

House Committee on Education and the Workforce
"Education in the Nation:
Examining Challenges and Opportunities Facing America's Classrooms"
February 10, 2011

Context: On February 10, the House Committee on Education and the Workforce held the 112th Congress's first hearing on education, broadly focusing on the "challenges and opportunities facing the nation's classrooms." The hearing represents the first of a series of committee discussions designed to lay a foundation for reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Chairman Kline has signaled a commitment to focus a significant amount of the committee's attention on updating the ESEA, but has said he intends to move at a pace that will enable new members of the committee to thoughtfully engage in the process. His timeline for moving the bill, however, may be accelerated if the Senate HELP Committee begins to make progress on the bill.

Testimony summary: Witnesses for the hearing included: Dr. Tony Bennett, Indiana Superintendent of Public Instruction; Lisa Graham Keegan, Founder, Education Breakthrough Network; Andrew Coulson, Director, Center for Educational Freedom, CATO Institute; and Ted Mitchell, President and CEO, NewSchools Venture Fund.

In Chairman Kline's (R-MN) opening remarks, he stated that nothing is more vital to our nation's economy and future than education. Rules often stifle innovation at the local level, or the ability of parents to choose the right school for their children. No longer can we accept the status quo where we spend more money to try and fix problems in our education system, nor can we measure our commitment to education based on how much money we spend. Chairman Kline also remarked that states are moving forward with reforms in areas such as accountability and school choice, and that the federal government should not stand in their way.

Ranking Member Miller (D-CA) stated that as the committee looks to the reauthorization of ESEA, it is important to understand what is occurring at the local level. While we have increased test scores and improved achievement gaps, the needs of our workforce for college educated individuals are going to outpace our supply. Rep. Miller noted that important steps were taken with NCLB, particularly regarding an important focus on improving the achievement of all children. He said additional steps are now needed, including greater local flexibility, implementing an accountability system that works, and setting high goals for all students. He expressed optimism that reauthorization will occur this year.

State Superintendent Bennett testified about the need for a comprehensive set of reforms when faced with complex issues. He developed specific statewide goals for Indiana and pursued major reforms including improving access to AP; developed a growth model; and is prepared

to intervene in chronically underperforming schools. Dr. Bennett urged the committee to provide states flexibility, but also set high standards and hold them accountable for results.

Lisa Graham Keegan told the committee that there is significant movement towards greater school choice options, including online learning and homeschooling. States are moving away from assigning students to schools, and towards specialization. Not only is there choice for students, but a focus on choice for teachers. She said teachers are fighting to take back leadership roles in the education system and against illogical constraints on what they can do.

Andrew Coulson presented a variety of statistics meant to demonstrate that despite spending \$2 trillion on education over the last 50 years, the nation has not seen improvement in academic achievement or in closing achievement gaps. He said the only federal education program that has shown effectiveness is the Washington, D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program. Mr. Coulson recommended expanding this program.

Ted Mitchell testified that the federal government should promote innovation and new school models in order to better meet the needs of low-income students, students with disabilities, and English language learners. This includes supporting charter schools and supporting strong accountability mechanisms. He said efforts should be made to speed reform as states transition to common standards; use Title II funding to encourage results oriented teachers; and help states eliminate policies that stifle innovation, such as seat time requirements.

Discussion focus: Following the testimony, many committee members engaged the witnesses:

- Chairman Kline asked Dr. Bennett to explain further his efforts to reform the teacher licensing system, empower parents, and develop a growth model. Dr. Bennett emphasized that it is now easier for individuals to change careers and enter education, and that the growth model is a "game changer."
- Ranking Member Miller expressed disagreement with the data that Mr. Coulson presented. Rep. Miller was interested in how best to balance flexibility and accountability. Dr. Bennett discussed Indiana's reforms such as eliminating seat time requirements, and ensuring students have access to technology resources. He said our next "achievement gap" may be between those who have technology access and those that do not. Mr. Mitchell discussed providing flexible resources and holding systems accountable. Rep. Miller also discussed teacher evaluations, as he does not envision an ESEA reauthorization bill that does not include teacher and leader effectiveness provisions. He stated it would be necessary to ensure that teachers have "skin in the game."
- Reps. Bucshon (R-IN), Gowdy (R-SC), and Rokita (R-IN) asked questions regarding parental involvement and the role of the family in education. Dr. Bennett and Mr. Mitchell emphasized the importance of setting high expectations of all students, and not accepting excuses among teachers and administrators. Mr. Coulson responded that parents need to have choices and a financial stake in the outcome. When parents are empowered, they take responsibility.

