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House Committee on Education and the Workforce
Hearing on Education Reforms: Examining the Federal Role in Public School Accountability
September 14, 2011

Context: On September 14, the House Committee on Education and the Workforce held a hearing on the federal role in accountability, examining problems within the current federal accountability system, and exploring innovative state and local approaches to school accountability. Chairman Kline called for the hearing - and a second accountability hearing to be held at the subcommittee level on September 21 – to educate members prior to the committee's upcoming consideration of a legislation to reform ESEA Titles I and II. The House hearings coincide with the introduction of legislation by several Senate HELP Committee Republicans to update Title I and II, even as Chairman Harkin and Ranking Member Enzi continue bipartisan negotiations.

Testimony Summary and Opening Remarks: In opening remarks, Chairman Kline (R-MN) expressed concerns about a significant federal role in education that produces limited results and may impede the work of state and local officials. He noted that according to recent poll results, Americans' confidence in the U.S. public school system continues to fall due to ongoing poor outcomes. He also stated that it is not possible to meet No Child Left Behind (NCLB) goals of 100% proficiency by 2014. He criticized a "one-size-fits-all" federal accountability system and suggested that states and districts are doing exciting work that is advancing student achievement and should be supported. He cited promising work in Florida in closing achievement gaps and work in Indiana using a growth model for school accountability and assigning schools letter grades based on results. He asserted that many reformers are creating important changes at the state and local level and believes that the federal government should not interfere with their efforts.

Ranking Member Miller (D-CA) stated that there is near universal agreement on the need to update NCLB. He suggested that the appropriate federal role in accountability is to establish guardrails so that states know what is expected of them. He noted that this should include a commitment to college and career-ready standards and goals as well as annual performance targets. He suggested that transparency is also important so that parents know how well their child's school is performing. He stated that the next step is balancing accountability with greater local flexibility and providing a less prescriptive federal role. He also noted the danger of returning to a pre-NCLB system in which student performance was masked by averages. While he noted the excellent work in place in some schools and districts, he suggested it was the responsibility of the federal government to ensure high expectations are in place for every student.

The hearing witnesses were: Ms. Hanna Skandera (Secretary-designate, New Mexico Public Education Department); Ms. Blaine Hawley (Principal, Red Pump Elementary School, Bel Air, MD); Mr. Alberto Carvalho (Superintendent, Miami-Dade Public Schools); and Dr. Amy Sichel (Superintendent, Abington, PA Public Schools).

- **Secretary-designate Skandera** noted that she is the vice-chair of Chiefs for Change which is a group of state chiefs advocating for research-driven reform. She also noted that she is a part of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), which has issued a set of accountability principles that provide strong recommendations for state accountability systems. She described the five strategic levers that New Mexico has identified as essential for education reform. These are: a

smarter return on investment by ensuring alignment of resources with proven strategies; real accountability and real results using a school letter grade system that provides more differentiated accountability than NCLB; student readiness for success using college and career-ready standards and a strong focus on reading; rewarding effective educators and leaders using evaluations that incorporate multiple measures of student achievement; and providing effective options for parents through charter schools, virtual schools, and other options. She encouraged the committee to provide states with flexibility to implement differentiated accountability systems, support the development of more robust educator evaluation systems, and be sensitive to the unique challenges of rural states.

- **Ms. Hawley** discussed the importance of teachers in providing data driven instruction that utilizes both formative and summative assessment. She noted the importance of collaboration across a school to meet student needs and provide remediation, enrichment, and intervention. She suggested that the current federal accountability system leaves little room for state and local input and is one-dimensional in its assessment of schools. She contended that the current Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) system is too prescriptive and can create unintended consequences by misidentifying schools as failing and imposing unfair sanctions. She highlighted some of the positive outcomes of NCLB including setting high standards and disaggregating student data, but suggested that the all-or-nothing yardstick and snapshot measurements of student performance are flawed. She suggested the appropriate federal role in education is to promote equity and provided targeted resources to state and districts. She also noted that assessment data should be provided in a timely manner on an ongoing basis so that it can be used to inform instruction.

