

## Policy Update

### Senate Education Committee Holds Roundtable Discussion on ESEA Reauthorization

#### Overview

The U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee held a hearing on November 8, 2011 to discuss the draft proposal for reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). This roundtable gave leaders in education—from teachers, to superintendents, to nonprofit executives—a chance to share what they support in the bill and the areas that need more attention. As Chairman Harkin (IA-D) noted at the onset, the roundtable was meant to be an open discussion that informs debate on ESEA as it moves forward in the Senate.

The bill, which passed out of committee last month with bipartisan support, was criticized by some as lacking specific accountability provisions, while others lauded it for giving states more flexibility. Dominating the conversation, evaluations for teachers and principals could have a separate hearing altogether. Some panelists felt that the federal government cannot regulate the “how” of evaluations, but it can certainly put incentives in place for states to adopt robust systems that support student achievement. Notably, most on the panel agreed that the focus on college- and career-ready standards is a necessity in today’s 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge economy.

#### Priority Areas

##### Federal Role

Debate swirled around the federal footprint in education, with Rick Hess, resident scholar and director of education policy at the American Enterprise Institute, encouraging everyone to stop asking *whether* the federal government should be involved in education, and start asking *how*. Some of the superintendents on the panel noted the importance of research and development and leveraging technological innovations from the federal perspective, but that no law should be too prescriptive. Others stated that the federal government can provide political cover for states that want to make bold moves away from the status quo in education.

##### Teacher and Principal Evaluations

A range of views were discussed on whether teacher and principal evaluation should be defined explicitly in federal law. Chairman Harkin asked panelists to consider if a template could be created from great examples happening in the Houston and Memphis systems. Tom Luna, superintendent of public instruction in Boise, ID was quick to respond that the federal

government cannot define and regulate evaluations; states are already ahead of the federal government. Others disagreed and argued that the federal government must do more to ensure our best teachers are teaching our most disadvantaged students. While still a third faction stated that major incentives could be used to spur improvements from states and strike a balance between motivating better evaluations and mandating them.

### **Accountability, Performance Targets and College- and Career-Readiness**

The discussion in the halls of the Senate around accountability echoed the comments voiced from the public since the proposal passed the committee. Wade Henderson, president and CEO of The Leadership Conference, said it was troubling that under this proposal the government would only focus on the bottom five percent of schools for improvement and that too many students would slip through the cracks with this model. Jon Schnur, co-founder and chairman of the Board at New Leaders, noted his concern for achievement gap students and how states will go about defining the additional schools to hone in on. On the other hand, Terry Grier, superintendent of Houston Independent School District, likes the flexibility that states will have in turning around the lowest-performing schools and thinks the accountability measures are targeted in the right areas.

For many, the scrapping of punitive adequate yearly progress sanctions and the adoption of growth models is met with open arms. And the bill's prioritization of high expectations and performance targets around college- and career-ready standards was also praised.

### **Moving Forward**

The roundtable marked the last step before the proposal goes to the Senate floor for a vote. Comments from senators, particularly Senator Enzi (WY-R) and Senator Alexander (TN-R), give the impression that additional changes to the bill will be sought when it reaches the floor. With a crowded Senate calendar, a vote has yet to be scheduled. To view footage from the hearing, visit the [Senate HELP website](#).