



# FIRST FOCUS

CAMPAIGN FOR CHILDREN

April 14, 2015

Dear Senator,

On behalf of First Focus Campaign for Children (FFCC), I'm writing today regarding the **Every Child Achieves (ECA) Act**. FFCC is a bipartisan children's advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families a priority in federal policy and budget decisions.

We are encouraged to see the bipartisan work in the Senate on reauthorizing No Child Left Behind, as it reflects a desire from both Democrats and Republicans to improve educational opportunities for children. While the ECA Act includes a number of provisions that contribute to positive educational outcomes, such as integrating early childhood initiatives with K-12 education, beginning to address school climate issues, and providing states the opportunity to create a continuum of the educator profession, the bill can be improved to better address educational challenges facing children.

As you consider this legislation, FFCC urges you to support the following amendments:

**Franken amendment to strengthen educational opportunities for children and youth in foster care:**

students in foster care face many challenges to educational achievement that their peers do not. These children should be afforded with the same rights and educational opportunities that homeless children have through McKinney-Vento, but in a system that is tailored to the unique needs faced by children in foster care. The ECA Act should ensure that child welfare agencies have the full cooperation of state and local education agencies by placing requirements on state and local education agencies that both mirror and extend beyond those placed on child welfare agencies. This amendment, supported by both advocates for foster children and homeless children, will help minimize frequent moves of foster children from school to school and offer the support they need to remain in school.

**Casey-Kirk amendment to address bullying and harassment:** research reveals that students who attend schools with comprehensive anti-bullying policies experience lower levels of victimization, have lower rates of absenteeism and higher grade point averages, and report that teachers intervene in bullying incidents more than twice as often. These policies are critical to ensuring that all students have access to an education free of bullying and harassment. This bipartisan amendment would: require comprehensive and effective student conduct policies that prohibit bullying and harassment and include enumerated categories for protection (including religion, race, color, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability), and require that states and districts maintain and report data regarding incidents of bullying and harassment in order to inform the development of effective state and local policies that address these issues.

**Kirk amendment for an opportunity dashboard:** NCLB attempted to measure student and school progress based almost exclusively on standardized test scores, which provide only a narrow glimpse into student and school. As a result, in too many places a student's zip code dictates the quality of their education. This amendment would create an "Opportunity Dashboard" comprised of a range of school quality indicators, which will allow leaders to quantify and track the things that contribute to student success. This will allow parents, educators, and leaders to

hold states accountable for providing students with the resources and opportunities fundamental to their success. In this amendment states collect and report on the indicators, disaggregated by student subgroups. States can then quickly remedy any gaps in the resources, supports, and programs provided to students.

**Murray-Isakson amendment on early childhood education:** The pipeline to high school and college completion, gainful employment, and successful adulthood begins at birth; the earlier we invest in our children's education, the greater return we will see on that investment. Research has shown that children from low-income families who participate in high-quality early learning are more successful in elementary school, more likely to graduate from high school and less likely to commit a delinquent offense or crime than children who did not have access to these crucial early experiences. These programs are also very cost effective; the return on investment of one dollar in high quality early learning program is seven to ten dollars in averted costs related to special education, health care, welfare, and crime. This amendment authorizes an early learning competitive grant program to provide funds to states to expand access to and improve the quality of early learning systems for children birth through age 5 with an emphasis on 4 and 5 year old children living in low-income households. This grant program builds on the success of Preschool Development Grants and the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grants, but will allow states more flexibility to design and align early childhood early learning systems than currently exists in those programs.

**Murkowski-Sanders-Franken-Cassidy-Collins-Baldwin amendment on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers:** Afterschool programs enjoy broad, well-deserved support from students, teachers, politicians, and celebrities. Research shows that afterschool programs funded by 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers improves student motivation to learn, behavior, test scores, and GPA. Afterschool programs have also been shown to narrow the academic achievement gap, increase school attendance, and contribute to social and emotional wellbeing. Yet for every one child enrolled in an afterschool program, two who would like to be enrolled are not. This amendment will re-affirm the importance of 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC in contributing to student outcomes and help states, districts, schools, and teachers meet the growing demand for these highly successful afterschool programs.

**Baldwin amendment on equitable access to educational resources:** Paramount among the reasons for ongoing, stubborn gaps in educational achievement is lack of resource equity for each and every student. The most recent Civil Rights Data Collection revealed stunning gaps in access to the basic components that lead to academic achievement for students. For example: 20 percent of high school students attend a school with no school counselor; between 10 and 25 percent of high schools do not offer more than one of the core courses in math and science; and students of color and English language learners attend schools with higher proportions of inexperienced teachers than their white and native English-speaking peers. By recognizing the ingredients necessary for an excellent education, this amendment would allow states to address the core issues facing too many students of color, students with disabilities, English language learners, and students from low-income families. Closing the access gap to essential educational resources, as this amendment does, will help close academic achievement gaps.

**Casey-Baldwin-Warren amendment on Profession Ready Educators:** Reauthorization of ESEA is an opportunity to ensure that every child has a well prepared, qualified, and effective teacher. Research reveals that the best way to do this is by improving teacher recruitment, preparation, professional growth, and leadership opportunities. Research also reveals that the students who would benefit most from profession-ready educators, including students of color, low-income students, students with disabilities, students in rural areas, and English language learners, are least likely to have highly trained, qualified, and experienced teachers. The profession ready standard set in the Casey-Baldwin-Warren amendment would make sure no child has underprepared, unqualified teachers and school leaders.