- Reps. Kildee (D-MI) and Gowdy (R-SC) engaged witnesses in discussions regarding AYP, subgroup accountability and growth models. Dr. Bennett discussed the growth model in Indiana, and how they are hoping to remove AYP from the state's accountability system. Ms. Keegan responded to concerns from Rep. Gowdy regarding students with apparent severe cognitive disabilities being tested on the same material as non-disabled students. She said that they should be in the one percent category that can be tested on alternate standards, and reiterated the importance of testing and holding schools accountable for all students.
- Rep. Andrews (D-NJ) asked witnesses to discuss the role of online learning in ESEA reauthorization. Ms. Keegan stated the importance of engaging in dialogue with groups like iNACOL, and that it should be included in a reauthorization bill. Rep. Andrews and Barletta (R-PA) also asked questions regarding dual credit. Ms. Keegan and Mr. Mitchell support students using Pell funding for dual credit in high school, in response to Rep. Andrews. Dr. Bennett responded to Mr. Barletta that Indiana has a dual advisory committee, and there are barriers to students receiving dual credit, particularly ones erected by universities.
- Reps. Barletta (R-PA) and Mr. Walberg (R-MI) discussed the appropriate role of the federal government, and what programs it should fund. Mr. Coulson said that there is no program other than the Washington, D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program that has been shown to be effective or efficient, and that the federal government should support its expansion. Rep. Scott (D-VA) asked for the data, as he has seen research that conflicts with Mr. Coulson's conclusions. Dr. Bennett stated the federal government should set a high bar, give states flexibility and enforce strict accountability. Mr. Mitchell responded that there should be transparency, and that resources are flexible.
- Rep. DesJarlais (R-TN) stated that he heard 40% of local district budgets go to busing. He would be interested in ways to look into busing costs and opportunities for more parents to get involved in transportation, since it appears that when parents transport their own students, it increases their engagement and achievement.
- Rep. Scott (D-VA) engaged witnesses regarding the elements needed to provide a quality education. Witnesses stated that there are many complicated factors managed best at the local level, including ensuring a strong culture and high expectations; and relying on data-driven decisions, accountability, and transparency about how resources are used. Rep. Thompson (R-PA) asked how to improve access to college and the workforce. Witnesses said that teacher and leader quality, local flexibility, school choice and competition are the answers. Dr. Bennett also stated that you need to align fiscal policy with education policy and priorities.
- Reps. Davis (D-CA), Scott, and Roe (R-TN) asked questions regarding teacher evaluations and effectiveness. Dr. Bennett spoke extensively about the model Indiana is putting in place. He stated that local districts will be developing evaluations based on "guidelines and

guardrails" set by the state. He does believe evaluations should be annual, that there is good data to use, and that we need to address collective bargaining agreements that uphold the interests of adults and not children, instead of using a "carrot and stick" approach at the federal level. To retain effective teachers, Ms. Keegan said that we should recruit the best students, provide teachers leadership opportunities, and dismantle regulations that thwart their ability to be most effective.

- Rep. Woolsey (D-CA) engaged witnesses in a discussion about student support services. Mr. Mitchell stated that we need to break down silos, and could bring services to the school site, and extend the school day. Mr. Coulson does not believe there is a place for those types of support services at the school. Dr. Bennett believes that schools should be able to provide those services and engage in partnerships if it is necessary for their students.
- Rep. Hirono (D-HI) discussed the importance of promoting and supporting high quality early childhood education. Dr. Bennett said he considers it very important, though not a silver bullet, with which Ms. Hirono agreed. Mr. Mitchell stated that depending on the structure, and that if there were ways to ensure quality, federal government grants for early childhood education would be helpful.
- In response to questions from Rep. Biggert (R-IL), witnesses discussed the role of Race to the Top. Dr. Bennett discussed Indiana's decision to not apply in the second round, and how it was ultimately easier to work with state leaders than prove to the federal government it would institute reform. Mr. Coulson stated the core idea – competition – was good, but the problem is that the states are accountable to the federal government and not parents. Mr. Mitchell stated it was very instrumental in brokering reform in California, and without the federal leverage, those reforms would not have occurred.

Analysis: Members and witnesses engaged in discussion that touched on many issues from teacher effectiveness to early childhood education, but not at great depth. There was a significant focus on ensuring continued accountability and setting high expectations for student achievement, but allowing flexibility in how those results are achieved. Given the large number of new committee members who are only beginning to learn the parameters and requirements of the ESEA, we expect upcoming hearings to continue focusing on high level reform issues, while becoming more issue specific and nuanced over time. This approach will enable committee members to build their knowledge and understanding of important education reform issues prior to taking action to update the ESEA.