April 13, 2015

The Honorable Lamar Alexander  The Honorable Patty Murray
Chairman  Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education,  Committee on Health, Education,
Labor, and Pensions  Labor, and Pensions
United States Senate  United States Senate

Dear Senators Alexander and Murray,

The Coalition for Teaching Quality—comprised of more than 100 civil rights, disability, rural, youth, parent, community, educator and principal organizations—thanks you for your leadership in developing bipartisan legislation to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the Every Child Achieves (ECA) Act. We write today to specifically comment on the teacher and principal quality provisions in the bill.

The Coalition for Teaching Quality seeks to ensure that every student is taught and led by excellent teachers and leaders. Research makes it clear that teachers, together with principals and school leaders, are the most important school-based influences on student learning. Unfortunately, many high-need schools and traditionally underserved students, specifically low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities and English Language learners, often do not have the same access to great educators. To address this reality, the Coalition for Teaching Quality has advocated that a reauthorized ESEA must strengthen the capacity of states and districts to implement a comprehensive approach to developing a strong teaching and principal workforce, grounded in a coherent professional continuum that begins in preparation and leads to accomplished practice and the opportunity to serve in leadership roles.

As such, we are pleased that the Every Child Achieves Act recognizes the importance of building a continuum of teacher and principal excellence. We are particularly pleased that Title II of the Every Child Achieves Act includes provisions to strengthen teacher and principal quality through improved preparation, performance assessment, residency, induction, professional learning and growth, and leadership opportunities that the Coalition for Teaching Quality endorsed in its two recent policy papers. These provisions are also included in Senator Casey and Reed’s Better Educator Support and Training (BEST) Act (S. 882). We look forward to working with you as the reauthorization process moves forward to further strengthen these provisions so that the Every Child Achieves Act fully ensures that states and districts adopt a comprehensive strategy for developing and supporting excellent educators that results in improved learning for all students.

Based on the experience and constituencies of the Coalition, we offer the following comments for consideration:

1. Certification Status

We are also pleased that the ECA Act maintains provisions requiring school districts to identify and address any disparities that result in low-income students and minority students being taught at higher rates than other students by ineffective, inexperienced, and out-of-field teachers. However, to truly ensure the equitable distribution of excellent teachers, we need to be able to identify certification status. Currently, the ECA Act does not include a minimum entry standard for teachers. The Coalition believes that a reauthorized ESEA must ensure that all students, especially our
highest-need students, are taught by profession-ready teachers who have completed robust preparation programs and achieved full licensure (http://coalitionforteachingquality.org/images/upload/Profession_Doc.pdf). Therefore the bill should set a floor, which no teacher entering the profession should fall below. In the same manner that states are asked to set student standards that are challenging and aligned with entry and success in postsecondary education, expectations regarding entry and success should also be set for those responsible for educating students.

2. Equitable Distribution

We are encouraged that the bill maintains a focus on equitable access to teachers for low-income and minority students. However, we are concerned that students with disabilities and English learners are not included in these provisions. Congress has recognized that teacher equity gaps exist for these subgroups, allowing IDEA funds for students with disabilities and Title III of ESEA funds for English Learners to be used to address these gaps. As such, we look forward to working with you to ensure that these traditionally underserved students be granted the same protections in regards to teacher equity provisions.

In addition, we are also concerned that the educator quality and equity provisions of the ECA Act use the terms “teachers who are certified or licensed” and “teachers who meet state certification and licensing requirements” as an important measure of educator quality. Because every teacher must hold some type of license or certification, and these may include substitute licenses and emergency licenses in many states, it is almost certain that states would be able to submit a report showing that 100 percent of teachers in the state are licensed or certified without revealing the variability embedded in that statistic. This conflation makes inequitable distribution nearly impossible to determine accurately and therefore address. We look forward to working with you to strengthen that language to provide meaningful information and transparency.

Also, given that teacher evaluation systems are still in early stages of development in most states, years of experience and certification status should be included equitable distribution provisions in both Title I and Title II. A continued focus on teacher experience is particularly critical as we know from the Civil Rights Data Collection that our highest-need students are twice as likely to be taught by novice teachers.

3. Measures and Accountability

Given that teacher evaluation systems are still in early stages of development in most states, years of experience and certification status should be included in the equitable distribution provisions in both Title I and Title II. In addition, the Coalition suggests that the bill include parameters for ensuring that teacher evaluation is based on multiple valid measures of performance, including a valid and reliable field-specific performance assessment for beginning teachers, and appropriate and multi-faceted evidence of contributions to student learning, school-wide goals, and achieving relevant professional teaching standards for experienced teachers. A continued focus on teacher experience is particularly critical, as we know from the Civil Rights Data Collection that our highest-need students are twice as likely to be taught by novice teachers.

