

**Opening Statement of Rep. Michael N. Castle (R-DE)
Senior Republican Member,
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and
Secondary Education
Witness Testimony on “Strengthening America's
Competitiveness through High School Reform”**

May 12, 2009

Good morning. Thank you Chairman Miller for holding today's hearing. As the Senior Republican Member of the Subcommittee that oversees K-12 legislation, I welcome the opportunity to testify before you today and look forward to hearing from my colleagues, as well as the other expert witnesses on this important issue - strengthening America's competitiveness through high school reform.

As you are aware, No Child Left Behind was passed in 2001 to address the achievement gap that exists between poor and minority students and their more affluent peers. Although we are just now beginning to see the results of the Law, studies demonstrate that America's elementary and middle school students are making great strides in closing the achievement gap in reading and math. We are not, however, seeing similar results at the high school level.

In fact, results from the most recent long-term trend report on the National Assessment of Education Progress, more commonly known as NAEP, showed that 17-year-old

test scores in mathematics and reading have not significantly improved since the 1970s. Additionally, according to a recent Editorial Projects in Education Report, three in ten students fail to finish high school with a diploma, and barely half of the historically disadvantaged minority students graduate from high school. At a time when students need higher levels of education and workforce training to succeed in an increasingly competitive global economy, the number of students leaving high school without a diploma is alarming.

This is compounded by the fact that the median income for high school dropouts is \$14,000, much lower than the median income of \$24,000 for high school graduates and \$48,000 for college graduates. Nationally, high school dropouts were also the only group of workers who have seen income levels decline over the last 30 years (Cities in Crisis 2009: Closing the Achievement Gap; America's Promise Alliance).

A hallmark of the No Child Left Behind Act is its promise to provide meaningful information to parents and communities about the quality of their children's schools. Yet, for too long, a key indicator of student success - graduation from high school - has been masked by misleading data and contradictory calculations.

As Congress works to reauthorize the No Child Left Behind Act this year, it is clear that we must work at the federal, state, and local levels to ensure students are prepared for college or the workforce when they graduate high school.

Last Congress, I introduced a bill to define a national graduation rate, in order to streamline data collection and create an indicator that is comparable throughout the United States. In October 2008, the U.S. Department of Education released final regulations regarding graduation rate accountability. I believe these regulations are aligned with the National Governors Association's (NGA) recommended graduation rate as well as the legislation I offered last year.

The work of the Department helps to clarify the current definition of graduation rate under the No Child Left Behind Act. Under current law a "graduation rate" is defined as "the percentage of students who graduate from secondary school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years." States are allowed to define and set their own standard number of years and results vary widely from state to state.

The Department's regulations provide for a uniform and comparable graduation rate calculation that attempts to

capture the true number of high school graduates in our nation.

Although much work remains, the establishment of a consistent graduation rate is a critical first step toward solving the graduation crisis and making certain our students are given the tools they need to succeed.

Second, I am hopeful we in Congress will look at the ways we can support state and school district efforts to improve state academic standards. High school is no longer about simply moving students from ninth grade to graduation. We must ensure all students are leaving their secondary education with the knowledge and skills necessary to reach their goals.

Finally, I am hopeful Congress will improve those programs under NCLB to ensure that they work and support students at the high school level, such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers which provide students with academic enrichment opportunities during non-school hours and mentoring programs that help foster safe learning environments, and strengthening and applying early childhood and elementary reforms that are helping younger children progress to later grades.

I hope that this Committee and Congress will continue to examine this issue very closely. I look forward to working along with my colleagues at the federal level, as well as the state and local level to prepare our nation's students, particularly those that will be graduating shortly, to compete in a global economy. The bottom line is that our children are the future of this nation and we must implement the laws that will shape our future for years to come.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today.