

Written Testimony

Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

NCLB Reauthorization: Modernizing Middle and High Schools for the 21st Century

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Chairman Kennedy, Ranking Member Enzi, and members of the HELP committee, thank you for the invitation to give testimony about middle and high school work and make recommendations on behalf of my colleagues for NCLB reauthorization.

My name is Edna Varner. I am presently a senior program consultant for the Hamilton County Public Education Foundation and Public Schools' partnership, working primarily on middle and high school reform. I am also a leadership associate for Cornerstone, a national literacy initiative. In my previous life I was a teacher, a middle school principal, and a high school principal, serving students in schools with poverty as high as 98%. I am a product of Chattanooga public schools; in fact, my K-12 education was in segregated public schools in Chattanooga. In my experience working with schools in Hamilton County and across the country, I have had an opportunity to see some of our worst public schools and some of our best.

In 2001, the Public Education Foundation in partnership with Hamilton County Schools began two major multi-million dollar initiatives aimed at transforming our nine lowest performing elementary schools and reinventing all 16 of Hamilton County's high schools. These five-year initiatives joined existing long-term programs in leadership development, highly effective teaching, and community engagement. In 2005, PEF launched a multiyear, multimillion-dollar project to boost achievement in Hamilton County's 21 middle schools, bridging the gap between successful elementary and high school work. In partnership with the school district, we have built support for students from kindergarten to college.

Hamilton County Schools and PEF welcomed the promise of NCLB. We developed rigorous standards, engaged faculties in the training necessary to deliver appropriate instruction, and jumped at the opportunity for resources and technical support from the Carnegie Corporation, the Annenberg Foundation, the Gates Foundation, and local Foundations, Benwood and Lyndhurst. Even before the NCLB Commissions affirmed it, we understood that our students must

be able to compete globally, that our standards must take us there, and that our assessments and data must give us confidence that we are reaching our goals.

At the time NCLB came into existence Hamilton County Schools received a generous grant from the Carnegie Corporation and matching funds raised by our local Public Education Foundation to provide resources for *possibility*. We are proud to say our schools have been good stewards of the resources, using them to experiment with what ifs—what if we encouraged principals to build knowledge and capacity and to work in collaboration instead of competition and isolation? What if we provided schools with expert teachers to work as on site professional developers and instructional coaches? What if we asked students how they learn best and engaged them as colleagues to help us achieve rigor and relevance through new career academies? What if we beefed up support for 9th grade and focused on 9th grade promotion rates? What if we made it possible for high school drop *outs* to drop back *in* to school and finish with a regular diploma? What if we invited outside evaluators to come into our schools and tell us what they see as strengths and weaknesses of our implementation practices? What if we strengthened the roles of parents on school leadership teams so that they can help inform curricular decisions? What if we held ourselves accountable for closing the achievement gap and for providing opportunities for all students to learn at higher levels? What if we used data routinely to guide our work? What if we held all our students to high standards and offered only one diploma that would make **all** our graduates eligible for postsecondary education? And what if we learned ways to sustain *possibility* at the end of the grants, knowing we can not go back once we have developed the habits of moving forward. And what if we determined to do this *and* comply with NCLB.

Schools for a New Society in Hamilton County

Reinventing 16 High Schools With 16 Unique Blueprints for Success

Every high school in Hamilton County is reinventing itself to create a more engaging, more challenging, and more personalized learning experience for all students.

In 2001, PEF and Hamilton County Schools jointly received an \$8 million Schools for a New Society grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the largest private grant in the history of our schools. PEF committed to raise a matching \$6 million, making a total of \$14 million dedicated to high school reform.

Because Hamilton County high schools are unusually diverse—urban, rural and suburban, as well as magnet and conventional zoned schools—each school has developed its own blueprint for reform while addressing four basic goals: to establish a more challenging, relevant and engaging curriculum; to improve teaching by providing more professional development for teachers, leaders and

staff; to create a more personalized and engaging experience for students; and to allow more flexibility to meet student needs more effectively.

A key element is a new single-path diploma for all students. Beginning with students entering ninth grade in 2005, the single path diploma will raise graduation requirements for all students and put them on a track that will prepare them to graduate with a diploma that qualifies them to enroll in a four-year college or obtain a higher skill job.

