

December 11, 2017

The Honorable Virginia Foxx
Chairwoman
Education & Workforce Committee
2262 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Bobby Scott
Ranking Member
Education & Workforce Committee
1201 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Foxx & Ranking Member Scott:

On behalf of the Autism Society of America, I write to express our concerns regarding the recently introduced bill to reauthorize the Higher Education Act, entitled the Promoting Real Opportunity, Success, and Prosperity through Education Reform (PROSPER) Act, and to offer our recommendations to improve the bill.

The Autism Society of America has been improving the lives of all affected by autism for over 50 years and envisions a world where individuals and families living with autism are able to maximize their quality of life, are treated with the highest level of dignity, and live in a society in which their talents and skills are appreciated and valued. We provide advocacy, education, information and referral, support, and community at national, state and local levels through our strong nationwide network of affiliates.

While we are very pleased that the bill continues the Transition Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) and new data collection on students with disabilities, we are extremely concerned that the bill eliminates several programs that support students with disabilities and does not include any of the other recommendations put forth by the Autism Society and many other members of the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities (CCD) that would increase access to postsecondary education opportunities to these students.

Of particular concern is that the bill eliminates several programs that are critical to the success of students with disabilities and the educators who instruct them in K-12 and postsecondary programs. The PROSPER Act removes all of Title II from HEOA, which includes grants that improve teacher quality and incentivize teachers to serve in high-need areas like special education. In addition, it eliminates the TEACH grants, which provide financial assistance to individuals who choose to pursue careers in public service, including educators and other school professionals. Eliminating these programs will only exacerbate the special education teacher shortage crisis that 98% of school districts are already facing and limit the services and supports available to students with disabilities.

In addition to the personnel development changes, the PROSPER Act eliminates grants that increase accessibility for students with disabilities on college campuses. The PROSPER Act eliminates grant programs that support faculty who work with students with disabilities and provide accessible materials in college. This will make it more difficult for students with disabilities to secure technology and accessible materials in postsecondary education. Furthermore, it will leave college faculty with fewer resources and less training to support and instruct students with disabilities.

The Autism Society recently signed onto a letter to the committee, along with almost 30 other national disability members of the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities (CCD) Education Task Force urging Congress to include provisions of H.R. 3199, the “Improving Access to Higher Education Act” in a comprehensive reauthorization of HEA. Provisions assisting students with disabilities include: training faculty to deliver accessible instruction; establishing an office of accessibility in every institute of higher education (IHE); developing university-wide universal design for learning (UDL); and increasing accessible instructional materials and technologies by establishing a commission to develop guidelines for IHEs to use to provide high-quality instructional materials and technologies to students with disabilities.

The Autism Society also recommends the inclusion of provisions within the Respond, Innovate, Succeed, and Empower (RISE) Act (S.1295 & H.R. 2782). This includes: authorizing increased funding for a technical assistance center that provides students and families information on disability services available in college and how to access them and offers college faculty training and resources on best practices to support students with disabilities; requiring IHEs to accept an IEP, 504 plan, or prior evaluation as documentation of a student’s disability when seeking accommodations in an IHE, preventing students from having to undergo a new, costly and burdensome evaluation that many IHEs require; and requiring IHEs to submit to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) or other federal data collection efforts key data related to their undergraduate students with disabilities.

In the Fall of 2015, the CCD Education Task Force submitted principles and recommendations in preparation for the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA). The Autism Society continues to believe that the recommendation outlined in the 2015 statement should be considered in any comprehensive reauthorization of the HEA. The recommendations can be found at: <http://c-c-d.org/fichiers/CCD-Principles-andRecommendations-for-the-Higher-Education-Act-10-06-15.pdf>

The Autism Society further encourages the committee to slow down, work in a bipartisan fashion, and engage with all those who benefit from a strong Higher Education Act. Students with disabilities must be fully included in any policy changes considered for the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in order to help these students benefit from our educational system and be as productive and economically self-sufficient as possible.

The Autism Society stands ready to work with Congress to improve this bill so that it meets the needs of underserved students, including students with disabilities, and the faculty that serve them. Please feel free to contact Kim Musheno, Autism Society Vice President of Public Policy at kmusheno@autism-society.org with any questions.

Sincerely,



Scott Badesch
Executive Director and CEO