

FEDERAL ISSUES 2014-2015

REAUTHORIZATION OF THE ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION ACT (ESEA), ALSO KNOWN AS NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND (NCLB)

The Suffolk County School Superintendents Association and the Nassau County Council of School Superintendents support the reauthorization of the ESEA. The nation's most sweeping education law, the ESEA Act of 1965, is outmoded and broken. At the heart of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is a promise: to set a high bar for all students and to protect the most vulnerable.

NCLB has given the country transparency about the progress of at-risk students. But its inflexible accountability provisions have become an obstacle to progress, and have focused schools too much on a single test score. It drives the requirement for almost all state testing in New York State and removes much flexibility from the state and local school districts.

NCLB is many years overdue for an update. It should be replaced by a law that gives states, systems, and educators greater freedom while continuing to fulfill the law's original promise.

The Suffolk County School Superintendents Association and the Nassau County Council of School Superintendents recommend that the reauthorization of ESEA include the following:

- States should be allowed to choose an alternative testing regimen for students in grades 3-8 in English language arts (ELA) and math. Currently, students are tested every year in both areas.
- Districts that have a proven record of success based on state assessments in ELA or math should be allowed greater flexibility in the testing regimen.
- Assessment requirements for limited English proficient students should allow flexibility for testing content area in their native language. For one calendar year after a student enters the U.S. system, test results on these mandated tests should not be included in accountability measures.



SCSSA & NCCSS Legislative Priorities



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STATE ISSUES 2014-2015

Due to the challenges districts face with federal regulations, financial funding formulas, unfunded and underfunded mandates and the property tax levy cap, it has become increasingly more difficult for educational leaders to deliver the quality instructional programs all children need to be college and career ready. The issues outlined below represent the core issues which have the potential to most negatively impact the future of quality education on Long Island and throughout New York State.

ELIMINATION OF THE GEA

The Suffolk County School Superintendents Association and the Nassau County Council of School Superintendents support the complete elimination of the Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA) during the 2015-2016 school year. The GEA was initially introduced in the 2009-2010 school year as a way to help reduce the state's \$10 billion budget deficit. The GEA is a formula in the state budget that reduces the amount of aid each school district is entitled to receive. Because of this, districts that are dependent on state aid for their funding are more negatively impacted by the GEA formula.

Over the past four years, Long Island's school districts have lost a total of \$1.2 billion in state aid due to the GEA. Over one-half (\$673 million) of the loss was incurred by the 38 low-wealth school districts (CWR <1.0), which enroll nearly 45% (200,400) of the students in the region. In the last several years, there has been a partial restoration of the GEA in the state budget. The GEA and its partial restoration have a disproportionately severe impact on Long Island schools. The GEA reduces aid to Long Island schools

at a higher rate than schools across the rest of the state, and the GEA restores aid to Long Island schools at a lower rate than the rest of the state (30.1% vs. 36.7%). If Long Island lost aid and had aid restored at the same rate as the rest of the state, our poorest districts would have received an additional \$10 million in GEA restoration money.

In the midst of the GEA, public schools in New York State are in the process of implementing reforms of an unprecedented nature. These underfunded mandates have proven to be a tremendous burden on school budgets. At the same time, schools are bound by cost drivers that are beyond their control, such as the Taylor Law, the Triborough Amendment and Wick's Law. These costs, in the midst of continued use of school funding to cover a budget deficit in New York State that no longer exists, not only are no longer necessary, but create a perfect storm for school district finance.

We are in support of full elimination of the GEA in 2015-2016 by providing school districts the full amount of aid generated by all of the existing funding formulas without the GEA deduction.

PROPERTY TAX FREEZE CREDIT CAP

The Property Tax Freeze Credit is a two-year tax relief program that reimburses qualifying New York State homeowners for increases in local property taxes on their primary residences. In order for the credit to be available to the homeowners in a local school taxing jurisdiction, the school district must comply with the New York State Property Tax Cap and, after the first year, must also develop an efficiency plan.

The Suffolk County School Superintendents Association and the Nassau County Council of School Superintendents support strong local and fiscal controls on school spending. However, the additional requirements for districts to remain under a tax cap, and in the second year to be required to submit an efficiency plan reflecting further savings in order for taxpayers to be eligible for School Tax Relief (STAR) rebates, are an undue burden on school districts.

School districts have worked to cut their spending as a result of the tax cap and the impact of the GEA for the last four years. Significant positions, programs, and extracurricular activities have already been cut.

Tying STAR rebate checks to these initiatives is unfair to homeowners in districts that are unable to meet the requirements and to businesses that don't receive the benefit of STAR rebates. Additionally, because STAR rebates are tied to the capped levy, STAR rebate checks are also reduced under this legislation. The anticipated \$1.5 billion in direct property tax relief over the three years of this plan should be redirected to all property owners to offset local taxes.

Schools have a built-in mechanism for sharing services and implementing operational efficiencies through their local Boards of Cooperative Educational Services. Savings through the use of shared BOCES services should be allowable under the required efficiency plans.

Although certain exemptions to the tax levy cap exist, additional exemptions for cost drivers beyond our control are critical. Health and pension costs, any additional unfunded mandates and the effects of Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) should be considered so as not to negatively impact a district's tax levy cap.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS IMPLEMENTATION AND THE REGENTS REFORM AGENDA

The Regents Reform Agenda addresses many key priorities for improving learning opportunities for all school children. But some of the initiatives prescribed to advance that goal are flawed, and some have been undermined by rushed and flawed implementation. As educational leaders, the Suffolk County School Superintendents Association and the Nassau County Council of School Superintendents support a more rigorous curriculum that properly prepares our students to be college and career ready and successful contributors in a competitive global society. Instructional shifts and rigorous learning promoted in the Common Core Standards movement are worthy of support.

However, teaching and learning in our state would benefit if we could reduce "overtesting" and eliminate the duplication of, and fixation on, testing and test results.

The overall rigor of a student's academic program matters more than the results from any one state assessment. No one test result is a good measure of all the work being done by our principals, teachers and other school staff, or by families and students. In light of this, we believe that there is currently limited value in connecting state assessments to student, teacher and principal evaluation scores. We support a moratorium on tying APPR scores to high-stakes testing. Reaching the Common Core Standards expectations is a marathon, not a sprint, and we need to be careful not to lose principals, teachers, students and their families along the way.

Schools were challenged to implement two state-mandated initiatives at once: preparing students for Common Core Standards-aligned 3-8 testing, while negotiating new Annual Professional Performance Review

plans for teacher and principal evaluations. Both of these were rushed. The second pushed schools to expand student testing. After much work to do on the latter, we are now being asked to review our assessments and determine if fewer assessments can be utilized. This is necessary work, but it is work to undo or redo – hard work that has already been done. We recommend deferring any further new requirements until the 2015-2016 school year.

Our schools need to focus on grasping the expectations the standards set for our students, and give educators the professional development and resources they need to help students reach those standards. We support and strongly encourage ongoing professional collaboration and a working partnership with the State Education Department as decisions about implementation are

being made. We support and promote high-quality professional development for teachers and principals. All of this requires sufficient school funding and resources. We strongly support ensuring adequate state and federal funding.

As the Educational Conference Board observed last fall, "The Common Core Learning Standards represent the most significant increase in student expectations New York schools have ever faced." As leaders, we are committed to doing the hard work required to provide our students with a quality education. Not only has the number of new initiatives caused unnecessary turmoil and anxiety, it has distracted us from the important work that needs to be done. The changes that have occurred, now need reflection and fine-tuning to fully benefit our students. A thoughtful, systematic approach moving forward is critical.