Eleven high schools have now established career academies. The goal is to create interest-driven, challenging learning experiences and to increase student achievement by fostering small learning communities. Academies at different schools include business & technology, engineering, environmental sciences, global studies, transportation, health sciences, and construction. Some schools have several academies. All academies combine college preparatory courses with a career theme to make academic learning more engaging and challenging. Ninth grade can be a make-or-break year, often ending in dropout or setting a long-term pattern of low expectations and low achievement. That's why all schools are addressing the ninth grade year through summer transition programs and some are creating ninth grade academies that give students more individual attention in this critical year.

Other important strategies include eliminating low-level courses, increasing the number of low-income and minority students who take rigorous academic courses, providing advisory classes for all students and expanding the use of literacy coaches to increase reading skills of all students.

Building a working partnership between PEF and the school system on the scale required by this initiative has been vital. The school system has supported the efforts of individual schools by taking many steps to create a decentralized environment in which new ideas can be nurtured and practiced.

So that every student has access to the best Hamilton County has to offer, we have created networks of principals, change coaches (established at schools to provide on site expertise), college access counselors, and literacy leaders. Networks meet monthly to learn together and share best practices to take back to individual schools.

In 2005, we launched a planning year of work to build on the success of the high school initiative and bridge the gap with Middle Schools for a New Society.

This has been the work of Hamilton County Schools and the Public Education Foundation since 2001. In some areas we are succeeding. Some of our data are included in this testimony to show our progress. We have momentum and evidence to support it, but we have not reached the high goals we have set for ourselves—all of our students achieving at high levels and graduating with the

knowledge and skills to pursue any opportunity available to students of the 21st century. This is why we are here today to ask for your help.

NCLB Implementation: Promises, Promises

While much of the discourse on the subject of NCLB is around closing the achievement gap for subgroups, a gap that needs equal attention is the gap between overall intention and reality. One reality is that NCLB is attempting to deliver on an unkept promise made years ago in the form of a 1954 landmark decision declaring separate but equal schools inherently unequal. The separate but equal schools for that century were visibly black and white. For the 21st century the distinctions are less obvious because students of poverty come in all colors. More than 50 years since that decision, it should be impossible to walk into an empty school on the weekend and tell who it serves by looking at the children's environment and their work. The broken promises are even clearer if one visits a school when children are present.

With No Child Left Behind, we received another promise: that public schools would now be held accountable for at least the promise of having students bloom where they are. But blooming in spite of overwhelming challenges is reminiscent of an era we hoped to leave behind. Children in the lowest performing schools do not get the same education as their peers in schools with resources, access to large numbers of highly skilled adults, and diversity. The climate and performance of a school is very different when the school is constantly faced with heavy sanctions if the scores are not up, when the school can not attract the best teachers (teachers who are creative and innovative and find no time for their talents in "schools in improvement") or the best principals (the heads are the first heads to roll). These schools are inherently unequal, and that is not what we promised.

Children in the lowest performing schools can transfer to other schools where their poor test scores are unwelcome (a few poor test scores can mean the difference between AYP success or failure) and so unwelcome test scores translate into unwelcome children. When they are welcomed, their teachers may feel unprepared for the challenges they bring, so these children are pulled out for special "remedial classes" where they remain--not just left behind, but left out.

Schools want the promises of accountability, but they want to feel equal to the challenges accountability brings. That requires resources--as predictable as interventions and sanctions. Educators are frustrated, of course, by poor test scores, but they are equally frustrated by scores from low level tests that say their students are making great progress when teachers know they are not. (Compare published state test scores to NAEP scores).

Educators want to prepare students for life and work as well as for tests. We understand the challenges of modernizing for the 21st century, especially preparing our students for jobs and opportunities that we may not imagine at this moment. We can be globally competitive with populations that far outnumber us, just one more reason to leave no child behind. That is a promise we can keep, but not until we confront the realities of NCLB implementation and work harder to make them reflect the intent.

Recommendations for Improvement

We concur with many of the recommendations by the NCLB Commission. The following three are high priority for middle and high schools.

Recommendation 1: Support Highly Qualified and Effective Teachers and Principals

We must invest in teacher capacity, and that costs money.

We especially recommend greater investment in building teacher capacity at the secondary level. The overwhelming percent of Title I funds go to elementary education, yet data show increasing need for support at the secondary level. We are not suggesting that elementary schools do not need these funds and we know that trying to use existing funds more creatively only shortchanges our children. We need additional funding to support more capacity building for secondary teachers and principals who need high quality professional development that prepares them to prepare their students for a world that is rapidly changing.

