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## TIME TO OVERHAUL THE ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION ACT OF 1965

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The 106th Congress will consider the reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which addresses the bulk of federal aid for K-12 education. At the heart of ESEA funding is Title I: Aid to Disadvantaged Children, which consumes \$8 billion of the roughly \$13 billion spent on ESEA programs each year. Members of Congress should focus on the ESEA during its reauthorization process because:

- **The public knows the current system is not working.** Polls show that education tops Americans' list of pressing concerns. A Pew Research Center poll conducted in late October, for example, finds that 88 percent of those surveyed think improving the quality of public school education is "very important." Americans want leadership *with action* on this issue; they do not care who fixes their broken schools, so long as the job is done right.
- **American students are not performing well.** In the inner cities, only 40 percent of 4th and 8th graders performed at the basic level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading test. The results of the latest Third International Math and Science Study reveal that U.S. seniors have lost their competitive edge over their counterparts in Western Europe in these core subjects. In Advanced Physics, U.S. high school seniors finished last behind 20 other countries, including Latvia and the Czech Republic. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reported

on November 13, 1998, that, even though the United States dedicates one of the largest shares of GDP to education, it has fallen behind other economic powers in high school graduation rates. Only 72 percent of 18-year-old Americans graduated in 1996, trailing all other developed countries.

- **Federal policy has failed.** The ESEA has done little to improve the quality of education. Select studies of its programs are inconclusive at best. The Title I program, which has spent over \$100 billion since its inception, has done little to boost achievement for poor children. In fact, no correlation can be drawn between ESEA programs or federal dollars spent on education and students' academic outcomes.

**A Historic Opportunity.** Members of Congress have a historic opportunity to change the course of education by improving the ESEA by:

- **Sending dollars to the classroom.** Today,

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much of the money allocated for education is spent on bureaucracy. According to Michael Antonucci of the Education Intelligence Agency, teachers comprise an average of only 52.1 percent of California's entire education staff; another 15.2 percent are instructional aides, guidance counselors, librarians, and administrators. The remaining 32.6 percent of the education workforce includes non-teaching staff in district, county, and state offices. Many such employees are hired by states to administer state programs, but many others administer federal programs. Frank Brogan, former education commissioner of Florida, estimates that six times as many people are required to administer a federal dollar as a state dollar. In 1990, Ohio calculated that over 50 percent of its paperwork burden was related to federal education programs, although only 5 percent of its education revenues came from federal sources. Congress should make sure that every dollar it sends to states for education is one spent on students.

- **Empower parents, teachers, and principals.** This is especially true of Title I funding. In its last reauthorization (1994), Title I funding was redirected to schools with a high percentage of disadvantaged children, instead of to specific services for Title I students. Schools can use Title I funding on their entire institution, instead of on select programs that pull Title I students out of the regular classroom. Members should offer schools additional flexibility to administer Title I funding to ensure that those who are closest to the students (especially their parents) determine which programs will help them learn best. Schools and states should be able to use their Title I funding to expand the range of services available to their students, such as opening access to private and sectarian providers with a proven record of success.
- **Boost teacher quality.** In the early 1980s, Bill Sanders, a statistician at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, measured the impact of individual teachers on students. Using complex statistical models, he controlled for family income, ethnicity, and other external factors.

Sanders concludes that all the factors he examined, including class size and student demographics, "pale[d] into near triviality in comparison to the magnitude of teacher effects." Just one year with a poor teacher had a ripple effect for years to come. By 6th grade, a student who had had three back-to-back years of poor teachers lagged more than 50 percentile points behind classmates who had had three years of excellent teaching in a row. The ESEA should empower principals to hire the best teachers and encourage the states to attract qualified teachers to low-income settings through alternative certification.

- **Allow flexibility and demand accountability.** States that are eager to innovate must have the flexibility to administer the federal programs while being held accountable for their outcomes. Congress should block-grant federal programs to the states and demand that the funding be used to boost overall NAEP or other high-stakes achievement scores. Federal dollars should not reward poor performance. To encourage competition, states with reforms that boost achievement should be showcased at the national level and rewarded financially. Congress should seek the advice of reform-minded education entrepreneurs and governors to develop a plan that assures maximum flexibility and desirable academic outcomes.

**Conclusion.** Reauthorization of ESEA funding offers Congress the opportunity to redefine the federal government's role in K-12 education—from one confined to inputs to one focused on academic achievement. By ensuring that more federal education money is sent to the classrooms, that states, schools, and parents have more flexibility in using that funding, and that states are encouraged to innovate, Congress can take the lead in reforming education. Otherwise, sending money to the same old programs will waste precious education tax dollars and allow American students to continue falling further behind in academics.

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