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Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
Hearing on ESEA Reauthorization: Improving America's Secondary Schools
May 4, 2010

Context: The Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions held a hearing on May 4 regarding reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), specifically related to improving secondary schools. The hearing was part of a series of conversations the Committee is holding in an effort to overhaul the ESEA.

Testimony Summary: Witnesses for the hearing included: Cassius O. Johnson, Director of Education Policy, Jobs for the Future; Don Deshler, Director, University of Kansas Center for Research and Learning; John Capozzi, Principal, Elmont Memorial High School, Elmont, NY; Rich Harrison, Middle School Director, Denver School for Science and Technology; Karen Webber-Ndour, Principal, National Academy Foundation High School, Baltimore, MD; and Tony Habit, President, North Carolina New Schools Project, Raleigh.

Chairman Harkin (D-IA) set the stage for the hearing by remarking on the need to focus on the severe dropout rate in the United States which disproportionately affects minority and low-income students. Chairman Harkin commented on the importance of the middle grades as a critical transition period that needs additional attention, and the overall imperative of ESEA reauthorization to meet the needs of all students in secondary schools to prepare them for higher education and the workforce.

- In his testimony, Cassius Johnson discussed the need to continuously invest in innovative high school design, with particular attention toward early college high schools, to improve the nation's secondary schools. He also emphasized the need for rigorous, fair accountability systems that place significant weight on graduation rates.
- Don Deshler focused on the importance of adolescent literacy in turning around low performing secondary schools. Additionally, he noted the significantly lower investment the federal government has made historically in adolescents, and discussed three "outstanding" pieces of legislation geared towards this age group: Graduation Promise Act, LEARN Act, and Middle School Success Act.
- John Capozzi remarked that the number one factor for creating successful secondary schools is improving teacher effectiveness. Additionally, having a strong principal that can be a "teacher of teachers," rigorous observation processes, a strong professional development plan, and a collaborative environment are also key.
- Rich Harrison discussed the experience of the Denver School for Science and Technology, and highlighted flexibility and innovation as key elements for their success. Mr. Harrison suggested to the Committee that ESEA should create more high performing schools, promote more innovative work of charter schools, and promote choice and demand.

- In her testimony, Karen Webber-Ndour also discussed the successes of her school, the National Academy Foundation High School in Baltimore. She highlighted the career academies model, and specifically how they formalize the relationship between business, community groups, and the school through the creation of an advisory group.
- Tony Habit remarked on the need to create a range of secondary school options, including innovation schools and early college high schools. He cited the lack of capacity at the school level around change management as critical, as well as the need for strong leadership.

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

- Chairman Harkin (D-IA) in his opening line of questions asked witnesses about successful dropout recovery incentives or initiatives, and asked about the need for a four year graduation rate measure as a performance criteria for high schools. In response to the dropout question, Mr. Capozzi noted the need for extended time, including summer school and night school, intensive counseling services, and a strong school culture in order to reengage this student population. Mr. Johnson addressed the accountability question, noting that there needs to be a consistent definition for a four year graduation rate and measures of progress.
- Sen. Bennett (D-CO) followed up on Chairman Harkin's concern over dropout prevention, and asked witnesses for recommendations on how to get students back on grade level. Mr. Harrison talked about his experience at the Denver School for Science and Technology, stating that having additional flexibility around making decisions regarding time, schedule, curriculum, supports and interventions was critical to their success. Sen. Bennett also asked for further detail around the early college high school initiative in North Carolina, specifically how this program gets funded, an area that Sen. Hagan (D-NC) also expressed interest in. Mr. Habit answered that while this is a challenge in every state, North Carolina gathered a working team from each sector to sort out this issue. In North Carolina, community colleges are reimbursed for FTE, and the State pays for textbooks for students enrolled in early college high school programs. Witnesses also remarked that early college high schools present an opportunity to remove students from an environment where there are low expectations, and switch that environment where they can be successful.
- Sen. Franken (D-MN) commented on the importance of strong leadership and the need for principals to be "teachers of teachers" and not simply building managers. He asked witnesses to provide recommendations on promoting this idea. Witnesses commented on the need to develop solid models for identifying and supporting effective school leaders, and the need for better coaching to demonstrate/mirror strong leadership. Sen. Roberts (R-KS) also centered his questions on the importance of teacher and leader effectiveness, and witnesses responded that there is a dire need to focus on improving teacher and leader preparation programs.
- Another focus for many of the Committee Members was on the middle grades and the lack of attention often paid to this critical transition period. Sen. Reed (D-RI) and Sen. Murkowski (R-AK) asked committee members for recommendations in assisting students in middle school. Witnesses commented on the need of having safety nets in place to help students catch up, the need to focus on core literacy instruction and infusing literacy across subject areas, and providing systematic interventions beginning with Kindergarten through Grade 12. Witnesses also mentioned the need to focus on improving school climate and culture to improve student engagement. Additionally, Ms.

Webber-Ndour explained that in Baltimore, successful high schools have begun annexing failing middle schools.

- Sen. Hagan (D-NC) asked witnesses to comment on the importance of expanded learning time, such as lengthening the school day and/or year, to improving secondary schools, an idea that was mentioned by witnesses in response to other questions. Witnesses remarked that students that are behind need extra time on instruction to catch up, and that schools need to optimally use time they do have on active instruction. Additionally, extra time should be focused on providing inquiry-based learning time that is based on making real world connections.
- Sen. Burr (R-NC) focused his comments on the need to capitalize on technology and develop online resources and textbooks to improve teaching and learning for a new generation of students.
- Chairman Harkin (D-IA) concluded the hearing by asking witnesses why it is so difficult to replicate models that work. Witnesses responded by stating that teacher and leader effectiveness is the most important factor in making a school successful, in addition to strengthening the supply of effective school models, sharing and learning from one another, and having leadership encourage replication of successful charter schools.

Analysis: Members of the Committee demonstrated a strong interest in improving secondary schools and focusing on the middle and high school years as a top priority. Members expressed support for innovative school models, including charter schools and early college high schools, and reinforced their belief that effective teachers and school leaders is essential in building and replicating successful schools.