

A Call to Action for the School Improvement Industry: Getting Involved in the Next Reauthorization of ESEA

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May 7, 2006

It is not too soon to get involved in the next reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). After all, the current authorization ----in the form of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002--- is set to expire September 30, 2007. While most policy makers predict that NCLB will be extended for at least two more years---until after the Presidential election in 2008, the buzz around Washington these days is all about reauthorization and getting ready for a long, complex and contentious process.

There are ample reasons for the school improvement industry to take notice and play an active advocacy role in the reauthorization deliberations. First, there is the obvious. ESEA has become a market shaper in increasingly profound ways. When it was originally passed in 1965 as part of the Johnson Administration's War on Poverty, ESEA was a relatively straightforward statute of 32 pages. Amended and/or reauthorized at least six times (in 1967, 1973, 1981, 1988, 1994, and 2001) ESEA has evolved into a massive multi-dimensional behemoth of more than 1,000 pages authorizing over 60 programs. As Chris Cross has noted, through each reauthorization, "...the federal government has vastly increased its role in K-12 education ..., from that of a passive actor mostly providing research, resources, and some guidance to the states, to the major factor driving policy and practice in almost every state and in most of the nation's 15,000 school districts..." While the federal role will inevitably be a bone of much contention in the next reauthorization, ESEA will certainly continue to have a critical impact on policy at all levels and significantly shape the school improvement market place.

What is equally compelling about the next reauthorization is that knowledge-based school improvement could be ---with the right kind of advocacy support from the education policy community--- the central organizing theme of the new law. As I have noted in previous SIIW articles, education policy has evolved in phases over the past 15 years in concert with the implementation of the elements of standards-based reform. The focus on standards and assessments in the late 1980's and early 1990's (remember when standards were controversial?) spawned a major focus on the alignment of assessments, curriculum, and assessments in the 1990's which in turn begat the current emphasis on accountability. It is particularly significant that the last three reauthorizations have paralleled this progression with the Hawkins/Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988, the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, and the NCLB of 2002.

The next logical step in this standards-based continuum is a more comprehensive and vigorous focus on school improvement --- when significant new resources and expertise would be targeted both to turning around low performing schools and to building a knowledge capacity and infrastructure for sustained improvement. Paul Kimmelman in his recently published book Implementing NCLB, Creating a Knowledge Framework to Support School Improvement argues for this point particularly well in his call for building organizational capacity through a knowledge model. (Note that Dr. Kimmelman is on the NEKIA Board of Directors)

And I believe this is where the next reauthorization of ESEA can and should be headed. What are needed are both a compelling vision and a vigorous and united advocacy effort. Towards this end, the National Education Knowledge Industry Association is preparing a comprehensive strategy based upon by five principles:

#1 Accelerating and Sustaining Improvement --- Effective use of education knowledge can significantly enhance, accelerate, sustain the nationwide efforts to improve academic performance and close achievement gaps in k-12 education.

#2 Applying Useable Knowledge to School Improvement --- Knowledge that is used to shape policy and practice should be derived from the best available empirical evidence as well as informed by sound professional judgment.

#3 Collaborating among Key Stakeholders --- The effective use of knowledge in school improvement requires the active participation of and the on-going collaboration among five key stakeholder groups: practitioners; policymakers; researchers; developers and providers; intermediaries

#4 Building a Dynamic Knowledge Base --- Effective knowledge use for school improvement depends upon dynamic on-going exchanges of data and information among the stakeholders and involves a continuous process of research, application and adaptation. As knowledge is used and adapted, new knowledge is created and applied in a cumulative, iterative fashion.

#5 Shaping School Improvement Policies --- School improvement policies at the federal, state, and local levels should focus priority attention on the effective use of knowledge and create incentives to stimulate greater demand for and increased supply of knowledge-based solutions.

In the coming months at NEKIA we will be initiating a major reauthorization effort. It will be a call to action for all involved in the school improvement industry to

come together and make the next iteration of ESEA realize its full promise in school improvement and knowledge-based reform.