



ESEA Reauthorization: Challenges & Opportunities

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CLASP Recommendations for Early Education, Academic Success, and College Readiness for All

CLASP advocates for public policies that reduce poverty, improve the lives of poor people, and create ladders to economic security for all, regardless of race, gender, or geography. We target large-scale opportunities to reform federal and state programs, funding, and service systems, then work on the ground for effective implementation. Our research, analysis, and advocacy foster new ideas and position governments and advocates to better serve low-income people.

CLASP's recommendations for reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) are based on our long-standing work and expertise in two areas: policies related to young children and early childhood education; and academic success and college readiness for disadvantaged youth.

Young children and disadvantaged youth are two key populations that deserve more attention in ESEA:

Young children experience the highest incidence of poverty, with young adults close behind. Blacks and Hispanics are disproportionately affected.ⁱ Children and youth who are poor or low income have far worse education and employment outcomes in adulthood. They experience poorer health, higher incidence of developmental delays and learning disabilities, and more hunger compared to their peers. Children born into poverty are also three times more likely to drop out of high school or become a teen parent. And the longer a child lives in poverty, the worse their adult outcomes.ⁱⁱ Only 34 percent of persistently poor boys and 28 percent of persistently poor girls have consistent employment in young adulthood. Employment outcomes are worst among poor Black boys. A comprehensive approach is needed to put these children and youth on a path to school success, good careers, and self-sufficiency.

High-quality early care and education programs play a critical role in the healthy development of young children, particularly those in low-income households. Research shows that high-quality early childhood education designed to support the full range of children's development improves outcomes for young children, especially those who are poor or low income.ⁱⁱⁱ But despite growing consensus on the importance of the early years, lack of public investment leaves many young children without access to high-quality early education programs. For example, Head Start, the nation's comprehensive early childhood program for poor children, serves only half of those who are eligible. While states have recently expanded pre-kindergarten programs, many are only part day, which present scheduling challenges for working families. Additionally, many programs serve only a small share of four-year-olds. Finally, there are large gaps in access to affordable, quality

child care programs that meet working families' needs and provide children with strong early learning experiences.

School districts are failing to educate many youth. For every 10 students that begin ninth grade, 2 fail to graduate 4 years later.^{iv} Urban areas have particularly low graduation rates. Racial disparities are also severe. Only 69 percent of African Americans and 73 percent of Hispanics graduate from high school on time—compared with 86 percent of White students.^v It's critical that we strengthen our education system to ensure *all* students graduate and are prepared for postsecondary opportunities.

ESEA could help more young children access high-quality early learning opportunities, as well as ensure youth succeed academically and are ready for college and careers.

Recommendations to Support High-Quality Early Care and Education Programs Through ESEA Reauthorization

Dedicated Federal Funding for Early Childhood Education

Poverty limits young children's early learning experiences and places them at high risk of educational failure. It is these children who most benefit from high-quality, comprehensive early care and education programs.^{vi} To that end, it is essential that ESEA reauthorization includes a large federal investment, through a dedicated funding stream, to help states expand these programs to more low-income children—especially those who are unserved or underserved. This funding should augment total current early childhood education and K-12 investments.

CLASP believes core components of high-quality early education include:

- Sufficient funding to attract and retain qualified, well-trained teachers;
- High staff qualifications, sufficient time and financial resources for teachers to meet educational and credential requirements, and ongoing professional development opportunities for all teaching staff;
- Low child-to-staff ratios and small class sizes;
- Developmentally, linguistically, and culturally appropriate curricula and learning environments;
- Access to comprehensive services, including child health, mental health, nutrition services, and family support;
- Family engagement for all families, including those working full time and those who do not speak English as their first language;

- Full-day options to support the needs of working families; and
- Infrastructure supports to ensure ongoing monitoring and quality improvement.

Recognizing that learning begins at birth, additional federal funding should expand access to early education programs for infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children through a mixed-delivery system. Programs within the early childhood continuum of care—including home visiting, Head Start and Early Head Start, public schools, and community-based child care—provide essential services to children and their families. Increased investments to supplement existing high-quality early childhood programs will help many unserved low-income children access early learning—leading to improved outcomes in the long term for our most vulnerable young children and for our country.

