

GradNation

February 12, 2015

Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman
U.S. Senate HELP Committee
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate HELP Committee
428 Dirksen Senate Office Bldg
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray:

After decades of stagnating graduation rates, the nation is finally seeing progress in graduating more students from high school. Since Congress reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2001, high school graduation rates have risen nationally about ten percentage points. Because of this progress, an additional 1.7 million students have graduated from high school on time instead of dropping out. The greatest gains have occurred among low-income and minority students and right at a time when graduating from high school became more challenging. As a result, we strongly urge you to support effective high school graduation rate accountability for states, districts and schools in the ESEA reauthorization.

As you know, leadership on high school graduation rates emerged from states. In 2005, members of the National Governors Association (NGA) reached a consensus that high school graduation rates should be calculated in a uniform manner across states and developed a pioneering compact to do so. In 2008, the U.S. Department of Education built upon the Governors' leadership and issued regulations (34 CFR 200.19(b)) to establish a uniform and more accurate measure of calculating a high school graduation rate that is comparable across states.

The four-year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) calculates the number of students who graduate in four years with a regular high school diploma and must be reported at the high school, district, and state levels and disaggregated by subgroups. We fully support this approach and believe ESEA reauthorization should continue the use of ACGR and the disaggregation of subgroup data to maintain strong graduation rate accountability across states.

We very much appreciate that the Chairman's ESEA discussion draft references the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate "as such rates were calculated on the day before the date of enactment of the Every Child Ready for College or Career Act of 2015." To ensure that parents and communities can rely on the accurate reporting of this critical indicator of school performance and young peoples' progress, we urge you to incorporate the specific definition of the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate into ESEA.

States are also required to set goals to improve graduation rates and annual targets to hold districts and schools accountable for graduating more of their students each year. For schools and districts to make continued progress, they must meet or exceed

the state's graduation rate goal or demonstrate continuous and substantial improvement from the prior year toward meeting that goal. These regulations have been essential to improvements in high school graduation rates, and we support their continued use in the reauthorization of ESEA. While the discussion draft requires states to incorporate graduation rates into state accountability systems, it does not maintain key elements of current policy as stipulated under the 2008 graduation rate regulation or under the U.S. Department of Education's ESEA Flexibility policy.

Specifically, we urge you to require that state accountability systems (1) implement evidence-based, comprehensive reform among high schools with low graduation rates (i.e., graduation rates at or below 67 percent); (2) implement evidence-based interventions to support student subgroups that consistently miss state-set annual graduation rate performance goals; and 3) make graduation rates a meaningful part of such systems so that districts and schools continue to make progress.

The increase in high school graduation rates is a considerable success story. This increase has made it possible for more young people to progress toward productive adulthood. It has also demonstrated that with focus and effort, the nation can make progress on a major education goal. To capitalize on the momentum, we believe graduation rates should continue to be an important and significant element in school and district accountability frameworks, and we look forward to working with you to ensure that the reauthorization you are considering includes strong accountability on high school graduation rates consistent with current federal and state policy.

Sincerely,



John Gomperts
President & CEO
America's Promise Alliance



John Bridgeland
President & CEO
Civic Enterprises

CIVIC
ENTERPRISES



Bob Balfanz
Executive Director
Everyone Graduates Center

EVERYONE
GRADUATES CENTER



Bob Wise
Executive Director
Alliance for Excellent Education

