

NATIONAL
BLACK CHILD
DEVELOPMENT
INSTITUTE, INC.

May 7, 2010

The Hon. Tom Harkin, Chairman
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
The U.S. Senate
Washington D.C. 20515

The Hon. Michael Enzi, Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
The U.S. Senate
Washington D.C. 20515

Dear Senator Harkin and Senator Enzi:

Thank you for inviting comments on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI) is a leading nonprofit organization dedicated to improving and advancing the quality of life for Black children and their families through education and advocacy. We believe that the reauthorization of ESEA comes at a critical time for our nation and that we must collectively take advantage of opportunities presented through reauthorization to support equitable achievement for all our children – and our youngest, emergent majority learners, in particular.

The black-white student achievement gap has been documented as “pervasive, profound and persistent.”ⁱ Studies have found that the achievement gap appears as early as school entry and increases over time.ⁱⁱ Indeed, according to the most recent NAEP statistics, released this spring, black 4th graders continue to score 27 percent behind their white peers. While less than one-third of all 4th graders performed at or above the level of proficiency, just 15 percent of African-American children performed at that level.ⁱⁱⁱ

We hope that, as you begin to undertake the extraordinary job of ESEA reauthorization, you will consider **prioritizing strategies that promote the elimination of racial, ethnic and socio-economic achievement gaps by focusing on the continuum of birth through age 8.** NBCDI is part of a coalition including the New America Foundation, PreK Now, and the Council of Chief State School Officers that has submitted recommendations focusing on PreK-3rd strategies as an essential component of ensuring that every child is college- and career- ready. We believe these strategies meet the needs and build on the strengths of black children, and we strongly encourage you to incorporate the specific steps outlined in that document to explicitly infuse early education and PreK-3rd strategies into ESEA wherever possible.

Our collective recommendations address funding; teacher and principal quality and development; longitudinal data collection; accountability and assessment; extended learning time, and family engagement. We are also pleased, however, to submit NBCDI's additional and highlighted priorities in the areas of:

- Effective and Equitable Teaching and Leadership
- Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Assessments
- Meaningful, Culturally Relevant Parent and Family Engagement
- Supportive Transitions for Children and Families

Effective and Equitable Teaching and Leadership

The Obama Administration's *Blueprint for Reform* places, as it should, strong emphasis on the need to "measure, develop and improve the effectiveness of teachers, leaders and preparation programs." We know that effective teaching is a central component of children's academic achievement, and, further, that consistent access to effective teachers and leaders can narrow the achievement gap. Indeed, as the *Blueprint* notes, and as research has demonstrated, "having a top-quartile teacher rather than a bottom-quartile teacher four years in a row may be enough to completely close the black-white test score gap."^{iv} Unfortunately, equitable access to effective teaching has been limited; according to an evaluation of Tennessee's Value-Added Assessment System, "low income and minority children have the least access to the state's most effective teachers and more access to the least effective."^v

States will have to grapple both with defining effectiveness and with the equitable distribution of effective teachers and leaders to ensure that emergent majority children have consistent access to positive teaching, beginning with their earliest years of education. A revised ESEA should give special consideration to the question of what it means to be an effective teacher of diverse groups of young children, focusing on and supporting professional development and preparation programs that help teachers and leaders build a deep knowledge of child development principles and culturally relevant practices. When providing federal grants to programs, for example, the extent to which programs provide training in child development and cultural competence should rank high on the list of items that will be taken into account.

Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Assessments

Much has been written in early childhood communities about the importance of developmentally appropriate assessments for young children. NBCDI believes that we need to direct increased attention towards children's abilities and performance in the early grades – though not through NCLB-style assessments. Along with many of our partners, we recommend that ESEA: (a) prioritize the creation of assessments in all domains of development, including social-emotional domains; (b) rely upon multiple methods and measures of assessment, with a focus on observational strategies; and (c) ensure that the primary purpose of assessment

for young children is to improve instruction. We also, however, encourage a stronger focus on the development of assessments that are culturally and linguistically responsive, in addition to being developmentally appropriate. “The majority of research on test bias, particularly cultural bias with minority populations, was conducted in the 1970s and 1980s” – mostly with older children.^{vi} The National Research Council report states that “the lack of current available empirical evidence exploring test bias in early childhood assessment suggests that the subject has become peripheral among both policy makers and researchers.”^{vii} Yet we live in a country in which the non-white child population is projected to grow to 47 percent by 2020.^{viii} To address the changing demographics of our schools and fairly implement assessments across the grades, we recommend that ESEA create incentives and support mechanisms to research, develop and implement instruments that offer broader observational assessments which are normed on diverse groups of young children, including dual language learners.

