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On

ESEA Reauthorization: School Turnarounds

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Good afternoon Chairman Harkin, Senator Enzi, and members of the committee.

Thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (“ESEA”) and New York City’s approach to school turnarounds. We hope that our experience can serve as a model for other districts nationwide as they take up President Obama’s challenge to turnaround the bottom five percent of America’s schools.

Fifteen years ago, the iconic teacher’s union leader, Al Shanker, made a point about public schools that we are still working to realize today.

“The key is that unless there is accountability, we will never get the right system,” he said. “As long as there are no consequences if kids or adults don’t perform, as long as the discussion is not about education and student outcomes, then we’re playing a game as to has the power.”

No Child Left Behind (“NCLB”) brought long-overdue accountability to public education and cast a spotlight on a shameful achievement gap that had gone unaddressed for generations. The law rightfully demanded that all children, regardless of their background, have access to a high-quality education that allows them to achieve their full potential. You and your colleagues deserve praise for bringing these difficult but essential reforms to the education landscape.

That said, there is widespread consensus that NCLB can be improved. Its focus on absolute achievement instead of growth put many schools in the category of ‘failing’ even if students made significant gains. Moreover, it takes years before interventions are first mandated in struggling schools, and even longer before more dramatic restructuring efforts are required for chronically low-performing schools. Even after six years of missing Annual Yearly Progress—years during which students lives and futures are on the line—NCLB is vague about what types of turnaround strategies are necessary to achieve fundamental change. This has allowed schools and districts to implement so-called restructuring initiatives that amount to mere tinkering around the edges while students are falling through the cracks.

The Department of Education’s Blueprint for changes in ESEA addresses some of these shortcomings and is a step in the right direction. Their proposed changes would require schools to show that they are responsible for helping all students to make progress rather than holding every single school to uniform expectations regardless of student achievement levels upon enrollment.

In New York City, we have focused on this type of accountability model, measuring schools not just on where they stand, but on how much ground their students gain from year-to-year. This system recognizes schools making great progress even while serving challenging student populations and it enables us to provide supports when schools are failing to meet student needs. Perhaps most importantly, it allows us to quickly identify schools where persistent patterns of

low performance necessitate more significant interventions, including—in some cases—making the difficult decision to replace failing schools with better options for our students and their families.

When Mayor Bloomberg and I assumed responsibility for our school system, we made a commitment to ensuring that all of our children have access to excellent schools, schools that help them graduate prepared for success in college and careers. And while much work remains, our efforts—along with the hard work of our teachers, administrators, parents, and students—are paying off.

In our elementary and middle schools, the percentage of City students meeting or exceeding grade-level standards on annual State Math and English Language Arts exams has risen dramatically since 2002—from 38 percent to 69 percent in English and from 41 percent to 82 percent in math. In fact, New York City's five boroughs made more progress than any other county statewide from 2002 to 2009—that's measured against other students taking the exact same tests.

These gains are mirrored at the high school level. Just last month, New York State education officials announced that the City's progress in improving graduation rates had continued unabated, with our four-year graduation rate reaching a historic high of 63 percent in 2009 with gains across every demographic group. We recognize that we still have a long way to go, but after a decade of stagnation, we are proud that the City's graduation rate has increased for eight consecutive years. Since 2005 alone, the graduation rate has risen by 12.5 points. And the dropout rate has been cut nearly in half since 2005, falling to a historic low of 11.8 percent. And this is true even though New York State is increasing graduation requirements.

So how did this happen?

Much of this progress reflects the efforts of diligent and talented educators who share our belief that the status quo is not good enough and who know that if they set goals and stick to their plans, they can change lives. It also demonstrates the commitment of students and families, who know that when it comes to education, hard work brings great rewards.

Some of the progress also reflects structural reform and a significant investment in initiatives designed to turn around failing schools. When the Department sees that a school is not providing students with the education they need, we quickly intervene to try to change those conditions, and our efforts have been effective in improving outcomes at many City schools.

Take, for example, Hillcrest High School in Queens. Hillcrest is a large school, enrolling over 3,000 students. In September 2006, we transformed Hillcrest into seven small learning communities or SLCs. Each of the SLCs is organized around a theme that engages student interests, and each enrolls approximately 450 students. A core group of teachers and staff work closely and consistently with those students, allowing them to develop academic and social supports tailored to meet individual student needs.

This initiative already appears to be making a difference at Hillcrest. In June 2007, the school's graduation rate was 62 percent. By 2009, it had climbed to 68 percent. While there is obviously still much room for improvement, Hillcrest presents an excellent example of a restructuring program that has put a low-performing school on the path toward success.

Another key strategy that can jumpstart school improvement is appointing a highly trained new principal. While some of our schools have experienced remarkable gains under a new principal, others only experienced incremental improvements insufficient to yield a dramatic turnaround.

