

Federal Relations Report

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Kelly Pollitt, NAESP Associate Executive Director for Policy, shared this with me yesterday:

Last week, the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee unanimously (22-0) approved a bill to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), known as the “Every Child Achieves Act of 2015”, following three days of committee debate including consideration of 87 amendments. Chairman Lamar Alexander (R-TN) and Ranking Member Patty Murray (D-WA) and their staff have been negotiating key elements of the legislation and orchestrated a bipartisan, collaborative process that was almost universally praised by committee members.

Overall, principals support many provisions contained in the negotiated bill, which make significant improvements over current law, such as the elimination of AYP and the 100 percent proficiency requirements and the one-size-fits-all federal accountability system, and removal of the unworkable school turnaround models that are required under the School Improvement Grants (SIG) program regulations. Notably, the bill does not include a provision to transform Title I funding into a private school voucher through “portability”.

At this time, NAESP believes the bill is a step in the right direction for principals as it requires states and local educational agencies, or districts, to work with local stakeholders, including principals, to develop plans related to accountability, assessment systems and interventions; disaggregation of subgroup data and reporting; emphasis on differentiated state accountability systems and measures that go beyond student achievement as part of statewide accountability system as determined by the state; and important guidance to states and districts to utilize programs and strategies that have a strong evidence base. However, NAESP has concerns that the bill does not require states to base assessment and accountability systems on student growth to avoid an overreliance on standardized assessments. NAESP continues to meet with lawmakers to encourage changes to the bill that would not make this an option for states as failure to make student growth the cornerstone of assessment and accountability systems may exacerbate the current problems in schools related to states’ overreliance on high-stakes summative assessments.

The bill also contains a stronger focus on principals and school leadership than current law, and includes provisions contained in the School Principal Recruitment and Training Act, a bill that has been an advocacy priority for NAESP over the past several years.

The next phase of work will nonetheless be very challenging, particularly given the committee's decision to delay several difficult issues until the floor debate, such as Republican efforts to ensure Title I portability and Democratic desires to insert more prescriptive accountability requirements in Title I.

Over the next two weeks, committee staff will work with the legislative counsel's office to rewrite the bill to reflect the amendments made this week by the committee. They will also draft report language and prepare for up to two weeks of Senate floor debate, which will likely involve dozens of additional amendments. Chairman Alexander hopes to move the bill to the Senate floor quickly - possibly before the Memorial Day Recess - but several major issues are competing for floor time, including the FY 2016 budget process. After additional follow up meetings this week, NAESP confirmed that both Senators Alexander and Murray remain committed to continuing with a bipartisan process, but have signaled there is significant work ahead in order to bring the bill to a conference committee and ultimately produce a bill that the President would sign into law. While the Senate seems on track to pass out a bill that may yield bipartisan support, there is still considerable concern as to whether or not the conservative Republicans in the House would be able to pass a bipartisan bill or even complete work on H.R., the Student Success Act, was pulled from the House floor after it failed to garner the support needed to pass it through the chamber.

As the Senate bill advances and more is learned about the possible “end game” on ESEA reauthorization this year, NAESP will continue to be at the forefront of discussions to provide the principal’s perspective on key issues.