



Recommendations of the American Youth Policy Forum on the Reauthorization of the
Elementary and Secondary Education Act

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AYPF's recommendations for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) are set forth by suggesting Goals, Principles, and Strategies for the Act, which are primarily focused on secondary schools. We have not included extensive background information or research on why these changes are necessary, assuming that you are very well-versed in the condition, status, and poor outcomes of youth in America. The Goals, Principles, and Strategies that are included in this paper can also be applied to various other education and training legislation, such as the Workforce Investment Act (youth programs), Perkins Act, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, certain titles of the Higher Education Act, and 21st Century Community Learning Centers. We urge you to look across all of these laws and consider how the Goals and Principles, in particular, could be incorporated to provide greater policy coherence, consistency, and alignment.

AYPF's comments are focused on issues that directly affect youth in their day-to-day learning, as opposed to extensive comments on issues such as longitudinal data systems, common core standards, or growth models. These are critically important issues, and we know that many of our colleagues will address these issues in depth with great expertise. Rather, AYPF seeks to represent the student perspective and build supportive environments, cultures, and policies that help youth thrive.

Goals

AYPF recommends that ESEA and other legislation that impacts youth and young adults have three ultimate and consistent goals:

- 1) that young people are prepared for family wage careers;
- 2) that young people are lifelong learners; and
- 3) that young people are prepared for civic engagement.

Given labor market demands and the complexity of our culture, society, and world, AYPF assumes that in order for youth to achieve these goals, they must participate in some form of postsecondary education (programs leading to a two- or four-year degree or industry certificate, the military, or apprenticeship). Therefore, the more immediate goals of ESEA would be to ensure that youth graduate from high school or its equivalent, that they are prepared to enter postsecondary education without remediation, and that they have the skills, knowledge, and supports to *complete* postsecondary education with a degree or certification.

Principles

The following principles are meant to drive behavior and influence the design of the education system. While these principles are relevant to middle and high school students, most of them could be adopted, with some revision, for the entire K-12 system, and they are relevant for the other laws mentioned earlier. They move in the direction of creating stronger relationships, communities, and social capital.

Youth Development Focus: Education must incorporate a stronger youth development focus, recognizing that young people need opportunities to develop many types of skills, knowledge, and abilities in order to be successful in today's economy and society. To succeed as adults, all youth must acquire positive attitudes and appropriate behaviors and skills in five areas, including health; personal/social skills; knowledge, reasoning and creativity; vocation; and citizenship. School-based learning needs to be supplemented and augmented by high quality expanded learning opportunities that take advantage of the various resources of the community to provide youth opportunities for exploration and growth. Students need opportunities not only to learn academic skills, but to learn how to apply them and to develop leadership, resilience, motivation, independence, time-management, social, technical, and employer-valued skills. Not all of these skills can be or are developed during the school day, so schools and other organizations need to partner to provide real-world learning and chances for youth to test out and hone their knowledge and skills. Youth also need adult support and mentors and health and mental health care, which many schools do not address. A positive youth development approach also assumes that adults and youth treat each other with respect and that adults have high expectations for youth to succeed. Research increasingly shows that these cultural issues have an enormous impact on what happens to young people.

Using Time and Place Differently: States, districts, and schools need to break out of the structure of the traditional school day, year, and building location, and create learning opportunities that take advantage of the resources in the community (colleges, museums, employers, e.g.), that provide learning at various flexible times and locations, and that use 24/7 online learning as an integral part of instruction. Learning should be based on student competency, rather than seat time or number of Carnegie units earned.

Literacy as a Foundational Skill: Developing literacy is an ongoing process, not limited to the elementary years. Students in middle and high school need continuing instruction to develop higher level reading, comprehension, and writing skills. Many of the students who drop out of school or who are unsuccessful in postsecondary education or in work have low literacy levels. Policy should set a high priority on ensuring that students have strong literacy skills, including reading and writing across disciplines and for multiple purposes. This is not to diminish the importance of mathematics, science, or history, but without foundational literacy, students will not be able to develop proficiency in any area, nor will they be able to hold down a family-wage job. Having a strong focus on literacy development requires different types of teaching and instruction, curriculum, teacher preparation and support, and professional development. It requires a thoughtful approach to who teaches literacy and how literacy is presented and developed across grades and disciplines.

Competency-Based Learning: Learning needs to be measured based on student competency and proficiency, not by how long a student has been in school or in class. When students have mastered content, they should advance; if they need more time to master certain material, they should be given additional time and support. While the traditional four-year high school calendar might work well for some students, other students benefit by accelerating their learning or by having more time. Basing high

school graduation on the number of Carnegie units earned or on seat time effectively dooms many older students who are behind in credits to failure, because they can never catch up in time.

Multiple Pathways and Options: Because youth have diverse needs and life situations, and because they learn at different rates and in different ways, they need access to various programs and pathways from secondary school into postsecondary education. Pathways and options that are differentiated in terms of daytime schedules, duration, location, and curricular focus, and that serve students with special needs, such as students with disabilities, foster youth, adjudicated youth, recent immigrants, teen parents, etc., should be provided equitably across communities. Some pathways can accelerate learning, others can assist students that need more time to master required material, and others can provide grounding in career preparation.

Project-based Learning: Research has shown that project-based learning has been effective in increasing student motivation and improving student problem-solving and higher order thinking skills. Project-based learning gives students opportunities to apply their knowledge and make connections between their studies and their longer-term career and life interests. Students become teachers, teachers become coaches, and parents and community members become motivators, role models, sources of information, critics, evaluators, guides, and mentors.

