AFT, NABE, TESOL on Senate Bipartisan ESEA Bill
Encouraging Signs for English Language Learners and Their Teachers

WASHINGTON—Leaders of three organizations representing the majority of educators who teach English language learners said Monday they are encouraged by the Senate bipartisan Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorization proposal.

“The proposed bill represents a significant step forward to support the academic and language needs of ELLs, to adequately prepare teachers to work with ELLs, and to promote equity,” said leaders of the American Federation of Teachers, the National Association for Bilingual Education, and TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) International Association, in a statement to their members.

One of the most important provisions in the bill, said AFT President Randi Weingarten, would be to give English language learners with basic or little English proficiency a three-year grace period before taking English language arts assessments in English. “This is a significant step toward more appropriately assessing English learners, and it better aligns with what research shows and educators know: that it takes time to learn English. ELLs need enough time to be part of the English-language culture. We’ve seen testing after one year, and it’s just not fair or right. This is an example of the commonsense provisions Sens. Murray and Alexander have put in their bill.”

English language learners—preK-12 students who are working toward becoming proficient in the English language—are one of the fastest-growing student populations. The goals of these three organizations include promoting educational excellence and equity for ELLs to ensure they are able to meet the same challenging college- and career-ready standards required of all students.

Leaders from the three organizations said they were pleased the Senate bill includes funds for professional development for general education and mainstream educators who have not worked with ELLs, and funds to help recruit, retain, mentor and induct educators of ELLs and ELLs with disabilities.
Weingarten said Sens. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) and Patty Murray (D-Wash.) took an important bipartisan first step in reclaiming the original purpose of ESEA, which was to help children, particularly those at risk, and address education equity.

“This is a significant and great beginning of a long legislative process to get a final bill that provides the right resources and policies for those with the most needs, including ELLs, and for their teachers,” Weingarten said.

Santiago Wood, executive director of the National Association for Bilingual Education, said the bill is encouraging, and NABE will work on making it better as the legislative process continues. “We will be advocating for high-quality bilingual education programs, considering we live in a globally competitive economy and all students could benefit from learning more than one language,” Wood said.

“We will focus our efforts on promoting a strong collaboration between English as a second language teachers and other teachers for the benefit of this diverse student population. This collaboration is at the heart of effective instruction for ELLs,” said Rosa Aronson, executive director of TESOL International Association.

The Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee is expected to take up the Alexander-Murray bill on Tuesday.

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