



American Federation
of Teachers, AFL-CIO

AFT Teachers
AFT PSRP
AFT Higher Education
AFT Public Employees
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July 20, 2009

The Honorable George Miller
Chairman
Committee on Education and Labor
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Miller::

On behalf of the more than 1.4 million of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), I am writing to offer our views on the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act (H.R. 3221). The AFT commends Chairman Miller and President Obama for recognizing the need to continue critical investments in higher education, early childhood programs and school renovation and construction. Making higher education more affordable, focusing attention on the vital role community colleges play in preparing students for the changing workforce, improving professional development and compensation for early childhood educators and helping to rebuild our nation's schools are top AFT priorities.

Following are AFT's detailed views on H.R. 3221:

Higher Education

Student Loan Programs

The AFT fully supports the underlying intent of this legislation—putting more money in the hands of the neediest students and their families by increasing the purchasing power of the Pell Grant. This has long been the AFT's top priority in higher education, and we fully support that effort. We also believe the programmatic focus on student access and persistence is critical to the success of our students and our higher education system. We do, however, urge a continuing role for nonprofit state agencies to service student loans and provide financial literacy for students.

As we understand it, the legislation would eliminate the loan cancellation provisions in the Perkins Loan Program that cover educators and numerous other public service employees. We strongly recommend ensuring the continuation of these loan-forgiveness programs.

We are concerned about the language that would eliminate subsidized loans from graduate students. This stands in direct contrast to H.R. 3221's goals of making

postsecondary education more affordable. Students attending graduate programs are every bit as important to our economy as those attending undergraduate programs, and all should be able to obtain subsidized loans.

Community Colleges

We support the direct investment in community colleges, both in terms of investing in programs that improve student success and providing funding to improve infrastructure. However, regarding the general framework of the bill, the AFT is interested in working with Congress to ensure that a significant focus of the program is to support high-quality college instruction and that faculty and staff play a central part in shaping the programs.

Helping students succeed not only requires quality programs and up-to-date facilities and technologies; it requires a professional teaching force with adequate resources and support. Unfortunately, colleges and universities are moving away from investing in their instructional workforce, relying on fewer and fewer full-time faculty and not providing enough support for the part-time faculty who now teach a majority of undergraduate classes at our public colleges and universities. The result is less and less investment in faculty which, in turn, limits the time, space and support faculty needs to work with students to help them persist and succeed. This is most true in community colleges and in disciplines and courses that serve as the common entry point for students in the most need of extra academic assistance.

To address this, we support the inclusion of language that recognizes the need for a full-time stable teaching workforce and encourages states and institutions to use programs in this bill, such as the college access and completion fund and the community college initiative, to strengthen their instructional workforce.

We also support the development of programs that will allow training for positions in high-skill, high-wage, new technology “green jobs” through collaborations with business, other unions, two- and four-year colleges, and state and local branches of government. Rigorous career-training education programs already have very high success rates; such programs should be expanded. Although H.R. 3221 provides an important first step in the process, more is needed, particularly in terms of coordination with the Workforce Investment Act.

Faculty Involvement

There are several sections of H.R. 3221 that call for assessing, creating and revising higher education programs. We believe that involving faculty in each of these steps is needed to ensure the highest quality educational programs. For example, H.R. 3221 correctly reflects ongoing concern about improving student persistence and completion rates—a concern that the AFT shares. As one part of addressing this

concern, the bill calls for the scaling up and rationalizing of data systems to track student performance, and we agree that better data will be helpful.

We encourage policy makers to include faculty members, who are the frontline educators, in any discussion of creating or updating data systems and the development of accountability systems at the institutional or state level.

In the area of online education, we suggest that faculty be included as participants in the grant process as new open online coursework is developed. We also urge that models employing blended learning pedagogies be included. We believe this can be done by strengthening the language in H.R. 3221.

Another area in which faculty involvement can be enhanced is in the grant application process. Sometimes this process requires collaboration among various stakeholders; but too often, insufficient time is allowed to adequately involve all who should be involved in the process. Similarly, it is often the case that those who are responsible for implementing state-level or institutional grants are not included in the grant writing process. We urge the committee to provide sufficient time in the grant writing processes to allow for meaningful collaboration with college faculty.

Early Childhood Education

The AFT supports the emphasis H.R. 3221 places on early childhood education through the establishment of a competitive grant program for states to build high-quality initiatives for children from birth to age 5. We are particularly pleased that the legislation focuses on the need to build a qualified and well-compensated early childhood education workforce. The legislation rightly provides support for sustained, intensive, classroom-focused professional development to improve the knowledge and skills of early childhood education providers.

Green Schools

The AFT strongly supports the goal of promoting green schools, which have a tremendously positive impact on student performance, school operational costs and staff attrition while creating jobs and strengthening the economy. In fact, a 2008 AFT study, "School Infrastructure Funding Need: A State-by-State Assessment and an Analysis of Recent Court Cases," showed that repairing school infrastructure will require a significant infusion of money. H.R. 3221 begins to provide the resources needed to make this happen.

We are, however, concerned about the setaside for charter school construction. Instead, the AFT supports language that would provide local education agencies with more flexibility to decide how best to utilize the funds based on the unique needs of each local community.

Page 4

The AFT is very supportive of H.R. 3221, and we look forward to working with you further to improve the legislation as it moves forward.

Thank you for considering our views on this important legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Cowan', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Kristor W. Cowan
Director, Legislation Department

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