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Honorable John B. King, Jr.
Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
Washington, DC 20002

Dear Secretary King:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit suggestions for non-regulatory guidance to states and districts on Title II of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

It is critically important that the Department of Education take every opportunity to educate states and school districts on the new provisions in Title II related to the learning needs of gifted and talented students. Not only is this the first time that states and districts are required to use federal Title II funds to support gifted students, but in most cases the new requirements will provide the first significant professional learning time focused on the needs of these students.

Across the nation, gifted and talented students receive the majority of their instruction in the general education classroom. However, these teachers typically receive no more than a few clock hours of pre-service instruction on the nature and needs of gifted and talented students; 60 percent of teachers report they have received no professional development in the past few years on the needs of these students. As a result, many students with high-ability go unnoticed and unchallenged in the classroom. The inability to identify and challenge all our high-ability students is a factor in the underrepresentation of low-income, minority, English learners, and children with disabilities in gifted and talented programs. It also is a factor in the achievement gap at the advanced achievement level between groups of students on NAEP exams and on state assessments.

Congress added new provisions in ESSA that require states to describe in their Title II applications how they will ensure that teachers and other school professionals are able to identify the needs of gifted students and modify instruction to meet those needs. Districts receiving Title II funds are required to address the learning needs of gifted and talented students. In addition, districts are permitted to use Title II funds to conduct training on how to identify high-ability students who have not been formally identified for gifted education services and on implementing instructional practices that support their education. Non-regulatory guidance provides an excellent opportunity to help states and districts understand the requirements and opportunities in Title II. Our suggestions are attached.

Sincerely,

M. René Islas
Executive Director

Suggested Non-Regulatory Guidance on Title II Part A – Gifted and Talented Students

State applications for Title II funds

Q: Does Title II, Part A of ESSA require attention to gifted and talented students?

Yes. The new law now requires states to include in their applications for funds a description of how the SEA will improve the skills of teachers, principals, or other school leaders in order to enable them to identify students with specific learning needs, including students who are gifted and talented, and provide instruction based on the needs of such students. (§ 2101(d)(2)(J))

Q: What approaches might states use to improve skills that enable teachers, principals or other school leaders to identify students who are gifted and talented and provide instruction based on their needs?

In addition to using multiple channels to inform districts of the new requirements of Title II Part A, state planning for use of these funds should be informed by a review of district needs. District gifted education coordinators, teachers, and principals, and also state agency staff responsible for gifted education, could provide high quality feedback on professional learning needs. Based on that review, state education agency staff might expand their technical assistance to include strategies that will support teachers and other school leaders in identifying gifted and talented students in all populations and providing instruction based on their needs. This may include for example, introducing district personnel to a range of assessment instruments and/or to the development of multiple criteria examples to be used to identify students from underrepresented populations; the use of local norm references to identify gifted and talented students from underserved populations; expanding current differentiation instruction to include strategies that are shown to be successful specifically with advanced learners; working with school counselors and other leaders on social, emotional, and other counseling issues that can arise with gifted and talented students; and encouraging districts to develop systematic plans to ensure that all classroom teachers understand the indicators of giftedness and have a repertoire of strategies to support and challenge students appropriately.

Local use of funds

Q: Must LEAs use Title II, Part A funds to support gifted and talented students?

Yes. To support effective instruction, LEAs that receive a subgrant from the SEA must address the learning needs of gifted and talented students with the funds. (§ 2103(b)(2))

Q: In what ways may LEAs use their Title II, Part A funds to support gifted and talented students?

ESSA permits LEAs to use Title II funds to provide training that supports the identification of gifted and talented students who have not been formally identified for gifted education services and to implement instructional practices, such as enrichment, acceleration, curriculum compacting, and dual or concurrent enrollment programs, that support the education of these students. (§ 2103(b)(3)(J))

The flexibility in the Title II provisions allows districts to tailor professional development to their specific needs. For example, one district might focus on using local norms to identify and support giftedness in underrepresented populations in early elementary grades to prepare those students for referrals for the gifted program. Another might focus across all grades on the social and emotional needs of gifted students to ensure they receive the support needed to persist and succeed in challenging and rigorous settings. Another district might hire gifted education specialists who can provide direct instruction but also can coach other educators in the school. Still others might provide training in advanced content in areas in which teachers lack strong backgrounds.