

**Testimony of Randi Weingarten,  
President  
American Federation of Teachers**

**Before the U.S. Senate Committee on  
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions**

**Full Committee Hearing on  
ESSA Implementation in States and School Districts**

**February 23, 2016**

Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray. On behalf of the 1.6 million members of the American Federation of Teachers, I appreciate the opportunity to testify on the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act. The AFT represents teachers, paraprofessionals and school-related personnel across the country. Our members fight for the public schools their students deserve, that can help give them the opportunities they need, and for educators who teach them to have the latitude, conditions, tools and respect to do their jobs. ESSA gives us the opportunity for the reset needed to move from a test-and-sanction environment to one of support and improvement.

Before going any further, I want to thank Senators Alexander and Murray for their tremendous work. In a time of increased partisanship and gridlock, your leadership made all the difference. By working with and listening to educators, parents, school administrators and other stakeholders, you have made it possible for states to move away from high-stakes testing and punitive sanctions that have left students alternately stressed or bored, frustrated parents, and deprofessionalized and demoralized teachers.

You have made it possible for states to create new accountability systems that focus on the meaningful learning that will prepare children for the complex world they are entering. You have made it possible to support educators as they meet the needs of the whole child, and

have maintained the original intent of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to address significant poverty and its effects. But states will need time to get it done and get it right.

Though ESSA is not perfect, the AFT supported its passage, as it will help level the playing field for those students most in need to have opportunities to be prepared for life, college and career. ESSA turns the page on the broken policies of No Child Left Behind, NCLB waivers and Race to the Top. It has the potential to ensure every public school is a place where parents want to send their kids, where students are engaged, where educators want to teach, where the curriculum is rich, where there is joy in teaching and learning, and where, ultimately, all children are successful.

While states create new, more effective teaching and learning systems, they should hold off on continuing to use the current, flawed high-stakes testing regime. As states develop the timelines and strategies for the interim period between passage of the new law and its full implementation—which is over 18 months—the AFT renews its call for a moratorium on the consequences of high-stakes testing. A reset means a reset.

Many states have already begun this, and we urge others to follow suit. For example, New York has adopted a four-year break on consequences of state tests for students and teachers. The Utah Legislature has introduced a bill to put a pause on how test scores are used. A lawsuit in New Mexico challenges the state's unreliable and unfair teacher evaluation system. And just last week, Tennessee announced that student test scores would not be used in teacher evaluations.

School districts and states now need to dive deeply into the new work—which includes building accountability systems that provide a framework for school and student success. Our public schools should be places where children are met where they are and have multiple pathways to realize their potential. They should offer an engaging curriculum that focuses on teaching and

learning, not testing, and that includes art, music, the sciences, physical education and project-based learning.

Accountability systems should measure and reflect this broader vision of learning by using a framework of indicators for school success centered on academic outcomes, opportunity to learn, and engagement and support. For example, the AFT recommends academic outcomes measured by assessments, progress toward graduation, and career and college readiness. Opportunity-to-learn indicators should include curriculum access and participation, sufficient resources, and measures of school climate. Engagement and support indicators should look not only at students, but at teacher and parent/community involvement. This is hard work, and state leaders will need the input of educators and parents, informed by best practices found throughout the world.

### **Regulatory Process**

To provide the best opportunity for success, the AFT has urged the U.S. Department of Education to stick to the letter of the law that garnered such broad bipartisan support and limit guidance and regulation to only those issues that need clarification to make the law functional in practice. This is a new era of flexibility. Decision-making should be left to the states and the educators, parents and community members—the true stakeholders.

As I wrote in a letter to Acting Secretary King in January regarding opting out and test participation requirements, states are now working out how they will move to new accountability systems, and they need flexibility and support, not threats of losing funding. There is no doubt that teachers will not like everything states do, but the intent of this law is clear. Hopefully, most states have learned from the failures of NCLB and will give educators the latitude and resources to deeply engage students and to focus on the whole child.

The AFT is working with a coalition of states, school districts, educators and parents united by our strong, shared commitment to making ESSA work for students. Although all these

stakeholders do not always agree, we are unified in our belief that ESSA is a historic opportunity. It is critical that this work has a direct impact in the classroom where teachers teach and students learn. We are dedicated to working together at the national level to facilitate our members' efforts to guarantee the success of this new law.

**We All Have to Step Up to Make the New Law Work**

Together, we must seize the opportunity to get this reset right. This is the opportunity to redefine student learning in the robust way that any parent or educator would value, and to offer interventions that will put struggling schools on the path to success. I challenge district, state and federal officials, and all of us, to empower and support teachers to stoke students' curiosity and help them pursue their dreams. We stand ready to partner at every level with all who share the goal of bringing back the joy of teaching and learning.