

January 25, 2015

Senator Lamar Alexander
Chair, Senate Education Committee

I am writing to applaud and support your initiative to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). As someone who consulted with the US DOE during the Bush Administration through the office of Character and Civic Education (appointed head Linda McKay, Missouri) for five years, I hope now that this reauthorization will be transformative-- directly and deeply enhancing the education of our children.

The current focus of education and of your bill is on instructional and management issues— two issues that must be addressed. However, many of us in education and educational research urge you to include a third focus--on improving the contexts of learning—the school, classrooms, and school-family relationships. This third focus supports and optimizes the effectiveness of instructional and management changes. If management understood how school policies can sometimes create barriers to learning they would be motivated to change. If teachers understood how some of their classroom rules and behavior management techniques often are seen by students as unfair, demoralizing and disenfranchising them, teachers would change. If students knew that their voices would truly be heard, they would make every effort to work with their teachers to create positive classrooms. If students came home eager to talk about what they learned and how they decided on a classroom rule, parents would definitely become more engaged.

Focusing on all three components together is the most effective strategy for school improvement; I have seen it in many schools as they went through a broad-based school improvement process that targeted enhancing school climate as well as improving congruence between school policies, classroom rules, and the conditions for effective student learning.

I support others with similar points and educational strategies, such as Howard Adelman, UCLA. He makes the point that “all school improvement policy discussions have marginalized the essential need to focus on transforming how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. As discussion of ESEA proceeds, it is imperative to focus on the need to fundamentally move school improvement policy from a two- to a three-component framework. (The current emphasis is mainly on instructional and management concerns; the third component that needs to be developed is a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system to enable schools to address the full range of factors interfering with student performance and achievement.)”

You and the Senate Education Committee have the opportunity and the power to begin the process of educational transformation. You have the support of teachers, principals, school boards, and researchers across the US who look to you to provide guidelines and funding to enable us to do the work of effectively educating America’s children and youth.

My best wishes to you in getting a super majority; we need it.

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