for example, states using watered-down tests to demonstrate student "success," schools becoming preoccupied with teaching to these tests, and test results being utilized to sanction schools—even some high-performing schools. As the Committee reauthorizes ESEA, I encourage our colleagues to consider a transition from the current test-based "Adequate Yearly Progress" (AYP) accountability system—towards a system that includes key reforms such as additional measures of student learning and school performance; assessments that are reliable, sound, and valid for the purposes for which they are used; rewards for schools that demonstrate progress; and the use of school feedback and improvement plans.

Please join me in recommending that Chairman Miller and Ranking Member Kline consider making important revisions to our systems of assessments and accountability under ESEA. To sign on to this letter, please contact Steffany Stern at Steffany.stern@mail.house.gov.

Sincerely,
Gwen Moore
Member of Congress

June 10, 2010

The Honorable George Miller
Chairman
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The Honorable John Kline
Ranking Member
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Dear Chairman Miller and Ranking Member Kline,

As you begin the process of reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, we encourage you to reform No Child Left Behind's system of student assessments, and related accountability measures.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was motivated by the worthy goal of shining much-needed light on achievement gaps, including those that exist between advantaged and disadvantaged student populations. Prior to NCLB, we lacked the necessary data to identify which students and schools were making progress, and which were in need of further assistance. But NCLB's undue emphasis on federally mandated, narrow student assessments as its primary accountability yardstick has also led to several unfortunate consequences—for example, educators teaching to a low-level test year-round, focusing solely on math and reading at the expense of other subjects, mislabeling and sanctioning schools based on test scores, and providing inadequate funding and support for those schools that are struggling.

Complete, balanced assessment systems must be an essential part of a continuous improvement system designed to improve instruction and measure progress—and we cannot let those schools who fail to make progress year after year off the hook. But we must also ensure that all states are using rigorous and sound assessments; we have heard too often that states have watered down their tests in order to demonstrate “stronger” student scores under NCLB. We must also be cautious about using test results to label schools as “failing” or to punish educators, particularly those who are serving some of the most high-need students. Significant effort must be made to acknowledge schools whose students are making progress. Assessment systems must serve the purpose of promoting student access to a comprehensive and challenging education. They should promote learning of deep understanding and complex skills above all. They should help teachers and students determine what real progress has been made in learning, what is working, and what needs to be addressed. Only with this type of complete assessment system can we truly transform schools into places where students have access to a complete education.

Reauthorization of ESEA should expand the current student growth models to include other indicators of student learning. Student scores on standardized assessments are but one of many indicators of student learning—and too often, our assessment tools have produced inaccurate, unreliable, or culturally-biased results. Evidence of student growth (as measured by accurate,

valid assessments and differentiated by subgroup, as well as cross-tabulated by race, ethnicity, and gender) must be augmented with other measures. These measures could include, for example projects, demonstrations, presentations and performance tasks. All measures must be rigorous and follow common protocols to allow comparisons across classrooms.

Congress should also require states to monitor multiple indicators of school performance in addition to student learning. Researchers and other experts have recommended that these indicators could include graduation rates; postsecondary and career placement rates; attendance rates; student mobility or transfer rates; the number and percentage of students participating in rigorous coursework (including honors, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, dual enrollment, early college); the number and percentage of students with access to courses infused with 21st century skills (communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity); and the number and percentage of students participating in STEM, humanities, foreign languages, creative and fine arts, health, and physical education programs. A more robust system would provide a more complete picture of the performance of schools in communities and states, instead of the current system that holds schools accountable based solely on how many students reach a certain score on a standardized test in reading, math, and science on the particular day the test was given.

We urge you to replace NCLB's current "Adequate Yearly Progress" (AYP) system and corrective framework through reauthorization. In its place, we encourage the use of a continuous improvement plan that relies on multiple indicators. ESEA's new framework should facilitate states' achievement of the following goals:

- Recognize areas of growth in all schools and states—and recognize that all students can learn and all schools can improve.
- Identify schools and programs that may offer innovative approaches or platforms for other schools so that promising practices can be identified and evaluated.
- Provide feedback to schools on areas of possible growth or improvement (including support in one or more areas, if warranted).
- Identify which schools are either "persistently low-achieving" or that demonstrate "significant educational opportunity gaps" in order to direct intensive resources and intervention supports to them.

Sincerely,