June 22, 2021

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chairwoman
Senate Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education, and Related Agencies
Appropriations Subcommittee
154 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Roy Blunt
Ranking Member
Senate Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education, and Related Agencies
Appropriations Subcommittee
260 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairwoman Murray and Ranking Member Blunt,

The experience of the pandemic has highlighted the critical need to focus assessments on supporting teaching and learning in ways that can help improve educational outcomes, especially for those students who in the pandemic’s wake are disengaged and disconnected. Assessments should be able to support teaching and learning throughout the year and reveal more about what children know and understand so their teachers can build on their knowledge and help them succeed.

In response to this need, we, the undersigned groups, are writing to urge you to provide funding in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies Appropriations (LHHSED) bill to advance innovative K-12 assessments.

Specifically, we are proposing $100 million for the longstanding Competitive Grants for State Assessments program of Title I-B of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) with a specific requirement to support key innovative activities. This would enable states to further improve teaching and learning and update and improve how they assess the academic achievement of their K-12 students. Our request would raise the total appropriation for part B, title I to $478,000,000, of which $100,000,000 would be for innovative assessment grants under section 1203(b).

Each of our organizations is focused on measuring student learning and brings important perspectives to this work. Our organizations support state and local leaders across the country to design and implement personalized learning and competency-based education systems. We identify and offer recommendations to remove policy barriers that inhibit personalized and competency-based learning. Collectively, we are working towards a coherent vision of equitable education systems capable of supporting all children. In recent years, we have witnessed an increasing number of states interested in the development of innovative systems of assessments designed to support competency-based learning and provide additional tools to measure proficiency.

Creating better assessments and having actionable data that accurately measures the acquisition of knowledge is more important now than ever. The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequities in the disparities in access to the resources and opportunities necessary to learn. There is focused national attention on how to better support historically underserved students as well as a hunger to know how to help accelerate and personalize the learning of students most negatively impacted by the pandemic. The pandemic has made it clearer than ever that we need better, more student-centered assessments to help drive both high-quality teaching and learning and provide educators and families with the tools to support student success.
Unfortunately, it is costly for states to both revamp their current assessment systems and maintain existing assessments to meet Federal requirements. Without an adequate Federal funding stream for innovative assessment systems, states that want to improve their assessment systems, either through the Department of Education’s (ED) Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA) or other means, are stifled. The lack of investment hinders states from exploring innovative strategies at a time when understanding student achievement is critical for future success, particularly amidst a period of fiscal uncertainty.

To assist states in improving their assessment systems, we request $100 million in investments for Section 1203(b) Competitive Grants for State Assessments under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in the FY 2022 LHHSED bill. Because assessment innovation involves stakeholder engagement, planning, and iteration, we urge the Committee to require ED to permit awards to be made with this funding for 60 months. To focus this investment and extend its reach, we ask the Committee to limit the award of these funds for two certain activities authorized under section 1201(a)(2), specifically the activities described in subparagraphs (K) and (L). Focusing the funds on these specific activities would permit them to be used to measure student academic achievement using multiple measures of student academic achievement from multiple sources [subparagraph (K)] and evaluate achievement through the development of comprehensive instruments that emphasize mastery of standards and aligned competencies in a competency-based education model [subparagraph (L)]. We further urge the Committee to require a competitive preference for applications which seek to fund activities described under subparagraph (L) to ensure the bulk of these investments are driving innovation and improvements.

We must boost funding for states to establish more student-centered assessments that provide families and teachers with a better understanding of their students’ strengths and understanding of the material. These investments are urgent in light of the pandemic as states work to further develop their assessment systems and better support teaching and learning in COVID’s wake.

We look forward to working with you to ensure innovative assessments are adequately funded in the FY 2022 LHHSED appropriations bill. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Aurora Institute
Center for Assessment
Center for Innovation in Education
Envision Learning Partners
Great Schools Partnership
KnowledgeWorks

Attachment: Proposed Language
ATTACHMENT

Proposed Language for Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies Appropriations (LHHSED) bill— to advance innovative K-12 assessments

For carrying out school improvement activities authorized by part B of title I, part A of title II, subpart 1 of part A of title IV, part B of title IV, part B of title V, and parts B and C of title VI of the ESEA; the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act; section 203 of the Educational Technical Assistance Act of 2002; the Compact of Free Association Amendments Act of 2003; and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, $5,444,217,000, of which $3,613,652,000 shall become available on July 1, 2021, and remain available through September 30, 2022, and of which $1,681,441,000 shall become available on October 1, 2021, and shall remain available through September 30, 2022, for academic year 2021–2022: Provided, That $478,000,000 shall be for part B of title I, of which $100,000,000 shall be for innovative assessment grants under section 1203(b): Provided further, Notwithstanding the activities described under section 1203(b)(1)(A), grants under the preceding proviso may only be used to carry out the activities described in subparagraphs (K) and (L) of section 1201(a)(2): Provided further, that the Secretary shall provide for a competitive preference priority for applications for grants proposing to fund activities described under section 1201(a)(2)(L):