No Dropouts Accepted: School systems must accept responsibility for all students in their community and for ensuring that if students are at-risk of dropping out, schools provide interventions to prevent that, and if students have already left, schools must work with other community agencies and partners to reconnect them to education and training pathways. The public school system must accept primary responsibility, but incentives should be created so that all public providers of youth services have a shared accountability in positive outcomes for young people.

Equity of Opportunity: One of the traditional roles of the federal government has been to ensure equity of opportunity for disadvantaged youth. While there is a role for the federal government to innovate and test new approaches to schooling, the primary role of the government should be to provide support to communities and schools serving disadvantaged populations to ensure they have the skills to be economically self-sufficient, lifelong learners, and good citizens. There needs to be a thoughtful balance between innovation and formula support so that high-need communities that often lack the social capital and infrastructure to solve persistent problems like low-performing schools have sustainable funding.

Cross-system collaboration: Because young people need various types of supports in order to complete high school, get into college, complete college, and find a job, communities need to work collaboratively and across systems to provide the necessary supports. For many youth, their families and caregivers provide this support and guidance, but many youth lack family support and need help from other sources and providers. This is particularly true for youth that face special challenges, such as teen parents, foster youth, adjudicated youth, and youth with disabilities. Various providers of services, including community- and faith-based organizations, social and family services, employment and training services, judicial system, health and mental health, institutions of higher education, and employers can all provide key programmatic elements to support youth as they develop. These providers need to collaborate to provide integrated services and smooth transitions.

Strategies:

Build Capacity: Funding should support capacity-building efforts at the state, district, and local levels for leaders, teachers, and staff. Instructional staff, in particular, need help learning how to teach reading,

writing, and literacy across the curriculum and grades, using differentiated learning strategies to meet student needs, providing applied, project-based learning opportunities, using time and place differently and structuring the school day differently, measuring competency and not seat time, integrating on-line learning, working with overage and under credited youth, and advising and guiding youth toward postsecondary education and a career pathway. In addition, all personnel need to learn about youth development, and schools need to create cultures of high expectations. Building capacity is an ongoing process that should incorporate school-based professional development, frequent and regular planning time for teachers, teacher coaches (such as literacy coaches), mentoring and induction strategies, and cross-systems training where appropriate (e.g. special education teachers and child welfare workers who work with foster youth that have a high incidence of disabilities would benefit from learning more about each other's programs and supports). School leaders need opportunities to learn about effective research-based instruction and be prepared to manage organizational and systems change.

Develop Literacy Proficiency: Developing proficiency in literacy is a non-negotiable. States, districts, and schools that receive funding should demonstrate how they plan to help every student, particularly older students who are behind in credits or grade level, develop literacy proficiency and what academic and social supports they intend to provide. Teachers and leaders need support to identify and use effective literacy instructional strategies, which is a key part of capacity building. Teachers and leaders should be held accountable for improving literacy, as measured by higher order and complex reading, comprehension, and writing assessments.

Accelerate Learning: All students can benefit from strategies to accelerate learning, as long as they are provided support strategies based on the academic level and learning needs of the student. Opportunities to participate in dual enrollment, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Early College High Schools, and virtual high schools should be supported. Policy must ensure that all students are able to avail themselves of these opportunities by breaking down financial barriers to participation and ensuring that appropriate academic and social supports are provided for each student.

Use Accountability and Data to Improve Learning: There should be greater clarity about what is measured, why, for what purposes, when, and how. The federal government needs different accountability measures than a school or teacher does. A systemic approach to accountability should be taken so all levels (federal, state, district, school, teacher, student) can design an assessment and accountability structure that provides each level with the necessary information to improve learning. Formative and summative evaluations and assessments are both needed, as are assessments that measure skill attainment and growth across various domains, not just purely academic areas. Teachers and school leaders should be held accountable for their knowledge of principles of effective instruction, for example. Multiple forms of assessments should be used. All data and accountability systems must provide disaggregated data on subpopulations of students and their performance.

Funding Flexibility: Policies should allow education leaders greater flexibility to combine funding streams or to use dollars differently to meet special needs of students or groups of students. Providing greater funding flexibility and waivers within and across funding streams would allow school leaders the autonomy to determine differentiated learning and a range of multiple pathways and options, as well as creating learning opportunities that use time and place very differently. They can also use funds to address specific financial needs that prevent certain students from fully participating in school (e.g. AP tests, college visits, etc.).

Equitable Funding Formulas: The current Title I formulas do not always direct dollars to schools, districts, and states with the greatest numbers of poor children. Funding formulas should fairly distribute dollars

to communities and schools with high need student populations. Also, because poor districts in particular need stable funding to maintain personnel and programs, there should be a limit on how much money is put into competitive funding, as many high need, poor school districts cannot compete against larger, better-funded districts. Lastly, there should be more parity in funding between secondary and elementary schools.

Break Down Barriers to Collaboration: Policy should encourage cross-system collaboration to better serve students by adopting common definitions, eligibility requirements, and reporting and accountability requirements. Having shared accountability and common goals across funding streams would drive greater coherence. Support for training and professional development of staff in multiple systems can lead to more collaboration, and providing support for intermediary organizations to manage coordination is needed.

AYPF is a nonprofit, nonpartisan professional development organization based in Washington, DC that provides learning opportunities for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers working on youth and education issues at the national, state, and local levels. AYPF's mission is to broaden the awareness and understanding of policymakers and to strengthen the youth policymaking process by bridging policy, practice, and research. AYPF does this by identifying the most pertinent high-quality information and research on youth issues available and providing a forum for prominent leaders in government, programming, and research, as well as the youth themselves, to share their viewpoints and expertise about the policies and practices that improve outcomes for all youth.

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