



**Statement of Michael Casserly on the Elementary and Secondary Education Act  
Reauthorization  
Before the  
Minority Forum of Education and Workforce Committee Members**

**February 5, 2015**

**INTRODUCTION**

Good morning Congressman Scott and members of the Committee. I am Michael Casserly, Executive Director of the Council of the Great City Schools.

The Council is the nation’s primary coalition of large central-city school districts. The 67 urban school districts comprising the organization enroll 25 percent of the all students in the country students living in poverty, 35 percent of all African American students, 38 percent of Latino students, and 30 percent of the nation’s English learners. Approximately 85 percent of all our students are students of color.

The Council is very proud of the fact that academic achievement in the Great City Schools as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has continued to climb at significantly greater rates than national averages, in part, because of the significant investment that Congress and the federal government continues to make in our schools.

Many people would be surprised that the Great City Schools—with all our academic challenges and diversity—would continue to support strong accountability for the academic outcomes of our students. Yet, our support for accountability and equity is not new. The Council signed onto the Clinton Administration’s Voluntary National Tests in 1997; we supported the passage of NCLB in 2001 despite its flaws because of its focus on historically under-served students; we began issuing district-by-district reports on reading and math assessment results in 2002; we initiated the expansion of NAEP into large urban school districts; and we have taken a strong leadership role in the President’s “My Brother’s Keeper” initiative. The Council and its urban school district members believe that results matter and that adults bear responsibility for the academic well-being of the children in their charge.

## **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE AND IMPACT OF PRIOR CONSOLIDATIONS**

Since coming to the Council, I have been intimately involved in every reauthorization of ESEA since the 1977-78 renewal. During that time, we have been involved in most of the statutory struggles that this landmark legislation has gone through. I hope I can bring some perspective on what has worked—and what has not—during the evolution of this critical program.

As you know, ESEA provides essential resources and benefits, particularly in poor and minority communities, which state and local governments either cannot or will not provide. The Council has supported the cornerstones of ESEA, but not necessarily every new little program that every interest group has promoted. The main components of ESEA that were built around the needs of poor and low-achieving students and students whose first language was not English have largely endured through the political and economic ups and downs across the decades. And so our support for this legislation has endured.

When those initiatives were at risk, the threat often came under the banner of budget cuts, program consolidation, and regulatory simplification. The mechanism for implementing those priorities was typically block grants. But, once consolidated or “block granted,” the remaining funding was often diluted and then eroded until it lost its purpose and effect. Of course, the prime example of this was the Reagan-era “Education Block Grant” (ECIA Chapter 2), which consolidated scores of federal education programs and was eventually defunded because there was no longer a reason for it. General revenue sharing in the 1970s was another such example.

We are not concerned about block grants and program consolidation for philosophical or ideological reasons; we are concerned for historic reasons. Where we have seen these consolidations, we eventually also see the erosion of priorities for our neediest children. Unfortunately, the House bill contains a quasi-consolidation that would jeopardize funding under both Title I and Title III for many of the students generating the dollars, a situation that is exacerbated by the bill’s freezing funds for ESEA programs from FY16 through FY21.

## **UNPRODUCTIVE VERSUS ESSENTIAL FEDERAL REQUIREMENTS**

At the same time, each ESEA reauthorization over the years often adds new federal programs and requirements that attempt to micromanage local implementation without removing old program mandates. Some of these add-ons have had very little basis in research. The NCLB-mandated “Supplemental Educational Services” to provide mostly private sector tutoring to students in low-performing schools, for instance, produced minimal academic gains, while absorbing significant Title I funds. And the comprehensive school demonstration models under the Clinton Administration were grounded in the flimsiest of evidence, but soaked up millions of dollars.

More recently, the various U.S. Department of Education-mandated “models” under the School Improvement Grants (SIG) showed no discernible differences from one another despite

presumptions to the contrary. Still, the SIG program, with its locally-designed intensive interventions in the 5 percent of lowest-performing schools, produced positive academic results in some 70 percent of the Great City Schools receiving SIG funding. In short, some federal requirements are important and some are not. Results of the federal policies often depend on the research behind them and how well they are funded and implemented programmatically

However, the House and Senate ESEA bills grind down some of the essential fiscal features of federal law that make success most likely and ensure the “value-added” benefit of federal grants. For example, maintaining effort with state and local funds, supplementing and not supplanting federal funds, and targeting federal funds for disadvantaged students are among the most critical provisions and successful components of federal education law—and among the most effective things the federal government does.