Small learning communities and leadership changes are among the more significant interventions the Department introduces to transform outcomes at our lower-performing schools. But we also provide extensive professional development for teachers and administrators and introduce enrichment programs or mentoring and tutoring services in struggling schools. Where appropriate, we help schools to phase down total enrollment or reconfigure grades and classes. Low-performing teachers are given evaluations and support in an effort to boost their effectiveness. Teams of teachers across the City have been organized to improve outcomes among targeted groups of students.

And yet at some schools, despite these efforts, the outcomes have not changed. In some cases, conditions have even deteriorated. As a City, and as a country, we must then ask ourselves: When should we stop sending children to a place unlikely to prepare them for life beyond high school? When is it simply immoral to consign students to the prospect of failure by sending them to schools where we would never send our own children?

When our efforts are not turning around failing schools and we know we are capable of doing better by our kids, we must be prepared to take more radical steps, even when those efforts prove controversial.

In issuing the Blueprint for revising ESEA, President Obama and the United States Department of Education have called upon State and local education officials to "turn around" the bottom five percent of schools nationwide. They recognize that turning failing schools around is difficult and often controversial work, and they have therefore outlined four permissible strategies designed to support schools in achieving that goal. They are:

1. Turnaround Model—Redesign or replace a school, including replacing the principal and at least half of the staff.
2. Restart Model—Convert a district public school to a public charter school.
3. Transformation Model— This is similar to the Turnaround Model, but requires rigorous evaluation of teachers and the principal, rewarding those who increase student achievement and removing those who fail to achieve that goal.
4. School Closure—Immediately close the school and re-enroll current students in other, more successful district schools.

As mentioned, New York City has a solid track record of improving achievement through a combination of rigorous accountability, structural reform, customized supports to schools and students, and leadership change. When those efforts are not good enough, however, we have implemented an approach to closing and replacing schools that the Department of Education would classify as the “turnaround model.”

Our approach to closing schools differs from that used in many other parts of the country. We don’t padlock the school doors immediately or transfer current students elsewhere in the district. Instead, we phase schools out gradually, without adding new incoming classes, until the final group of students graduate. Simultaneously, we gradually introduce replacement schools into the building, typically adding one class per year until they reach full enrollment. These replacement schools have new principals, and while they are required to interview 50 percent of highly qualified staff from the pre-existing school, they can also bring in new teachers matched to the new school’s mission and theme. Unlike similar efforts in many other parts of the country, this turnaround strategy has a solid track record of success.

Since 2002, New York City has announced the phase out of 91 schools. We have replaced these schools with more than 400 new schools that are outperforming other schools citywide. Our new high schools, for example, have an average graduation rate of 75 percent even though they serve some of the City’s highest-need students. In fact, MDRC—one of the nation’s most-respected education policy research institutions—recently reported that students enrolled in our new schools tend to be more disadvantaged than their peers in other schools citywide across a number of socio-economic and academic indicators.

I want to be clear that we do not arrive at the decision to phase out a school without careful consideration. We have a comprehensive process for identifying our lowest-performing schools and then determining which turnaround strategies will be used in them. But there is simply no excuse for keeping a school open when it is not giving students the education they need and when our best efforts have failed to change those conditions.

Our accountability system ensures that all schools are held to clear and fair standards. Every City school receives an annual Progress Report grade, which is shared with the school community and the broader public. These grades range from an “A” to “F” and take into consideration student performance, student progress, and school environment. Each school is compared against all schools serving the same grades, and also against a “peer group” of the 40 most similar schools citywide. Schools can earn extra credit for exemplary progress among high-need students.

Any school that earns a “D” or “F” grade on its most recent progress report, or that earns a “C” grade for three consecutive years, is automatically considered as a candidate for restructuring, leadership change, or possible closure.

But that is not the only criteria we look at, and we also contemplate significant interventions at a handful of other schools based on a broader set of considerations.

Another important factor we consider is a school's performance on its annual Quality Review. These on-site evaluations of a school's culture and teaching practices help us assess the school's capacity to turn around. In evaluating Quality Reviews, we look closely at a school's strengths and weaknesses to see how they might impact its capacity to achieve a dramatic turnaround. When we have concerns about a school based on its Quality Review, we initiate additional conversations with the Superintendents and other Department staffers that have first-hand experience working with the school to determine whether it has the capacity to show significant improvement in the near future.

Finally, we weigh community indicators at each school. This includes annual school survey results from parents, students, and teachers. And it also includes demand for seats to assess whether or not families feel that the school is a good option for their children. When schools are not working, students and parents vote with their feet, and most of the schools we have decided to phase out have experienced low and declining demand.

We remain steadfastly focused on helping phase-out schools to improve during their final years of operation, and we provide intensive support to the students enrolled in those schools. Indeed, our experience shows that outcomes for students in phase out schools tend to get better as those schools move toward closure. Any students that are still working to earn their diplomas when a school closes receive guidance and the opportunity to transfer to another school or program that better meets their needs.

