

Statement on Every Student Succeeds Act

The recent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in the US House of Representatives is a major step forward in bringing significant changes to public education in the United States. TESOL International Association is encouraged that this effort to update the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 keeps a strong focus on supporting the needs of English language learners (ELLs), and is moving forward cooperatively in a bipartisan manner.

While the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 brought a major spotlight to the needs of ELLs, ESSA makes significant and long overdue improvements to problematic areas of that legislation. First and foremost, it de-emphasizes the high stakes assessment practices that have become the focus of public education. As President Obama noted recently, testing should not “crowd out teaching and learning,” nor should it drive instruction so that teachers are simply teaching to the test.

We are also very pleased that ESSA maintains the historic federal commitment to support disadvantaged students, which is at the center of ESEA, and does not include provisions such as the Title I portability proposal that TESOL International Association and other education groups have opposed.

As ELLs continue to be one of the fastest-growing student populations in the United States, English language development will become a priority in statewide accountability systems under Title I of ESSA. We are especially pleased that the legislation not only maintains the commitment of federal funds to support language instruction for ELLs and immigrant students under Title III, but reflects higher authorization levels advocated for by TESOL International Association and many of its partners in the education community.

The diversity of the ELL population and the complexities of second language acquisition are also reflected in several of the new provisions in ESSA. As part of the reporting requirement under Title I, states will not only need to report on the academic performance of ELLs, but also on long-term ELLs and those with special needs. In addition, the legislation allows states to exclude test results for those newly-arrived students who are first learning English, and includes the performance of former ELLs for reporting purposes up to four years. We are very pleased that these provisions supported by TESOL International Association and its partners, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE), are included in the final bill language.

While we are encouraged by these elements, there are other areas where we had hoped the bill would go further. Although language in the bill includes broader support for professional development for teachers in working with ELLs, the legislation does not include any specific proposals or mechanisms to increase the number of English-as-a-second language (ESL) and bilingual specialists that are needed in U.S. schools. Moreover, the legislation does not have explicit support for high-quality bilingual education, dual language programs, and multilingual enrichment programs that are valuable assets in meeting the demands of a globally competitive economy.

We greatly appreciate the cooperative efforts by the leaders of the US Congress to develop this bipartisan, bicameral bill. The much needed fixes to NCLB are long past due. It is time to focus on modernizing the education system in the U.S. so that all students and teachers receive the resources and support they need.

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