

Prepared Statement

Presented at

“Democratic Forum: Reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act”

Submitted to
Members of the Education and the Workforce Committee

Submitted by
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Remarks as Prepared for Delivery:

Congressman Scott and Members of the Education and the Workforce Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. With both the House and Senate poised to move forward on the long-stalled ESEA reauthorization, it is exactly the right time to discuss the importance of the law to the education of Latino students, English learners (ELs), students who are low-income and other at-risk populations. These groups of students are the most likely to be affected by potential changes to ESEA's provisions, including those on testing, accountability, teacher quality, and the equitable distribution of resources.

My organization, the National Council for La Raza (NCLR)—the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization—works to improve educational opportunities for Hispanic children, who now represent 25 percent of school-aged children in the United States. We are particularly concerned about programs and services for the 4.6 million ELs enrolled in our schools because nearly 80 percent of these students are from a Spanish-speaking background.

Since its initial enactment in 1965, ESEA has been a critical component of our nation's efforts to ensure that all children receive the education they need to succeed in life. We have seen progress toward this goal but significant gaps in achievement remain. For example, over the last 15 years, Hispanic, black, and students who are low-income have made steady progress in closing achievement gaps when compared to white students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), but these gaps have not closed sufficiently. Further, ELs and students with disabilities have recently lost ground on educational outcomes after years of improvement. Remaining gaps between these students and white students must continue to improve; therefore, reauthorization of ESEA must be designed with the needs of these students in mind.

Current provisions in ESEA provide the resources and the accountability mechanisms to close these gaps for ELs must be maintained. The law now includes two objectives aimed at ELs: (1) ensuring that the attainment of high academic standards by ELs is part of a school's effort to enable all students to meet those standards; and (2) ensuring that schools also focus on enabling all ELs to make steady progress toward full English proficiency. The provisions in these two areas, as well as the disaggregation of test data by student subgroup, have had a powerful effect on programs and services for ELs and must be included in the reauthorization.

While current law under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is not perfect, we have strong evidence that accountability has had a role in closing score gaps, therefore accountability provisions must remain strong in the reauthorized law. Research shows that, under well-designed accountability regimes, school districts seek and adopt more effective curricula and programs, provide the additional services to at-risk students, do more to ensure the equitable distribution of effective teachers, and take additional steps to improve outcomes for all students. These actions appear to result in improved outcomes. For example, over the past 10 years, the percentage of eighth grade Latino students achieving at or proficient in math on the NAEP more than doubled.

Going forward, maintaining strong accountability measures will be critical to achieve better outcomes for ELs and other students. Before NCLB, schools were generally judged on the average performance of their entire student body. If one or more groups of students were failing, no one really paid attention or took action, as long as students as a whole were meeting achievement targets. The enhanced accountability provisions of NCLB made evident the achievement levels of all groups of students and ensured action to address the needs of those falling behind. The next reauthorization may allow states greater flexibility in implementing accountability systems, but requirements for the disaggregation of data by student subgroup and accountability for the achievement of all students must remain. In addition, a annual testing in grades 3-8 and once in high school must continue. A retreat from this testing would severely diminish accountability for the achievement of ELs, Hispanics, low-income children, and other student subgroups and make it difficult to ensure that these students are not falling behind.

In my remaining time, let me touch briefly on NCLR's five other recommendations for reauthorization of ESEA.

First, the law must continue to provide targeted investments to support the unique needs of ELs.

Second, the reauthorization should address the unmet national need for early care and education. Latino children are the least likely racial or ethnic group to be enrolled in early learning programs.

Third, the law must ensure that Latino and ELs have equal access and supports that will enable them to meet college- and career-ready standards.

Fourth, the law must provide for the inclusion of parent voices and perspectives in ESEA programs.

Fifth, the reauthorization must address the shortage of teachers who are prepared to teach Latino and ELs, and provide ample resources to support the continued professional development of those teachers.

I thank you again for the opportunity to provide this testimony, and I would be happy to take your questions.