- **Mr. Carvalho** noted that extensive use of data to analyze student performance has helped drive significant improvements in student achievement in Miami, including closing achievement gaps. He suggested that federal accountability needs to shift from comparing different cohorts of students to measuring the academic growth of individual students from year to year using growth targets. He also suggested that the federal government should recognize robust state accountability systems such as the one in place with Florida and not require a confusing federal overlay. He expressed concerns about the failure of NCLB to differentiate between historically low-performing schools and those which require only modest improvements, the lack of inclusion of writing and science assessments, resources allocated to supplemental educational services with limited evidence of effectiveness, a lack of comprehensive college and career-ready indicators, and quickly escalating sanctions that require schools to change strategies before they have time to show results. He suggested that a differentiated model of accountability with flexibility for high performing districts and schools with greater oversight in low performing districts and schools would help improve student performance and overall international competitiveness.

- **Dr. Sichel** discussed the positive impact that NCLB has had in her district through an increased focus on data and subgroup performance. However, she noted the weakness of an unrealistic goal of 100% proficiency by 2014, and a pass-fail model that does not promote growth in student achievement. She suggested that accountability should instead focus on continuous improvement for all students with multiple assessment measures that document individual student growth. In response to challenges her district faced with achievement gaps, they de-tracked their secondary schools, provided more inclusion for special education students, and reorganized the school day to include more academic supports. This plan resulted in significant narrowing of the achievement gap as well as benefits for all students. She recommended that reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) include growth models of student achievement, research-based

approaches to what works, replication of best practices from successful districts and schools, and a state and local locus of control for developing accountability systems.

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

Chairman Kline noted that he and Ranking Member Miller agree on the benefits of information and disaggregation of data in NCLB but have some disagreements about other issues. He asked Ms. Skandera for more information about how New Mexico had implemented its school grade system of accountability. Ms. Skandera described New Mexico's model for elementary and middle school students which encompasses both proficiency and growth including a value-added model and other academic indicators linked to student achievement. Additionally, the model has a double emphasis on the lowest-performing quartile of students. For high schools, the model includes cohort measures, graduation rates, and college and career ready measures including the SAT, and career and technical certification.

Ranking Member Miller noted that there has been a major shift from conversations that took place during the drafting of NCLB including the move by governors to adopt Common Core State Standards. He noted that California had an initial growth model that was not strong and asked witnesses to describe the flexibility that could result from those standards. Ms. Skandera suggested that a focus on outcome measures of student achievement is what is most important. Ms. Hawley spoke to the need of ongoing assessments to measure progress and allow educators to tailor instruction. Mr. Carvalho discussed the need to value growth as an outcome and measure students skills. Dr. Sichel discussed the value-added model used in Pennsylvania which provides educators with access to data at the student, class, and school level and allows for an analysis of root causes, strengths, and needs and informs plans to provide support and intervention.

Rep. Petri (R-WI) noted that his state uses adaptive testing to assess student achievement and asked witnesses if they recommend using similar systems. Dr. Sichel noted that her district uses Compass and Study Island adaptive remediation systems to help increase student achievement. Ms. Skandera suggested that with increasingly sophisticated assessments, the key issue is setting high expectations for student growth outcomes.

Rep. Kildee (D-MI) asked about the appropriate balance of federal/state/local control. Mr. Carvalho suggested that the federal government needed to respect state and local responsibility for school accountability but also consider how to ensure there is a way to compare performance across states as well as to other countries. Ms. Hawley recommended that the federal government set guidelines and provide support while allowing states and districts to develop the specific accountability mechanisms.

