

January 20, 2015

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chair, Senate Health Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
455 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander:

Thank you for addressing the urgent need to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) by issuing your discussion draft and for scheduling the January 21 hearing on the important topic of assessments and accountability.

The Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD) represents 67 University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD) and 43 Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (LEND) programs. Vanderbilt University and the University of Tennessee house one of each of these programs. These centers train professionals to work with students with disabilities, conduct research to improve instruction for students with disabilities, and provide training, technical assistance and dissemination of the most effective practices to educators, the general public and policymakers.

Reauthorization of NCLB must address the problems inherent to the current version of the law, including the heavy-handed categorizing of schools as failing designed by the 2001 authors of the ESEA reauthorization. However, any reauthorization of the law must continue to include high expectations for all students, including those with disabilities, assessments procedures to document student progress and availability of that data to parents and communities to determine the effectiveness of schools, and accountability systems that ensure students with disabilities have access to the general curriculum and instruction that is challenging and meets their needs.

Despite its many problems, under NCLB, students with disabilities have made considerable gains, particularly in high school graduation. Thanks to NCLB's focus on all schools and all subgroups, it has become clear which schools are working to address the educational needs of students with disabilities and which schools are not. Improvements have been made for students with disabilities in assessment participation rates, academic achievement in grade level reading and mathematics, and, more generally, in being expected to achieve and being taught the curriculum taught to all other students. These gains are due largely to the requirement that schools include all students with disabilities in their accountability procedures and work to educate all students so that they are proficient in challenging standards.

Students with disabilities may be most at risk if revisions to the law do not ensure all schools are accountable for student achievement and receive extra resources and attention when they fail to produce progress. While the reauthorization of ESEA should explore ways to grant appropriate flexibility to ensure schools can best meet local needs, this flexibility should not eliminate the current focus of NCLB's accountability framework on all schools and all subgroups or eliminate targeted help to schools that need it. To do so ignores the real

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challenge facing our education systems: that too many schools are not providing an educational experience that enables all students with disabilities to make academic gains.

Staff at AUCD are currently reviewing your full discussion draft. We will provide more complete comments by the February 1st deadline.

Your outstanding work as Ranking Member of the HELP Committee during the 113th Congress addressed many disparities for people with disabilities and fostered increased access to the great opportunities of this country. We thank you for those efforts, particularly your work in passing the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. We look to you as the new Chairman of the HELP Committee to continue your leadership and to work with the minority to address the needs of people with disabilities.

Thank you for considering our views. We look forward to working with you as the reauthorization of ESEA moves through the committee process and, hopefully, to passage.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Andrew J. Imparato". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "A".

Andrew Imparato
Executive Director, AUCD

cc: HELP Committee Members