

**Testimony of Marie Parker-McElroy
Before the U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Education and Labor**

**Hearing on
Supporting America's Educators:
The Importance of Quality Teachers and Leaders**

May 4, 2010

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee. My name is Marie Parker-McElroy, a Cluster-Based Instructional Coach in Fairfax County Public Schools, the twelfth largest school district in the country. I work in two schools, Camelot Elementary and Graham Road Elementary. I am honored to be invited to bring the teacher and instructional coach perspective to this important conversation. I am here today to share my views and experiences, and to express my support for Congressman Polis' Great Teachers for Great Schools Act, which directly addresses the implementation of high-quality, effective professional development -- something that I am passionate about.

Let me start with a metaphor. For every surgeon beside an operating table, there are countless people behind the scenes, making sure that the surgeon can save a life. For every teacher in the classroom, we have specialized professionals to support them, help them solve problems and improve, encourage them, and make sure that their students are receiving the best instruction possible. I am one of those professionals.

Like surgeons, teachers cannot effectively perform in isolation. They require teamwork, continuous professional development and improvement. However, most schools are not organized to support valuable team work. School structure and tradition forces many teachers to teach alone, in isolation from their colleagues. I work with teachers to buck this trend, to make sure that they understand the data, the research, the best practices, and the best ways to work together.

Today, I want to talk about the impact that professional learning has on teachers that I work with daily, and more importantly, the impact it has on students.

At Graham Road Elementary, there is a strong professional development structure in place. Most of the professional development occurs among teams of teachers organized by grade level. We begin professional development meetings by looking at our data, focusing first on school-wide data. As the instructional coach, my job is to work with each team to analyze the data, discover instructional strengths and weaknesses, establish team learning priorities, and define indicators for success. Throughout this process, we identify books and research that we will read together to deepen our understanding and content knowledge. We also develop a sense of shared responsibility for our student success.

On an ongoing basis, we review our progress in implementing the school improvement plan. We constantly check to see if what we are doing is making a difference for our students and revise our practices accordingly. These measures can be as simple as a teacher using pencil and paper to analyze a test or include excel spreadsheets with student data to analyze our impact on students' learning.

To recap, teachers are supported in developing their understanding and practice of new strategies by engaging in activities explored during team-based professional learning meetings. These meetings are led by teacher leaders, coaches or principals. The meetings focus on deepening content knowledge, planning formative assessments to check for student understanding, and analyzing common assessments to measure the impact of instruction.

Let me tell you about one team in particular. This year I am working with a team of fifth grade teachers. At the beginning of the year, only 72 percent of students passed the county assessment. We meet weekly during regular school hours. We study the standards that 10-year-olds ought to achieve. We determine the knowledge and skills students will need to meet the standards. We ask each other, "how does this look for academically advanced students, second language learners, students in special education or the economically disadvantaged?" We develop lessons and strategies for teachers to use with their students. This professional learning takes place in real time; not months before in random lectures or workshops that occur away from our school.

After implementing the strategies and lessons developed by the teams of teachers, we study how the students responded to our lessons and whether they achieved the required standards. We immediately know if the students are achieving or not and determine why. Our team uses the live feedback from the students to adapt our instruction.

This continuous, job-embedded, and data-driven process of teams of teachers studying and implementing effective teaching practices aligned to student needs has produced significant academic gains for our students. One week ago, we retested our students and 91 percent of them passed. That is an increase of 19 percentage points, gained in less than one full academic year. How did this happen? Teachers were involved in effective, real-time and on-the-job professional learning with their colleagues who know their students and know what their students need to increase their success. Students in our classrooms only have 36 weeks to learn the grade-level standards. My teachers, and more importantly my students, don't have time to waste. Collaborative professional development allows them to learn from each other and access the tools and strategies they need—when they need them—to help our students achieve.

A teacher I coached once said:

I joined Graham Road Elementary School as a brand new teacher and having a personal connection to a coach, who understood curriculum, instruction, and the culture of the school gave me more support than anything else that was offered. Being able to rely on a coach to come into my classroom and not judge, but support my instruction increased my

ability to support each individual student I taught. My coach's constant feedback and modeling increased my own efficacy as a teacher, which in turn improved each student's learning within the class. I am confident to say that without an effective instructional coach many teachers would not be as effective as they are and therefore many students would not be at their full academic potential.

In summary, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I am confident that students can reach their full academic potential when teams of teachers are actively engaged in professional learning based upon data and the needs of their own students and organized in a structure that offers timely and embedded team and classroom-based support.

I recommend that the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act include a federal definition for professional development consistent with the National Staff Development Council's Standards for Staff Development and Congressman Polis' Great Teachers for Great Schools Act. We, as teachers, need the support to improve our practice and increase student achievement. I also recommend that federally funded professional development should be evaluated rigorously for its impact on teacher performance and student learning. Finally, please provide dedicated resources so that districts – especially those most in need of improvement - can build capacity, and provide time and support to implement effective professional development in all schools. This is the most critical lever available to improve the effectiveness of our teacher workforce, as we continue to seek ways to improve recruitment and preparation. Achievement for all students depends on investing in it now.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee for the opportunity to share my point of view as a teacher and instructional coach.