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Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
Hearing on ESEA Reauthorization: School Turnaround
April 13, 2010

Context: The Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions held a hearing on April 13 regarding reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), specifically related to school turnaround efforts. The hearing was part of a series of conversations the Committee is holding in an effort to overhaul ESEA. Overall, Committee members expressed a commitment to supporting efforts to turnaround the nation's lowest performing schools, and acknowledged that a silver bullet does not exist to solve this issue, but rather, schools require access to a range of potential solutions.

Testimony Summary: Witnesses for the hearing included: Joel Klein, Chancellor, New York City Public Schools, Beverly Donohue, Vice President of Policy and Research, New Visions for Public Schools (New York City), Robert Balfanz, Associate Research Scientist, Center for Social Organization of Schools & Associate Director of the Talent Development Middle and High School Project, Timothy Mitchell, Superintendent of Schools, Chamberlain School District 7-1 (South Dakota), and Marco Petruzzi, Chief Executive Officer, Green Dot Public Schools (Los Angeles).

Chairman Harkin (D-IA) set the stage for the hearing by commenting both on the dire need and challenge of focusing on the nation's lowest performing schools. Chairman Harkin remarked on the need to scale up proven school turnaround strategies, and assured that this will be a major focus of ESEA reauthorization. Ranking Member Enzi (R-WY) expressed concern over the four prescribed intervention models laid forth by the Administration, and called for more local flexibility. Ranking Member Enzi also discussed the need to focus attention on the unique needs of rural and frontier schools.

- Joel Klein discussed New York City's approach to turning around low performing schools, noting that improvements in the district were made by focusing heavily on improving educator talent, implementing structural reform, and a significant investment in initiatives designed to turn around failing schools. Mr. Klein also discussed the importance of strong school leadership and extensive professional development to improve teacher and leader effectiveness. Additionally, Mr. Klein remarked on the city's process for identifying low performing schools, comprehensive accountability and supports, and interventions system.
- Beverly Donahue discussed the work of New Visions for Public Schools in New York City, which undertook turnaround efforts in three large failing high schools beginning in 2002 to 2003. Through their experiences, Ms. Donahue noted that they learned that one of, if not the single, most important factors in turning around low performing schools is the capacity of teachers and leaders.
- Robert Balfanz in his remarks commented on why the lowest performing schools are persistently failing, pointing to a lack of accountability and support at the federal level, failure at the state level to develop the necessary capacity to provide supports, and a blame game between teachers, parents, and principals at the local level. Dr. Balfanz suggested the need for widespread adoption and use

of early warning and intervention systems, investment in capacity at the state and local levels, and that changing staff and governance structures is a means to achieve school turnaround, but not an end in itself.

- Timothy Mitchell commented on his district's ability to achieve success in turnaround efforts through an investment and focus in capacity building, and the development of professional learning communities. Dr. Mitchell also discussed the unique challenges faced by failing rural schools.
- Marco Petruzzi provided the Committee with information on the transformation of schools through the Green Dot network in Los Angeles, achieved through a focus on governance, creating a culture of excellence, training and support highly effective teachers and leaders, and providing a safe and respectful environment.

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

- An overall theme of the hearing centered around the Administration's four specific intervention strategies and the need for greater flexibility at the local level. Dr. Balfanz, in response to a question by Ranking Member Enzi (R-WY), acknowledged the need for a middle ground strategy saying that interventions should require an evidence-base. He also noted that no intervention strategy has achieved enough of an evidence-base to be considered the sole solution. Sen. Alexander (R-TN) also expressed concern over the need for greater local flexibility, asking how about intervention models should be selected, to which witnesses responded that districts should make the decision since they bear ultimate responsibility. Sen. Isakson (R-GA) also added his concern over flexibility, specifically regarding budget and hiring decisions.
- Chairman Harkin asked witnesses to comment on the research on the importance of class size or school size. Mr. Klein responded stating that the most important factor is teacher effectiveness, and that while class size does not seem to matter, school size does matter.
- Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) asked if any of the witnesses had used career pathways to improve student achievement. Robert Balfanz noted the effectiveness of career academies and said that there is research that suggests that emphasizing career and academics together provide the best results. Beverly Donohue also noted that their four most recent NYC openings were career academies.
- Sen. Bennett (D-CO) asked witnesses to comment on the effects that turnaround efforts have on students. Witnesses responded that they have seen the tide turn over time in terms of increased enrollment at schools that present new options. In environments that work, kids have embraced the new interventions and express this with their renewed interest and effort.
- Sen. Reed (D-RI) questioned the existence of empirical evidence on the prescribed turnaround models. Dr. Balfanz acknowledged that successes and failures for each one of these models exist, and that districts need to analyze each school's challenges and see what model fits. Sen. Reed followed by asking if there is an ongoing research plan to validate these models? Mr. Petruzzi noted that there are a lot of people currently studying Green Dot's model and that there will likely be evidence by external evaluators in the next few years.
- Sen. Merkley (D-OR) expressed concern, reinforced by other members, over the nature of competitive grant programs, especially with regard to rural schools. Dr. Mitchell of South Dakota

echoed this concern, citing a lack of capacity to apply for grants. Dr. Balfanz suggested the potential for a middle ground, by requiring grant recipients to participate in learning networks to share practices.

Analysis: Overall, the tone of the Committee hearing was positive, with players from both parties expressing their commitment to working together on ESEA reauthorization and turning around the nation's lowest performing schools. The key area of contention for members was the balance between prescribed intervention models and the need for local flexibility.