Recommendations for Dedicated Funding for Early Education:

- **Support a Federal-State partnership** to increase access to high-quality preschool programs for low-income children.
- **Promote a mixed-delivery system** that provides a wide range of high-quality early childhood education options, improving access and allowing parents to choose the provider that best meets their family's needs.
- **Implement high-quality standards** to improve outcomes for children and families.
- **Include targeted infant and toddler investments** by requiring states to spend a percentage of the dedicated funding stream on high-quality programs and services for infants and toddlers.
- **Enhance professional development opportunities** to help teachers, teaching aides, paraprofessionals, early childhood program leaders, and school leaders develop expertise on early childhood development and appropriate practices with English language learners (ELLs). This should include sufficient time and financial resources to help teachers attain a baccalaureate degree and paraprofessionals attain appropriate early childhood development credentials.
- **Provide state flexibility** to determine whether funds should be used to create new, high-quality programs or improve the quality of existing programs. This flexibility will allow states to increase access to programs that meet high standards of quality, which is an essential component to improving child outcomes.
- **Maintain existing federal investments** in early childhood education and ESEA.

Priorities for Improving the Provision of Services

Over several years, CLASP documented the relationship between ESEA and the provision of high-quality early education programs in local communities, particularly through the use of Title I funds.^{vii} Under current law, Title I funds can be used to finance many different components of an early childhood program, such as teacher

salaries and professional development; minor remodeling; comprehensive services, like health, nutrition, or other social services, or developmental screenings.^{viii} CLASP's research through data collection and interviews with local implementing programs revealed positive aspects of the current statute, as well as major challenges schools and local education agencies (LEA) face in providing young children access to high-quality programs within the early childhood continuum of care. In conjunction with the dedicated funding stream described above, the following improvements we recommend for ESEA reauthorization would enhance the quality of early childhood programs and increase access for the children and families most in need.

Recommendations for Improving the Provision of Services:

- **Increase Title I funding** to ensure LEAs have sufficient resources to meet the needs of—and provide high-quality educational services to—low-income children of all ages.
- **Preserve and support local flexibility** provided to LEAs through ESEA to use funds for discretionary purposes, including the funding of early childhood programs. Language in the reauthorization should make explicit the ability to use ESEA funding for early care and learning programs to support community needs and fill service gaps for families with children from birth through school entry.
- **Support accountability** by: 1) improving data collection policies and procedures, including requiring LEAs to report how many children under the age of school entry served by ESEA funds, as well as which services these children receive and the total expenditures related to this age group; and 2) encouraging the adoption of developmentally appropriate, early learning assessments that conform to the National Research Council's recommendations and cautions on the use of child assessments;
- **Support coordination** across early childhood programs by requiring LEAs to work with local Head Start agencies, as well as other publicly funded early education programs serving young children in their catchment area, to ensure effective transition policies and practices are in place.

Recommendations to Support Academic Success and College Readiness for All Through ESEA Reauthorization

High school completion and postsecondary readiness have been major focuses of education reform in recent years. It is widely accepted that the U.S. must better prepare students for careers that provide financial stability, promote national economic growth, and improve our standing globally. By 2018, 60 percent of all U.S. jobs will require some level of postsecondary education. At the current rate, employers in 2025 will need about 23 million more degree and credential holders than our higher education system will have produced.^{ix}

Certainly, strides have been made in high school graduation rates. The national on-time high school graduation rate has steadily increased over the past decade to 80 percent.^x However, that figure can be misleading. Graduation rates remain lower than the national average for students of color and students in poverty. Seventy-three percent of Hispanic students and sixty-nine percent of African American students graduate from high school—compared with 86 percent of White students.^{xi} According to the most recent data available on males ages 16 to 24, the dropout rates of students of color are much higher than the national average. Latinos and American Indians have the highest percentage of youth dropping out of high school (14 percent and 13 percent respectively), compared to just 5 percent of Whites. Latino and Black males have the highest dropout rates at 13.9 and 8.1 percent.^{xii}

