

18 May 2018

The Honorable Betsy DeVos
United States Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary DeVos:

On behalf of TESOL International Association (TESOL), the professional association representing approximately 12,000 English language educators worldwide, I am writing to express our strong concerns about the proposal to significantly restructure the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) as part of an overall reorganization of the U.S. Department of Education.

As you are well aware, English learners continue to be the fastest growing population of students in public schools in the United States. There are more than 5 million English learners in public schools speaking more than 150 languages, and over 3300 school districts have 25% or more of their students identified as English learners. In addition, there are many more language minority students who may no longer be identified as English learners but are in need of additional support services. Measures such as performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the high school graduation rate show that English learners continue to lag far behind their native English-speaking classmates, indicating that much more work needs to be done in order to help these students succeed academically.

The demand for qualified English language educators is not only higher than ever before, but also extends beyond the classroom and into local communities, which depend on young English learners to become knowledgeable and productive members of society. Many areas of the country such as the southeastern U.S. are dealing with rapidly growing English learner populations and are faced with quickly building their capacity to equitably serve these students. Given these continued challenges, OELA fills a critical role in the U.S. Department of Education in helping states and districts meet the demands of serving this growing population of students.

At a meeting with officials from the Department of Education on 7 May 2018, TESOL and other stakeholder organizations were informed of a proposed reorganization under the guidance of Executive Order 13781 that would move OELA and its functions into a reorganized Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE). Although Department

of Education officials at the meeting indicated that the integrity and role of the office would be maintained, and that the proposed reorganization would provide an opportunity to improve services, TESOL has serious concerns about the negative impact such changes would have upon English learners, schools, districts, and communities.

OELA is specifically mandated by statute under the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), as is the role of the Director of OELA, who is to report directly to the Secretary of Education. The intended effect of the proposed reorganization is to reduce redundancies, increase efficiency, and better integrate services to English learners with other programs within the Department of Education. However, our concern is that reorganizing the office under OESE will have the opposite effect. Integrating English learners into all programs and services is important and necessary. Too often, however, these students are treated as an afterthought if their academic needs are not deliberately and proactively highlighted and elevated. In fact, the optics around the proposed reorganization are sending that very message to states, districts, and schools: that OELA is being downgraded, and English learner issues are no longer a priority for the Department of Education.

It's been more than 16 years since accountability for English learners was highlighted under the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) initiated by President George W. Bush, yet English learners continue to be a marginalized population in U.S. schools. Having a specialized office at the Department of Education with the knowledge and expertise about the needs of these students is crucial. OELA has served an important role in providing technical assistance to states and districts, developing invaluable resources such as the *English Learner Toolkit*, administering grants for professional development programs for teachers working with English learners, and supporting research projects on English learner issues. This role not only needs to be maintained but strengthened.

To enhance the Department's support for English learners, we recommend the following:

- 1) Maintain OELA's current organizational profile, to include a full-time Director, at the Assistant Deputy Secretary level, who reports to the Secretary; and
- 2) Relocate administration of the formula grants under Title III of ESSA back to OELA, where they had previously been administered prior to 2007, during President Bush's administration. At present, these are administered by OESE, which means that the technical assistance, desperately required by recipients, is separated from the formal oversight of the program.

TESOL recognizes the need to create greater efficiencies within the Department. However, it should not come at the expense of an office that serves a vital role in supporting one of the most at-risk student populations in the United States. The impact of the visibility of OELA cannot be overstated. I urge you to find ways to maintain OELA's important role while also expanding the necessary expertise on serving English learners throughout the Department of Education.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christopher Powers". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "C".

Christopher Powers
Executive Director

cc: The Honorable Mr. Kent D. Talbert, Senior Policy Advisor, Delegated the Authority to Perform the Duties of the Deputy Secretary of Education

The Honorable Mr. José Viana, Assistant Deputy Secretary and Director of the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA)