

## **Turning Around the Nation's Low-Performing Secondary Schools**

### **Testimony for the Senate HELP Committee Hearing on "ESEA Reauthorization: School Turnaround"**

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Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi, and members of the HELP committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century all students need to be provided a pathway from secondary school to post-secondary success, via college, job training, or the military. To put it simply, there is no work that can support a family for students who fail to graduate from high school or do so unprepared for further learning. Yet for far too many of our students, in particular low-income and minority students, such pathways do not exist. In an era dominated by human capital this not only weakens our nation's competitiveness, but also, as both the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and U.S. Army have noted, threatens its social fabric. We cannot have a country in which entire communities are cut off from the only real avenue to prosperity -- a good education.

We find ourselves in this troublesome situation, in good part, because too many of our low-income and minority students are concentrated in middle and high schools that are designed and operated to fail. In 2,000 of our nation's high schools, graduation is not the norm, in an era when it is a necessity. These schools, which can be found in every state, in both urban and rural areas, are almost exclusively attended by low-income and minority students. As such, they are the nation's dropout factories and engines of the underclass.

Each of these high schools, in turn, is linked with one or more middle schools, where at least half of eventual dropouts begin the process of disengaging from school, and achievement gaps become achievement chasms. Thus, by the time they get to high school, many students already have one foot out the door, as witnessed by their declining attendance, poor behavior, and course failure during the middle grades. As a result, high schools face an intense educational challenge they were not designed to meet.

What do I mean when I say these schools have been designed and are operated to fail? Let me paint a picture based on my 15 years of research and direct experience working in and with these schools.

These are schools in which less than a quarter of the students enter with even near grade-level skills. In a high school you can find half of the entering ninth-graders with reading and mathematics skills at the fifth-to seventh-grade levels, and another quarter with skills below those expected of fifth-graders. The ninth grade may have from 300 to 500 students, with perhaps 20% or more repeating the grade for a second time. Half or more of the entering students fell off the path to high school graduation as early as sixth grade, and during their middle grades missed a month or more of school each year. These same students were cited for demonstrating poor behavior, and/or failed their math and English classes. In addition, 15% to 20% of the students could be special education students and nearly 100% live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty.

Do we respond to this extremely high degree of educational challenge with the educational equivalent of the Marine Corps-the best trained, best equipped and motivated teachers and administrators? No. In fact, it is often just the opposite: These schools are the training grounds for the young and inexperienced; they often see at least half of their staff turn over every few years. In some, principals change as frequently as every year. A considerable number receive no Title 1 funding, even though they face some of the greatest impacts of poverty of any school in the nation. As a result, they cannot provide the level and intensity of support required for students to enter their classrooms ready to learn or the teacher supports and training required to effectively deliver standards-based courses to underprepared students.

There is shared responsibility for this failure. At the federal level, there has been a lack of accountability and support for low-performing secondary schools. At the state level, there has been a failure to develop the capacity needed to support improvements in these schools, and the perpetuation of funding systems that make it difficult for dollars to be matched with student needs. At the local level, reform efforts have often focused elsewhere and simply re-arranging the deck chairs by changing principals or staff without addressing the underlying challenges has too often been seen as enough reform (a mistake that we must avoid repeating at the federal level). Within the schools themselves, improvement is often stymied by the blame game with teachers, parents, and students (who must support one other for success to occur) too often saying nothing can be done until someone else works harder or better.

It does not have to be this way. Over the past decade we have amassed enough proof points to show that turnaround is possible. Middle and high schools can be designed and operated to succeed even when they exclusively serve high-needs students. It is possible to combine whole school reform with the teacher, administrator, and students supports needed to ensure that students can stay on track to graduate prepared for college, career and civic life, even when they enter middle and high school significantly off-track. More significantly, from these successes, as well as from our failures, we can deduce what is essential for turnaround to work.

In our own experience through our Talent Development Middle Grades and High Schools programs and most recently our collaborative Diplomas Now Secondary School Transformation model (a partnership of Talent Development, City Year, a national

service program, and Communities in Schools, using early warning indicators to identify students as they begin to stray from the graduation path and to apply the right intervention to the right student at the right time), we have witnessed first-hand how this can be done. Our results have been validated by third-party research and by the federal What Works Clearinghouse.

