Senate Committee Approves “No Child” Reauthorization

In mid-October, the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee held a hearing to markup a comprehensive reauthorization bill for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The ESEA, the current version of which is known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), is the overarching federal law dealing with K-12 education policy.

The NCLB legislation was one of the few signature bipartisan accomplishments of President Bush’s first term in office. No Child, which was passed in late 2001 and signed into law in January 2002, has been due for reauthorization since 2007, but Congress has been slow to act. Additionally, the law has never been fully funded and has proven troublesome for the states to implement, so U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan recently announced plans to offer waivers from some of NCLB’s most stringent requirements.

As I have noted in recent columns, leaders of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce decided early in 2011 to work on the reauthorization in a piecemeal fashion. Since that time, the panel has passed several small bills dealing with individual sections of the ESEA framework. Some of these proposals have had bipartisan support while others have passed on party-line votes.

The HELP Committee, meanwhile, has been working on a comprehensive reauthorization for several years now. The panel’s efforts have been bipartisan and have been led by Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Ranking Member Michael Enzi (R-WY). The October markup was the beginning of the culmination of their work.

In an opening statement, Harkin noted that the reauthorization is long overdue and said it is critical that Congress act now for sake of best preparing our students and for American economic competitiveness. Harkin also noted that closing achievement gaps and promoting college readiness are two key priorities of the proposal. Finally, he explained that the bill seeks to improve teacher and principal evaluation systems by giving the states more and better options.

Enzi stressed that he welcomed the reauthorization process that the Committee and the Senate was engaging in, and he asserted that while flaws have emerged with NCLB, departmental “waivers are not the way to correct the ESEA—the time is now for legislative action.” He stated that the bill grants flexibility to the states in a number of key areas, including college- and career-readiness standards, and that the legislation eliminates forty wasteful or duplicative programs. Finally, he said that the proposal holds America’s worst-performing schools accountable by giving them a last chance to improve.

The bill, which was passed by the Committee on a 15-7 vote (with three Republicans, including Enzi, joining panel Democrats), does not specifically address geography education funding—as called for in the “AAG Resolution Supporting K-12 Geography Education” (see From the Meridian column on page 2 of this issue for more information). Senator Enzi, however, did assert that he welcomed additional K-12 education bills dealing with specific corrections to the ESEA. In his remarks, Chairman Harkin did express hope that the reauthorization would allow for a focus on a “well-rounded education”—and one key amendment offers hope for geography education.

Casey Amendment Positive for K-12 Geography

Senator Robert P. Casey, Jr. (D-PA), a member of the HELP panel, introduced an amendment designed “to improve student achievement by giving students increased access to high-quality instruction for a well-rounded education.” The proposal, which was added to the bill by voice vote despite some Republican opposition, is specifically aimed at improving teaching in key areas other than reading and math, and geography is one of eleven eligible subjects specified.

The amendment would create a grant program under Title IV of the ESEA that would allow state and local education agencies, institutions of higher education, educational service agencies, and certain nonprofit organizations to apply for federal funding aimed at any of the following:

- Improving the knowledge and skills of teachers through rigorous evaluation systems, professional development, and other instructional supports in order to deliver high-quality instruction in such subjects, including to students who are English learners and students who are children with disabilities;
- Providing assistance to high-need local educational agencies to improve low-income student access to, and achievement in, such subjects, or
- Developing and implementing, or building local capacity to develop and implement, high-quality curricula, instructional supports, and assessments that are aligned with the State college and career ready academic content and achievement standards in such subjects.

Casey’s proposal would allow grants of up to five years in duration and would give priority to proposals that include in the application “(i) a plan to implement an interdisciplinary approach, by integrating instruction in one or more covered subjects with reading, English, language arts, science, or mathematics instruction; and (ii) a plan to expand learning time in the schools served by eligible subgrantees (generally high-need schools and service agencies),” in order to increase access to covered subjects. The amendment also calls for evaluation of the grants by the federal Institute of Education Sciences (IES) and requires use of performance metrics identified by the IES along with annual reports.

The Harkin-Enzi bill, including the Casey amendment, will now be considered by the full Senate at a time to be determined. As always, we will continue to keep you abreast of any key policy developments in this column. We are heartened by the support the AAG resolution has drawn and we remain hopeful for geography education’s prospects during the ESEA reauthorization process.

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