

Dear Chairman Alexander, Chairman Kline, Ranking Members Murray and Scott, and Members of Congress:

Re: ESEA: Smarter Tests, Equitable Resources and Stronger Schools for Every Child

As part of the next reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), we urge you to roll back the amount of federally-required high-stakes assessments to give students more time to learn and teachers more time to teach. Standardized tests are a blunt tool for assessing student success and school system progress unless matched with significant resources to address the unequal conditions in schools based on race and ZIP code. Tests should be used to support student learning and school improvement, not to push out students or punish educators and schools. They must be combined with other indicators of student learning and integrated with reasonable accountability and viable improvement actions.

Before No Child Left Behind (NCLB), federal law required students to be tested just once in reading and math during each of three grade spans corresponding to elementary, middle and high school (3-5, 6-9, and 10-12). We should return to that sensible approach, while including science. We should also continue to disaggregate data for students of color, low-income students, students with disabilities, and English language learners, to allow the federal government and the states to monitor school progress.

NCLB brought an avalanche of testing as schools, fearing sanctions, narrowed curriculum and turned many classrooms into little more than test-prep factories. The problem is most acute in schools serving the students ESEA is most intended to help - students in high-need communities. By focusing its accountability framework almost exclusively on students' standardized test performance, NCLB placed punitive sanctions on struggling schools without providing sufficient resources, tools or guidance to improve their performance, and it failed to address significant funding and resource disparities among our nation's schools.

The results of NCLB have been dismal. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the rate of improvement in both reading and math has been slower under NCLB than under the previous version of ESEA. Moreover, by focusing so heavily on standardized testing as a metric for accountability and by attaching high-stakes consequences to test results, NCLB has created an extremely narrow definition of educational success.

Facing mandates to raise student test scores and sanctions for failure to do so, districts, schools, administrators, and teachers are under enormous pressure to produce results. If a student acts up in class, especially if s/he has low scores, it is often much easier and more "efficient" to simply remove the child from class through punitive disciplinary measures and focus on the remaining students. As a result, the practice of pushing struggling students out of school to boost test scores has become quite common, which we now know contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline. Further, test results required under NCLB have become a reason to close schools in low-income communities of color, undermining those communities and placing students at educational and sometimes physical risk.

Nationwide, parents, students, teachers, and community leaders are demanding an end to the misuse and overuse of testing. Surveys show the public now realizes that increased testing has hurt or made no difference in improving schools.

We agree that accountability is necessary and the federal government has an important role. Assessing grade spans will provide sufficient school-level data on student achievement while minimizing the dangers of unwanted side-effects seen with every-grade testing. Locally-driven, high-quality assessments are a better way to inform instruction and improve teaching and learning than federally-mandated tests. Congress should make investments in states, districts, and schools to develop higher quality assessments, using funds made available by reducing standardized testing mandates.

The route to improving educational outcomes is through strengthening schools, not measuring each individual in each grade. The law should require states to augment test results with meaningful data on important indicators of school quality and improvement, including: multiple forms of evidence of student learning; available and needed resources; and efforts to strengthen curriculum, instruction, leadership, school climate and discipline strategies, parent engagement and wraparound services. Districts must support and monitor schools, just as states should with districts, and the federal government should ensure that states are fulfilling their responsibilities.

In conclusion, we the undersigned civil rights, disability, and community organizations urge Congress to return to the appropriate use of student assessments, and to address resource disparities and school improvement in ways that that will strengthen opportunity for all students.

Please do not hesitate to contact Monty Neill monty@fairtest.org for further information. We look forward to hearing from your office in the coming weeks.

Signatories:

Action Now (IL)
Advancement Project
Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE)
Alliance for Quality Education (NY)
Center for Popular Democracy
Citizens for Public Schools (MA)
FairTest (National Center for Fair & Open Testing)
Journey for Justice Alliance
Learning Disabilities Association of America
National Pacific Islander Education Network
Neighborhoods Organizing for Change (MN)
New Jersey Communities United (NJCU)
Newark NAACP (NJ)
Opportunity to Learn Campaign
Paterson Education Fund (NJ)
School Social Work Association of America

Wisconsin Jobs Now