



5 Reasons Why Sen. Alexander's Education Bill Fails Communities of Color

February 2, 2015

Earlier this month, Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN) proposed a bill to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or ESEA.¹ The ESEA is seven years overdue for a reauthorization. The process presents an opportunity to improve U.S. school systems for communities of color. Unfortunately, Sen. Alexander's proposal fails to seize this opportunity. Instead, it proposes to reduce parent access to reliable and valid information and devolves most decisions about school quality to states, which historically have not taken action to address deficiencies in school systems. Here are five reasons why Sen. Alexander's bill harms communities of color:

- 1. Allows low-performing schools to languish:** Sen. Alexander's bill essentially eliminates accountability for low-performing schools. In place of the rigorous system currently in operation, states could design and implement almost any system they want with no federal checks or guardrails. As a result, many students of color would be forced to attend low-performing public schools without other viable school options.
- 2. Lowers academic standards:** Sen. Alexander's bill fails to require that states implement internationally benchmarked, college- and career-ready standards. Instead, states may adopt standards that do not establish a meaningful, high bar for the information students need to succeed after graduation. These lower standards would undoubtedly leave many more students of color unprepared to successfully compete in a global economy after high school graduation.
- 3. Opens the door to significant budget cuts:** Sen. Alexander's bill eliminates the ESEA's "maintenance of effort," or MOE, provision, which requires states to maintain approximately the same spending levels from year to year. Without the MOE provision, states would have free rein to underinvest in schools. As a result, many more students of color would be likely to attend schools with inadequate resources, ineffective teachers, and larger class sizes in the early grades.

4. **Prevents parents from making informed decisions about where to send their child to school:** In order for parents to know whether their children are on track to graduate from high school ready for college or career, they need access to objective annual information about how they are progressing. Sen. Alexander's bill offers an option whereby states would have complete flexibility when it comes to deciding when and how to measure student progress. His bill also eliminates the requirement that states use the same assessments for all students. Without equivalent data across school districts, parents would be unable to compare school performance and make informed choices about where to send their children.
5. **Eliminates focus on that state's students of color:** Sen. Alexander's bill removes the requirement that states improve their graduation rates for students of color. Establishing these specific graduation targets is clearly an effective measure given that young Hispanic students are now half as likely to drop out of high school as they were 15 years ago.² Unfortunately graduation rates for students of color could decline significantly in the coming years because Sen. Alexander neglected to require specific targets for states.

Endnotes

1 *Every Child Ready for College or Career Act of 2015*, forthcoming, 114 Cong. 1 sess., available at <http://www.help.senate.gov/imo/media/AEG15033.pdf>.

2 Arne Duncan, "Improving American education is not optional," *The Washington Post*, January 16, 2015, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/arne-duncan-a-quality-education-is-not-optional/2015/01/16/ac8ad214-9ce6-11e4-bcfb-059ec7a93ddc_story.html?wpisrc=nl_opinions&wpm=1.