

Testimony for the U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Education and the Workforce, hearing on the *Student Success Act* and the *Encouraging Innovation and Effective Teachers Act*

Re-Authorizing ESEA: The Need for Federal Guideposts, Guardrails, and Catalysts

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Chairmen Kline, Ranking Minority Member Miller, members of the Education Committee thank you for inviting me to testify today. My remarks are shaped by my experience over that past decade and half, as both a researcher and practitioner, working to improve educational outcomes for high-poverty middle and high schools at the federal, state, district, and school levels. Most recently, this has involved working with 12 school districts including Philadelphia, East Baton Rouge, Boston, Los Angeles, and San Antonio on a school reform effort called Diplomas Now, an Investing in Innovation I3 winner, designed for the highest needs middle and high schools that drive the nation's dropout crisis. It combines evidence-based whole school reform, with enhanced student supports provided by non-profit partners, guided by an early warning system

What our research and this experience tell me is that our nation stands at a crossroads.

The recent economic challenges have brought into stark relief that in order to prosper in the 21st century, our nation needs to graduate all its students from high school prepared for post-secondary success, be it through college, job training or the military. Simply put, there is little work for young adults who do not have a high school diploma. Currently, nearly three out of four high school dropouts in their 20s are not employed full time. If you are 25 years old, without a high school diploma, and no work history, are you ever going to find sustained work? Moreover, there is little work that will support a family, unless you have not only a high school diploma but also some post-secondary schooling or training. At its core our nation is based on work and family. Yet we are turning out more than a million students a year, who lack the education needed to work and support a family. Only three out of four students in each high school class are earning their high school diplomas, and at least another 25% graduate from high school but are unprepared for additional schooling or training. No business can survive when it succeeds only half the time, nor can any country remain economically competitive. The economic cost of the dropout crisis is enormous in terms of lost wages, revenues, and productivity.

Moreover, in my work on the dropout crisis, I have found no more passionate advocates for the need to end the crisis, than the leaders of the U.S. Army Ascension command. Not only because of its ramifications for a strong military, but because they can see, that left unchecked, this crisis threatens our nation's fabric.

The good news is progress has been made over the past decade and our knowledge of what needs to be done and how has increased. Graduation rates and achievement are up. The number of high schools where graduation is at best a 50/50 proposition (the nation's "dropout factories," which produce half the nation's dropouts) has declined from about 2,000 to 1,500. The number and percent of students taking and passing AP tests, indicating that they are doing college level work in high school, has doubled.

Over the past decade, we have also learned the early warning signs that indicate students are on the path to dropping out, years before this will occur. This means we can now be much more effective and efficient in getting the right intervention to the right student at the right time, and in so doing, keep many more students on the path to high school graduation. The last decade has also seen significant advances in building the evidence base needed to improve educational practice. As importantly, thanks to NCLB, the idea that schools must be accountable for all students, rich and poor, majority and minority, English language learner and special education students, learning at sufficient levels for success in the 21st century has become firmly engrained in our education system.

The progress though has not been fast enough, deep enough or wide enough. While NCLB focused schools attention on the pressing need to improve the achievement of all students, it did not provide for tailored enough interventions. That is why today's hearing and the re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is so timely, and so important. We have to get this right. Our nation's future depends on figuring out how we can step on the gas, and not tap on the brakes. Central to this will be figuring out, the most beneficial federal role.

Here I would like to offer three suggestions.

First, my experience and research suggests we need federal guideposts. Over the past ten years, we have had a great natural experiment-about what happens when we let states lead without federal guideposts. NCLB left it to the states to set their own high school graduation rate goals, select their own means of measuring graduation rates, and allowed any improvement to satisfy accountability requirements. What was the result? Some states led the way and put forth comprehensive and sustained efforts to raise their graduation rates, and saw large gains. Tennessee, for example, increased its graduation rate by 18 percentage points, New York by 13, and overall nine states had average gains of at least one percentage point per year. On the other hand, almost an equal number of states used inaccurate graduation rate measures and either lulled themselves into a false sense of complacency or did not give raising graduation rates high priority. Today, 10 states have lower graduation rates than they did in 2002, in an economic era when every dropout means lost revenue and increased social cost. When the states that moved ahead on their own are combined with the states that did not, the nation as a whole, witnessed only a modest 3 percentage-point increase in high school graduation rates. Recognizing that this was not a prescription for national prosperity, the Bush administration in 2008 put

