

February 27, 2017

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Senate Health, Education, Labor
and Pensions
455 Dirksen Senate Office
Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Senate Health, Education,
Labor and Pensions
154 Russell Senate Office
Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Virginia Foxx
Chairwoman
House Education & the
Workforce Committee
1230 Longworth House Office
Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Bobby Scott
Ranking Member
House Education & the
Workforce Committee
1201 Longworth House Office
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Committee Leaders:

We are writing to share some exemplary efforts underway by educators, school and district leaders, policymakers, and other stakeholders who are responsible for implementing the Every Student Succeeds Act (“ESSA”). These leaders view the early learning provisions in ESSA as a foundation for strengthening and expanding early childhood education in a way that is responsive to the needs of the families and communities they serve.

More than a year has elapsed since Congress overwhelmingly approved ESSA, and state and local leaders have already started successfully implementing the law in red and blue states. ESSA provides powerful new tools for state and community education leaders that are working to strengthen and expand families’ access to high quality early learning programs. Congress’s bipartisan decision to expand and elevate ESSA’s early learning provisions will ensure that federal law effectively complements and leverages the innovative early learning initiatives blossoming at the state and local levels across the United States. This will ensure that states are better equipped to coordinate across their early learning system and meaningfully bridge early learning with the early elementary grades. Supporting all young learners will require a strong, ongoing collaboration between federal, state, and local leaders, similar to the balanced partnership embodied by ESSA. As a result, we are grateful that Congress decided to fully partner and champion this critically important work for the many American families who struggle to find, and afford, quality learning opportunities for their young children.

Our organizations work closely with those responsible for implementing ESSA. As such we are committed to continue working with you in order to make a significant impact in the lives of children through meaningful access to high-quality early learning opportunities. ESSA's early learning provisions have fueled momentum for building upon state initiatives that prioritize supporting children at this critical time of brain development. Continued ESSA implementation efforts lie ahead for state and local leaders. We hope these examples from your states (please note that Virginia has not yet released an ESSA plan or outline), and Secretary DeVos's home state, will highlight ways federal leaders can continue to support the implementation process, this includes ensuring the early learning provisions are funded appropriately. Key highlights from draft ESSA consolidated state plans contain the following:

Tennessee

Tennessee proposes to use early learning as a strategy for supporting the state's overall focus on improving reading proficiency. The state intends to use ESSA's early learning provisions and expanded flexibility to implement rigorous early childhood program and instructional standards, develop a portfolio model that measures student growth over the course of the instructional year in pre-K and kindergarten, and appropriately evaluate teachers in these and other areas.

Tennessee's draft ESSA plan (December 19, 2016) states that the "resources and flexibilities in the ESSA will supplement the state's commitment to preschool and early education for all students, especially for students who need it most." The plan notes that "while many of Tennessee's pre-K programs are state and locally funded, some districts and schools utilize Title I dollars to support their youngest learners." The state plans to use ESSA's expanded flexibility to support an emphasis on reading, including early learning activities such as implementing "rigorous program and instructional standards," evaluating teachers through a "new portfolio model," developing a "portfolio model that measures student growth over the course of the instructional year in pre-K and kindergarten," and designing a "new kindergarten entry assessment." Further information about Tennessee's plan is available on the state's website, which can be accessed [here](#).

North Carolina

North Carolina's ESSA strategy includes an exciting birth to third grade vision. The state embraces ESSA's important focus on improving the transition to kindergarten, building teachers' skills to serve young learners, and creating balanced accountability standards that value early childhood education.