At our Baltimore Talent Development High School, located in one of the highest poverty communities in America, in sight of an open air drug corner, we take students who fit the profile described above -- with below grade level skills and declining attachment to school -- and graduate more than 80 percent of them with all graduates having a post-secondary schooling or job training placement. For those of you, like me, who believe the proof is in the pudding, we invite you to come up the road and visit the school. At our three Diplomas Now high schools in the Recovery School District of New Orleans, we have been able to get ninth-grade attendance and passing rates to levels not seen in decades. At our Chicago Talent Development High School, which is operated in partnership with local, state, and national service employees and teachers' unions, we are recording ninth-grade success rates of 90%. This is critical because the evidence is clear: Students who make it to tenth grade on time and on track have three to four times the graduation rates of students who do not.

Fundamental to the success of all these schools is the teacher team -- four to six teachers working with 75 to 100 students. The teacher teams, in turn, need to be supported by research- and evidence-based acceleration instructional programs for students who enter with below-grade-level skills. They also need strong state standards linked to benchmark assessments; good and consistent early warning data to let teachers respond to the first signs that a student is falling off track; time in their schedules for the teacher teams to meet and work collaboratively to improve their practice and to collectively meet student challenges, and assistance from a second shift of adults -- national service corps members, counselors, and wrap-around student support providers -- so that every student can get the assistance he or she needs to succeed. The teacher team also needs support from a school leadership team. And here too teamwork is essential. As important as they are in large middle or high schools, good principals cannot do it alone. With staffs of 100 or more there are too many adults to coordinate, support, encourage and guide. Thus, turnaround middle and high schools need leadership teams composed of principals, assistant principals, and teacher leaders that are trained together, guide the school, and are held jointly accountable for school progress.

Thus, we applaud the Obama Administration's efforts through ARRA and School Improvement Grants to elevate turning around high schools with graduation rates below 60% and their feeder middle schools into an urgent national priority by holding states and districts accountable for their transformation, as well as providing sufficient federal support.

The work that remains through ESEA re-authorization is to create a federal-state-local-community partnership to turn these schools around. Here it is possible to draw several

essential lessons from our own work and the larger body of research on school turnaround and improvement.

**The first lesson** is that it is not simply about how the school is governed and operated or who it employs. In the three examples I cited above, one school is a startup, three others were existing schools that are being turned around, and the last is a contract school. I have seen the strategy of closing low-performing schools and replacing them with new schools work well and poorly. I have seen schools that thoughtful and informed educators considered beyond repair, transform themselves. I have seen charter operators turn national disgraces into schools that succeed, but I have also seen charter schools that need to be shut down. I have seen schools come alive under the guidance of a new and invigorating leadership team. I have also seen highly skilled and committed principals chewed up by intransigent faculties. And I have seen schools that replaced the faculty *twice* and were no better off. Governance and staff changes are a means to end not an end in themselves.

**The second lesson** is that there are at least a dozen things one needs to get right to successfully turn around a school. This is why turnaround is difficult and our success rate has been low. But if you look at prior efforts, you also see that in the main we have approached turnaround as an amateur endeavor via instinct and trial and error, usually in ignorance of prior efforts and often without even an attempt to address the full range of challenges in turnaround schools. Thus, the low success rate to date is not surprising. What we need to do is make school turnaround a professional effort grounded in analysis and knowledge -- one in which evidence-based reforms are matched to the challenges faced, and we strategically deduce the quickest way to implement them well and quickly.

In short, schools do not succeed and are organized for failure when their implemented design does not match their educational challenge.

Educational challenge in turn has three inter-related components:

**Academic challenge:** How far away from required standards of performance are students when they enter a school? It matters greatly whether there are 20 or 200 students who are two or more years below grade level.

**Engagement challenge:** The greatest teachers and instructional program in the world will have little impact if students do not attend, behave, and try. Yet in many high-poverty middle and high schools, especially in urban areas, chronic absenteeism is rampant. In one city we examined, 40% of middle and high school students missed in total a year of schooling over five years, 20 percent of their educational time. This is how achievement gaps grow.

