MEMO

National PTA Board of Directors, State Presidents, State President Elects, State Office Staff, Federal Legislative Chairs, All Governance Committees

From: National PTA Government Affairs Department

Date: February 5, 2020

Re: 2020 State of the Union Address

Last night, President Donald Trump delivered his third State of the Union, outlining his priorities for 2020 including immigration, healthcare, trade, foreign policy and the economy. The President specified a number of legislative and policy priorities that would improve the lives of many Americans with education receiving slightly more attention than previous State of the Union addresses. This memo summarizes the relevant policies to National PTA’s public policy agenda expressed by the President in his address.

School Choice

In contrast to years past, the President specifically promoted private school choice legislation – the Education Freedom Scholarships and Opportunities Act (S. 634/H.R. 1434) – as the most viable alternative to “failing government schools.” National PTA opposes this legislation as it would redirect $5 billion per year of federal taxpayer dollars to fund private school voucher programs. National PTA advocates for the improvement of, and investments in public education for all children and to guarantee public funds are not diverted to any private school choice proposal or voucher system. See National PTA’s position statement on Public School Choice and position statement on Opposing Vouchers, Tuition Tax Credits and Deductions as Systems of Education Aid. National PTA is also a founding member of the National Coalition for Public Education (NCPE) which supports public schools and opposes school choice measures. We remain steadfast in our opposition to private school choice proposals that divert public money from public schools and will continue to actively monitor and engage on school choice legislation. To date, Congress has not adopted any of the Administration’s proposals on expanding school choice.

Vocational and Technical Education

The President called on Congress to support his plan to offer vocational and technical education in every single high school in America. While the President did not offer any specifics about this policy proposal, he did indicate this policy would be a part of the Administration’s forthcoming Fiscal Year 2021 budget that will be released next week. National PTA will examine this policy proposal more closely upon the release of the President’s budget. For more information on National PTA’s stance on vocational and adult education, read our position statement here.
Prayer in Public Schools

The President reiterated his Administration’s commitment to defending religious liberty including the constitutional right to pray in public schools. While there is a constitutionally protected right to prayer in public schools under the First Amendment, the Supreme Court has set forth principles that distinguish impermissible government religious speech from constitutionally protected private religious speech. As outlined in National PTA’s position statement on the Role of Religion in Publicly Funded Educational and Social Services, we support the right of children to pray individually or in groups, to read religious texts, and to discuss their religious views with their peers. However, we believe the free exercise of personal religious speech does not include the right to have a captive audience or to compel other students to participate. National PTA will continue to monitor policy proposals related to the expression of religion in public schools.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

The President highlighted that 7 million Americans have come off “food stamps”, known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), under this Administration. While a strong economy may be one contributing factor to this exodus, National PTA has been closely monitoring recent regulatory activity related to SNAP. On September 4, 2019, National PTA submitted comments expressing concerns about the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s proposed rule to revise SNAP and the potential for benefits to be eliminated for millions of families which could jeopardize children’s access to free school breakfast and lunch. As outlined in our child nutrition issue brief in our federal public policy agenda, National PTA works to ensure students in need have access to federal nutrition programs, including the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program.

Infrastructure

The President declared that we must also rebuild America’s infrastructure and urged Congress to invest in new roads, bridges and tunnels. However, improvements to school facilities and infrastructure were not included in his remarks. Schools are a critical part of our nation’s infrastructure and it is essential that investments are made to repair, renovate and modernize school facilities to ensure they are safe, healthy and well-equipped to advance student achievement, grow our economy and improve our competitiveness. National PTA has endorsed the Rebuild America’s Schools Act (S. 266/H.R. 865) which will provide federal financial assistance to states and local school districts to provide safe, modern, healthy, energy efficient schools for our students. We are actively working to ensure the bill’s passage or its inclusion in any comprehensive infrastructure package taken up by Congress. For more information on our position, see National PTA’s resolution on improved infrastructure around schools.
Second Amendment

The President reiterated his firm commitment to American’s Second Amendment right to keep and bear arms. As outlined in National PTA’s Gun Safety and Violence Prevention position statement, our association is committed to federal efforts to protect children and youth from gun violence and strongly believes that Congress must enact legislation that will help prevent future tragedies from occurring while preserving the lawful use of firearms for sport and personal protection. National PTA continues to advocate for common sense gun violence prevention policies such as universal background checks, an assault weapons ban and federal funding for comprehensive research of the causes and effects of gun violence.

We are committed to working closely with the Administration and Congress, as we have been throughout our association’s history, to promote educational equity and opportunity for all children so that every child’s potential becomes a reality.