We also recommend using NCLB to break the logjam on differentiated pay or incentive payments for shortage area teachers (math and science) to teach in hard-to-staff schools, for example, high poverty middle schools. We need increases in funding for principal and teacher leadership development.

Recommendation 2: Support Fair Accountability and Improved Data Systems to Track Student Performance

We encourage support of the following recommendation by the NCLB Commission:

Improve the accuracy and fairness of AYP calculations by allowing states to include achievement growth in such calculations. These calculations would enable schools to receive credit for students who are on track to becoming proficient within three years, based on the growth trajectory of their assessment

scores, when calculating AYP for the student's school. Including growth as a factor in AYP will yield richer and more useful data on student performance—both for the classroom and for school accountability purposes.

To determine growth, it is crucial that states have in place sophisticated, high-quality data systems that can track student performance over time and assessment systems that can monitor student growth from year to year. Therefore, we recommend that states be required to develop high-quality longitudinal data systems that permit the tracking of student achievement over time.

Recommendation 3: Increase Funding for Literacy and Numeracy

Whether students remain in low performing but improving schools or they transfer to higher performing schools, their success ultimately depends on their level of literacy and numeracy. Research is telling us that even high performing students are able to mask weak skills until they begin testing for college. The federal government spends \$1 billion (or \$72 per child) for literacy in grades K-3, but it only spends \$30 million (or 13 cents per child) in grades 6-12. We get what we pay for – 4th grade NAEP scores have risen significantly in the past 5 years. Unfortunately, 8th and 12th grade NAEP scores have remained flat or even declined.

Without the literacy skills needed to succeed in all subjects, students will be left behind. The federal government must invest in literacy in NCLB. We appreciate the federal Striving Readers program for older students. We also urge you to support the Striving Readers bill introduced in the Senate that would expand and strengthen federal efforts in adolescent literacy. The Striving Readers Act is a step in the right direction for improving the achievement of all students:

- The bill would provide targeted intervention to students far behind
- The bill would train teachers in all core subjects to use literacy strategies
- The bill would include grades 4 to 12 so that all grades (K-12) are served.

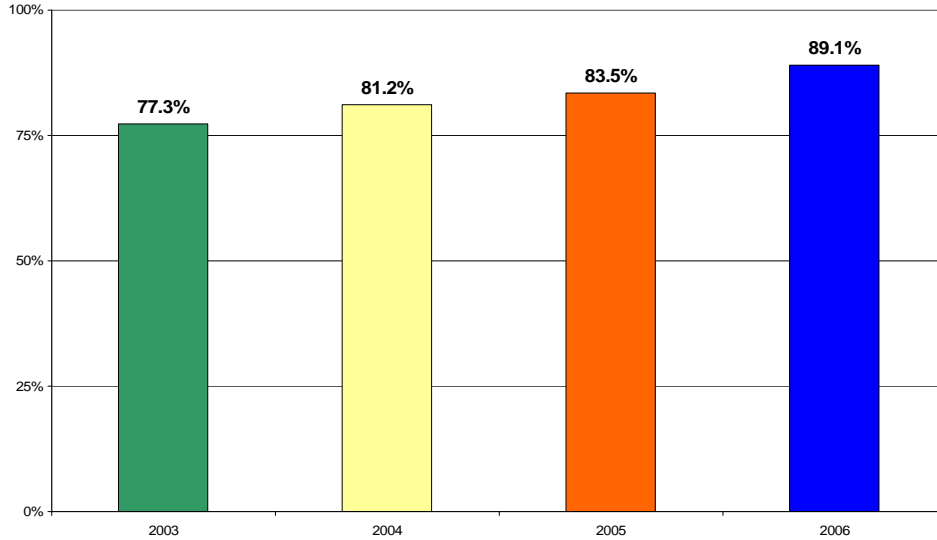
The Striving Readers Act can also help all states improve literacy. The current Striving Readers program serves only 8 cities across the country; 150 districts applied, and Memphis schools in Tennessee received one of the grants. The proposed Striving Readers Act would ensure every state is served.

