

Talking Points

Reauthorization of Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act *(formerly known as No Child Left Behind)*

Re-draft needed for real change

- The Obama administration blueprint for overhauling our education law seems to have moved a few walls, but it does little to make the ESEA foundation any stronger.
- We applaud the president's ambitions, but hope he is open to re-drafting his blueprint so we can see real change in our nation's classrooms.
- As educators, we share the president's goals -- we want children who not only graduate, but who are set to take on the world prepared for both college and a career. We can't make it there, however, if we continue to put test scores first and students second.

High stakes testing weakens our schools

- Instead of eliminating the dangerous and stressful system of high-stakes testing, the blueprint reinforces it.
- As educators, we know the impact this has had inside our classrooms: children are frustrated, anxious and bored; teachers feel powerless; and principals and administrators are bound in fear.
- It's time for some real change in our schools -- with a system that doesn't blame teachers or stifle students. Let's work together to re-draft the blueprint, and ensure our nation's public schools are built on a rock-solid foundation.
- For nearly a decade, No Child Left Behind -- the law that dictates how federal money will be spent in our schools -- has labeled and punished students and schools.
- Our children have been tested more, but they have not fared better.
- This reauthorization must correct what time and experience has shown to be the serious flaws in No Child Left Behind. These include a narrowing of the curriculum that has resulted from a focus on testing and, consequently, on test preparation, rather than on teaching; an accountability system whose arbitrary targets and punitive sanctions for schools have done nothing to foster shared responsibility or the implementation of policies and programs that improve student achievement or teacher practice.

Are we really putting children first?

- The president says the blueprint will hold "educators accountable, but will let them be creative." Unfortunately, his blueprint still classifies whether schools are good or bad based solely on test-score results.
- How can we expect teachers to be creative if they are still required to teach to a test, take full responsibility for their student's performance and live in constant fear that their jobs will suddenly evaporate.
- The president's blueprint requires that low-performing schools choose one of four models to turn their schools around -- one option is to fire teachers, and another is to close the school completely.
- A district with more than nine low-performing schools would not be able to choose one particular model that works best for its schools. For example, a district with 14 identified schools could not choose the comprehensive "transformation" model, only some would be able to -- leaving the others to either close down, fire teachers or become a charter school.

- In theory our education law would put the needs of our children first and give teachers more autonomy in the classroom. In practice, the president's blueprint would do neither.

Teachers welcome high standards, but need the resources to do the job

- The public knows that struggling schools need a wide range of targeted actions to ensure they succeed, and yet the administration's plan continues to call for prescriptions before the actual problems are diagnosed. We need proven answers along with the deep insight of the experienced professionals who actually work in schools.
- FEA members, including teachers, paraprofessionals and other school staff, work every day to give their students a great education. But they need the tools, resources, policies and programs that make that possible -- including a bill with 360-degree accountability at its center, accountability that makes our children's education a shared responsibility, not the sole responsibility of the teacher in the front of the classroom.
- That means investing in teacher development and evaluation systems that inform teaching and learning; it means investing in curriculum and programs that are aligned with the new common core standards and the new, yet to be developed, assessments; it means investing in wraparound services that help better equip students for the work going on inside the classroom; and it means making real, demonstrable collaboration a cornerstone of developing and implementing policies and programs.
- We believe that the reauthorization should require high academic standards aligned with a well-rounded curriculum that educates, engages and enriches students; focus on closing the achievement gap; demand meaningful accountability -- and by that we mean full accountability for all; strengthen teacher quality by doing the real work required to develop, support, nurture and retain great teachers; and provide targeted, formula-based funding.
- The blueprint's reliance upon competitive grant programs will, if enacted, provide to some students funding that should be provided to all students in need. That is wrong, and it runs counter to the role ESEA was designed to play for disadvantaged children. A child's education should not be dependent upon how well adults write grant proposals.
- This is especially troubling at a time when many communities are facing historic fiscal challenges and cannot afford for their schools to be forced to pursue ineffective reforms.
- By limiting interventions to four models, three of which are punitive and deeply flawed, the blueprint prevents districts to scale up successful, research-based interventions.
- AFT and NEA have put forward ways to overhaul teacher development and evaluation systems -- which we agree are pivotal to ensuring a path to great teachers and teaching. However, teachers alone are not responsible for ensuring that every child receives a great education.
- Teachers alone cannot turn around struggling schools. Teachers alone cannot align curriculum and assessments. Teachers alone cannot assure that students come to school well-fed, healthy, supported and ready to learn.
- We intend to continue to engage in a productive dialogue to meet the needs of students, educators and public schools.
- We hope that in the end this legislation's original name -- the Elementary and Secondary Education Act -- will restore its original purpose: to level the educational playing field for disadvantaged students so they can compete with their more-advantaged peers.