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The Honorable John Kline
2439 Rayburn HOB
Washington, DC 20515

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Dear Representative Kline,

We write to urge you to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as No Child Left Behind, with an emphasis on greater student input and influence in the classroom and in the broader school structure. As you have previously stated, Democrats and Republicans hope to restructure the ESEA to improve student achievement, rather than simply to label our schools as failures.¹ We believe that some of the most promising educational innovations are taking place where students are given the opportunity to become active participants in their learning experience. Additionally, researchers and policy makers are discovering that students, who are at the center of education reform, can offer valuable feedback and guidance about how to serve them best. Rather than continuing to impose more unrealistic standards and rigid federal mandates, we hope that you will help our public education system to focus on meeting the needs and interests of its students.

Our desire for this change in education policy is rooted in our experiences as students and educators. From kindergarten to Carleton College, our most rewarding and useful learning experiences have been those that have encouraged us to be creative, to ask questions, and to direct our own learning. Now, as we prepare to become public school teachers, we are developing methods to engage and challenge students in similar ways. Anna directs an after-school program in nearby Faribault, Minnesota, focused on expanding college access for immigrant youth. Nick volunteers as a teaching assistant in a college access program for low-income and Latino students in our college's town of Northfield, Minnesota. Both of us have also worked as interns at innovative urban public schools that look beyond standardized definitions of proficiency to focus on meeting community needs. Through this work, we have been incredibly impressed with how responsible and excited students become when their ideas help guide the learning experience.

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/12/us/politics/12education.html?_r=1&ref=nochildleftbehindact

Standardized Education in the Current ESEA

In 2001, when the ESEA was last authorized as No Child Left Behind, both parties praised the law's commitment to make all students proficient in all subjects. Ten years later, however, too many schools across the country are struggling to make what the ESEA defines as adequate yearly progress toward total proficiency. President Barack Obama's administration has released a blueprint for reauthorizing the law that focuses on helping schools improve, rather than simply labeling them failures.² But much of the blueprint follows the federally imposed standardization seen in 2010's "Race to the Top" for education stimulus funds.

As you, sir, have noted, many local leaders and educators have begun to complain that "the federal government has gotten too deeply entrenched in the schools."³ Your leadership as the chair of the House of Representative's Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions committee has already earned you accolades such as the "Star of Education," so we believe that you can lead the push to reauthorize the ESEA with bipartisan measures to focus education reform on our students.⁴

Student-Centered Classrooms

The Obama administration's blueprint for reforming the ESEA takes important steps away from the rigid standardization of the current educational system. As President Obama explained in his State of the Union address, "Our students don't just memorize equations, but answer questions like 'What do you think of that idea? What would you change about the world?'"⁵ Northfield, Minnesota, our local community, is home to two innovative schools that, rather than teaching to the test, are embracing this approach via student-centered curricula.

At Prairie Creek Community School, a K-5 charter school, students' interests are the basis for lessons.⁶ One example of student-centered curricula is the "Village Project." The youth at Prairie Creek create their own town, including a village government, the buildings, and the economic system. Through projects like these, students master practical applications of higher-order skills in social studies, math, and science. **The reauthorized ESEA should encourage new assessments that better measure higher-order and interdisciplinary skills that schools like Prairie Creek develop.**

The Northfield School of Arts and Technology (ARTech), another local charter school, offers students in grades 6-12 the opportunity to determine their own curriculum while still meeting standards for career and college readiness.⁷ Students explore their passions

² <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/blueprint.pdf>

³ http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/12/us/politics/12education.html?_r=1&ref=nochildleftbehindact

⁴ <http://kline.house.gov/index.cfm?sectionid=3§iontree=3>

⁵ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/25/remarks-president-state-union-address>

⁶ <http://www.prairiecreek.org/>

⁷ <http://artech.k12.mn.us/>

through critical thinking strategies and problem solving they have learned from the school. Recently, the Gates Foundation rewarded ARTech for their innovative approach to project-based learning with the EdVisions grant.⁸ **The reauthorized ESEA should embrace these successful models of student-centered curricula with more local innovation grants.**

Student-Centered Schools

Neither the current ESEA nor the Obama administration's blueprint for reform recognizes that local students can help guide reforms. Researchers and educators, however, have successfully incorporated student input into their reforms. For example, kids can help adults with teacher assessment, because they understand who the best teachers are and why. The Gates Foundation recently found that students' assessments of their teachers' abilities – such as caring for students, challenging students, and controlling the classroom – produced ratings positively correlated with external evaluation criteria.⁹ **Accordingly, the ESEA's system of teacher assessment ought to include student surveys in the teacher evaluation process.**

Independent community groups have also harnessed students' knowledge to improve education policy. In our nation's capital, DC Voice interviewed high school students across the district to learn about how well their school was run and what needs were not being met. These interviews have helped reformers provide repairs, staffing, and professional development where and when they are most needed.¹⁰

The Philadelphia Student Union is also a model for community-based reform, working to equalize funding and staffing in the city's schools. Most notably, the student-led group helped create a new school, West Philadelphia High School, by designing small schools and curricula to meet the needs and interests of local students.¹¹ **We hope the ESEA will better utilize the energy and insight shown in these examples by asking the “effective school quality review teams” that reform struggling schools to interview focus groups of students and to present their plans for reform to each school's student government.**¹²

A Student-Centered ESEA

In its attempt to ensure that every child has access to a quality education, the ESEA has too often overlooked the unique qualities and insights of the students that it serves. After reauthorization, the ESEA should encourage schools to take student voices into consideration when creating their curricula and policies. This should include:

⁸ <http://northfieldnews.com/news.php?viewStory=40023>

⁹ <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/college-ready-education/Documents/preliminary-finding-policy-brief.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://www.dcvoice.org/>

¹¹ <http://home.phillystudentunion.org/>

¹² <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/blueprint.pdf>

- Innovation grants for schools with student-centered curricula,
- Assessments that measure higher order skills that are developed through project-based learning,
- Teacher assessment that takes student feedback into account, and
- Review teams that collaborate with students to find solutions for struggling schools.

Representative Kline, if we hope to better meet the needs of our students, the ESEA must include them in the conversation. Please put forward a law that advances the countless possibilities of American public education for each individual student. **We urge you to reauthorize the ESEA with a focus on students' potential to help improve our classrooms and schools.**

Thank you for your attention and your leadership on this issue.

Sincerely,

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