In conclusion, all of our children deserve our best, and our teachers and principals deserve the training and resources to offer nothing less. Accountability helps us confirm that we are doing our best work. We welcome that. We appreciate the opportunity to share our experiences and make our recommendations to the committee. America has always been a land of

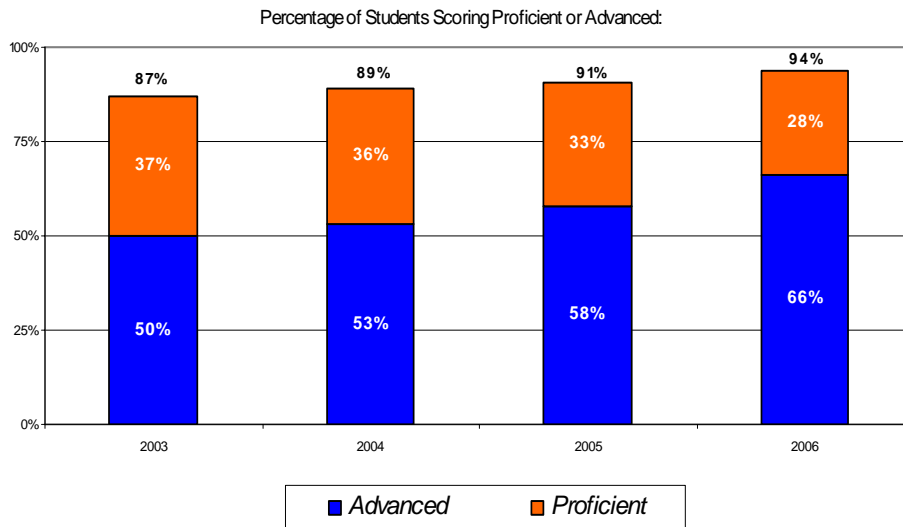
promise. If we continue to work to improve the model, NCLB can be a promise kept. Again, thank you for this opportunity.