A failure rate of this magnitude is simply not acceptable. In allowing such a substantial proportion of our student population to leave school without attaining a high school credential, the public has abdicated its responsibility to educate the nation's youth. It does not bode well for our economic future that many youth will lack continuous employment and have unstable living situations. Individuals and families do not fare well because they lack the skills to secure self-sufficient employment. On average, high school dropouts earn 24 percent less than high school graduates and 55 percent less than college graduates.^{xiii}

Equally disheartening are disparities in educational quality among public schools. Lack of funding, rigorous course offerings, access to teachers, and specialized support staff lead to lower-quality education in schools serving high-poverty communities. The accountability provisions in the last authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) brought to light many disparities in our education system. It demonstrated the severity of the achievement gap and graduation rate crisis, which were previously masked by misleading calculations. Now, ESEA must take the next step and quantify the disparity in educational quality, as well as hold state and local education agencies accountable for closing those gaps. ESEA must also incentivize sustainable solutions to address the educational needs of students whom the system has failed. It is school districts' responsibility to recover students who have dropped out of high school and connect them to multiple options for completing their secondary education. Moreover, districts should be held accountable for the eventual successful completion of all students in each graduation cohort.

ESEA fails to allocate the resources necessary to meet low-income students' educational needs at all grade levels, but particularly for middle and high school students. Sustained investment across the grade span is essential to keep youth engaged in school and achieving. The education system is currently losing value on its investment in earlier years by failing to maintain supports for older students. Reauthorization of ESEA gives Congress an opportunity to correct this problem. By better targeting investments, ESEA can ensure middle and high schools receive the resources needed to provide a quality educational experience—enabling students to complete high school and prepare for postsecondary opportunities and careers.

By holding local education agencies (LEAs) accountable for students who have dropped out of high school, opening the door for flexible education options, creating partnerships with other youth-serving entities, and ensuring all schools offer rigorous educational opportunities to all students, ESEA can help end the dropout crisis, decrease racial and opportunity gaps, and produce students who are ready for college and careers.

College and Career Readiness

The disparity in high school preparation for students of color is a major challenge for college and career readiness reform. Much of the discussion about these students, particularly those living in poverty, has centered on the deficiencies of students, families, and communities. Lack of academic achievement for students of color is often attributed to environmental and cultural differences that impact school performance. However, greater focus must be given to deficiencies and disparities in school systems, particularly those with high-minority populations. The United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights has quantified the deep disparities in high schools in three key areas that are critical for college and career readiness: the level of coursework available, the experience level of teachers, and access to guidance counselors.^{xiv} A fuller understanding of systemic influences is critical to developing effective policies and practices that improve college and career readiness for students of color.

Recommendations for College and Career Readiness:

- Require state and local education agencies to analyze high school coursework data to identify equity gaps in the availability of a robust menu of college-preparatory classes, as well as develop strategies for closing the gap in annual plans.
- Require states and local education agencies to track rates of participation among students of color in higher-level and advanced placement courses, as well as develop strategies for closing equity gaps in annual plans.
- Conduct a racial equity analysis of proposed teacher and school accountability statutes to determine its impact on teacher placement in low-income, high-minority schools. Provide incentives for experienced teachers to serve in more challenging schools.
- Incentivize reduced student-to-counselor ratios, particularly in high-poverty and high-minority schools, where greater supports are needed to navigate college enrollment and matriculation.
- Track the number of high school graduates who need remedial coursework in the first year of college. Use this data to improve high school curricula.

Dropout Prevention and Recovery

While most students do not drop out until high school, warning signs are evident in the middle school years. Research demonstrates several predictors of eventual high school dropout, including chronic absenteeism, behavioral issues, and course failure.^{xv} Students who have been involved with the juvenile justice and child welfare systems are particularly vulnerable and more likely to drop out of high school. These students often lose large amounts of instructional time and fall far behind. Also at significant risk are students who have not successfully completed enough credits by the end of ninth grade.^{xvi} The first year of high school is pivotal for students; the majority who drop out do so in ninth grade. By analyzing the student population, LEAs can accurately predict which students will need additional supports and help them remain on track to finish school. Districts with early warning systems are utilizing a variety of strategies, such as pairing students with school mentors, wake-up calls, transportation services, and tutoring services. Emerging evidence suggests these approaches are highly effective. In New York City, chronically absent students gained from two weeks to a month of additional instructional time by improving their attendance with the help of success mentors.^{xvii}