forth regulations that required all states to measure graduation rates in the same accurate manner, set forth more aggressive graduation rate goals, and establish substantial and continuous rates of improvement. To give states time to make this shift, it established this year, 2011-12, as the first year that federal graduation rate accountability would take hold. The re-authorization of ESEA needs to codify these graduation rate improvement guideposts that all states have agreed to, and in so doing, keep all states focused on graduating all their students prepared for college, career, and civic life.

Second, there is a need for federal guardrails. As we work together to increase the nation's rate of educational progress, there is a federal role in making sure that all kids and all schools are included, that critical performance measures are being used, and that taxpayers get a good return on their investment. As I have worked with state department of education officials, school district leadership, and principals across the nation, I have never seen anything but good intentions. I am continually amazed by the level of insight and wisdom brought to the day-to-day work of educating students. But we are all human, and as such, struggle to make good decisions when faced with too many competing needs, too little time, or not enough good information. Accordingly, I have also too often seen whole groups of students, or whole categories of schools, being put aside, as either not the priority of the moment, too challenging to address, or beyond the capacity at hand. In particular, I have seen this happen with high schools. Districts sometimes view them as too hard to reform, and instead focus on improving earlier grades, with the hope that over time, these improvements will trickle up and make high schools more successful. But in the meantime, thousands of students each year continue to drop out of school, but stay in the community, at high economic and social costs.

As a nation, we cannot afford to have whole groups of kids, or sets of schools not able to perform at the level needed for success in the 21st century. Thus, it is important for the re-authorization of ESEA to continue to stress that *all* means all kids and all schools. Over the past two years, the number of high schools with low graduation rates, the nation's "dropout factories," have declined at an accelerated pace. This is good news but we cannot ease up, as 1,500 remain. That is why in its re-authorization ESEA needs to maintain a focus on transforming the lowest-performing schools, including high schools with graduation rates below 60%. It is not enough just to identify these schools. Within their communities it is well known that they have not been successful, often for decades. In many cases, it was only when NCLB, most recently through school improvement grants, finally said they must be transformed or replaced that significant and urgent efforts to improve the schools commenced. But the re-authorization also needs to go beyond current efforts and build up the capacity of state educational agencies, school districts, and school leadership teams to make good decisions and implement evidence-based reforms so all kids and all schools can improve. This is especially essential, in high-poverty rural areas, and smaller, formerly industrial cities, where often the only high school in the district has as many dropouts as graduates, and the school district fundamentally lacks the capacity to transform it.

There is also a need for federal guardrails with regard to performance measures. Take the case of chronic absenteeism. There is perhaps no more basic performance measure than how often students attend school. Even the greatest teachers and the strongest curriculum will not produce learning gains, if students are not regularly in class. You have to be there. Yet, while nearly every parent receives an

accounting with each report card of how many days of school their child missed, it is very rare, for schools, districts, and states to report to the public how many students in each school are chronically absent or have missed a month or more of school. The reason is simple, no one has asked them to do it. As a result, left unmeasured, chronic absenteeism and its detrimental effects remain unrecognized, and much like bacteria in a hospital, chronic absenteeism silently creates educational and social havoc. Consider just one statistic. In a report we will release in a few months, we found a major state, where 20,000 students per class of sixth-graders cumulatively missed 6 months or more of school between 6th and 8th grades. Ultimately, only 3% of students from this group recovered sufficiently to enroll in higher education. The irony is that, once identified, chronic absenteeism is something communities can do something about. Recently a number of mayors, most prominently Mayor Bloomberg of New York, recognizing the connection between absenteeism, school achievement and advancement, and crime, unemployment, and social costs have led the charge to address it. In addition to achievement test scores, graduation and college readiness rates, the re-authorization of ESEA should include expanded measures of attendance, so all parents, communities, and taxpayers can know how many students at the schools they support are missing a month or more and a week or less of school.