Meaningful, Culturally Relevant Parent and Family Engagement

Consistent with our belief that parents are children’s first and most important teachers, NBCDI urges Congress to build support in ESEA reauthorization for family engagement by defining it as a “systemic and sustained commitment that occurs across time, spans many settings, and requires shared responsibility from all parties.”^{ix} Family plays an undeniably key role in children’s social and academic experiences, particularly in the early years; research has demonstrated that differences in early parenting practices explain approximately one-third of the achievement gap between black and white children in kindergarten, and that parenting remained a strong predictor of outcomes until at least the sixth grade.^x Yet current policies do not do enough to support schools or hold them accountable for comprehensively and consistently engaging a diverse range of families. The reauthorization of ESEA is an opportunity to provide additional support and guidance to Parental Information and Resource Centers, and to include language drawn from evidence-based research that will help districts and schools understand how they can better utilize and report on the Title I funding that is dedicated to parent involvement activities. It is critical to use the funding to support best practices in family engagement that are culturally relevant, age-specific, and reach beyond the traditional means of involvement and communication. These practices and strategies – such as including children’s extended family members, engaging in summer-time home-visiting, leading school-based playgroups, encouraging parent-led workshops, and holding regular cultural celebrations – result in strong home-school relationships beginning before children enter school and continuing throughout their educational journeys.

Supportive Transitions for Children and Families

The concept of transition in ESEA should not be limited to the first day of school – or even to an open house in the months before. Successful transitions from early childhood settings through elementary school happen because of ongoing relationship-building among teachers, parents, providers and children. There are a

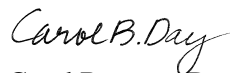
number of ways in which ESEA can contribute to building and strengthening these relationships, including creating expectations, incentives and/or requirements for districts to successfully develop and implement:

- Joint professional development systems for providers, teachers, principals and administrators across Head Start, community-based early education and care settings, and elementary schools
- Integrated data collection and reporting systems from early education through K-12 and beyond, which are meaningful, useful, and limited in the burden they place on front line staff
- Policies promoting shared teacher planning time within and across systems and grade levels

The responsibility for successful transitions must be shared between early childhood systems and K-12 education systems. Where Head Start, for example, is required to coordinate with their local school districts, those districts should, in turn, be held to the same expectation through ESEA. Districts should also be strongly encouraged to use Title I funding for early childhood programs, including those that serve children beginning at birth; and should be supported in their efforts to blend existing federal, state and local funding streams to increase the access and availability of high-quality, comprehensive early childhood programs.

We thank you for your commitment to our children and families and hope this contribution is valuable to you as you work to strengthen ESEA through the reauthorization process. Given our knowledge about the critical nature of the early years in ensuring a child's lifelong success and in preventing the achievement gap from even taking hold, we hope that you will prioritize the years between birth and age 8 in the federal government's policies and investments. Indeed, as we invest in preschool, PreK, and K-12 systems, it is also our responsibility to be mindful of the ways in which these investments affect our youngest children, child care workforce, and their parents. A coordinated birth through eight system will help to lay a strong foundation for the success of all our children and our nation moving forward.

Sincerely,



Carol Brunson Day, President & CEO

ⁱ Braun, H., Wang, A., Jenkins, F. & Weinbaum, E. (2006) The black-white achievement gap: Do state policies matter? *Education Policy Analysis Archive*, 14(8), 1-110.

ⁱⁱ Wang, Aubrey. *A Pre-Kindergarten Achievement Gap?* US.-China Education Review. Sept. 2008; Vol 5; No. 9 (Serial No.46).

ⁱⁱⁱ The Nation's Report Card. *Reading Assessment 2009: A National Assessment of Educational Progress at Grades 4 and 8*. Institute of Education Sciences. NCES 2010-458

^{iv} Gordon, Robert, Thomas J. Kane and Douglas O. Staiger, (2006) "Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance on the Job" Hamilton Project Discussion Paper, Published by the Brookings Institution.

^v Tennessee Department of Education. Tennessee's Most Effective Teachers: Are they assigned to the schools that need them most? Research Brief, published March 2007.

^{vi} National Research Council. *Early Childhood Assessment: Why, What and How*. p. 245

^{vii} Ibid. p.246

^{viii} Child Trends Data Bank. *Racial and Ethnic Composition of the Child Population*. www.childtrendsdatabank.org/pdf/60_PDF.pdf

^{ix} Weiss Heather, et al. *The Federal Role in Out of School Learning: After-School, Summer Learning, and Family Involvement as Critical Learning Supports*. Harvard Family Research Project, as commissioned by the Center on Education Policy. February 2009.

^x Belsky, J. et al. Are there long-term effects of early child care? *Child Development*, 78(2), 681-701. 2007.