



INTERCULTURAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH ASSOCIATION
MARIA "CUCA" ROBLEDO MONTECEL, Ph.D., PRESIDENT & CEO
5815 CALLAGHAN ROAD, SUITE 101
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS 78228
210.444.1710 • FAX 210.444.1714
CONTACT@IDRA.ORG • WWW.IDRA.ORG

Key Issues in ESEA Reauthorization that Are Vital to Ensuring High Quality Education for All Students

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IDRA is dedicated to assuring educational opportunity for every child. The U.S. Congress plays a pivotal role in helping states achieve this goal as it considers reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). IDRA's track record in educational pedagogy, research and policy on behalf of minority and at-risk school children and emerging communities forms a strong basis for its policy recommendations at the federal level.

Accordingly, any proposed federal policies impacting students must address the following issues:

- **Title I portability should not be authorized.** The Title I "student portability" idea, if not restricted to public schools, would allow public dollars to flow into private and/or religious schools with no accountability to the public. Any proposed legislation or policies must ensure that public funding is limited to public schools. This includes Title I funding. Proposals should not allow Title I funds to "follow the child" into private schools.
- **Federal policies requiring testing should discourage high-stakes testing and encourage stratified random testing.** The federal government should reconsider its overly burdensome standardized testing requirements that have led to the loss of significant time and expense at the state and local level. The *No Child Left Behind Act's* requirement that 95 percent of children be tested has encouraged the proliferation of high-stakes testing, which has narrowed the curriculum and penalized children for what they have not been taught. If annual federal standardized testing requirements remain, efforts should be made to reduce the testing requirements and prohibit states from using tests for high-stakes grade promotion and graduation requirements.

While acknowledging the civil rights concern of not testing students at all, a reasonable alternative to testing every child that should be considered is the stratified random testing of students in the states and the continued reporting of disaggregated student subgroups. This method would address diverging concerns and save precious federal and local resources currently expended on over-testing.

- **Restoring state control over accountability systems must be balanced with the need to ensure that all students are learning and achieving.** Giving states greater control over the design of their respective accountability systems with fewer prescriptions raises a legitimate concern that the result could be a hodgepodge of watered-down systems at one end and a hodgepodge of arbitrary, overly punitive

systems at the other. While the one-size-fits-all approach of Adequate Yearly Progress has largely not resulted in the promised returns of increased achievement and opportunity, there should be some federal measure of ensuring that the various state accountability systems provide clearer, stronger and more effective models.

An important step to having a stronger, more effective accountability system includes retaining disaggregated student assessment data, graduation rates, post-secondary readiness, and English proficiency among the measures that must be considered for accountability purposes, along with the flexibility for states to add other measures of student and school performance. But how those measures are weighed is equally important.

The lack of required opportunity to learn metrics in the ESEA is a weakness that should be addressed. All accountability plans, federal and state, must include opportunity-to-learn metrics so that educational investments can be targeted to those indicators that are shown to matter for local schools, for states, and at the federal level.

- **The federal strategy should not divert limited federal resources from public schools to privately-run charters.** Because the ESEA is premised on the protection of the civil rights of students, it makes no sense to continue to divert limited federal resources to supporting privately-run charter schools and other approaches that rely on a “lottery” to accord protections.

Therefore, efforts that funnel federal dollars to privately-run charter schools have no place in the reauthorization of the ESEA. Proposals should not include competitive grants for privately-run charter schools that do not routinely serve all students like their public school counterparts. Instead, non-Title dollars should be directed at competitive grants aimed at improving achievement and expanding opportunity, such as for English language learner (ELL) programs that provide high quality education for ELL students.

- **Supporting teachers, rather than focusing on evaluating teachers based on high-stakes testing, is a step in the right direction.** Supporting teachers, principals and other educators with high quality induction programs and ongoing professional development should be required in lieu of mandating student test-centered evaluations of teachers. States can still have the discretion to enact teacher evaluation systems based on student performance, but efforts to mandate such should be repelled. The use of student performance by the states in teacher evaluations should be monitored and regulated to avoid the overuse and abuse of student test scores. In addition, emphasis should be placed in enacting legislation that ensures high poverty and high minority schools access high quality teaching and that those schools have access to teacher and administrative support programs.
- **Ensuring access to high quality teachers and high quality teaching for students of poverty and of color must not be left to the whim of the states.** The federal government’s mandate of highly qualified teachers in the core content areas drew much-needed attention to the qualifications of teachers in schools across the country. Certification of teaching in the content areas is one of the key teacher quality factors where research has proven to advance student learning.

While the federal definition of a *highly qualified teacher* is imperfect and should be improved upon, allowing the 50 states to develop their own definitions of highly qualified

teachers will likely lead to a varied assortment of definitions that will lessen the effectiveness of teaching, especially for students served in high poverty, high minority and rural schools.

Instead, Congress should build on the federal definition by developing policies that remedy differential access to high quality teaching for student groups and that ensure all students are taught by high quality teachers certified to teach the subject they are teaching. In addition, federal policies must ensure that ELL students are taught by high quality teachers certified to teach the appropriate language program.

- **Beware of funding “flexibility” approaches for Title dollars.** Proposals that consolidate the several Title grants into one funding grant should be avoided. Although elicited as more simplified approaches that provide states and local education agencies more “flexibility,” this process would in reality erode accountability of the expenditure of those funds on those students most in need.

Title III dollars, for example, are intended to supplement local language programs and services for ELL students. Allowing state or local agencies the “flexibility” to spend these dollars on programs that they believe are needed, but that do not serve ELL students, would not be an efficient investment of limited federal resources.

- **Excluding ELL students from accountability systems and from testing should not be expanded, and native language assessments should be encouraged.** A constant struggle in discussions surrounding accountability systems concerns what states should do with ELL students. As long as states continue to administer standardized assessments, and the federal government continues to require such testing, ELL students must not be excluded from testing or accountability measures.

The testing of students’ *English proficiency* on a yearly basis also must continue and must be monitored at the state and local level. States should further be supported in developing appropriate native language content-based assessments for ELL students, which would provide a more accurate snapshot of ELL student performance.

Reauthorization of ESEA must be built on the foundational goal of securing equity and excellence in education for all students. Our children deserve it, our democracy demands it, and the future of our country depends on it.

IDRA is an independent, private non-profit organization, led by María Robledo Montecel, Ph.D., dedicated to assuring educational opportunity for every child. At IDRA, we develop innovative research- and experience-based solutions and policies to assure that (1) all students have access to and succeed in high quality schools, (2) families and communities have a voice in transforming the educational institutions that serve their children, and (3) educators have access to integrated professional development that helps to solve problems, create solutions, and use best practices to educate all students to high standards.