

February 10, 2016

Comments Prepared for Committee on Education and the Workforce  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2176 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515-6100

Good morning and thank you for allowing me to speak to you about the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) which resulted in the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). My name is Vic Wilson, Superintendent of Hartselle City Schools in Hartselle, AL, and I come to you today representing AASA, The School Superintendents Association, School Superintendents of Alabama (SSA), and Hartselle City Schools.

ESSA signifies a wonderful step in the right direction to return autonomy and decision making to the state and local level. Just as former Speaker of the House, Tip O'Neill observed "all politics is local," I contend all education is local as well and best delivered and administered at the local level by education professionals and stakeholders who know and understand the intricacies of not only local politics but local education.

Certainly a role exists for USED, a role focused on strengthening and supporting public schools by equitably applying broad flexibility to states and local districts in their efforts to meet the needs of the stakeholders under their purview. ESSA represents the first time in 15 years that state and local education agencies can demonstrate what they can do to support student learning without federal overreach.

Throughout the United States, the nation's 14,000 public school superintendents are charged with meeting and exceeding expectations of student achievement and learning for stakeholders at the local level. What works in Alabama might differ slightly from what works in Minnesota. Likewise what works in Hartselle, AL might differ slightly from what works in Florence, AL or Arley, AL. ESSA provides a new opportunity for each of those leaders to craft and implement 'customized education' for learners in their district. In Hartselle City Schools, we strive to customize an education for each of our 3010 students. With local control, we are better able to meet the needs of the student who wants to be a rocket scientist; the student who wants to be a doctor; the student who wants to be a welder; the student who wants to work in public service; the student who wants to be a teacher; and the student who is not quite sure what he/she wants. Thanks to the flexibility given to us by the ALSDE and now ESSA, we are able to do this by collaborating as necessary with local entities and with other school systems across the state. We are even able to converse and collaborate with leaders across the nation to see how ideas that are working in one region of the country might be used in another area. This works best on an organic level via networking conducted by local leaders instead of top down mandates, and ESSA allows and encourages this type of collaborative dialogue.

Last week, Superintendent Bill Hopkins, Superintendent Ed Nichols and I met in Montgomery with all superintendents across the state at our Legislative Conference. While all three of us reside in Morgan County, we each have differences with which we must deal on a daily basis. Without the ability to implement guidelines that best fit the needs of our respective districts' students, we would be forced to work with round holes and square pegs too often. Every leader needs the flexibility to deal with those situations that are unique to their district in a manner that best meets the need. Superintendent Janet Womack will deal with issues in Florence City Schools differently than Ed, Bill, or I will, and rightly so. ESSA is a huge step in this direction, and will serve leaders as they strive to lead all learners up the stairs of success.

When it comes to federal regulations and ESSA, less is more. I strongly encourage the USED to incorporate input and feedback from stakeholders before adding regulations that could hamper state and local decision making. In Alabama, Dr. Bice implemented Plan 2020 that has greatly increased local control and has resulted in great growth across the state. Our graduation rates are going up and our dropouts and recidivism rates are going down. For example, by re-examining rules and regulations that tie seat time to credit bearing courses or regulations that ignore competency based accountability systems, the USED can empower school districts to think outside the box and implement procedures and policies that best meet the needs of schools and students they serve.

Hartselle City Schools, School Superintendents of Alabama, AASA, The School Superintendents Association and other agencies concur about the importance of implementing ESSA in a manner that reflects the expanded authority and flexibility now granted to the education experts at the state and local level. ESSA makes it clear that Congress' intent is that states should be solely responsible for decisions regarding accountability, standards, teachers, and other factors. Essentially, ESSA is codification of the reality that one size does NOT fit all, and there truly is not one 'best' model that will serve all students and all schools.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today and submit these comments. My goal today has been to highlight the importance of ensuring that state and local education agencies have local control when deciding among the myriad options available in delivering quality instruction and meeting the needs of all students and stakeholders. By allowing broad flexibility to the states and local education agencies, ESSA will go a long way in transforming public education at the local and state level and as a result will help propel public education forward nationally.