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House Committee on Education and Labor Hearing on Research and Best Practices for School Turnaround May 19, 2010

Context: The House Committee on Education and Labor held a hearing yesterday, May 19, to examine the best practices for school turnaround. The hearing was part of a series the Committee is holding in an effort to overhaul the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Overall, Committee members were intrigued by the successful models presented by the witnesses and mused about the proper role of the federal government in supporting best practices.

Testimony Summary: In his opening remarks, Chairman Miller (D-CA) decried the nation's dropout crisis, highlighting its economic costs. After asserting that the interventions under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) for failing schools have been too prescriptive, he cautioned that school closure should be a last resort and expressed discomfort with what he deemed the arbitrariness of the transformation model's firing and rehiring process. Chairman Miller identified as important elements of successful turnaround the following: good teaching and learning; extended learning time (including longer school day, enrichment activities, and time for teacher planning), and wraparound services. In his remarks, Rep. Thompson (R-PA) (serving as the senior Republican in place of Ranking Member Kline) praised NCLB's parental choice and supplementary education services provisions and noted his concern with the recent changes to the existing School Improvement Grants program, which occurred without Congressional oversight.

The hearing witnesses were Dr. John Simmons (President, Strategic Learning Initiatives; Chicago); David Silver (Principal, Think College Now Elementary School; Oakland); Dr. Daniel P. King (Superintendent of Schools, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District; Pharr, TX); Jessica Johnson (Chief Program Officer, Learning Point Associates; Naperville, IL); Dr. Thomas Butler (Superintendent, Ridgway Area School District; Ridgway, PA); and Susan Bridges (Principal, A.G. Richardson Elementary School; Culpeper, VA).

- Dr. Simmons described his organization's successful turnaround work in eight Chicago elementary schools. Applying research-tested ideas, Strategic Learning Initiatives (SLI) subscribes to the following five essential supports: shared leadership; high-quality professional development; rigorous and focused instruction; parental engagement; and a culture of trust and collaboration. Dr. Simmons recommended that ESEA support models like SLI's and invest in scaling up successful schools.
- Mr. Silver summarized his experience as founder and principal of a successful college-prep elementary school in low-income Oakland. He credited success to community involvement, high expectations, and great educators. He recommended that ESEA support the following five conditions: school autonomy for hiring, curriculum, budget, and assessment; maximum budget flexibility; the use of student growth measures (including for teacher evaluations); standards-based instruction and assessments; and increased federal funding to Title I schools.

- Dr. King discussed his work at the helm of two school district turnarounds. He noted the success of innovations including dual credit and dropout recovery high schools and stressed the importance of quality district leadership.
- Ms. Johnson described her work consulting with districts in corrective action and restructuring under NCLB. She emphasized that districts especially could use help with needs assessments and the planning process for turnaround. She also supported improved data collection and evaluation to determine which strategies work best.
- Dr. Butler spoke about turnaround from the perspective of a small, rural district. He noted the human capital challenges associated with rural isolation (for example, accessing professional development opportunities) and recommended that ESEA provide quality broadband internet and support local flexibility.
- Ms. Bridges discussed the importance of principals in the turnaround process and advocated for principal autonomy in arranging staff and resources. She further advocated for locally-based decision-making.

Discussion Focus: Following the testimony, members of the Committee participated in a question and answer session with the witnesses.