Maintenance-of-effort generally prevents significant reductions to state and local education funding, which might allow states to undercut federal programming by reducing their own funds as federal monies were allocated. Local school districts are particularly concerned about efforts to eliminate these protections. Again, there is historical precedent. The State Fiscal Stabilization Fund under ARRA allowed some states to disproportionately lower state education aid because the legislation weakened the maintenance-of-effort provision. In one instance, the result was that the state simply redirected state education funds into the state’s “Rainy Day” fund when local schools were trying to retain instructional programs in the withering economy

In addition, the supplement-not-supplant provisions prevent federal funds from replacing state- and locally-funded educational activities and disallow having state and local funds in non-Title I schools and Title I funds in Title I schools used for the same activities. This provision is critical to ensuring that federal funds add value to the efforts that local and state agencies are making.

Furthermore, the targeting of ESEA funds ensures that there is a “critical mass” of federal funds allotted to high-poverty schools in a way that produces positive academic results for the neediest students. Since the ESEA Title I program is funded at less than one-third of its authorized funding level, the necessity of concentrating scarce federal dollars on high-poverty school districts and a select number of high-poverty schools, rather than spreading Title I funds across any school with a poor child, ensures the efficacy of this landmark program.

To be clear, the “Portability” proposal in both the House and Senate ESEA bills would fatally undermine this targeting of Title I funds and their ability to focus on areas of highly concentrated poverty. Under the provision, funds now allocated to high poverty school districts would be redistributed among lower poverty and even relatively affluent school districts. Some 3,000 school districts across the nation would have over \$1 billion in their federal aid taken and then spread out across the remaining 10,000-plus Title I-participating school districts that are generally less-needy.

Moreover, changes proposed in recent years to the Title I formula would have a similar effect on high-poverty and high-minority school districts. The best way to increase Title I allocations for districts and solve formula anomalies that may have cropped up over the years is simply to increase the appropriation for the program.

While there are a lot of other education policy matters at issue in the upcoming ESEA reauthorization, these basic fiscal issues must be protected to ensure the integrity and benefit of this historic legislation.

## **TESTING AND ASSESSMENTS**

Finally, the issue of testing has attracted major national attention and is likely to be an issue in this reauthorization. The Great City Schools and the Council of Chief State School Officers recently issued a joint statement promising to look at the assessment issues emanating from federal, state, school district, and school levels.

Yet, there appears to be a substantial amount of conjecture about the origin, amount, time, and purpose of testing across the country. The Council of the Great City Schools has conducted the largest survey in the nation of testing practices in the big city school systems. Our preliminary results do not always support some of the public's conclusions on the testing issue. For example, our data show that, on average, only about 4 percent of students' time is actually devoted to taking tests that are required of all students. Still there are other assessment issues like the quality of the tests, test redundancy, test prep, and the inappropriate use of tests that thoughtful people need to address. In general, however, we suspect that concerns about other issues like the Common Core State Standards and personnel evaluations and accountability systems may be clouding how the public views assessments.

In our opinion, the benefits of gauging student academic progress from grade to grade in at least reading and math under the current ESEA provisions far outweigh the limited testing burdens identified in the Council's study. We stand firmly in favor of retaining annual testing in grades 3-8 and once in high school. Some of the add-on tests, measures, and indicators arising from federal, state, or local administrative requirements, however, are questionable and indeed deserve review and revision. We will issue these findings in a formal report later this spring.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Again, for the Great City Schools, results matter. Student achievement and eliminating student achievement gaps is what we are here for. Any reauthorization of these critical national programs should continue to allow school districts to sustain their local instructional initiatives and reforms without having to shift attention and resources to a new regime of federal and state requirements. And the fiscal integrity and program accountability of the legislation should be maintained.

The challenge, of course, facing the Committee is to design an ESEA reauthorization that is an improvement for schools and students over current law with their accompanying flexibility waivers. Merely delegating authority to the states and hoping for the best is not a supportable approach. And there is strong history there as well. Unfortunately, the 2015 ESEA draft bill does not meet this standard in our opinion. The Council stands ready to assist the Committee in developing a better ESEA bill.