In regards to the language on statewide accountability systems created by the ECA Act, the legislation provides states with the discretion to use “teacher engagement” as one measure of school quality. The Coalition believes educator quality should be a mandatory, not discretionary, element of the accountability system. We are concerned that teacher quality and effectiveness is
listed as one element of the broad category of “teacher engagement,” rather than as a stand-alone indicator. Given the broad research base linking teacher quality to student achievement, we believe that teacher quality and effectiveness should be given equal or greater weight than other indicators such as teacher engagement, teacher satisfaction, and teacher absenteeism in any state.

4. Transferability of Funds

Lastly, we are concerned about the provisions in the ECA Act that allow for 100 percent transferability of funds between Title II and IV as they serve two very distinct but necessary but distinct purposes for improving student achievement. Some level of transferability could be negotiated to allow for local flexibility, but we strongly urge the Committee to ensure that activities under both of these titles are sufficiently funded. Funding for these two titles is particularly vulnerable during the appropriations process where they are likely to be perceived as essentially one pot of transferable funds.

Thank you for considering our concerns and for your leadership in developing a bipartisan ESEA reauthorization bill. We know this is in many ways the beginning of the process and want the strongest bill possible to come out of Committee. We look forward to working with you to strengthen legislation that is likely to be in place for the next ten years and plays a vital role in ensuring that all students are taught and led by excellent teachers and leaders.

Sincerely,

Coalition for Teaching Quality (member list attached)
National Organizations

Alliance for Excellent Education
Alliance for Multilingual Multicultural Education
American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
American Association of People with Disabilities
American Association of State Colleges and Universities
American Council for School Social Work
American Council on Rural Special Education
Association of University Centers on Disabilities
ASPIRA Association
Autistic Self Advocacy Network
Center for Teaching Quality
Citizen Action of New York
Citizens for Effective Schools
Coalition for Community Schools
Communities for Excellent Public Schools
Council for Exceptional Children
Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates
Disability Policy Collaboration, A Partnership of The Arc and UCP
Easter Seals
Education Law Center
FairTest, The National Center for Fair & Open Testing
First Focus Campaign for Children
Gamaliel Foundation
Helen Keller National Center
Higher Education Consortium for Special Education

Latino Elected and Appointed Officials
Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law
Leadership for the Common Good
League of United Latin American Citizens
Learning Disabilities Association of America
Movement Strategy Center
NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.
National Alliance of Black School Educators
National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of School Psychologists
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Association of State Directors of Special Education
National Board for Professional Teaching Standards
National Center for Learning Disabilities
National Commission on Teaching & America’s Future
National Council for Educating Black Children
National Council of Teachers of English
National Disability Rights Network
National Down Syndrome Congress
National Down Syndrome Society
National Education Association
National Indian Education Association
National Latino Education Research & Policy Project
National Network of State Teachers of the Year
National Opportunity to Learn Campaign
Opportunity Action
Parents Across America
Progressive States Action
Public Advocates Inc.
Public Advocacy for Kids
Rural School and Community Trust
School Social Work Association of America
South East Asia Resource Action Center
Southwest Education Development Laboratory
TASH - Equity, Opportunity, and Inclusion for People with Disabilities
Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children
TESOL International Association
United Cerebral Palsy
United Church of Christ Justice & Witness Ministries

State and Local Organizations

Abbott Leadership Institute – Newark, New Jersey
Action Now – Illinois
Action Now – North Carolina
ACTION United
Alliance for Quality Education (AQE)
Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE)
Arkansas Community Organizations
Bay Area Parent Leadership Action Network
Brighton Park Neighborhood Council – Chicago
California Association for Bilingual Education
Californians for Justice
Californians Together

California Latino School Boards Association
Campaign for Quality Education
Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning Coalition for Educational Justice
Citizen Action of New York
Delawareans for Social and Economic Justice
Educate Our State
Education Voters Pennsylvania
Grow Your Own Illinois
Inner City Struggle
Justice Matters
Legal Advocates for Children and Youth
Montgomery County Education Forum
Parent-U-Turn
Parents for Unity
San Francisco Teacher Residency
Texas Association of Chicanos in Higher Education
Young Voices-Providence, Rhode Island
Youth On Board – Somerville, Massachusetts
Youth Together