Rep. Roe (R-TN) asked the witnesses what was necessary to ensure that the best teachers were in the classroom. Dr. Sichel suggested that providing collaborative work environments and ensuring adequate pay are the most effective ways to recruit and retain teachers. Ms. Skandera suggested that it is important to shift the focus from having a credential to considering educator effectiveness outcomes. Mr. Carvalho suggested that there is a need to consider teacher preparation and how we can develop stronger models, possibly by looking to other countries and incentivizing great performance.

Rep. Hinojosa (D-TX) asked how to create effective school reform at the secondary level and how to address the needs of English Language Learner (ELL) students. Mr. Carvalho discussed the Florida state accountability system and the need to focus on academic, workforce, civil, and personal adequacies. He also suggested an emphasis on teacher and leader quality. He provided an analogy of states building a road and the federal government installing guardrails to ensure that no one falls off. He suggested that research-based instructional strategies and additional time focused on literacy and math as well as extended school time can boost achievement of ELL students.

Rep. Heck (R-NV) expressed concerns about the size of the "n" counts in subgroups and small numbers of students causing a school to miss AYP targets. Dr. Sichel suggested that if there was a focus on growth rather than proficiency, this would not be an issue. Ms. Skandera concurred that the focus should be on growth and discussed the importance of reading in predicting future success. Rep. Heck also inquired about concerns from educators in his district that Supplemental Educational Services (SES) spending provided little return due to a lack of vendor accountability. Mr. Carvalho suggested that SES could have greater impact if it was implemented well, but that there are currently over 400 providers in his district with no connection to the school curriculum and little oversight. Consequently, they have recently adopted a pre- and post-test for SES students to better inform parents of program outcomes.

Rep. McCarthy (D-NY) asked what could be done to boost performance of students after elementary school, improve the quality of teacher preparation, and address persistently low-performing schools. Mr. Carvalho suggested that sometimes closure is an appropriate response for low-performing schools. He also suggested that a strong investment in early childhood education will yield better outcomes in later years and that teacher preparation must have a stronger focus on content knowledge.

Rep. Thompson (R-PA) asked witnesses how the federal government should define career-readiness. Dr. Sichel suggested that most careers require advanced skills in math, science, problem-solving, analysis, reading, and writing and rigorous academics are important for career as well as college. Mr. Carvalho suggested that there be a greater focus on employer skills. His district does this through thematic career instruction in many science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) areas that are industry specific and tied to certification. Ms. Skandera suggested that states should set career-readiness standards but that the federal government should set a high bar and include reading and math as fundamentals for all students.

Rep. Scott (D-VA) asked witnesses how schools should respond to subgroup failure and whether resources should be directed specifically to these groups. Ms. Skandera said that schools need options beyond SES and school choice and that resources should be directed to target areas of failure. Mr. Scott also asked about how to make communities more conducive to learning. Mr. Carvalho discussed his district's work to set up a business-community sponsored parent academy that offers more than 200 courses across the district focused on teaching parents how to navigate the school system, helping support parent academic development, and teaching parents civic skills.

Rep. Biggert (R-IL) discussed her concerns about science education and asked witnesses whether science should be included in state accountability systems. Dr. Sichel stated that science is very important and has been a greater focus in her district for the past 3-5 years, but that they face challenges in getting good teachers in this area. Rep. Biggert also inquired about how to measure social/emotional growth of students. Ms. Hawley suggested that when students have their social and emotional needs addressed, they are better able to perform on academic assessments.

Rep. Hirono (D-HI) asked what priorities the witnesses would have for changes in ESEA reauthorization beyond growth. Ms. Skandera suggested differentiated accountability that is more nuanced and can help target interventions. Dr. Sichel recommended growth measures for students with disabilities that are based on their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Mr. Carvalho suggested holding non-public schools accountable for the academic growth of ELL and special education students, requiring greater content knowledge of teachers and paraprofessionals, and recognizing the challenges of districts that have large populations of recent immigrants. Ms. Hawley suggested addressing the over-focus of certain groups in accountability systems. Rep. Hirono also asked witnesses if their states were planning to apply for NCLB waivers from the U.S. Department of Education and whether they were planning to apply to the Race to the Top (RTTT) Early Learning Challenge. Ms. Skandera and Mr. Carvalho noted that their states will apply for waivers. Dr. Sichel noted that Pennsylvania had not yet decided and Ms. Hawley was not aware of Maryland's intention. All witnesses affirmed that their states intended to apply to the RTTT Early Learning Challenge.

