

AFT, NABE, & TESOL International Association on Senate Bipartisan ESEA Bill Proposal

April 13, 2015

Given that English language learners—students in preK-12 who are working toward becoming proficient in reading, writing and communicating in the English language—are one of the fastest-growing student populations, the American Federation of Teachers, the National Association for Bilingual Education, and TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) International Association commend the efforts of Sens. Lamar Alexander and Patty Murray on this latest draft of a bill to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. As the three organizations representing the majority of educators who teach ELLs, our goal is to promote educational excellence and equity for ELLs to ensure they are able to meet the same challenging college- and career-ready standards required of all students.

One of the most important provisions in the bill would be to give English language learners with basic or limited English proficiency a three-year grace period before taking English language arts assessments in English. This is a significant step toward more appropriately assessing English learners, and it better aligns with what research shows and educators know: that it takes time to learn English.

The proposed bill is a strong effort to support the academic and language needs of ELLs, to adequately prepare educators to work with them, and to promote equity. Our teachers, paraprofessionals and school-related personnel in both large and small cities are encountering more ELLs in their schools, yet they often have received little or no information, preparation or resources to work with this unique group of students. We are encouraged to see that this effort to reauthorize ESEA includes:

- Funds for professional development for general education/mainstream educators who have not worked with ELLs; and
- Funds to improve the recruitment, retention, mentoring and induction programs of educators of both ELLs and ELLs with disabilities.

While we are encouraged to see that native language assessments have prominence in the bill, we would also like see more advocacy for high-quality bilingual education, dual language programs and multilingual enrichment programs. We live in a globally competitive economy, and all our students, like most students in industrialized countries, can surely benefit from being proficient in more than one language. In addition, we suggest considering nationwide English language proficiency standards and common criteria for exiting a student from ELL status, since having multiple standards and systems will make it difficult to ensure consistent identification of ELLs across states. The bill must also consider including the specific needs of gifted and talented ELLs. There is a vast range of ELL students, from students with limited or no formal schooling to students who are transferring from more advanced schooling experiences, and we must aim to be responsive to all. And finally, we believe strongly that there should be funding support for implementing a national Seal of Biliteracy option for all high school students.

This bill is a promising start, and we look forward to working with Congress to further include all the components necessary to help our hardworking educators and all of our nation's children.