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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

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**STATEMENT OF
THE HONORABLE CHAKA FATTAH
MEMBER OF CONGRESS
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
TEACHER EQUITY: EFFECTIVE TEACHERS FOR ALL CHILDREN
SEPTEMBER 30, 2009**

Mr. Chairman and members of the House Education and Labor Committee, thank you for inviting me here to testify today on the issue of teacher quality and the equitable distribution of teacher talent. As research has repeatedly demonstrated, high quality teachers are the most reliable and powerful contributors to student academic achievement. This same research also shows that low-income students and students of color are consistently and disproportionately taught by teachers with the lowest pre-service predictors of teacher success. I would like to focus my remarks today on two issues central to this discussion. First, I would like to talk about measures of effectiveness and the role of pre-service indicators of quality, including subject mastery and experience. Then, I will address the pernicious challenge of attracting and retaining the most desirable teachers in high-poverty schools.

I would like to applaud the efforts made by this Committee and our Senate colleagues in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to promote measures of teacher effectiveness, which are tied directly to student progress. Surely the objective of all teachers is to see that their students master the content they teach and to ensure they are prepared to progress to the next grade. Unfortunately, we have relied for years on informal and anecdotal assessments of teachers and their classroom performance. Parents have discussed amongst themselves which 3rd grade teacher was best at teaching fractions, and which 6th grade students would be best prepared for 7th grade. Likewise, 11th grade teachers compare the quality of the 10th grade teachers based on what incoming students knew and were able to do.

As the Department of Education and schools nationwide undertake the daunting task of measuring what was “value-added” during the school year, I wish them luck. This mission will require balancing the accuracy of assessments, fairness to teachers, and a system to support teacher improvement in identified weaknesses. Any system of measuring effectiveness must include teacher participation in development, student achievement data, and a means for correcting inevitable flaws in any first attempt. The objective of such a system must be to support teachers at improving their practice and to build long-term gains in student achievement, rather than simply to weed out bad apples.

As these systems are being developed, however, we must not abandon current proxy measures of teacher quality. While teacher content expertise, preparation and experience do not correlate in all cases with student learning, they are the best indicators available to predict classroom success. Rigorous evaluations of Teach For America have shown that those teachers, overwhelmingly inexperienced and without school of education credentials, have dramatic effects on student achievement. Students of these teachers learn at least as much as students of better credentialed and more experienced peers. This said, Teach For America teachers are the exception rather than the rule when considering teacher experience and effectiveness. Experts agree almost universally that the quality of instruction improves over time, and that it takes at least three years before teachers begin to master the art and science of teaching. Teacher experience is also a broader indicator of school stability and management. Schools with more experienced teachers are better able to support long-term growth and to tackle long-standing challenges. While experience should not replace effectiveness as the measure of teacher quality, it is a worthwhile proxy until effectiveness measures have been put in place and tested.

In addition to experience, we must consider teacher content mastery. We cannot expect students to reach high levels of subject understanding if the instructor him/herself lacks that very understanding. Naturally, this issue arises more frequently in secondary education. In order to prepare students for college-level science, technology, engineering and math, we must provide educators who have demonstrated mastery of these subjects. Too often, high-poverty schools are staffed by teachers who attended the least selective and rigorous post-secondary institutions, who achieved the lowest scores on certification exams and who failed to major or minor in the subject they are assigned to teach. There are certainly teachers for whom any of these indicators of content mastery (college selectivity, exam scores, major/minor) bears no relation to their effectiveness as instructors in the subject. Once again, a fair and reliable system for measuring teacher effectiveness will replace the need for these proxy measures.

Establishing and reporting pre-service proxy measures of teacher quality and reliable measures of teacher effectiveness will only get us halfway to our goal of providing every child a high-quality, effective teacher. For many (if not most) schools, this reporting will demonstrate what we already know. Most teachers in most schools are doing an excellent job of teaching their students and preparing them for the next grade. Nevertheless, we are also confident that this widespread and consistent reporting will also show (as previous research has done) that low-income students and students of color are disproportionately taught by lower-quality teachers. This is the case in both the remedial tracks of lower-poverty schools, and across the board in higher-poverty schools.

One of the more admirable provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act was a requirement in Sec. 1111(b)(8)(C) that state plans include, "steps that the State educational agency will take to ensure that poor and minority children are not taught at higher rates than other children by inexperienced, unqualified, or out-of-field teachers, and the measures that the State educational agency will use to evaluate and publicly report the progress of the State educational agency with respect to such steps." Though this provision has been virtually unenforced since its inception, I was pleased that this Committee sought to remedy that problem in the American Recovery and

Reinvestment Act. The Department clearly has the authority it needs to address the challenge of inequitable distribution of teacher talent.

Addressing this problem will require the engagement of schools, districts, collective bargaining units, teachers and state and federal policymakers. If we are to provide low-income students the best teachers, we must make their schools and classrooms desirable places to be. While we could simply mandate the redistribution of teachers from the federal Department of Education, this would be absurd and ineffective. Merely assigning a teacher to teach in a dysfunctional school with ineffective leadership, community support and resources will not solve the problem. We must develop better ways of recruiting and retaining good school leadership, providing support to struggling teachers, and offering compensation and working conditions commensurate with the importance of the task we have asked these teachers to undertake.

If we are to build and develop a strong 21st century teaching workforce, we must make greater efforts to attract people of color, especially men, into education. Simply relying on the status quo ignores the increasing diversity of our classrooms and fails to capitalize on the talent and dedication of diverse young college graduates. In order to build a pipeline of effective educators with diverse roots, we must instill in young children, through example, the sense that teaching is a possible career path for everyone. We must recruit students early in their college careers by providing assistance to those who face disproportionate challenges in funding their education. As one example, the “Call Me Mister” Program, a successful model for bringing more African American men into teaching, has recently been expanded to Philadelphia in a partnership with Cheyney University. In addition, we must provide the compensation, working conditions and professional recognition and development necessary to attract and retain professionals who would otherwise pursue different paths. As racial barriers to entry fall in many fields, it is important that the field of education become more competitive and proactive in ensuring that children are educated by teachers who are as diverse as their classmates.

As I have consistently argued before this Committee and elsewhere, we must make better strides in ensuring that all schools have resources adequate to teach students to high standards. High-performing teachers consistently flock to high-poverty schools with good leadership, motivated students and adequate support. While students in high-poverty schools often present teachers the greatest professional challenges, they also offer the greatest rewards. As we begin to measure teacher effectiveness, I believe that contrary to the assumptions of many, we will see teachers can be more effective at moving students ahead years at a time when they start with such serious deficits. It is likely that teachers of the highest achieving students will face the greatest challenges increasing student achievement as significantly as is expected.

Ultimately, we must invest in teachers, administrators and school systems the idea that low-income students and students of color hold the same potential as their higher-income and White peers and that they are worthy of the resources we know they need to be successful. Now is the time to recognize those amazing educators who are moving their students ahead at a stunning pace and to support more teachers to take up this challenge. Our students should expect and certainly deserve nothing less. I appreciate the attention of this Committee and look forward to working with you to advance this critical goal.