Many faculty and staff members continue working in our phase-out schools for several years as those schools move toward closure. As I mentioned earlier, our new schools are also required to hire 50 percent of highly-qualified faculty from schools they replace, and any teachers who do not seek or obtain positions in the replacement schools can apply for other vacancies citywide. But our new schools have new leaders, many new teachers, and distinctive themes—all of which allow them to build the new school cultures that are a precondition for truly turning around a failing school.

We believe that our approach to school turnaround is effective because our new small schools allow teachers, school leaders, and other staff to get to know every student very well, ensuring that academic and social supports are in place to meet individual student needs. The smaller size of the staff also makes it easier for educators to collaborate and plan collectively to design a coherent curriculum. And school leaders are better able to plan school-wide professional development so that students make continuous progress. All of these characteristics are found in high-quality, large- and medium-sized schools as well, but we believe that the personal attention afforded by a much smaller school makes a particularly powerful difference for our highest-need students. And that belief is borne out in the results that these small schools have achieved to date.

I want to take a moment to provide a concrete example illustrating what this approach can mean for students and communities.

In September 2003, we initiated the phase out of Bushwick High School in Brooklyn. That school had a longstanding history of academic struggles. The four-year graduation rate for the Class of 2002 was 23 percent. Today, there are four small schools thriving on the campus. Collectively, they enroll a very high-need student population—roughly 14 percent of Bushwick students are English language learners and 17 percent are special education students, and most students come from low-income families. The overwhelming majority of incoming ninth-graders are performing well-below grade level upon enrollment. Nonetheless, the average four-year graduation rate for the three schools we opened in September 2003 is 72 percent.

There are many examples of large, successful high schools in the City, and those schools are a valued part of our diverse system of 1,600 schools. But we also know that some of our schools—large and small alike—have been underperforming for years. We have high schools, for example, that have sustained graduation rates at-or-below 50 percent for a decade or longer. We cannot stand by and watch such schools fail another generation of students when a host of interventions and supports have not yielded meaningful improvements, especially when we have similar schools serving similar students that are achieving significantly better results.

There is always anxiety associated with change of this scale. But sometimes, when a school has experienced sustained failure, the only way to transform those conditions is through fundamental change—change that offers increased support for current students and better learning environments for future ones.

For this reason, I believe ESEA needs to be explicit about what should happen to persistently failing schools. While Race to the Top gives states incentives to close schools after all other school improvement strategies have failed, the Blueprint is more ambiguous about this issue. Our experience in New York shows that replacing failing schools can transform entire districts, so it is essential that the legislation does not permit states to shy away from making tough choices when necessary. As you revisit ESEA, I urge you not to waste this historic opportunity to make lasting change that—if done right—will enrich students’ lives and advance the future of our nation.

At the outset of my testimony, I noted that graduation rates have risen steadily in New York City over the last six years, and I asked how this had been achieved. Much of the work, I explained, has to do with the determination of educators, parents, and students.

But the other reason it has happened is that our City has been honest with itself in cases where those efforts were not good enough. There are many stories like Hillcrest High School, where planning and support changed outcomes. And there are others like Bushwick where more radical steps were required to turnaround a school that had failed its students for years. When we talk about a school with a graduation rate at or below 50 percent, that means that every year we take a “wait and see approach,” half of its students are falling through the cracks.

Unlike many other districts across the country, the Mayor and I have been willing to make tough choices and take on powerful interest groups to ensure that our students have access to the

excellent schools they need and deserve. While much work remains, we have achieved progress, and learned important lessons along the way that can guide nationwide school turnaround efforts.

First and foremost, you must establish clear and fair accountability systems that account for where students are when they first enter a school and how they progress along the way. We support the introduction of a growth model as proposed in the Blueprint, and we also support a continued focus on boosting achievement among the highest-need students.

Secondly, you must demand that states are honest in identifying schools that are persistently failing students. Some low-performing schools will benefit from restructuring interventions, leadership change, or other support such as intensive professional development. But when those interventions are insufficient to reverse chronic underperformance, you must be fearless in establishing explicit restructuring strategies that prevent states and districts from evading the tough choices necessary to give all students the education they deserve. We believe our approach of gradually phasing out failing schools maximizes stability for current students while creating better options for their younger peers. New schools also grow gradually, allowing them to build a culture of high expectations for students and a community that supports student success.

Real education reform cannot occur without your leadership and support. Powerful interest groups continually advocate in favor of the status quo, despite abundant evidence that the public education system is not getting the job done for far too many of our students. We are therefore counting on you to strengthen ESEA, so that all of our students have access to the high-quality education they need and deserve.

Thank you again for inviting me to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions you have.