



Recommendations of the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Reauthorization

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U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Education and Labor

About NACAC

The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) and its state and regional affiliates represent more than 20,000 college counseling and admission professionals nationwide. The association represents more than 1,600 high schools and 1,100 not-for-profit colleges and universities. Since its founding in 1937, NACAC's enduring goal has been to provide students greater access to higher education.

President Obama's Goal

At the start of his presidency, President Obama set a goal for the United States: Make sure that by 2020 we have the highest rate of college attendance of any country in the world.

NACAC believes that to be successful in college or career and technical education, students and their families need to be informed on how to best prepare for these postsecondary options. Such preparation includes information on curriculum planning, student financial aid, the college admission process, and career planning. High school students and their families are faced with high-stakes decisions that will affect the rest of the student's life, including their career and lifetime earning potential. With the right resources and training, a school counselor is the best source for this critical information for all students.

To equip students and families with this necessary information and preparation to make postsecondary decisions and achieve the President's goal, Congressional leaders must fully integrate school counselors and college counseling into the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Recommendations

As educators dedicated to helping students make the transition to postsecondary education, NACAC members' leading policy priority is solving the college access crisis. In elementary and secondary education, two principles must be addressed to achieve this goal: (1) access to quality counseling on postsecondary preparation and (2) access to college-preparatory curriculum for all students. Additionally, support for school counselors through professional development and inclusion of school counselors in school reform efforts is essential to improving student achievement and college access.

I. Improve access to school counselors for all students.

- ***Implement the provisions of the Pathways to College Act*** with the purpose of increasing access to school counseling services for the neediest students, reducing the student-to-counselor ratios in the neediest school districts; and removing structural barriers that prevent school counselors from providing effective service to students.

The Pathways to College Act is a bipartisan bill (S 1129 and HR 2579), sponsored by Senators Richard Durbin (D-IL) and Richard Burr (R-NC) and by Representatives Timothy Bishop (D-NY) and Vernon Ehlers (R-MI). The legislation's provisions would create a competitive grant program for high need school districts to: improve college readiness and academic achievement, help create and maintain a college-going culture in schools, and reduce the structural barriers to quality college guidance that school counselors and their counterparts are in a unique position to provide. The Pathways to College Act recognizes the crumbling state of college counseling in many of our nation's public schools, and provides tools that can better equip schools to prepare students for the types of education needed in our global economy.

- ***Maintain current language in Title V, Part D, Subpart 2 - Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Program (ESSCP) and amend*** to increase the authorization to \$75 million; to make necessary changes to ensure program funds reach high schools; and to add a definition of "comprehensive school counseling program" to emphasize college readiness and collaboration with other school-based support staff to reduce barriers to learning and help all students achieve academically.

As part of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Congress expanded the ESSCP to include secondary school activities. The ESSCP is intended to provide schools with the necessary resources so that school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, child and adolescent psychiatrists and other qualified psychologists can work together to establish a comprehensive counseling program that makes a difference in students' lives.

In his Fiscal Year 2011 budget, President Obama proposed to consolidate the ESSCP into a larger, Safe, Successful and Healthy Students Program. Although we commend the President and Secretary Duncan for the proposal of a new school climate initiative, we are concerned with the elimination of the only dedicated funding stream preserved for the creation and expansion of comprehensive school counseling programs.

There is a significant demand for federal assistance to build the capacity for school counseling programs in America. Every two years when the U.S. Department of Education requests applications for ESSCP, it receives approximately 500 applications. It also notes that the current funding level (\$55 million for FY 2010) limits its ability to fund programs, resulting in funding only about 10% of applicants. For the 2007-2008 school year, 97 school districts across 22 states were able to provide counseling services and supports through ESSCP. In 2009, 64 school districts, comprising more than 850 schools and more than 429,000 students across 29 states, obtained new grants to establish

or expand school counseling programs and services. The proposal to consolidate ESSCP would threaten the capacity-building efforts of existing grantees and eliminate the absolute priorities that seek to meet this growing public demand for school counseling programs.

Rationale: Research conducted by NACAC and in collaboration with our colleagues in the Pathways to College Network shows that access to quality school counseling has a significant impact on the academic achievement and postsecondary planning of all students, but especially low-income students. However, many students do not have access to a school counselor in the critical secondary school years when postsecondary planning must happen. Additionally, many quality school counselors nationwide are overburdened with large student caseloads and non-counselor duties, both of which hinder their abilities to provide quality postsecondary advising.

The ESSCP is the only federal program exclusively designed to provide funds to hire school counselors and other school-based professionals that help eliminate barriers to learning. This small but effective program has only recently been appropriated sufficient funds to allow high schools to receive grants to hire counselors. The addition of a definition of “comprehensive school counseling program” would ensure that grant funds have a direct affect on student achievement and school reform.

II. Fully integrate school counselors into the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

- ***Ensure that school counselors are able to receive professional development funding*** under Title II of ESEA. Professional development is an integral part of enhancing and maintaining quality performance of college counseling professionals so they may better serve students and families.
- ***Involve school counselors in annual assessments and other school reform efforts*** required under ESEA. School counselors are uniquely positioned, serving as partners and resources to principals and teachers, to provide support students need to maintain academic progress.

Rationale: No Child Left Behind does not fully integrate school counselors into accountability and school reform programs. Organizations like NACAC, Education Trust, and College Board and have advocated for a stronger counselor presence in the law’s provisions. Research proves the positive effect school counselors have on academic achievement and postsecondary planning of students. Few pre- and in-service requirements help prepare school counselors to provide postsecondary counseling and no state requires college admission counseling coursework to fulfill undergraduate or graduate counseling course requirements (Education Commission of the States, 2008). School counselor participation in school reform and professional development efforts should therefore be encouraged by federal legislation.

III. Improve access to college preparatory curriculum for all students.

- ***Amend allowable uses of Title I funds to allow the neediest high schools to develop and support innovative approaches to improving curriculum***, including dual enrollment or early college programs in partnerships with colleges and universities. These curriculum opportunities expose students to challenging coursework and enable them to obtain college credit while in high school.
- ***Provide incentives to allow states to develop more equitable K-12 finance structures***. Research on college readiness and student achievement often cites the need for all students, but especially low-income and first generation students, to have access to information about how to prepare academically and financially for college. Regardless of socioeconomic status, all students deserve access to college- and career-preparatory coursework.
- ***Support state innovation in providing expanded curricular opportunities*** for all students, while maintaining flexibility and state autonomy in developing curriculum standards and content.

Rationale: Successful completion of a college preparatory curriculum is a better predictor of college success than test scores, and is in fact a better predictor of bachelor's degree completion than any other factor (US Department of Education, 1999). Performance in college preparatory courses is the most important factor in admission decisions (NACAC, State of College Admission 2008). Currently, low-income and other underserved students lack access to rigorous curriculum and therefore are not as prepared for postsecondary education as their more affluent peers. Although great improvements have been made in the college enrollment and graduation of low income and minority students over the last several decades, the gap between high and low income students in high school graduation, college enrollment, and completion has remained steady for 35 years. Access to rigorous curriculum for all students is the best way to expand access to higher education, increase postsecondary completion, and improve the quality of the workforce.

Conclusion

NACAC urges the House Committee on Education and Labor to draft Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorization language that will provide students from all socioeconomic backgrounds with access to quality counseling on postsecondary preparation and access to college-preparatory curriculum. School counselors, when supported through professional development, are equipped to be integral parts of school reform efforts. Fully integrating school counselors and counseling into the Elementary and Secondary Education Act will increase America's rate of college attendance and secure our nation's economic future.