May 18, 2017

David T. Donahue
Acting Assistant Secretary
Bureau of Consular Affairs
U.S. Department of State
Washington, DC


Dear Mr. Donahue:

On behalf of TESOL International Association (TESOL), a professional association for English language educators, I am writing to express the association’s concerns regarding the proposed changes to the existing vetting procedures. TESOL supports the State Department’s mission to shape and sustain a peaceful, prosperous, just, and democratic world, and the Department’s many educational and cultural programs. We also recognize the need for appropriate procedures in granting visas. We believe, however, that the proposed changes could discourage international students and scholars from traveling to the United States, and ultimately undermine our security.

TESOL represents over 11,000 English language education professionals from the United States and around the world. TESOL members work with English learners at all levels, including many international students studying in the United States. Many more TESOL members are educators and scholars from different countries who travel here to attend conferences, gain professional development experiences, and participate in other academic activities.

International education and cultural exchange has long been an important asset to U.S. security and diplomatic interests. Students and educators who come to the United States for educational conferences and short-term or long-term studies, not only bring invaluable skillsets and experiences that benefit American citizens, but return to their home countries having grown academically and gained important first-hand experiences with U.S. citizens, an appreciation for our culture, and a respect for our institutions. These interactions have the dual benefit of enriching the experiences of students and educators, as well as those of the local communities with which they interact. These experiences are critical to advancing the mutual understanding that enhances security and the collaboration necessary to a global economy. Moreover, international education has a major economic impact on the U.S. economy, contributing more than $36 billion in 2015 alone.

We believe that the proposed changes are vague and excessive, with no indication given as
to how they will be implemented, or which visa categories might be impacted. Although the notice indicates that the new procedures would impact only 0.5% of U.S. visa applicants worldwide, the proposal is ambiguous enough to warrant concern as to who might actually be directly impacted.

TESOL recognizes the need for secure measures in the U.S. visa system, but the proposed changes could have a detrimental impact on international students and scholars. Current applicants already undergo a complex process to obtain a visa to enter the United States, raising the concern that the proposed vetting changes could further slow down the current visa application system. TESOL encourages the State Department to strike a balance between appropriate security procedures, and the positive economic and security benefits that accrue from legitimate travel and study in the United States.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer our comments on the vetting procedures that are being proposed for visa applicants seeking entry into the United States.

Sincerely,

Christopher Powers
Executive Director