



# A Way Forward

## A Progressive Vision for Reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

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June 2011

# Introduction and executive summary

Congress has the opportunity to move forward on education reform by reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or ESEA, to ensure all children achieve their greatest potential. Unfortunately, it has yet to find the will to do so, to the detriment of our nation's students and schools.

ESEA is the largest and most significant federal education law supporting public schools. ESEA, currently known as No Child Left Behind, was due to be reauthorized in 2007. Congress has the opportunity to fix numerous flaws in NCLB and to build on positive change due to new, innovative programs already underway in many places. Political events and calculations, however, threaten to stymie the law's renewal.

This paper outlines a smart, progressive vision for moving forward with the reauthorization of ESEA. The stakes are high, both for our nation's students and our economic growth and competitiveness. Raising achievement levels in the United States to those of other industrialized nations could increase our GDP by trillions of dollars.

Following core principles of federal education policy, we propose significant policy changes on topics such as teachers and principals, funding, school improvement, and innovation. There are many important issues that impact schools and students in a large, complex law such as ESEA, and an astute reader will notice, we have not addressed all of them. We focused our recommendations on those topics we think are critical to advancing progressive education goals.

Specifically, we recommend:

- Holding all schools accountable for getting results with all students
- Investing in teachers and principals so they become more skilled and effective
- Making funding practices more fair and efficient so every student gets a fair shot at having an effective teacher and adequate resources

- Targeting support to low-performing schools, including expanding learning time and providing nonacademic services that meet all student needs
- Investing in innovative practices that bring American schools into the 21st century

We recognize our approach runs contrary to many on the far right who have embraced a cut-and-run strategy—gut education funding and scale back federal involvement in education. We believe this to be an approach that shirks federal responsibility in exchange for a cheap return to greater state and local control, and likely inaction on education reform.

Instead, we believe strongly in the federal government's role in promoting equity and opportunity, high standards and strong outcomes, and efficient use of public funds. We believe a forward-looking, forward-moving federal government can leverage its relatively modest contribution to education budgets to spur reform and economic growth.

Therefore, we call for a smart, progressive approach to improving education. Through targeted programs like Race to the Top, or RTT, the federal government was able to encourage significant reform at the state level. Thirty-four states amended or passed education laws before RTT money was awarded, demonstrating that federal law can be both lean and effective at fostering change. We believe Congress can apply such a strategy to the reauthorization of ESEA, not only in authorizing competitive programs like RTT but also in asking states to engage in reform in exchange for federal dollars.

The next steps for Congress regarding ESEA are about policy but also about politics. Both chambers must find consensus on issues such as accountability, teacher effectiveness, and funding. Equally critical, they must become willing to work in a bipartisan way, as they did in passing No Child Left Behind. In the end, what hangs in the balance is not a particular poll or election but the economic and social well-being of our nation.

As Congress rolls up its sleeves and gets serious about reauthorization, we stand ready to work with them. We urge Congress to revise ESEA not in a timid way, but in a bold and progressive way.

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