

knowledge alliance

July 22, 2021

Senator Patty Murray
Chair, Senate Committee on Health,
Education, Labor and Pensions
154 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Richard Burr
Ranking Member, Senate Committee
on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
217 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Chair Murray and Ranking Member Burr,

On behalf of Knowledge Alliance, a non-profit, non-partisan organization focused on improving education by advocating for the widespread, effective use of research-based knowledge in policy and practice, we are pleased that you will be working together in a bipartisan manner to reauthorize the Education Sciences Reform Act (ESRA). Additionally, we are supportive that efforts to reauthorize ESRA will build off improvements made in the Strengthening Education through Research Act (SETRA), which passed the U.S. Senate in December 2015.

Given our extensive background in ensuring the equity and efficacy of education research, we have compiled our main priorities and recommendations – that are shared in more detail below – to be considered in your discussions on the reauthorization of ESRA. These priorities include:

- Increasing the federal investment in research, development, dissemination and technical assistance;
- Driving effectiveness and efficiency in every Federal education program by aligning and coordinating the use of research and evidence across all ED and IES programs;
- Ensuring a strong definition of research;
- Maintaining the independence of IES and its basic structure but also promoting and incentivizing the responsiveness and usefulness of research to educators;
- Strengthening existing language in ESRA to protect student privacy;
- Improving the ability of Regional Educational Laboratories (RELS) to serve their stakeholders effectively;
- Ensuring that the Comprehensive Centers (CCs) serve their customers effectively; and
- Supporting effective state implementation of federal programs.

Knowledge Alliance will be providing specific legislative language and justifications for these recommendations in the coming days.

Thank you for your commitment to the future of equitable education research and the success of all students and schools. Your leadership is crucial in ensuring that every student and every educational institution has access to the necessary research and evidence-based resources and tools to respond to the world around them, which has recently been characterized by the COVID-19 pandemic and social and racial disparity.

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If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact Danica Petroschius (dpetroschius@pennhillgroup.com), Lindsay Fryer (lfryer@pennhillgroup.com) or Soraya Zrikem (szrikem@pennhillgroup.com).

Sincerely,



Jacki Ball
President
Knowledge Alliance



Recommendations for Reauthorization of the Education Sciences Reform Act (ESRA)

[Knowledge Alliance](#) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization committed to the greater use of research-based knowledge in education policy and practice. We believe the effective development, dissemination and use of research-based knowledge is essential to improving instruction and increasing student achievement. With that in mind, we believe the reauthorization of the Education Sciences Reform Act (ESRA) is long overdue. Our Nation's education research infrastructure must be updated to meet the pressing needs arising from the pandemic, address racial and social inequities and align with current federal education law to be prepared for future critical events that can dramatically upend how schools operate.

Despite having bipartisan support and passing both chambers of Congress during different sessions, the Strengthening Education through Research Act (SETRA) was not enacted. Knowledge Alliance urges the 117th Congress to begin its ESRA reauthorization negotiations with SETRA as a starting point. We believe SETRA made some positive changes to current law, including promoting education research and evaluation programs within the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) that allow for the support of evidence-based policymaking and provide federally funded research providers with the flexibility to be responsive to the needs of states, districts and schools in their various school improvement efforts to improve teaching and learning.

Our organization welcomes the opportunity to provide input to improve policy and practice in education research, evaluation and dissemination based on our collective experiences and expertise. ***To that end, we recommend the following in your efforts to reauthorize ESRA:***

- 1. Increase the federal investment in research, development, dissemination and technical assistance.**
 - The U.S. Department of Education (ED) spends less than one percent of its budget on research, development and statistics. This level of investment has not generated the evidence base needed to achieve systematic improvements in teaching and learning and improve student outcomes.

- 2. Drive effectiveness and efficiency in every Federal education program by aligning and coordinating the use of research and evidence across all ED and IES programs.**
 - Require that ED and IES co-develop and align their standards of rigor for research, with public comment, and apply them to all appropriate programs, including Regional Educational Labs (RELs), Comprehensive Centers (CCs), and National Education Research & Development (R&D) Centers.
 - Prioritize timely, effective and wide dissemination of research and evaluation results from RELs, CCs and the R&D Centers to ensure that states, districts and schools have

continuous access to the latest evidence on which educational strategies and interventions work and under what context.

