

“Next Steps for K-12 Education: Implementing the Promise to Restore State and Local Control”
House Education and the Workforce Committee
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
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Thank you Chairman Rokita, Ranking Member Fudge and members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today, and congratulations on the successful passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act.

As Oklahoma’s State Superintendent of Public Instruction, I embrace the challenge of successfully implementing this important new law. I have first-hand experience in education at the local, state and now the national level. I am a former public schoolteacher. I served on Oklahoma’s State Board of Education prior to becoming elected State Superintendent, and I bring 15 years of experience in the private sector, where I worked directly with parents and students at the local level to help kids reach higher academic achievement.

As State Superintendent in Oklahoma, my goal is to ensure all students have access to a high-quality education. To do so, we have set out on an ambitious path to focus on early childhood foundations and literacy; to close achievement and opportunity gaps; and to increase the number of high school graduates fully prepared for the challenges of a post-secondary education or the workforce.

Passage of this new law could not have come at a better time to give us the flexibility and authority needed to achieve these goals. Because of the additional flexibility provided by the Every Student Succeeds Act, we in Oklahoma can now develop programs and systems that align with our vision to meet the needs of our schools and every child in those schools.

Prior to the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act, Oklahoma was struggling to realize the full potential of every child. Why? While we set ambitious goals and created meaningful programs to meet those goals, we were burdened with a prescriptive federal law that offered neither the space nor the flexibility to do what we needed to do on behalf of kids.

Today, however, my fellow state chiefs and I look forward to both the flexibility and the stability of this new law that gives us an opportunity to take the lead and create accountability systems, school-level interventions, and educator evaluation and support frameworks to achieve the goals we have set out for *all* students in our states.

State education leaders believe in being held accountable for results. Every one of us is committed to equitable results for every child, no matter their background or income level. Yet, before the passage of this law, we did not have access to the tools we needed to attack, without federal interference, the deep-seeded problems our children face. This law signals the

passage of a new era of federal policy in education, one that lets those at the state and local levels — those *closest* to the classroom — focus their efforts on reaching the best outcomes for all students.

States like Oklahoma will only be able to achieve the full promise of the ESSA if the federal government holds true to the spirit of the law. We will only be able to accomplish Oklahoma's goals if we truly are allowed to innovate free from regulations and guidelines that change the intent of this body.

I recognize, of course, that some regulation and clarification are necessary as states transition to the new law. For example, I would welcome clarification on such issues as the implementation timeline. The Department has already moved to clarify some of these issues such as states being allowed to transition away from Highly Qualified Teacher regulations. State and local education agencies, working closely with educators and administrators, are in the best position to make decisions about the policies and practices that will benefit every child, especially those most in need. Striking the balance between guidance to the states and ensuring that states are not overly prescribed is what state leaders need. We are already seeing positive signs from the U.S. Department of Education that they will be leaving necessary decisions up to states and local communities. I appreciate their efforts to date, and encourage them to continue working with us to craft responsible regulations.

Continuing Progress

It is not new for state and local agencies to take a leadership role in developing and implementing education policy. Under No Child Left Behind, states and local communities were the primary drivers of new ideas for making our education system work more effectively for every child.

However, states soon realized that progress in raising academic achievement stalled, and the law was not reauthorized to meet our needs. We first noticed it in our accountability systems. Because they relied solely on proficiency on one test each year, systems failed to accurately identify all schools in need of improvement or additional assistance. Moreover, once schools *were* identified, we saw that what may work for school improvement in Oklahoma City or Tulsa is not the same as what might work in Guymon or Muskogee.

Oklahoma has seen this in our work to address an unprecedented teacher shortage. More than a thousand teacher positions remain vacant statewide, while more than a thousand other teaching jobs have been filled through emergency certification, meaning the school district has exhausted all other means of securing a trained classroom teacher.

To address this crisis, we need the flexibility and authority to innovate, and attract and retain great people in the teaching profession. No Child Left Behind has made this more difficult with prescriptive policies. Instead, we have increased flexibility to focus on recruiting and retaining

highly effective teachers for our areas of greatest need, which now include early childhood and elementary as much as STEM fields.

Subsequently, many states, including Oklahoma, turned to ESEA Flexibility Waivers when they became available. Oklahoma has operated under a Waiver since 2012. In so doing, we were able to implement a number of practices aimed at moving the needle. That has included strengthening accountability measures for schools and our professional educators.

Still, these Waivers could not get us over the finish line for every child. While providing some additional flexibility, Waivers remained prescriptive on the interventions that states could use in school improvement and how we should create an evaluation and support system for our teachers. To complicate matters further, they fueled uncertainty as our Waiver required annual approval.

That is why I applaud members of Congress for passing the Every Student Succeeds Act that allows states to move past the Waiver process and provide states and local districts with a long-term and stable federal policy.

In Oklahoma, we plan to build on the progress we made through our Waiver to create a better system for *all* kids — an accountability system that better identifies schools and what assistance they need, more flexible interventions that recognize not every student or community is the same, and complete authority to craft an evaluation and support system that truly evaluates and supports Oklahoma teachers. The U.S. Department of Education's regulations on this new law should continue to encourage and support this leadership from states.

Ensuring Accountability

Let me focus on accountability systems as an example. Under the Every Student Succeeds Act, states will have significantly more authority to design and implement our state-level accountability systems, from the indicators we will use to the appropriate interventions we will provide to schools. In Oklahoma, we are committed to ensuring *every* student is given the best possible chance to succeed. We have long pursued meaningful accountability in our state's education system, and we will continue to do so under ESSA. In fact, I believe we will be able to create an even *better* system given the additional flexibility of ESSA.

While the new law sets a high bar for what every state should achieve, it also gives us the latitude to design an accountability system that is reflective of, and responsive to, the needs of our students. This authority will help us ensure that our accountability system is not seen as punitive, but that we create a system in which we can help schools create meaningful, positive changes for every child.

In Oklahoma, this means not just measuring how many students pass a single test, but looking at the growth a student shows in a given year. Or recognizing that one assessment at the end of the year is not the only indicator of how a child is performing.

Conclusion

Thank you to the members of this Committee for allowing me to testify, and thank you for the opportunity we now have under this new law.

Let me leave you with this final thought. States are not only ready, but we are willing and able to lead. We have proven it time and time again as we have raised academic standards for every child, created better assessments to meet individual needs and sought additional flexibility to do what is best for all kids in our state. What we need today is for Congress and the U.S. Department of Education to recognize this leadership and trust us as we work with parents, teachers and key stakeholders to transition to this new law. Future regulations should focus on providing states with guidance, clarification and support, not prescription or compliance.

As a State Superintendent, I look forward to this exciting opportunity to focus on the work that needs to be done for every Oklahoma child to providing a first-rate education for all students in Oklahoma. Under the Every Student Succeeds Act, I finally see the federal government as a partner in this effort, rather than a barrier. I hope we can work together to keep it that way.