**Poverty challenge:** It is often hard for policymakers and others who do not live in poverty to comprehend its impact on school success. But poverty taxes student and school success through a number of means. It keeps some students out of school to provide emergency day care for younger siblings, so parents can keep their job; others stay home to give the grandparents who are raising them their daily insulin shots. It pushes some students to drop out to help earn money to pay the utility bill or keep food on the table. It engulfs others in continual exposure to violence and the grief of losing

family members. Others are consumed by the stress of parents losing jobs and homes or succumbing to drug and alcohol addiction. In our innovation high school in West Baltimore, faculty members estimate that 15% to 20% of our students are essentially raising themselves. Schools can mobilize when a handful of students are in these situations. They become overwhelmed when, as is often the case in middle and high schools in high-poverty neighborhoods, it is dozens to more than 100 students.

While schools in need of turnaround are often similar in terms of facing high academic, engagement and poverty challenges, they also differ in the contours, magnitude, and intensity of these challenges, as well as in their existing capacities to meet them. Thus, it is essential that each be analyzed on its own, so that reforms can be matched to needs. We also have to keep in mind that every school in need of a turnaround likely has been attempting to reform and improve for a decade or more. So it is also important to analyze why prior reform efforts have failed and what pockets of capacity may remain. The quickest way to doom a school turnaround effort is to impose a reform that most adults and students in the building believe was already tried and failed.

With a thorough understanding of the educational challenge a school faces and its current capabilities, it is then possible to create an educational design that can turn the school around. For the design to work, however, it must navigate four hurdles: It needs to be based on appropriate **know-how**; the school needs the **capacity** to put it into place; the adults and students in the building need to have the **will** to implement it with fidelity and speed, and finally, the effort needs to be protected from the policy and practice **turbulence** that can derail it.

Before we get too depressed and ask how it will be possible to accomplish this at the scale we need, it helps to look at some other sectors of society, the level of complexity they handle and how they succeed. If we look at medicine, the military, and business, we see that problems with this level of complexity are routinely solved.

To close this testimony, I will try to advance a case for a federal role in enabling school turnaround to succeed at scale by looking at how we can increase the nation's ability to apply the lessons of other sectors and create the know-how, capacity, will, and ability to mitigate turbulence we need.

### **Increase the Know-How to Meet Academic, Engagement, and Poverty Challenges in Low Performing Schools**

The military, medicine and business all invest much more in applied research and development, or how to solve problems of practice. Moreover, what is known is widely disseminated and turned into protocols or standards of practice. Using such standards is viewed as essential for practitioners in the field, and lack of use, absent compelling circumstances, is sanctioned. The military and medicine routinely study instances in which standard practices fail and use this knowledge to improve and innovate. In terms

of turning around low-performing middle and high schools, we have learned enough in the past decade to begin formulating standards of practice.

What is required to move this forward is a public-private partnership along the lines of the Data Quality Campaign and the State Common Standards, supported by federal policy. For areas where current understanding is less clear, we need an aggressive federally supported applied research and development effort.

One clear candidate for this is extended learning time. Most successful turnaround efforts have found one way or another to extend student learning time. We do not know enough, however, to say how this should be done and how it will vary by circumstances. Is it better to extend the school day, the school week, or the school year? How should the extra time best be used? What is the most effective balance between more time on core academics and experiences that deeply engage students in school and learning like drama, debate, and robotics? The answer is we don't know. But we could find out quickly, and in so doing, save ourselves from making expensive investments that don't pay off. The question of how best to extend learning time lends itself to rapid analytic study. By randomizing four or so different approaches to extending learning time across enough schools, within a few years we would know the effectiveness and the costs and benefits of the different approaches.

### **Increase Our Capacity to Implement Effective Turnaround Strategies**

Building our capacity to turn around schools is in my view our current number one weakness and greatest need. We need to invest in capacity building efforts at the state, district, and school levels. Schools in need of turnaround should be paired with external partners or school district or state support teams with proven track records. We need to make sure that sufficient funds are set aside in school improvement grants or by other means so that this assistance can be hands-on, in the school, and continuous. We also need to provide turnaround teams and external support partners with the conditions needed for success such as control over staffing, budget, and scheduling. There is also a new role for national non-profits that can inject capacity into schools by providing high-quality student supports and management strategies that needs to be developed and supported. Organizations such as City Year, Communities in Schools, the Boys and Girls Club, the U.S. Army through JROTC, and College Summit, among others, are rapidly developing the ability to project high-quality student supports nationwide, and need to become tightly integrated into turnaround efforts.

