

TESTIMONY FOR
ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR MANAGEMENT MICHELL CLARK
for the Senate Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management,
Government Information, and International Security
Thursday, September 14, 2006 / Washington, D.C.

Chairman Coburn, Senator Carper, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for inviting the Department of Education to this hearing.

My name is Michell Clark, Assistant Secretary for Management at the Department. I appreciate this opportunity to testify on the Department's policies and practices as they relate to conference sponsorship, attendance and related costs.

As public stewards, we have a special obligation to ensure that taxpayer dollars are spent wisely, appropriately and in a manner consistent with congressional intent. We are fulfilling those goals.

It begins with a strong policy on Departmental travel. I have here the Department's official Handbook for Travel Policy. It does not make for exciting reading. But its common-sense rules illustrate our principles.

The very first requirement is that travel will be authorized "only when it is necessary to accomplish the Department's mission in the most effective and economical manner." Travel outside a 35-mile radius of the employee's daily commute must be authorized by the Department.

A Travel Management Center makes all arrangements, searching for best values and federal discounts. Use of an outside contractor for official travel must be justified in writing with a cost comparison. We also have strict policies regarding acceptance of payment for official travel from non-federal sources. Such an acceptance must be approved by the Department's chief of staff with concurrence by the Ethics Division of the Office of the General Counsel.

Under the Constitution, education is primarily a State and local responsibility. Much of our work entails person-to-person contact with our numerous State and local partners and stakeholders, the people who administer programs for 54 million K-12 and 22 million post-secondary students. One of the most effective ways to communicate with them is through conferences, which enable us to interact with hundreds or thousands of people at a time.

Take our Federal Student Aid, or FSA, conferences. These conferences are a critical source of training for financial aid administrators. They allow us to provide more than 6,000 participating schools with updates on changes to Title IV student aid programs and policy.

For the past two years, FSA has hosted two Electronic Access Conferences per year—one in the East and one in the West—with plans to move to a single conference in 2008.

Each conference is attended by as many as 2,500 customers, who choose from up to 70 informative training sessions. FSA staff serve as session instructors and in logistical support; they account for less than 10 percent of total conference attendees annually.

We have also held conferences on the new IDEA legislation and regulations, helping State and local education officials learn about new provisions affecting students with disabilities. We've also held conferences on the Title I program for low-income students.

Hundreds of our educational partners and stakeholders attend workshops and confer with Department officials on a variety of subjects. These range from changes to Department regulations, to aligning instructional methods with state accountability standards, to providing choice and supplemental educational services to a greater number of families.

Sometimes requests for conference training and assistance are made by Members of Congress on behalf of their constituents. We are happy to comply.

Much of this recent conference activity was spurred by passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, the greatest education accountability law in our nation's history. These conferences actually improve accountability. They help stakeholders better understand how to increase academic achievement for all students. They also help grant recipients avoid missteps that could lead to costly program fraud, waste, or abuse.

In the most recent fiscal year, about \$6.3 million was spent on conferences, a figure that included normal staff salaries, which would have been paid regardless of the setting. By contrast, our Department's discretionary budget was more than \$56 billion.

Seventy-six percent of the conferences sponsored or attended by Department staff between October 2004 and May 2006 involved fewer than three Department employees. A total of 67 conferences were held in the Washington, D.C. area.

We are using technology to further reduce the need for travel. Our use of video-teleconferencing has increased by 78 percent since 2003.

We recognize that accountability does not occur without transparency. Our Office of Communications and Outreach has compiled information on annual conference attendance and sponsorship, coordinating with various offices to find ways to improve their management and administration.

And Weekly Speaking Reports let our senior officials know who's going where and why, and how this contributes to meeting the Department's goals and priorities.

As we continue working to implement *No Child Left Behind's* accountability provisions, we must hold *ourselves* accountable as well. We are working hard every day to set a good example.

Prior to 2001, the Department of Education had earned only one “clean” audit in our history; we’re about to receive our fifth. We were the first Cabinet Department to achieve “green” status on the Improved Financial Performance PMA scorecard. Our administrative expenses account for only about two percent of our total budget. And in 2004, we received the Presidential Award for Management Excellence for improved financial performance.

We are continuously searching for innovative new ways to accomplish our goals in the most effective and efficient manner. Those goals include measuring and improving academic performance, sharing best instructional practices, promoting global competitiveness and reducing conference costs.

We will continue to improve our financial management and oversight of policies governing conference and travel-related costs. And we are eager to work with the OMB and Congress every step along the way.

Thank you, and I will be happy to take questions.

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