Students drop out of school for many reasons. Proven factors that contribute to students dropping out include challenges in the school environment and schools' inability to meet their educational needs. Complex family and personal situations for many youth, especially those who live in high-poverty communities, also lead to premature school exit. Even worse, many students are “pushed” out as a result of punitive, inconsistent school discipline policies that disproportionately impact students of color. African American students are three times more likely to be suspended from school than Whites, largely for subjective infractions such as “disrespect” and “insolence.” However, given the opportunity, these students wish to continue their education. In a national study of high school dropouts, researchers found that 88 percent had passing grades and 74 percent would have stayed in school if they had it to do over again.^{xviii}

Young people need viable options for returning to school. The current system presents obstacles; youth often lack information on available education options and where to enroll. States and LEAs must recognize these students as their responsibility and create intentional, coordinated plans for reengaging and keeping them connected. To ensure this happens, the reauthorized law must incentivize dropout recovery for states and LEAs. Current policies provide disincentives because unsuccessful students negatively affect school and district aggregate test scores. As a result, many LEAs conduct very little outreach and encourage students that have dropped out to pursue opportunities outside the education system, where resources are limited and schools and LEAs have no responsibility. Dropout recovery policies and strategies have been elevated in several states. For example, Oregon encourages school districts to establish alternative, district-run educational options, as well as contract with qualified providers who receive district funding for each student enrolled.^{xix}

Recommendations for Dropout Prevention and Recovery:

- Fund early identification and intervention approaches for middle school students who feed into high schools with low graduation rates.
- Target resources to students most in need of dropout prevention services and intervention, as defined by the term “high needs students” in *Race to the Top*. Also include in this “high needs students” definition, those students who have completed far fewer credits than necessary to be on track for graduation in four years.
- Use Title I funds to support secondary school reform and dropout recovery efforts.
- Encourage states and LEAs to place prioritize Title I funding for secondary schools, especially low-achieving high schools with poor graduation rates.
- Appropriate sufficient funds to: 1) enable all states to design an early warning system to identify students in danger of dropping out of school; and 2) enable LEAs to implement early intervention strategies to support students before they drop out.
- Require dropout recovery strategies to be included in state and LEA plans. This should include strategies for outreach and re-enrollment, multiple options for completion, partnerships for wrap-around services, and connections to postsecondary and work opportunities.
- Include four-, five-, and six-year cohort graduation rates in accountability requirements to allow LEAs sufficient time to help former dropouts complete high school. Include in the graduation rate calculation all students enrolled in alternative education schools and programs that lead to a regular high school diploma or recognized equivalent credential. Require that graduation rates be disaggregated by race, socioeconomic status, and disability.
- Designate a percentage of the formula funds given to all states and LEAs to be used exclusively for high school dropout recovery. Appropriate sufficient funds to enable states and LEAs to design and implement robust dropout recovery strategies.

Multiple Educational Pathways and Options

The traditional high school model is unsuccessful for large numbers of students. In fact, many students cite strict and unresponsive school structures as a reason for dropping out. Research also shows that students who dropped out would have stayed in school if they had smaller class sizes, more individualized instruction, and classroom experiences that reflect real-world scenarios.^{xx} Additionally, research suggests that “youth who move across systems experience disruption in their home lives as well as in the educational system” and that those who spend time in juvenile facilities are “less likely to succeed at education and employment at the same level as youth who were never incarcerated.” Young people in the foster care system also experience poor education and employment outcomes; they need increased supports to ensure a healthy transition into adult life. For

others, personal situations, such as the need to work to support a family, affect their ability to attend school. For many youth that have dropped out, returning to a traditional high school is difficult due to age differences, the need for remediation, or accelerated approaches that will allow them to complete credits in a shorter span. LEAs need support to create multiple education pathways and options to meet the needs of their school populations and guide students to successful completion.

