

The Presidential Nomination of Margaret Spellings to be Secretary of Education

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Chairman

Testimony

Statement of Michael B. Enzi,

Chairman - Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

Hearing on the Nomination of Margaret Spellings to serve as Secretary of Education

January 6, 2005

Good morning and welcome to today's hearing on the President's nomination of Margaret Spellings to serve as our next Secretary of Education. It is a pleasure to welcome Mrs. Spellings and all those in attendance to this, our first hearing of the 109th Congress.

Before we begin, we are marking several firsts today and I would like to take a moment to call attention to a few of them.

For me, this is the first Committee hearing that I will conduct as its Chairman. I can't think of a better or more important opening hearing for the Committee than to spend this morning talking about the state of education in the country and how to make it better for students of all ages.

It is also my first opportunity to welcome to the Committee and thank for their willingness to serve on it our new members, Senator Burr of North Carolina and Senator Isakson of Georgia. In addition, it is a pleasure to welcome back a former Chairman of this Committee, Senator Hatch. It is good to be here with you and my other colleagues who are returning to serve on this Committee, especially my good friend and our ranking member, Senator Kennedy.

Today's hearing is one of the first on the President's nominees for his Cabinet for his second term. It is also the beginning of what I hope will be a continuing dialogue between this Committee, the Administration, and you and your staff at the Department of Education.

Looking back, I believe we have made an excellent start. We have some real progress to show for our work on the education issues that have such a strong and direct impact on our children.

The centerpiece of that effort, the President's No Child Left Behind Act, emphasized accountability and the importance of getting results in the classroom. Thanks to that important legislation, our nation's classrooms are more effective and efficient places of learning and our children are benefitting from that.

As the President's Domestic Advisor, you were a part of that effort. Now you will be taking up the reins at the Department of Education and bringing your own style and substance to the task at hand. It will be difficult but I am confident you will do a good job. You have more than 10 years of experience with these issues on the local, state and national level and I don't think anyone has a better understanding of the President's position on them. You will now be in the perfect position to promote his agenda and

ensure that we continue to make progress on an issue that I know is as important to you as it is to him.

Having had the chance to spend some time discussing these issues with you, I know you share my commitment to ensuring our children receive the education they will need to take their place in a workplace that continues to change and evolve. Your record on these issues is clear – you believe, as I do, that every school can be a good one and every student can be a star achiever. That has been my experience as the father of three college graduates, one of whom is a former principal and current school teacher. It is also my hope as the grandfather of a little boy. I know he is counting on his Grandfather and the other parents and grandparents on this Committee to ensure he receives the kind of education he will need to find a good job and the continuing training he will need to keep it. We must provide a lifetime of learning to our students and workers of today and tomorrow that will enable the United States to retain its competitive edge.

It may sound like I am jumping the gun by expressing my concerns about the kind of world my grandson will face in the years to come, but, as the old adage says so well, the future will be here before we know it. It's our job to ensure we're prepared for it when it arrives.

That is why these reforms we have been working on must continue to be put in place as soon as possible. Our schools need us to take action today for tomorrow may be too late. Reforms that will make our schools better in ten or more years won't help our children who need the foundation only a good education can provide now. They are looking to us to keep the promise of No Child Left Behind and ensure they leave school with the education they will need to be prepared for the challenges that await them as they join the workforce and begin their careers.

We have all heard the horror stories of young adults graduating from High School or College unable to fully participate in society – unable to even read the diploma they have just been given by their school. The programs we will work to support and improve here in Committee and on the Senate floor will continue to make those stories a thing of the past.

I believe you also share my concerns about current workers, and the importance of ensuring that they have access to the kind of skills training they will need to keep their abilities up to date. The workplace isn't what it used to be. Time was that graduation day marked the beginning of a career that would last a lifetime and the end of classes and the learning experience. It isn't like that anymore. In this global, technology-driven economy, school is never out. Today's workplace demands an ever changing workforce that can adapt to the requirements and skills of the new high tech jobs that are in such high demand. Keeping our workforce's abilities and skills current will be vital if workers are to continue to find the kind of good jobs they will need to support their families and maintain a constant and consistent standard of living. In addition, advancing these goals will help maintain our nation's stature on the world marketplace.

