

January 21, 2015

Deborah Spitz  
U.S. Department of Education  
400 Maryland Ave. SW, Room 3E306  
Washington, DC 20202

**Docket ID: ED-2015-OESE-0130**

Dear Ms. Spitz,

On behalf of [America Forward](#), thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on potential regulatory activity related to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as reauthorized by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

As a coalition of more than 70 impact-oriented organizations nationwide that are driving innovative, systemic improvements in teaching and learning, America Forward believes that the statutory language in ESSA makes important progress in a number of critical areas, including the elevation of effective external partnerships, an emphasis on investing in what works, the support of learner-centered systems, and strengthened accountability and transparency. At the same time, America Forward recognizes that there are significant areas of uncertainty and ambiguity that remain as states and local districts begin the process of implementing the new law. As such, we believe the Department has a vitally important role to play – both through regulation and non-regulatory guidance – in ensuring that implementation is feasible and consistent, and thereby helping to make certain that the programming in ESSA expands educational opportunities for all children.

These comments detail provisions in the new legislation where America Forward believes that regulation or additional clarification from the Department would help state and local officials implement new programs and requirements effectively, as well as areas where additional clarification or guidance will help maximize the positive impact for educators and students.

#### **Indicators and State Accountability**

America Forward urges the Department to clarify that, in determining the indicators of school quality or student success described in Section 1111(a)(4)(B)(v)(I-II), states should apply meaningful weight to these indicators, which may provide important information on student performance beyond the specific academic benchmarks required by the statute. Furthermore, the Department should explicitly clarify that these additional indicators may reflect a “whole-child” definition of college- and career-readiness, and may include factors that assess students’ social-emotional development, in addition to purely academic information, because the best learning environments recognize that, along with cognitive skills, the development of social-emotional skills is inextricably linked to improved academic performance, well-being, and greater life success. America Forward believes that a holistic approach is necessary to meet the needs of diverse learners, identify the correct supports, and put every child in the best possible position to succeed.

At the same time, however, America Forward recognizes the importance of providing transparency and differentiating schools based on the academic factors specifically identified in the statute. In order to

ensure that students who have been historically underserved are well supported, we need clarity on academic outcomes across subgroups. As such, we urge the Department to consistently reinforce the clear mandate in the statute that the specific academic indicators be weighted more heavily, in the aggregate and of substantial weight individually, than potential additional factors, while still encouraging states to incorporate other indicators in a meaningful way that provides a clear picture of the whole child.

### **Postsecondary Metrics**

America Forward worked closely with lawmakers over the past year on the inclusion of postsecondary enrollment as an element on report cards through provisions in Title I, Section 1111(h)(1)(C)(xiii) of ESSA. We believe students and parents deserve to know the quality and progress of their schools on critical issues related to college readiness. Including data on postsecondary enrollment on state and local report cards will help students and their families better understand how well schools are preparing students to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. In addition, collecting, linking, and reporting this data will help educators and policymakers better understand how to prepare students for postsecondary success and target limited resources to the schools that need the most support. It is important to note that, while we believe the report card requirements in ESSA are a positive first step, several of America Forward's member organizations are pushing forward, even now, to help states and local educational agencies generate and interpret additional indicators of post-secondary success, in order to give a more complete picture of how well our K-12 education system is preparing students for the rigors of post-secondary education.

As it relates specifically to the requirements in ESSA, we urge the Department to develop guidance that clarifies the expectation for state inclusion of postsecondary enrollment data on report cards, as well as encourages states to include additional data reflecting postsecondary success (e.g. persistence, credit accumulation, and remediation rates). Finally, we urge the Department to provide guidance to States on how to make data as transparent and accessible as possible to parents, educators, students, and school and community partners.

### **Effective Partnerships**

America Forward believes that high-quality community partners – including non-profits, institutions of higher education, and other community-based organizations – can provide states and local districts with the capacity and specific expertise to help them effectively implement programming under the new law and meet new requirements. We strongly support the provisions in ESSA that promote high-quality partnerships, including the requirements in section 1111(g)(2) that state plans provide an assurance that, to the extent feasible, local educational agencies will work with intermediary organizations to develop and implement programs under Title I, and the strong emphasis on high-quality community-based partnerships under the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers program. As such, we urge the Department, when considering regulation and non-regulatory guidance, to consider language that promotes the role of high-quality community partnerships and clarifies for states the resources they have to establish such partnerships. There are many strong examples of high-quality partnerships that lead to improved outcomes that can be shared with states to help them implement this provision. We would welcome the opportunity to help the Department identify these examples and provide technical assistance to states as needed.

### **Innovation and Pay for Success**

America Forward supports the provisions in the statute that support and expand innovation. In particular, America Forward strongly supports the Innovative Assessment and Accountability Demonstration Authority, included as Section 1204 of ESSA. In considering regulations and guidance on this section, America Forward urges the Department to reserve flexibility for states and local school districts to pilot innovative assessments, while still ensuring accountability for student achievement.

America Forward also worked closely with lawmakers over the past year on the inclusion of Pay for Success provisions in ESSA, including in Title I, Part D and Title IV, Part A, section 4108. Pay for Success helps drive funding toward high-quality, effective programs that measurably improve student outcomes. We believe that the Pay for Success model is an important element of the shift away from focusing on inputs and outputs and, instead, placing more emphasis on ensuring positive outcomes for students. We urge the Department to consider regulations and other guidance that highlight the potential of Pay for Success as an important tool to support the focus on achieving better outcomes and provide information to States and school districts on development and effective implementation of Pay for Success models. In addition, the Department should provide information and clarification on the elements of the comprehensive definition of Pay for Success included in ESSA, specifically on the reference to feasibility studies, rigorous, third party evaluations, and payment allocation.

Finally, America Forward supports the inclusion of the Education and Innovation Research (EIR) program (section 4611), which establishes a multi-tiered system of evidence for awarding grants to support innovation. The evidence-based approach embodied in the EIR program is critical to driving investment in the development and implementation of practices that are demonstrated to have an impact on improving student achievement. As such, we encourage the Department – through regulation and guidance – to emphasize the program’s focus on evidence, and assist states in developing interventions, collecting data, and scaling-up best practices.

### **Personalized Learning**

Overall, America Forward supports the flexibility afforded states and local school districts to develop personalized learning environments, including the innovative assessment pilot and the additional indicators in state accountability systems, both discussed above, as well as other provisions. We believe that, in regulating and providing guidance on Title I, the Department can further advance the development of personalized learning environment by clarifying for states that the allowable 3% state set-aside for direct student services provided under Title I may be used to expand, create or improve such environments. Specifically, the Department can issue guidance making clear that this funding may be used to cover the costs associated with offering expanded learning opportunities – including in partnership with a community-based organization – that may include academic tutoring, mentoring, apprenticeships, and career exploration. More generally, there is a growing body of evidence that participants in high-quality expanded learning time programs see significant positive outcomes, and we believe the Department should consistently encourage states and local districts to incorporate expanded learning time into their Title I plans, as well as their turnaround and improvement plans.

In addition, America Forward believes that the Student Support and Academic Enrichment grant program created by ESSA (section 4101) has the potential to provide states and local districts with the flexibility and resources that help support the creation of personalized learning environments. Under the authority

granted to state and local educational agencies by the new grant program, the Department should explicitly clarify that the funding allocated for program activities may be used to develop and scale-up personalized learning strategies, including in partnership with effective external partners.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment on these critically important issues. Please do not hesitate to contact us if we can be of any further assistance during this process.

Sincerely,

Members of the America Forward Coalition and Members of the Reimagine Learning Policy Work Group