

SHEEO STATE HIGHER EDUCATION EXECUTIVE OFFICERS

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March 25, 2010

The Honorable George Miller
Chairman
Committee on Education and Labor
U.S. House of Representatives
2205 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable John Kline
Senior Republican Member
Committee on Education and Labor
U.S. House of Representatives
2181 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Miller and Senior Republican Member Kline:

We write on behalf of the association of State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) to comment on the proposed reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

We have reviewed the *ESEA Reauthorization Principles and Recommendations* prepared by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), and we endorse their thoughtful recommendations. We join CCSSO in encouraging a federal law that sets broad goals, encourages policy innovation, and supports and becomes leverage for state policy leadership.

The three priorities we wish to highlight are: a) implementing and achieving the benefits of Common Core Standards; b) strengthening the capacity and effectiveness of teachers and school leaders; and c) developing data systems that provide guidance for improvement at every level of education.

Common Core Standards. We are grateful for the leadership of CCSSO and the National Governors Association in developing Common Core Standards for college and career readiness. Too often students are presented with vague, confusing learning expectations. Fewer, clearer, higher standards will help students focus on and acquire the fundamental knowledge and skills, which provide a springboard for all educational achievement. In addition, we believe a rigorous and broad high school curriculum and well-aligned assessments are essential complements to core standards in promoting college readiness.

We also appreciate the need to avoid undue standardization while establishing fundamental standards. Common standards are essential for fundamental knowledge and skills, but they are not essential for every important area of learning nor every aspect of education. Along with our colleagues in K-12, we are committed to cultivating and expanding the creative, problem-solving energy which springs from the diversity of America's states, schools, and colleges.

Common Core Standards will achieve their intended purpose only when they are employed by schools for achieving student progress through grades K-12 and by colleges and universities for placing students in credit-bearing postsecondary work. Since students attend colleges and universities well beyond the boundaries of their local K-12 district, common standards will make it much easier for colleges and universities to align with K-12 in terms of college readiness and for students to know and meet expectations. The development of the Common Core Standards is being informed by higher education faculty and academic leaders, and we are working nationally with institutionally based higher education

associations and with institutions within our states to build the voluntary, grass-roots acceptance and credibility the standards must have in order to achieve their goals.

High Quality Teaching and School Leadership. Higher education's responsibility for building and enhancing the capacity of teachers and school leaders is perhaps its most critical role. As for other elements of American education, the problem is not the absence of teaching excellence, but the absence of teaching excellence at scale, and where it is most needed. The adoption of ambitious common standards will make the need for excellent teaching even more critical.

For some time we have had a national consensus on the ingredients of excellent teaching and excellent teacher preparation. At the risk of oversimplifying for brevity, that consensus includes: solid mastery of subject matter; well-supervised, extensive classroom experience; ability to use data to diagnose problems and improve teaching strategies; and the ability to recognize and assist students with different learning challenges. This consensus is reflected in statements you have received from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), and in numerous other studies and reports over many years.

We know what is needed, but significant changes in school personnel policies, teacher mentoring, and in pre-service and in-service professional development have been slow in coming. Some of the policies and practices in K-12 and in higher education that must be improved are deeply intertwined (e.g., teacher certification policies and schools of education curricula), while other impediments to progress (personnel practices, funding, high rates of turnover, etc.) appear mostly within the responsibilities of each sector.

K-12 districts, institutions of higher education, and privately funded initiatives all can point to effective and inspiring examples where the vision of more effective teacher preparation and in-service professional development has been realized. Such initiatives are a first step toward progress, but they cannot achieve scale. Achieving scale will require higher levels of collaboration and significant changes (including financing commitments through reallocation and new investments) by each of the critical elements of the system, state policy, K-12 policy and practice, and higher education teacher and school leader preparation programs. Unfortunately, these interdependent entities often find it hard to change their own practices and easy to point to ways others could do more.

The reauthorization of ESEA cannot, by itself, achieve the deep reforms required to achieve this vision. But it can help. The higher education community stands ready to become much more deeply engaged in: a) improving the capacities of teachers now serving K-12 schools; and b) improving the preparation, induction, and successful retention of newly trained teachers. We see no other viable way of achieving excellent teaching at scale. There is no adequate substitute for the intellectual and human capital of our colleges and universities in this work. But higher education cannot improve its contributions without help from K-12 educators, state policymakers, and federal programs. We are committed to working together with them for such reforms, and we are more than ready to accept accountability for improvement.

Proposals to *eliminate* existing federal programs that directly support the improvement of higher education teacher preparation programs and competitive professional development grants administered by state higher education agencies, work at cross-purposes to the goal of achieving the collaboration and engagement of higher education required for systemic change. The attached discussion paper prepared by the SHEEO staff provides recommendations to build a deeper, authentic partnership.

Data Systems to Improve Student Outcomes. Increasingly, educators and policymakers recognize that improving educational quality requires better data on educational outcomes at each step of the educational process. Data systems within states and school systems must have the capacity to monitor the experience and performance of individual students and the effectiveness of teachers trained in our colleges and universities in order to identify opportunities for improvement and understand the factors related to student success. For example, a recent study in higher education, *Crossing the Finish Line*, by William Bowen, Matthew Chingos, and Michael McPherson, used existing longitudinal student data to gain important insights about student success and failure to complete degree programs in large public university systems.

Federal efforts to help the states develop or refine longitudinal data systems are creating essential tools for educational improvement. SHEEO and CCSSO are working with our colleagues to help develop and promote the voluntary adoption of common standards for core data elements throughout education to reduce confusion about critical outcomes such as drop-out and completion, and provide the tools necessary for individual schools to learn how and why their students have succeeded or failed to thrive in later stages of the educational process. We encourage the continuation of federal support for this work.

We are grateful for your leadership in addressing these critical issues, and for your consideration of our views. Please do not hesitate to contact Paul Lingenfelter, President of SHEEO, (303) 541-1605 or plingenfelter@sheeo.org if we can be of assistance in any way.

Sincerely,



Paul E. Lingenfelter
President



James H. McCormick
Chair, Executive Committee and Chancellor
Minnesota State Colleges and Universities



John C. Cavanaugh
Chair, Federal Relations Committee and Chancellor
Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education