- Ensure effective collaboration and consultation between IES and ED on all evaluations of impact, implementation and utilization of funds across Federal education programs as outlined in Section 8601 in ESEA.

3. Ensure a strong definition of research.

- Maintain the “principles of scientific research” and updated definition of “scientifically valid research” included in SETRA that is aligned to the definition in Head Start and the Higher Education Act.
- Ensure effective implementation of the definition of “scientifically valid research” across programs by having the National Research Council conduct a timely, third party review to evaluate its implementation. The Secretary should be required to provide specific guidance for using the best available empirical evidence for specific projects or interventions.
- Add definition of “evidence-based” as defined in section 8101(44) in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and include other appropriate references to “evidence-based” throughout the bill.

4. Maintain the independence of IES and its basic structure but also promote and incentivize the responsiveness and usefulness of research to educators.

- Provide a more transparent and engaging process by which researchers and practitioners can contribute to the articulation of new topics of research from IES that are responsive and relevant to the field.
- Update the duties of NCER, NCES and NCSER to reflect current and emerging needs, including those related to the COVID-19 pandemic and other traumatic events, as well as other critical equity-based issues.
- Provide flexibility for the Commissioner of Education Research, as outlined in SETRA, to establish national research and development centers that address topics of importance and relevance in the field such as equity and racial injustice; technology-based instruction & assessment (including but not limited to AI applications); students’ social and emotional well-being; and civic learning and media literacy.
- Include language from SETRA that updates the functions of IES and its Director to ensure all activities carried out by IES are relevant, useful and widely disseminated to researchers, policymakers, practitioners and the public.

5. Strengthen existing language in ESRA to protect student privacy.

- Maintain language throughout SETRA that reinforces and protects student privacy by ensuring that the various duties, activities and functions authorized are carried out consistent with and adhere to privacy protections in section 183 of ESRA.
- Require the Director of IES to ensure that any disclosed information with respect to individual schools does not reveal any personally identifiable information (PII).

6. Improve the ability of Regional Educational Laboratories (RELS) to serve their stakeholders effectively.

- Maintain current REL governing board structure in ESRA and ensure the governing board continues to include the chief state school officer or such officer's designee, and that it has full authority to select the priorities for RELs and their final work plan reflects regional needs.
- Clarify the critical role of RELs in conducting applied research on improving teaching and learning by updating the key activities of the program to include analytic support.
- Authorize RELs to conduct a full range of scientifically valid research that address practice-based questions.
- Encourage and invest in innovative approaches to bridge the gap between practice and research, such as research practice partnerships, also known as research alliances, that have been a part of recent REL work.
- Ensure RELs have the flexibility to respond quickly to stakeholder needs.
- Maintain a separate authorization funding level for RELs as in current law.
- Ensure evaluations of RELs are timely and based on their full body of work, not just randomized controlled trials, to drive program effectiveness.

7. Ensure that the Comprehensive Centers (CCs) serve their customers effectively.

- Provide that CC Advisory Boards continue to include the chief state school officers or such officer's designees in the regions served by the CC, so that the primary stakeholders –SEAs – help drive the work and membership is representative of the geographic and demographic student populations in the regions served.
- Require CC evaluations be conducted objectively, based on each Center's full body of work, and finalized in a timely fashion to drive program effectiveness.

8. Support effective state implementation of federal programs.

- Maintain current law which provide for at least 20 Comprehensive Centers (CCs), with at least one in each of the 10 geographic regions served by the RELs.
- Allow flexibility as authorized in SETRA for the Secretary of Education to establish additional comprehensive centers that provide technical assistance on areas of importance to the nation.
- Clarify the critical role of the CCs, as SETRA does, in providing high-quality technical assistance, analysis and training on effective implementation of federal education laws, programs and research-based practices; leveraging applied research from RELs and other sources; and product development aligned to technical assistance needs.