

## Beyond NCLB: Views on the Elementary and Secondary Education Reauthorization Act

### *Witnesses:*

**Katherine Beh Neas**

Senior Vice President for Governmental Relations, Easter Seals

**Amanda Danks**

Lead Teacher, Wm. S. Baer School, Baltimore City Public Schools, Baltimore, Maryland

**Pam Geisselhardt**

Gifted and Talented Coordinator, Adair County Schools, Columbia, Kentucky

**Terry Grier**

Superintendent, Houston Independent School District, Houston, Texas

**Wade Henderson**

President and CEO, The Leadership Conference

**Frederick Hess**

Resident Scholar and Director of Education Policy, American Enterprise Institute

**Tom Luna**

Idaho Superintendent of Public Instruction

**Charles Seaton**

Teacher, Sherwood Middle School, Memphis City Schools, Memphis, Tennessee

**Elmer Thomas**

Principal, Madison Central High School, Richmond, Kentucky

**Jon Schnur**

Co-Founder and Chairman of the Board, New Leaders

### *Members Present:*

Tom Harkin, Chairman (D-IA)

Michael Enzi, Ranking Member (R-WY)

Kay Hagan (D-NC)

Al Franken (D-MN)

Jeff Merkley (D-OR)

Lamar Alexander (R-TN)

Johnny Isakson (R-GA)

Rand Paul (R-KY)

On November 8, 2011 the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions held a Round Table hearing to discuss the advantages and drawbacks of the Elementary and Secondary Education Reauthorization Act (ESEA) recently passed through committee as an amendment to the 2008 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, P.L. 107-110). ESEA, originally passed in 1960, has been reauthorized every five years since its enactment to provide federal funding for elementary and secondary public schools in America. NCLB, passed during the Bush Administration in 2001, is a standards-based education reform that contains provisions to improve the quality of education in America and increase accountability within schools. The law puts greater emphasis on standardized student test scores and federal funding is based on test score results. Although many praise the law's positive aspects, others find weaknesses within NCLB, including a lack of teacher evaluations and ineffective procedures for low-performing schools. This hearing invited principals, teachers, and education administrators to share their thoughts on the reauthorization of ESEA.

Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA) opened the round table by presenting the reauthorization's central goals: providing students with the tools needed for success and delicately balancing authority between federal, state, and local governments. Harkin noted that the "current law is not bringing about the significant improvement in student achievements that our country needs and our children deserve." Ranking Member Michael Enzi (R-WY) emphasized the need for state flexibility for innovative approaches in schools. He

recommended “shining the light on the children, rather than just the schools” and increasing transparency in schools for students and parents.

Chairman Harkin asked the panel of witnesses to discuss the strengths of and improvements needed in the current ESEA reauthorization. Jon Schnur of New Leaders felt that College-Career Ready standards, grant programs focused on talent, and the heightened flexibility for states are all strengths of NCLB. He is concerned, however, that NCLB does not include much-needed teacher and principal evaluations and performance targets. Charles Seaton of Memphis City Schools and Terry Grier of Houston Independent School District agreed with Schnur, stating that evaluations of teachers and principals is necessary to create a national standard for improving schools. According to Grier, evaluation is so important “it has to be fixed;” he told the committee that 55 percent of low-performing teachers were replaced within one year using Houston’s teacher evaluation program. Grier told the committee that Houston’s methods can easily be developed into a national template for teacher and principal evaluations.

Rand Paul (R-KY) asked the panel to discuss federal versus local regulation. Tom Luna of Idaho Public Instruction felt that, while teacher evaluations are crucial to maintain teacher quality, putting them in the hands of the federal government “goes too far,” because states can do their own evaluation with approaches best suited for each state. He said there is a common misconception that schools will not make improvements without federal mandates: if there are federal mandates, schools are more likely to opt out of regulations. When the power is put in local governments, states have “historically shown” the ability to improve their standards and accountability using creative and unique solutions. Elmer Thomas, Principal of Madison Central High School in Kentucky, agreed, saying that federal oversight “makes people a number.” Due to the ineffectiveness of a one-measure evaluation of schools based solely on testing, Thomas supported a “holistic” view to grade a school’s success.

Schnur argued for performance targets within all schools; however, he believed that the federal government should not micromanage them. Amanda Danks of Baltimore City Public Schools stressed the importance of state and local level autonomy, which she believes is a strength within the ESEA amendment. As an example, she referenced the successful specialized rubric for performance targets developed by her school, which she said could be done by any school. Pam Geisselhardt of Adair County Schools pointed out the drawbacks of creating teacher incentives for performance targets, as they create unhealthy competition between teachers. She told the committee that the new reauthorization needs to shy away from the “push to test and not to teach” model that NCLB utilizes. Katherine Neas of Easter Seals told the committee that the reauthorization will “hugely” benefit students with academic disabilities by preparing more educators to effectively teach to their needs.

Frederick Hess of American Enterprise Institute said the federal government is “horribly situated” to improve teaching from afar and should only maintain its role in basic research for education. Seaton added that schools need the federal government for funding assistance: “NCLB gave us the direction but not the resources.” Geisselhardt added that federal funding needs to be better channeled to increase flexibility for schools. In her opinion, each school has varying needs of improvement and should be able to allocate those funds appropriately. Al Franken (D-MN) brought up adaptive computer-based assessments as a fundamental direction for federal funding.

A web cast of the hearing can be found on the committee web site.

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