



ESEA Re-authorization: An Opportunity to Redefine the Mission

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Education reform brings with it levels of uncertainty. In recent years, what characteristics reform should entail have been debated on many fronts. To educators, is this viewed as a barrier or an opportunity? Considering that policy change has become rare, we are on the cusp of what might be a giant opportunity.

Congressional jockeying has underscored an intense ongoing battle for how to define what schools should do and how they should educate our next generations. Amidst all of the requirements, sequestration, waivers, and arguments, a constant remains: Teachers and schools continue to do so much for our students while balancing the rhetoric that policymakers have established.

Therefore, with the imminent overdo passage of a bipartisan law which reauthorizes perhaps one of the greatest civil rights accomplishments of the 20th century, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), schools should use this opportunity to really ask (and develop) what we can do for our students to fulfill the goals that prepare them for their future in an ever changing world.

Local Control and Owning Your School's Work

In 1993, Wang, Haertel and Walberg conducted high quality research through meta-analysis to investigate what influences student learning. The researchers did an exhaustive search of peer reviewed studies and data. What they found could have predicted the next 20 years of education and brought some context for why regardless of the initiative, we just have not been able to achieve the desired goal. Wang et al. found that the further (more distal) an initiative moves away from the students the lesser the initiative or effort contributes to student learning. So as schools and school leaders begin to prepare for new education policy which will likely allow for more local control, those who structure the system around the new law should take note of what we have learned through research and practice.

Some policymakers and education department leaders have done work to support proximal efforts in schools. For instance, in recent years under the waiver granted to the New Jersey Department of Education by the United States Department of Education, Regional Achievement Centers (RACs) have been set up by local government and have focused on supporting areas of how schools deliver classroom instruction. Also, schools in waiver states have been required to adopt teacher evaluation models that target effectiveness in the classroom.

While no data is yet available on the success of these efforts, it is clear that a paradigm shift is occurring.

How does the profession move forward? How can leaders be ready?

Regardless of the stakeholder, views of what schools and school districts should be like vary. Schools are not one-size-fits-all systems but instead locally defined and dynamic. Educators should embrace the opportunity to make their schools and districts great within their local environment. Teachers and more importantly leaders and Board members must create a vision for what they want their schools to be. So, as we reset federal and state requirements for accountability or educational framework, we also need to reset our schools to target what we believe is great for students. For many, this is a leap; the questions to ask are 1) what should our schools be; 2) what tools should be used, that policymakers provide, to support those goals; and 3) what materials provide a pathway to achieve the vision for our graduates? Educators can then begin to uncover and unleash the hidden greatness of who we are as a profession so that students, OUR students, can make the world great in the future.

After the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act takes place, schools and school districts have an opportunity to redefine the mission of their schools. In his study and book *A Place Called School*, John Goodlad (1984) described schools as dynamic places where some of the most powerful and impactful learning interactions take place each day in the classroom, between teachers and students. Goodlad said, "Cosmetic changes can be legislated and mandated; the ways that children and youth acquire knowledge and ways of knowing cannot." Change occurs over time. Local schools and districts cannot miss this opportunity to define how we can make our schools better for students!

References



- Goodlad, J. (1984). *A place called school: Prospects for the future*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
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