The final area, where there is a need for federal guardrails, is how federal funds, in particular Title 1 dollars get spent at the school and district levels. When you spend time in schools, in particular high-poverty middle and high schools, one thing you quickly learn is that their principals have some of the most complex and challenging jobs in America. Imagine having to organize often 100 or more adults, to teach and support, 700 to 2,000 students, the majority of whom enter the 6th or 9th grade behind grade level, often with waning motivations, impacted by concentrated and often inter-generational poverty, and as we have just heard high rates of chronic absenteeism. Add to this, now several years of budget cuts. Into this environment comes federal Title 1 money, which in reality is viewed by principals and school districts as often the only discretionary funding they have. As such, this funding is very important to enable different high-poverty schools, with different needs, to implement the reforms they need to improve. But we also need to take into account that in this environment, principals are not that different from mayors. They seek to use federal funds to strategically bring in high value-added resources, but they also feel pressure to use money to engender support, buy peace, and reward loyalty. Inertia can also play a limiting role, in particular, when Title 1 funds have been used for years to cover the salaries of employees who are valued by the community, but may not necessarily represent the most effective way to off-set the impact of poverty and propel student achievement. Hence, it is important to put some guardrails on how Title 1 funds are used by districts and states. To avoid micro-regulation, perhaps this can best be achieved through incentives -- by having a base level of discretionary Title 1 funding, but then reserving some portions of it, for schools that a) implement evidence-based comprehensive reforms, informed by a needs and capacity assessment, and b) bring in external partners with track records of success in similar schools to enhance school and district capacity. On this later point, Chairman Kline's Encouraging Innovation and Effective Teacher Act provides some excellent guidance.

The last area, where there is a clear need for a federal role, is as a catalyst. To accelerate educational improvement fast enough to keep the nation competitive, not only do we need federal guidepost and

guardrails, but we need to soup up the engine. Part of this is enhanced research, development, and evaluation, as well as incentives to encourage innovation. Here, strategic federal investments to further build the knowledge base are essential. But what I want to end my testimony with is a brief discussion of the importance of dissemination, in particular of evidence- and practice-validated educational improvements.

Much of this nation's wealth can be traced to large improvements in agricultural productivity. In many states, this generated the wealth that let them invest heavily in education during the first half of the 20th century, which in turn positioned the nation to be at the forefront of the human capital driven technology revolutions that powered economic growth in the latter part of the century. One key driver of agricultural productivity, in turn, was the federally funded agricultural extension agency that spread scientific farming techniques throughout the nation, but also worked to customize and adapt them to local conditions, while also spreading local innovations more broadly. What is the relevance of this history lesson to improving educational outcomes today? In my work with states, school districts, and schools, I almost always see one or more really powerful practices wherever I go. But over time I have realized that many have very short shelf-lives and only exist as long as their developer or proponent is in the school, or working for the district or state department of education. I also often see examples of uninformed practice or efforts that have been shown by solid research to be typically ineffective. As a result, we are constantly re-inventing things, already proven and established elsewhere, but not sustained or spread, while at the same time unknowingly implementing a practice that has been shown broadly not to work. Consequently, educational productivity is often quite low. This tells me we need to re-think how we disseminate evidence-based and practice-validated educational improvements, in part, by funding dissemination efforts at the local and state levels and creating more efficient means to spread what works with a means to customize it to local conditions. This translation function is not unique to education; it is increasingly being practiced in medicine and public health.

In closing, in my work with schools over the past decade and half, I have seen impressive efforts that have led to large improvements in educational outcomes, in our highest-poverty schools. This has occurred when the adults in the building have been guided by ambitious improvement goals and a sense of shared urgency; when they have had access to good data to guide diagnosis and performance; when they have applied evidence-based strategies that enabled them to provide strong and coherent instructional programs school-wide; when point professional development enables teachers to organize the school around teacher teams led by strong leaders, and when these teams partner with their parents and non-profits with track records of providing the range of student support to propel all students to attend, behave, and try hard. These are the efforts we need to bring to scale, for our nation to meet the economic and social challenges of the 21st century. The federal government has a key checks-and-balances role to play in providing the guideposts, guardrails, and catalysts needed. If at the end of this decade, we are still debating how to do this, while other nations have built more universities than we have fixed failing schools, we as nation will be on the wrong track.