Recommendations for Multiple Educational Pathways and Options:

Encourage states and LEAs to create a menu of well-supported educational pathways and options for high school students (including over-age students, uncredited students, and students who have dropped out) that meet young people's needs and prepare them for postsecondary success. Examples of options include but are not limited to:

- Reengagement centers;
- High-quality alternative programs or charter schools;
- Credits earned based on demonstrated competency instead of seat time;
- Applied learning approaches
- Accelerated learning models;
- Twilight academies;
- Specialized supports for parenting students;
- Concurrent enrollment in high school and community college;
- Integrated Education Training models in partnership with workforce boards;
- GED Plus/Diploma Plus models; and
- Career and technical education.

Collaboration with Other Systems and Sectors

LEAs cannot address the high school dropout crisis alone. It is imperative that they establish partnerships with other youth-serving entities, including government systems, community-based organizations, business and industry. There are several examples of effective reengagement of disconnected youth in other systems, such as the Youth Opportunity Program, which operated through the Department of Labor. In addition, there are many effective community-based alternative schools or programs operated by nonprofit organizations. These components should all be part of a seamless P-20 educational delivery system that provides multiple options for young people. Collaboration among these various entities will create a safety-net to capture and provide new opportunities for students who have dropped out.

Recommendations for Collaboration with Other Systems and Sectors:

- Recommend that states and LEAs make deliberate efforts to establish “horizontal alignment” with all other youth-serving systems (i.e., workforce investment boards, juvenile justice, child welfare, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) to support the educational needs of students who drop out or are at risk of dropping out of high school.
- Recommend collaborations between states, LEAs, and local colleges and universities to create a seamless P-20 route for students, focusing intensively on those who have dropped out.
- Require that states and LEAs include representatives from local workforce investment, juvenile justice, and child welfare systems as partners in planning for turning around struggling high schools and in their dropout recovery strategies.
- Encourage collaboration between LEAs and local community-based agencies to provide high-needs students with comprehensive services, such as transportation, mental health supports, child care, and social services.

Accountability

States and local education agencies should collect information that provides a clear picture of both “inputs” and outcomes. This enables them to plan strategically and make sound decisions that improve education for all students. State longitudinal data collection must support dropout prevention and recovery in meaningful ways. This should include data from other systems or entities involved in educational services, attainment tracking for both regular high school diplomas and recognized equivalent credentials, and data on all multiple education options developed and recognized in that state. This enables states and LEAs to paint a more accurate picture of their dropout interventions and to identify gaps in services to youth. Data systems should also track postsecondary data for students; this will help assess whether student high school experiences provided adequate preparation for postsecondary opportunities.

Recommendations for Accountability:

- Encourage states to develop longitudinal data systems that include: the points at which students enter, exit, drop out, re-enroll, and complete high school or a recognized equivalent; enrollment in postsecondary education; remedial coursework needed in postsecondary settings; and rates of postsecondary completion. Include language that encourages states to identify specific mechanisms or data systems to ensure they are useful in informing planning and programming around dropout prevention and recovery.

Funding

Past funding for high school dropout prevention and recovery has not reflected the scope of the problem. Under the current law, funds specifically designated for dropout services have largely been competitive grants to a small number of states and districts. However, this issue affects the whole country. While the overall high school graduation rate is 80 percent, there are many districts, particularly in high-poverty communities, that still graduate fewer than half the students in their annual cohort. This problem requires a large-scale solution. It's critical that we invest in dropout recovery and prevention to ensure today's young people are equipped to be tomorrow's leaders.

Recommendations for Funding:

- Provide dedicated resources for high school dropout recovery and prevention and ensure they match the scale problem.
- Target resources to middle schools and high schools by requiring LEAs to distribute formula funds more equitably between eligible elementary, middle, and high schools.
- Guide states in development of sustainable funding formulas beyond competitive grants that support multiple pathways and expanded learning options that keep struggling students connected to school and re-engage dropouts with viable educational options.

For questions about our recommendations related to early childhood education, please contact Hannah Matthews, Director, Child Care and Early Education at hmatthews@clasp.org. For questions about our recommendations related to academic success and college readiness for disadvantaged youth, please contact Kisha Bird, Director, Youth Policy at kbird@clasp.org or Rhonda Bryant, Senior Fellow at rbryant@clasp.org.

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