**Murphy-Casey amendment on reducing referrals to juvenile justice system:** Keeping children in school and learning is of paramount importance for their educational success. Too many students are referred to the juvenile justice system, and recidivism rates for students leaving the juvenile justice system are far too high. This amendment would contribute to solving both of these issues by including officials with practical know-how of keeping students out of the juvenile justice system in the planning process in Title IV and assisting states in implementing evidence-based practices to reduce juvenile delinquency. This amendment is essential to ensure that all students have the opportunity to succeed in school.

**Whitehouse amendment encouraging community partnerships:** Across the country, results demonstrate that when schools offer comprehensive, integrated student supports, student achievement improves. Last year, Child Trends conducted a rigorous review of research findings on integrated student supports and found that using integrated student supports: decreases grade retention and the likelihood of dropping out; increases attendance, math achievement, and overall GPA; is firmly grounded in child and youth development by recognizing the importance of whole child education; takes into account more of the factors that contribute to student success than other approaches; and produces a positive return on investment. This amendment would include community partners in students' education, allowing for integrated student supports that contribute to student achievement.

**Whitehouse amendment to improve the middle grades:** The middle grades are especially important for adolescent development and to prepare students for academic work they will encounter in secondary school, but many middle schools are in need of improvement. This amendment would allow states and LEAs to collaborate to better assist middle schools in need of improvement.

**Baldwin amendment to reduce unnecessary testing:** Since the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001, an overemphasis on standardized testing has emerged. Intended as a way to measure academic achievement gaps between student subgroups (such as students of color and students from low-income families) and ensure that schools are improving, achievement on standardized tests has become the primary focus of SEAs, LEAs, schools, and teachers, all of which are burdened with harsh accountability measures tied to these tests. But measuring achievement gaps does not close them. In fact, measuring achievement gaps with standardized tests often only measures differences of opportunity for students, and an overreliance on standardized tests is a distraction or, at worst, a detriment to the more important goal of creating equal opportunity to high-quality education for every student. This amendment would provide grants to States to support development of quality assessments and audits of state and local testing systems to reduce low-quality, misaligned and redundant tests, similar to the SMART Act.

Additionally, we express our concern and urge you to reject amendments on the following issues:

**Portability and Private School Vouchers:** The original Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was a supports-oriented civil rights bill intended to close academic achievement gaps and ensure that every child has equal opportunity to succeed. Title I, Part A was that principle codified in policy, with formula grants to help LEAs with high concentrations of poverty to meet the unique needs of children living in poverty and make up for lower state and local education funding as a result of being located in an area of high poverty. Though never fully funded, by allowing LEAs to direct Title I funds to schools that need it most, Title I has had a positive impact on schools and their students. Still, funding inequities persist, with serious implications for students. New research reveals the importance of funding for student outcomes; a 10 percent increase in per-pupil spending per year for all twelve years of a child's education increases educational attainment and adult wages and decreases the likelihood of living in poverty as an adult, with a greater impact for children from low-income families. Money matters because it pays for educational resources for students, resources of particular importance for students who face challenges outside the classroom like poverty or homelessness.

Provisions that allow portability of Title I, Part A funds to public school and, even worse, provide private school vouchers, would significantly weaken Title I, Part A and negatively impact student achievement across the country. These provisions would take away the ability of LEAs to make local decisions about how to use funds and greatly increase inequity. Amendments include Alexander Title I amendment number 1, Scott Title I amendment number 1 and both amendments to create a new title, and Paul Title I amendment numbers 1 and 2.

**Weakening Teacher Preparation:** We urge you to not support any amendment that adds to the current issue of underprepared teachers entering the classroom, often in schools that need fully prepared teachers the most. In particular, we are concerned about amendments that reflect the Growing Education Achievement Training Academies for Teachers and Principals (GREAT) Act and allow for-profit and other entities to create teacher preparation programs with little to no oversight, standards, or requirements would weaken teacher preparation in the United States, and to do so in a way that experience shows us will particularly undermine the preparation of those who teach our most high-need students. Teachers need the depth and rigor of completing the full range of courses and experiences that are part of a full preparation program. Requiring states to have authorization and approval processes for academies separate from those for current teacher and principal preparation programs would create a second set of standards for teacher preparation that divides rather than unifies efforts to prepare all teachers in the most effective ways. In addition, prohibiting the requirement of accreditation for these academies would set up a second tier of schools not evaluated by the national bodies devoted to quality in teacher education, and allows these academies to operate without adequate quality assurance. Particularly alarming in the GREAT Act and similar proposals is a lack of specificity about clinical standards. Recent reports by the Council of Chief State School Officers, the American Federation of Teachers, the National Association of State Boards of Education, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, and the National Education Association all call for extensive clinical experiences for aspiring teachers, with most experts calling for at least a year of clinical experience. In the past, the GREAT Act has had no clinical standards meaning the clinical component of an academy's curriculum could last a single day.

The preparation of those entering the education profession should be parallel to those of other professions – requiring all candidates to meet the same high standards and assessments to enter the field. Other professions, such as law and medicine, do not have a shadow system of preparation of lawyers and doctors who do not benefit from professional preparation in an academy. Amendments that would create such a shadow system for the education profession and set a precedent that would undermine the very goal that all of us share – to provide effective educators for all students – should be rejected. This includes Bennet Title II amendment number 2.

We look forward to working with you further to improve educational opportunities for every child in this country. If you have any questions please contact Kevin Lindsey, Senior Director, Education Policy, at [KevinL@firstfocus.org](mailto:KevinL@firstfocus.org).

Sincerely,



President