Next, we need to greatly increase the intensity of training we provide to educators. When you compare typical on-the-job training in education to that of medicine, military or industry, you see how light it is. Short days and short weeks, crammed in when opportunity allows, uncoordinated and often of low quality compared to the high-intensity, dawn-to-dusk, mandatory attendance, training with accountability for implementation one can find in other sectors.

## **Build Accountability and On-Track Indicator Systems that Encourage and Sustain the Will to Implement Needed Reforms with Speed and Fidelity**

To develop the will to implement needed reforms quickly and with skill takes accountability systems that send the right signals. At the high school level this means counting graduation rates equally with test scores as essential outcomes. We need every student to graduate prepared for post-secondary success. It also means establishing a national baseline for continuous and substantial progress in raising graduation rates. If each of the 5,000 high schools with graduation rates below the current national average (of approximately 75%) increased its rate, on average, 2 percentage points per year for 10 years, the national graduation rate would hit 90%. This is an attainable goal and should become the minimum progress viewed as acceptable.

For us to monitor turnaround efforts and be able to change those that are not working, we need to adopt on-track to success indicators. The emerging science of on- and off-track indicators for high school graduation and college readiness, as well as benchmark tests tied to the new common state standards, can be used to create indicators for school progress that will let us know if schools are on track to meet their achievement and graduation improvement targets, and will keep schools focused on essential actions. We also need to support turnaround options that build teachers' beliefs that large scale improvement is possible. One way to do this is to create and enable teacher-led school turnaround efforts. Turnaround should not be seen as something done *to* teachers, but rather an effort that they lead, and hence, are responsible for.

## **Work to Mitigate Turbulence, in Policy and Practice**

For turnaround to work, we need to insist on high-intensity and rapid implementations of school reform efforts designed to meet a school's educational challenge. But we also need to provide the stability for these efforts to take root and bear fruit. This means that the federal government, in partnership with states, should insist that effective reforms supported by federal and state dollars are not changed simply because a new school superintendent with a new vision for district improvement arrives or a new principal takes charge.

The federal government also needs to insure that schools that have successfully turned around can still gain access to the resources necessary to meet their educational challenges and overcome the achievement and engagement drains brought by poverty. This means we need to think flexibly and creatively about how Title 1 resources or dedicated secondary school success funds can be targeted and available for all high-poverty middle and high schools that meet continuing performance criteria. Recall our Baltimore Talent Development High School. Its success does not negate that fact that almost all its student live in poverty, 15% to 20% are functionally raising themselves, many are essentially caring for younger siblings and family members, and three-fourths enter with skills two or more years below grade level. To meet these needs and overcome

the additional educational challenges they bring, resources are required, over and above the funding provided to schools with far fewer challenges. At its heart, the purpose of Title 1 funds is to help schools overcome the impact of poverty. Secondary schools that face these challenges need to have full access to this support.

## **In Conclusion**

Members of the Senate HELP committee have been at the forefront of the effort to create a federal-state-local partnership to transform the nation's low-performing secondary schools. Much of what is needed in ESEA Reauthorization to enable successful secondary school turnaround exists in the legislation members of this committee have advanced. Chairman Harkin's Every Student Counts Act, Senator Bingaman's Graduation Promise Act, Senator Reed's Success in the Middle, The Keeping PACE act, Senators Franken's and Hatch's School Principal and Training Act, and the Serve America Act, among others, contain essential elements of what is needed. We also need to support the widespread adoption and use of early warning and intervention systems in conjunction with school transformation and turnaround. I have offered a few additional ideas and suggestions based on our on-the-ground experience and existing evidence and research. The bottom line is that the time is now to make reforming the nation's low-performing secondary schools a vital national mission. A federal-state-local partnership designed to accomplish this, guided and supported by ESEA reauthorization, can fundamentally transform the nation for the better.