Hamilton County High School Data

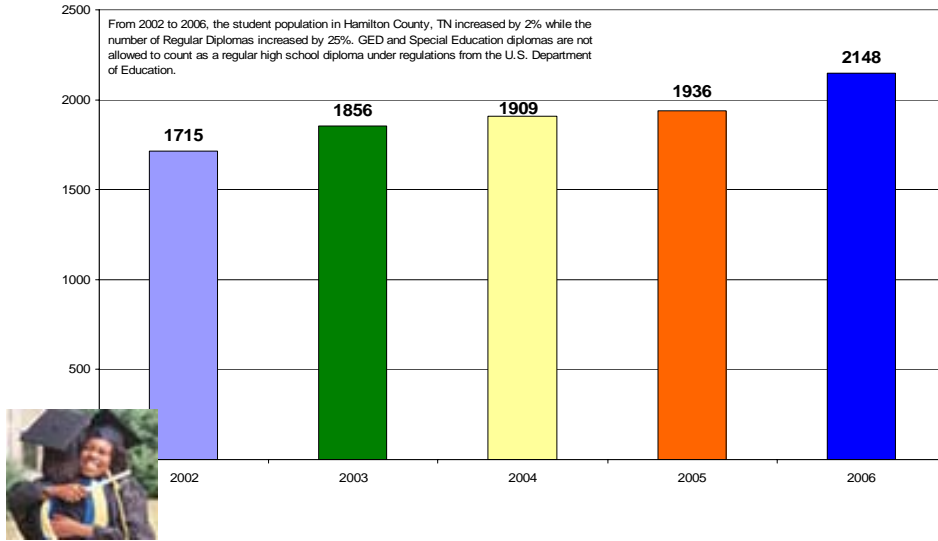
9th to 10th Grade Promotion Rates



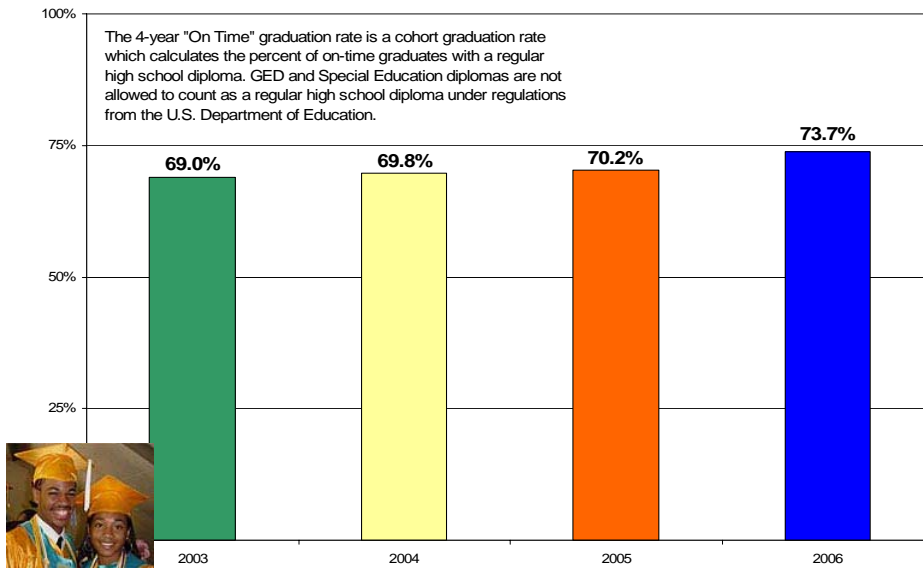
TN English 10 Gateway Performance



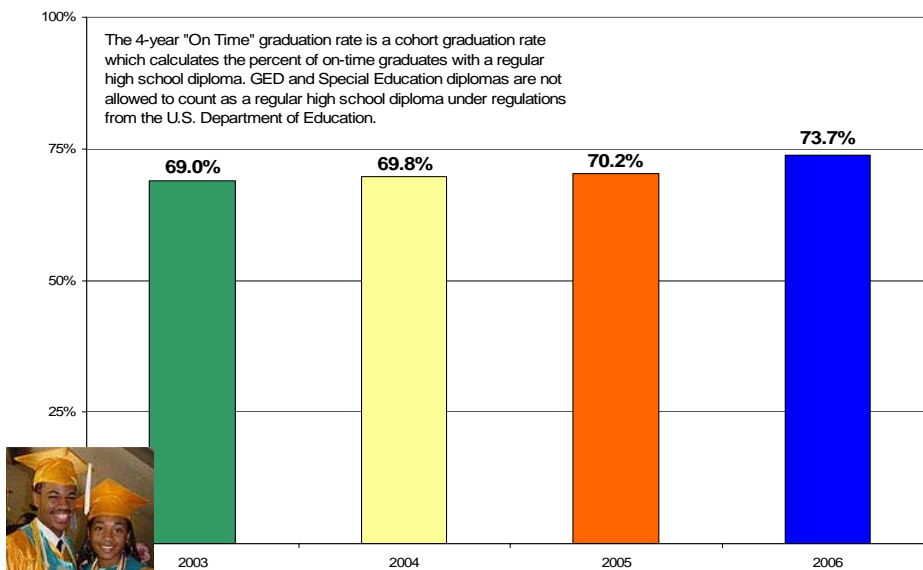
Number of Regular Diplomas Granted



4-year "On-Time" Graduation Rates

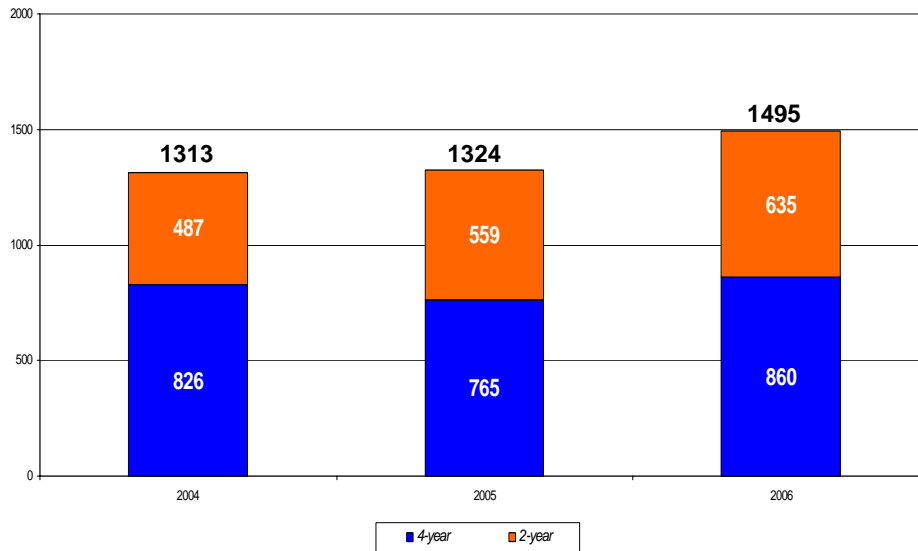


4-year "On-Time" Graduation Rates



College Enrollment

as reported by the National Student Clearinghouse



Tracking Hamilton County-Chattanooga Graduates