That will mean integrating our education programs so they support a lifetime of learning and changing the way we think about school and the education process. In the past, we too often looked at the process of education as if it existed in separate, distinct silos. Preschool, elementary, secondary and postsecondary education were thought of as separate programs and, often, considered in isolation. This perspective was often reflected in local, state and federal policies. If we are going to be successful as a nation in

preparing the next generation of engineers, teachers, healthcare professionals, and the thousands of other jobs in demand, we need to make sure there is a seamless transition all the way from preschool through postsecondary education and beyond.

When we met to discuss your goals and your unique vision for the Department of Education, you made it clear that you understand the need for flexibility in our approach to education. Each state has its own unique needs and we need to address each state's challenges individually. In my own state of Wyoming, for example, every school and classroom is different. Some schools require teachers to handle several subjects – others require them to be highly specialized. Rural areas, like Wyoming, face a unique challenge in this area because we receive fewer dollars for almost every federal program because we have the smallest population. Complicating matters, Wyoming also has one of the largest physical areas of any state. That means some schools exist to serve a relative handful of students. If forced to close, those children would have to travel 60 miles or more to school and that would be unacceptable. The problem of providing good schools over such a widespread area makes unique demands on our school system that have to be dealt with on a case by case basis. It also makes teacher recruitment and retention a very real problem that must be constantly addressed.

As a former Mayor and now as I serve in the Senate, it has always been my belief that the system that works best is the one that keeps the decision making process as close to home as possible. There is a lot of wisdom at the kitchen dinner table and we need to do all we can to promote each parent's active participation in the education of their children. That is a vital component of the process because, in the end, it will not be enough for us to ensure each child has access to a good education. We must ensure we produce well educated young adults. Increasing the level of parental involvement in our children's education will help to make sure that happens. Best of all, when teachers, students and parents work together – the teamwork that results will help our children to gain a greater respect for our historical traditions and a better appreciation of the ideals and values that made our country great.

Looking ahead, studies show that today's workers will change jobs and careers more times than they might change cars. It is estimated that a worker starting a job today will have around 14 different careers in their lifetime. It is also suggested that 10 of those careers haven't been invented yet. With each change, that person must learn a new skill set or apply their current skills in a different way.

To meet this challenge, the federal government can and should do a better job of coordinating federal education programs with federal workforce preparation and anti-poverty programs. Some programs are even working at odds with each other. The lack of consistent objective outcome standards across federal programs creates unnecessary burdens for students, schools, state and local governments, and just about anyone else involved with more than one federal education or workforce program.

Congress needs to look at ways that we can ensure these programs work together and meet the needs of business at all levels of government, from city hall all the way up to the halls of Congress. When we are successful at integrating these programs, we will be successful at leveraging scarce resources in a way that will have an immediate and immense impact on outcomes for our students, our workers, and our businesses.

I believe every child is born with a special gift, destined to make a unique contribution to the world that only he or she can make. An integrated system of education will cultivate

that child's gift and help to develop it so that it can be expressed and shared. It won't be an easy thing for us to do, but it must be done. Providing a lifetime of learning to our children and continued training to current workers is the key they will need to find good jobs and keep them. Our success in that effort will ensure that every child's life will be a success story and the cherished American Dream a possibility that will be within every child's grasp, no matter where they live or what school they attend. Today, we have before us an excellent nominee who possesses the skills, experience and character to help bring our students of all ages and backgrounds along the pathway to the American Dream. I look forward to Mrs. Spellings' speedy confirmation, and I look forward to working with her in her new role as Secretary of Education to help achieve this goal.