Rep. Hunter (R-CA) asked witnesses whether existing data allowed for identification of root causes and whether there was a standardized growth model that could be imposed at the federal level. Dr. Sichel noted that data does allow for analysis of causes and identification of needed supports. All witnesses suggested that there is no standardized growth model that could be used across states.

Rep. Holt (D-NJ) expressed support for including science in accountability systems since it is essential for many jobs, technology, and for global competitiveness. Witnesses all concurred that science should be included in accountability systems. Mr. Carvalho suggested that what is measured is what is valued and that we need to add both science and writing to accountability systems. Ms. Hawley cautioned that a careful approach to measurement is used since science assessments often measure reading and math skills and not just pure content knowledge.

Rep. DesJarlais (R-TN) asked how to ensure that federal spending leads to improvement and provides parents with strong options. Ms. Skandera suggested that investments must be tied to proven strategies. Dr. Sichel emphasized the need for transparency in reporting of outcomes. Ms. Hawley suggested giving schools additional autonomy and time to do meaningful turnaround.

Rep. Woolsey (D-CA) discussed her belief in the need for wraparound services. Dr. Sichel emphasized that her district has a no excuses approach that provides screening assessments and remediation, community organization referrals, or other needed supports to facilitate student achievement. Mr. Carvalho discussed the value of community partnerships and discussed the work his district has done in creating school health clinics, providing social workers and school psychologists, and setting up a parent academy to support families.

Rep. Andrews (D-NJ) asked witnesses what impedes their ability to close gaps and how much annual growth is sufficient in a growth model. Dr. Sichel offered an example from a high school in her district that has made dramatic improvements in closing gaps but that still needs more flexibility as it could be identified as a failing school in the future. All witnesses concurred that the standards of a year's academic growth in a school year is a reasonable standard for an accountability system. Ms. Skandera noted that in some cases a year's growth won't close gaps and that effective teachers can exceed this standard and should be rewarded for doing so.

Rep. Davis (D-CA) asked witnesses what the federal role in teacher and leader evaluation should be and how long states need to develop these evaluation systems. Ms. Skandera suggested the federal role is to encourage states to adopt evaluation systems based on student achievement. Mr. Carvalho contended that the federal government should incentivize higher teacher quality requirements, development of career ladders, and other policies to recruit and retain effective teachers. He also suggested that teacher and leader evaluation systems should have a 50% weight on student outcomes. Dr. Sichel recommended that the state and school district negotiate teacher evaluation systems.

Analysis: Chairman Kline closed by discussing the challenge for Congress to write legislation that "sets a high bar" or "encourages states" and that the body must determine what to mandate while ensuring that they do not impede state/local progress. Ranking Member Miller noted in closing that the witnesses had provided good ideas for ESEA reauthorization. He suggested that during challenging economic times, there must be a focus on working with existing resources and repurposing funds to be used more effectively. Finally, he suggested that the role of the federal government is to create flexibility based on universal high standards.

The two most recent ESEA bills approved by the committee were approved by partisan votes. Several areas of agreement between Republicans and Democrats emerged during this hearing, for example transitioning to growth-centric systems, continuing subgroup performance transparency, and focusing on college and care readiness, but development of a bipartisan approach to reforming Title I may be challenging given distinct differences about the appropriate level of federal involvement in accountability systems. More will be know in the coming weeks as committee staff begins to draft legislation to update ESEA Titles I and II.