Friends: while Congress prepares for its spring break next week, here’s a roundup of what’s happening in D.C.

UPDATE ON ESEA

Lawmakers continue to search for a viable path forward on reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, also known as No Child Left Behind) as the 114th Congress moves past its opening months.

In the House, H.R. 5 (the Student Success Act) moved through committee on a party-line vote on Feb. 11, with Democrats opposing the bill due to concerns over portability of funds and other measures they say would weaken the federal commitment to students from low-income households. The legislation, sponsored by Education & Workforce Chairman John Kline (R-Minn.), would streamline the funding for many programs that currently stand on their own, with supporters arguing that this new system would provide flexibility for districts to prioritize funding where they see the greatest need.

The legislation was scheduled for a floor vote, but was ultimately pulled when the House became embroiled in the dispute over Homeland Security funding and immigration issues. Reportedly, House GOP leadership was also concerned that some conservative members would not support the bill and it would ultimately fail.

In the Senate, ongoing negotiations between Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee Chairman Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) and Ranking Member Patty Murray (D-Wash.) are encouraging. The two sides are working to come up with a bipartisan draft before committee markup (currently expected the week of April 13). The Senate Democratic Caucus has sent a letter urging the HELP Committee to include a new early education title in ESEA—something that Chairman Alexander has not supported.

NCSL has been active on Capitol Hill, speaking with Senate education staffers regarding its plan (released in partnership with the National Governors Association) to reform ESEA. The plan was endorsed recently by the Bipartisan Policy Center’s Governors’ Council.
HELP COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN SOLICITS COMMENTS ON HIGHER ED REAUTHORIZATION

This week, Senator Alexander, chairman of the Senate HELP Committee, released three white papers related to reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA). The three topics are:

- Higher education accreditation;
- Higher education data collection and consumer information; and
- Institutional risk sharing in student aid programs.

Each short paper gives some background and legislative history, and lays out some possible policy options. Senator Alexander has made clear his desire to tackle HEA reauthorization as soon as ESEA reauthorization is completed. Comments on the white papers, which offer a glimpse into the priorities of Chairman Alexander, are due April 24.

Senator Alexander had previously stated he is committed to finishing a rewrite of the Higher Education Act, with a draft version of legislation being completed by the summer and Senate floor consideration after the August recess.

STUDENT AID BILL OF RIGHTS

The Obama Administration recently announced an initiative to promote the president’s “vision for an affordable, quality education for all.” This plan, known as the Student Aid Bill of Rights, comes in the form of a Presidential Memorandum signed on March 10. A blog post by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan lays out the administration’s four main principles guiding this policy. The Presidential Memorandum then directs administration officials on how the departments and agencies involved—the Department of Education, the Social Security Administration, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, the Office of Management and Budget, the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, and the White House Domestic Policy Council—can work toward those goals.

The administration seeks to improve affordability and reduce debt burden on student borrowers by creating an enhanced complaint system, improving loan servicing and repayment options, providing extensive information to borrowers and offering improved options for those who fall behind in their payments.

Critics have argued that the plan, while providing some benefits to borrowers, does little in the scope of the larger student aid crisis. The amount of student debt outstanding in the U.S. today—approximately $1.2 trillion—has tripled over the last decade and become a hot topic for legislators and the public alike in recent years.
WATCH THIS SPACE

Student Data Privacy Bill Still in Process

Pushback from parents groups and privacy advocates concerned that the proposal contains too many loopholes has delayed introduction of a bipartisan bill to protect student data privacy. The legislation, sponsored by Representatives Jared Polis (D-Colo.) and Luke Messer (R-Ind.), is part of President Obama’s privacy protection agenda and is based on a voluntary student privacy pledge signed by 125 companies and a state law passed last year in California. The bill would set rules governing how companies that make computer apps for educational purposes can use the student data they collect. It would bar education companies from targeting ads to children based on the information they collect, and bar them from selling that information to others. Introduction of the bill is expected soon, after the language is fine-tuned.

For more information on federal education issues, please contact Lee Posey (lee.posey@ncsl.org) or Ben Schaefer (ben.schaefer@ncsl.org), or call NCSL’s Washington Office at (202) 624-5400.

Registration for the 2015 Summit is now open! Click the image below for more information!