

The Buck Stops with Us

By ALEXANDRA FUENTES



Earlier this month, I was one of a group of teachers who met with senators on the Hill to weigh-in on the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind also known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The day before, I was in my high school classroom preparing my students for a lab and teaching them the words for comparing and contrasting cells, a necessary instructional move since all of my biology students are also learning English as a second language.

It is not every day that teachers have the opportunity to talk with leading senators and Senate staff working on a key piece of education legislation. I planned to seize the opportunity to explain how changes to Title I funding would hurt my students, and how assessment data can benefit students, especially when states ensure that tests are high quality.

By the end of the day, I had learned a great deal more than I expected.

1. More teachers need to offer solutions rather than critique.

In one Senate office, the staff seemed to expect us to complain about policies on the Common Core State Standards. Instead, we shared examples of how teacher-led training on Common Core had made it possible for public school teachers, including teachers in public charter schools, to implement more effective instructional strategies in our classes. Our message was that annual assessment data provides critical information we use to plan our instruction and improve outcomes for students. Walking out of the meeting, I wondered why the staff seemed to expect us to complain. Clearly, we need more teachers to bring solutions backed up by success stories to the table to help policymakers fine-tune legislation.

2. Other states have figured out solutions to the problems we face.

The way I see it, legislators in those states have an obligation to make sure that legislators working on ESEA know about the policies that are working.

In another Senate office, I listened as a teacher from Massachusetts described how student growth percentile (SGP) data was motivating students to make accelerated gains. Where I teach, test results only tell me if students are proficient or on grade level. A student who starts out three years

behind grade level and makes two years of growth gets no recognition, because the only test results we receive will say that she is still below grade level. The SGP data used in Massachusetts is an innovative

solution to one of the challenges we face in Virginia. I hope that senators (and teachers) in states that have developed innovative practices share these with policymakers on education committees in the House and Senate as they revise ESEA.

COMMENTARY

3. We (read: individual teachers and citizens) need to stop accepting excuses and start taking action to make sure that ESEA gets reauthorized.

One Senate staffer spoke honestly and said, "In my opinion, I'm not sure any bill is going to get past the House." The House version of the bill was dead on arrival because it was a partisan and not a bipartisan bill. That is unacceptable. ESEA is seven years overdue. How many more years will we enable Congress to debate and drop an issue that is so vital to the millions of children in pre-k through 12th grade? If there is one thing I walked away with from my time talking with senators on this Hill, it is the understanding that I have a voice that can help make policy better. If teachers across the nation speak up and contact our senators and representatives, we can make ESEA a priority for Congress. When teachers also take action at the state level, we can have meaningful impact on policies that matter for students. In Virginia, that means working to improve the quality of state exams.

Back in the classroom, my students will continue their investigation of cells next week, and I will continue to assess their progress and give them feedback. Daily assessments are an integral part of teaching, but the annual assessments required in ESEA are necessary too. After all, the program that supports English Language Learners (ELLs) in my school was only put in place after the disaggregated data from ESEA exposed the fact that ELLs were not learning. Students all across the country need Congress to reauthorize ESEA and keep annual assessments.

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