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February 23, 2018

The Honorable Lamar Alexander  
Chairman  
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions  
455 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510-4206

The Honorable Patty Murray  
Ranking Member  
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions  
154 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510-4704

Dear Senators Alexander and Murray,

On behalf of the three million members of the National Education Association and the 50 million students they serve, we thank the committee for taking up the long overdue reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) and providing the opportunity to comment on the proposed approach. The attached letter from educator Jim Grimes provides a firsthand perspective on the most pressing issues confronting today's higher education faculty and students. Please be advised that our top priorities for HEA reauthorization include:

### **College affordability**

The student debt burden is nearly \$1.5 trillion and exceeds total credit card debt. The average 2016 graduate has \$37,172 in student loan debt, the [Wall Street Journal](#) recently reported. This crushing debt is hindering graduates' ability to buy homes and cars, start businesses and families, invest, and contribute to economic growth in other ways. To address these issues, we support:

- Expanding the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) Program to encourage college graduates to pursue careers in education, firefighting, law enforcement, and other forms of public service
- Helping students begin a pathway to a postsecondary degree by eliminating community college tuition
- Allowing federal student loans to be refinanced when interest rates decline
- Streamlining repayment plans to create a single income-based option with affordable monthly payments
- Restoring federally subsidized loans for graduate students
- Permitting private student loans to be discharged in bankruptcy

### **Access to higher education**

The original goal of the Higher Education Act was to ensure that every American has access to higher education, regardless of income or zip code. Disinvestment in higher education after the Great Recession halted progress toward that goal. In the 2016-17 school year, states invested \$9 billion less

in public colleges and universities than they did in 2008 (after adjusting for inflation), according to the independent Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. To address these issues, we support:

- Providing incentives for states to reinvest in higher education, not shift costs to students and families
- Increasing opportunities for students to earn college credits while still in high school
- Increasing support for institutional aid programs for Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and Asian-Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions

### **Teacher preparation**

To help ensure teachers are profession-ready from the first day they enter the classroom, we encourage comprehensive residencies that go beyond traditional student teaching and require teacher candidates to demonstrate that they have the skills and knowledge necessary for effective practice — for example, by completing a classroom-based performance assessment.

### **Faculty working conditions**

More than 75 percent of the instructional workforce in U.S. colleges and universities are adjunct or “contingent” faculty and 50 percent are part-timers. On average, they earn about \$25,000 per year, the official poverty level for a family of four. Moreover, most adjuncts are not eligible for unemployment compensation or public service loan forgiveness and generally receive neither health nor retirement benefits. These near-impossible working conditions are hurting students as well. Mentoring, advising, and informal meetings with faculty are key to student success. Yet many adjuncts don’t have offices on their campuses, office hours for students, or time to write recommendations for students because they spend so much time traveling from job to job, campus to campus. To address these issues, we support:

- Restoring the focus on the core mission of higher education: teaching students
- Providing incentives for institutions to invest in a predominantly full-time, tenure-track faculty
- Making adjuncts eligible for public service loan forgiveness and unemployment compensation between academic terms

Thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments.

Sincerely,



Marc Egan  
Director of Government Relations  
National Education Association



Great Public Schools  
for Every Student

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Dear Senators Alexander and Murray,

In connection with reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, I would like to submit comments for the record based on my extensive, firsthand experience as higher education faculty. A certified master online teacher, I am currently an adjunct broadcast instructor for Loyola University Chicago and National Louis University; statewide coordinator of the Illinois Broadcasters Association's multicultural internship program; and assistant sponsor for broadcasting at New Trier High School in Winnetka, Illinois. I previously worked as an adjunct instructor at Joliet Junior College, Lincoln Land Community College, and Kankakee Community College. I retired from the U.S. Army/Illinois National Guard as a major with 36 years of service.

### **Background**

For much of America's history, we recognized that every dollar spent on higher education pays dividends many times over. The Morrill Act, signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862, revolutionized higher education by providing each state with public lands to create universities specializing in agriculture, mechanics, and military tactics. The GI bill passed after World War II sparked the greatest and most widely shared economic expansion in U.S. history. The National Defense Education Act, signed into law by President Dwight Eisenhower in 1958, helped put astronauts on the moon and launched a massive technological revolution.

More recently, America has disinvested in higher education. We rank 5th in the percentage of 25-64 year olds with higher education degrees and 14th in the percentage of 25-34 year olds with higher education degrees. One-third of the money spent on higher education in countries that have surpassed us comes from private sources; two-thirds of that money comes from private sources in the United States. (Source: *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators*)

### **College affordability**

Disinvestment in higher education has led to an explosion of student loan debt, which now totals nearly \$1.5 trillion and is the largest type of indebtedness in our country today. Many low- and

middle-income students simply cannot afford to go to colleges or universities that prepare them for their careers. Even with student aid programs, higher education can be beyond the reach of many qualified students and their families.

One of my students, a single mother with a two-year-old daughter, worked full-time in health care and attended community college classes. She had previously attended a university and was trying to pay off her student loans. A friend who worked at Oprah Winfrey's Harpo Studios in Chicago identified an internship opportunity, but she could not afford to apply even though she was an outstanding candidate. She could not afford to pay for the train ticket or take time off from work.

Seventy percent of those who default on their student loans do not finish their programs of study. To address this problem, we need to invest in academic and other support services — more faculty as well as student advisors.

### **Contingent faculty**

Another issue hurting colleges and universities is the explosion in the use — and overuse — of contingent faculty. Almost three-quarters of college and university faculty are contingent or adjunct faculty who do not have tenure and have no possibility of getting it. Typically, they are paid by the course and employed semester to semester. Some work part-time at one or several institutions. Occasionally, part-time work at multiple institutions adds up to full-time work — or more than full time. Some contingent faculty work full-time at one institution, but without the stability and benefits of tenure or tenure-track faculty.

These poor working conditions hurt faculty and students alike. If I were not a retired teacher and soldier, I could not have afforded to travel to Joliet Junior College, where I was paid \$1,950 to teach a course, or Kankakee Community College, where I was paid \$2,600. In an academic bait-and-switch for students as well as instructors, contingent faculty can be reassigned or have their classes canceled at the last minute. We have limited or no access to instructional resources and facilities that enhance the ability to engage and serve our students.

The ultimate solution is to move most part-time faculty into full-time positions. In the meantime, we need to treat those working in higher education fairly — for example, by ensuring access to the full range of faculty benefits and resources. Specifically, contingent faculty should be eligible for Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) and unemployment compensation between terms.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments.

Sincerely,

James Grimes  
Elected Member  
Illinois Education Association Higher Education Council