- Committee members, including Reps. Hirono (D-HI), Woolsey (D-CA), and Polis (D-CO) asked the panelists about the proper **role of the federal government** in addressing school turnaround. All six witnesses agreed that the four prescribed turnaround models are too restrictive and that ESEA should provide a more flexible approach. Ms. Johnson advocated for federal support for better data collection to focus policy on metrics that work.
- Several Committee members including Chairman Miller and Reps. McCarthy (D-NJ) and Clarke (D-NY) noted that witnesses had identified **community involvement** as one element of successful turnaround. Ms. Johnson agreed that connecting parents, communities, and schools to the turnaround vision is vital. Mr. Silver noted that parents of his students sign contracts to commit to attend conferences and work daily at home with their children. Dr. Simmons noted the important role parents can play on school councils.
- Rep. Thompson asked Dr. Butler about the primary obstacles for **rural school turnaround**. Dr. Butler explained that the four listed turnaround models often are untenable at the rural level.
- Committee members also focused on the **importance of leadership** in school turnaround. Rep. Thompson subtly chided the Administration for appearing to believe that local leaders lack the will to make difficult decisions while Rep. Polis (D-CO) indicated that his experience on the Colorado State Board of Education suggested that many districts do lack the willingness to reform. Prompted by a question from Rep. Thompson, Dr. King explained that quality leadership must emerge at all levels, including from the principal and vice-principal, the superintendent, and district leadership around staff and curriculum development. Additionally, Rep. Davis (D-CA) discussed the work of evaluating and recruiting principals. Mr. Silver noted the work of New Leaders for New Schools; Ms. Bridges recommended mentorship programs for new principals; and Dr. Simmons suggested including parental input on principal evaluations.
- Reps. Hirono and Scott (D-VA) asked the witnesses about obtaining **teacher buy-in** for turnaround strategies. Dr. Simmons explained that SLI requires 80% of teachers to agree to

participate in its program before working with a school. Mr. Silver noted that models that provide incentives for student growth make turnaround schools more attractive for quality teachers because students in these schools generally have the capacity to show impressive growth, given their starting points. Ms. Johnson stressed the importance of supporting schools in the diagnosis of problems and the planning process for turnaround.

- Reps. Guthrie (R-KY) and Holt (D-NJ) discussed the importance of **student assessment data** for informing decisions. Ms. Bridges spoke highly of her school's use of benchmark and growth model assessments. Dr. Butler noted that his rural district lacked the technological infrastructure to provide real-time results.
- Both Rep. McCarthy, who questioned the use of the **charter schools** as a turnaround model, and Rep. Clarke, who wondered whether charter schools shared their practices with regular public schools, expressed some skepticism about charter schools. Mr. Silver, whose school is not a charter, explained that he collaborates with other schools, both traditional and charter, and believes that charter-like autonomy for schools is vital for turnaround.
- Rep. Tonko (D-NY) considered whether turnaround models are **cost-effective** and also discussed the use of competitive **funding** as opposed to Title I formula funding. Ms. Johnson recommended that Congress find points of leverage that could launch broader reform, identifying the cultivation of a pool of qualified turnaround principals as one leverage point. Mr. Silver repeated that high-poverty Title I schools need more funding.
- Rep. Grijalva (D-AZ) asked about the growth of the **English language learner (ELL)** student population. Mr. Silver works with other schools that have implemented successful strategies for these students and focuses on literacy for ELL students. Ms. Bridges concentrates on family outreach, using a bilingual parent liaison.
- Prompted by questions from Reps. Chu (D-CA) and Hinojosa (D-TX), witnesses identified the following as **elements of successful school turnaround**: high-quality, on-site professional development and coaching; high expectations for students; a strong leadership vision; and a focus on quality instruction.

In closing, Chairman Miller listed some of the elements of successful turnaround that had been discussed during the hearing – collaboration, buy-in, leadership, community involvement, and professional development. He noted also the themes of local autonomy and flexibility that had emerged in the conversation. He concluded that Congress would need to elaborate on the four turnaround models in the Administration's ESEA plan.

Analysis:

Members expressed appreciation for the work of the witnesses and conversed at length about best practices for school turnaround. They acknowledged the difficulty in successful implementation of turnaround strategies. Members on both sides of the aisle indicated that the four prescribed turnaround models might be too restrictive, but did not identify what other models might be included, other than to acknowledging the witnesses' advocacy for flexibility in local decision-making.