North Carolina's draft ESSA plan (December 22, 2016) states that the "expanded flexibility that is offered through the ESSA allows North Carolina to recognize and address the distinctive challenges and opportunities presented by early education from birth through grade three." The plan notes that "[d]uring its 2016 Legislative Session, the North Carolina General Assembly approved language mandating the State to 'develop and implement a statewide vision for early childhood education,

including “a comprehensive approach to early childhood education, birth through third grade.” As encouraged by ESSA, North Carolina plans to use the law to “[s]upport smooth transitions for children as they begin school and through the early grades...,” ensure “teachers and administrators have the skills and knowledge to support young children’s learning...,” and “implement accountability measures that reflect the importance of children’s early years...” Further information about North Carolina’s plan is available on the state’s website, which can be accessed [here](#).

Washington

Washington has long been an early learning leader and plans to continue blazing trails using ESSA’s early childhood provisions. The state’s plan includes a focus on helping school districts leverage ESSA’s early learning investments and providing rich technical support to help schools improve early learning quality.

Washington’s draft ESSA plan (November 13, 2016) notes that the “added clarity and flexibility in ESSA to support prekindergarten families, educators, and children makes it possible to utilize a larger share of ESSA program funds to advance [statewide early learning initiatives].” Washington’s plan asserts, among other early learning goals, that “[p]rior to school districts making decisions regarding their utilization of ESSA program funding, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction will provide technical assistance to school districts regarding: The availability and use of ESSA funds for serving prekindergarten children (e.g., Title I, Title II, Title III); creating quality preschool programs; how to create socioeconomically diverse classrooms using multiple funding streams; transitions into kindergarten; Head Start requirements; and other related information.” The state plans to work closely with early childhood providers and early childhood professional organizations to support the law’s success. Further information about Washington’s draft plan is available on the state’s website, which can be accessed [here](#).

Michigan

Michigan leaders quickly recognized ESSA’s ability to support their efforts to better connect early childhood education programs with elementary school. The state has innovative ideas for incentivizing teacher performance, providing health and wellness screenings, and promoting powerful evidence based practices.

Michigan’s ESSA plan formation documents (January 12, 2017) highlight key “areas of consensus” including using the law to better integrate early childhood education. The state notes “ESSA provides us with opportunities to integrate early childhood work with the K-12 work more efficiently.” In a presentation to the State Board of Education on January 12, Deputy Superintendent of Education Venessa Keesler outlined a series of ideas for using ESSA’s early learning provisions to further the state’s goals. These ideas include: pay equity for early childhood teachers; home visiting programs for families; comprehensive screening services (vision, hearing, dental, social emotional); adoption of age-appropriate, evidence-based practices for use in Pre-K- 3rd grade classrooms; ensuring alignment, collaboration, and

coordination of P-12 programs; and coordination and supports for the education workforce in terms of appropriate development practices, whole-child development expectations of young children, and authentic parent engagement. Further information about Michigan's emerging ESSA plan are available on the state's website, which can be accessed [here](#).

Our organizations look forward to working with the 115th Congress and the U.S Department of Education collaboratively to support ESSA's implementation during the coming months and years. We were pleased to see the bipartisan discussion about ESSA's early learning provisions during Secretary DeVos's confirmation hearing and hope that securing funding for ESSA's new Preschool Development Grant program will be an early example of continued bipartisan success. Thank you again for your commitment to early learning. If we can be of any service to you, or your staff, please let us know.

Sincerely,

First Five Years Fund

National Organizations

Child Care Aware of America
First Focus
National Association for the Education of Young Children
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of School Superintendents
National Association of State Boards of Education
Ounce of Prevention Fund
Save the Children Action Network
The Partnership for 21st Century Learning

State and Local Organizations

Advocates for Children of New Jersey
Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families
Children's Alliance
Children's Institute
Children Now
Clayton Early Learning
Colorado Children's Campaign
Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative
Educare of Washington, D.C.
Kingsley House
North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation
Smart Start Oklahoma
Strategies for Children Inc.

Voices for Virginia's Children
Wisconsin Council on Children and Families
Wolf Trap Institute for Early Learning Through the Arts/ Wolf Trap Foundation for
the Performing Arts

cc: The Honorable Betsy DeVos
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20202