

Prepared Statement

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Roundtable: "NCLB Reauthorization: Strategies that Promote School Improvement"

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to speak with you today. It's with great pride that I tell you I have been a classroom teacher of mathematics for 30 years, and I currently teach geometry at Easton High School in Easton, Maryland. I graduated from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville Campus, with a Bachelor of Science in Education and hold an Advanced Professional Certificate in general science and mathematics for grades 5 through 12.

I am pleased to be with you here today to discuss some school improvement strategies that have worked at my school, including student engagement, intensive professional development, after school hours for extra help, and the school's one-to-one laptop initiative (every 9th and 10th grader is given a laptop). In addition, it is important to recognize that every student is different and that teachers have to make content relevant to all of them—they are not robots, they can't be taught in the same way.

I was asked to focus my comments on two areas of questioning, as follows:

1. What specific strategies, programs or policies have been effective in addressing the progress of school improvement?

What outcomes or progress have been made as a result of these strategies?

Easton High School in Talbot County, Maryland, has implemented the one-to-one laptop initiative. We are using the Carnegie Learning Cognitive Tutor Programs for Bridges to Algebra, Algebra I and Geometry. The laptop initiative allows students to access these programs at any time rather than just during math class time. So, students who need help can go online anytime, anywhere and access the tutoring programs in these math subjects. What I've seen with the laptop initiative is amazing – the students are more engaged in their education because they're using tools that are part of their daily lives outside of school. The world has changed, so we as educators need to change to respond to the needs of our students. One of the most critical aspects of helping any student, particularly one who is struggling, is to find innovative and creative ways to make the content come alive for that student. Keeping them interested and engaged is one of the most important things we do in the classroom – and it's an essential ingredient in increasing student learning and achievement. Educators need the support to make lesson plans and individualized instruction more relevant to every student. That's a key element to success for every child.

We have also established an extra help class for identified students so they may get extra help and time on algebra within the school day. We have also implemented a pullout and after-school intervention program to help students prepare for the High School Assessments (HSA). These supports are offered to ensure that every child has access to the tools they need to succeed in school. The use of technology to help students stay focused on academics during out-of-school time is beneficial. The other after-school initiative is that all teachers have after-school hours, so that students can drop in anytime for extra help.

We have aligned our curriculum to the Voluntary State Curriculum and there has been significant growth in the enrollment of our Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Maryland School Assessments (MSA), Scholastic Assessment Tests (SAT) and AP data show appropriate services are in place for Gifted and Talented students.

We undertook these strategies because it is paramount that the curriculum is aligned with state standards and that assessments be aligned with the curriculum and instruction provided to students. We know that all students should have access to a rigorous, comprehensive education that includes critical thinking, problem solving, high level communication and literacy skills, and a deep understanding of content. Curriculum must be aligned with standards and assessments, and should include more than what can be assessed on a paper and pencil multiple choice test.

At Easton, we know that high-quality staff development is critical to keep pace with the increased academic standards. Sixteen teachers attended the HSA Governor's Academies. There is continual mandatory professional development given on the use of technology in the classroom. In addition, more teachers are taking AP Training. The higher standards are meeting more of our students' needs. Our attendance rate has improved to 94.7 percent and is above the state targets. Our graduation rate has increased to 90.85 percent, which exceeds the Annual Measurable Objective (AMO) of 80.99 percent.

While these results are impressive, we are not resting on our laurels because there is more work to do. Academic standards are updated periodically and educators need to keep pace with developments in education that will help us do our jobs better. In addition, I believe there should be federally funded salary incentives for teachers who achieve National Board Certification, with additional compensation for teachers with specific knowledge and skills who take on new roles to assist their colleagues. Furthermore, we should expand opportunities for education support professionals to broaden and enhance their skills and knowledge, including compensation for taking additional courses or doing course work for advanced degrees.

At Easton, special education services are delivered in the inclusive setting of the regular classroom using a collaborative teaching model. All schools in Talbot County met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for this population. Our English Language Learners (ELL) have additional teacher time for direct instruction. We have a full-time ESOL-trained teacher in the building. The MSA and HSA performance of our ELL students is generally improving. These results show what can be done with a commitment to improvements as well as the necessary resources to meet goals. Providing adequate funding to develop and improve appropriate assessments for students with disabilities and English Language Learner students is imperative.

We have moved from the 4 x 4 block schedule to a hybrid schedule having 45- minute, 60-minute, and 90-minute classes. The 60-minute classes are year-long and are mainly the HSA subjects. This gives students more time to learn and absorb the material covered. The school will then only need to give the HSAs once a year instead of twice a year so less class time is disrupted.

During the 2005-2006 school year, Talbot County implemented Performance Matters, an online data management system for administrators and teachers. The program will integrate local assessment data with MSA data and local benchmarks so administrators and teachers will be able to monitor the progress of their students. Once teachers learn the program, it will be a very beneficial tool for teachers and help save them time. In other words, the time for “assessment literacy” has come, with educators and parents needing to know about some of the details of assessments so that they can ensure that students have the requisite knowledge as they prepare for assessments.

Parents can use ParentConnect to check their student’s progress in any class, their attendance, and their discipline record. They can also email teachers directly with the program. With more parent involvement and support, students are challenged to do better work. In addition, we encourage parents to get involved in other aspects of the school, with the goal of having programs and resources for the school to become the hub of the community. To smooth the transition to a parental involvement model, we recommend that as a requirement for professional development programs funded through ESEA, educators receive training in the skills and knowledge needed for effective parental and family communication and engagement strategies.

2. What challenges did you encounter in your school improvement efforts, and how did you address those challenges?

The number one challenge is funding. Improving the level of technology available – wireless, projectors, laptops – is expensive. Providing ongoing training for teachers is mandatory and expensive. Upkeep of such an elaborate system is expensive. We do get some funding for the Board of Education through the City Council and from business partners, but it’s not enough to meet our needs.

I’m proud to be a member of an association that has put together such a comprehensive, positive agenda for reauthorizing the ESEA law. That agenda is very clear: educators, like you Mr. Chairman, believe full funding of ESEA programs is essential for improving our schools. In addition, if we truly are going to demonstrate our commitment to school improvement, the budget should reflect that goal by establishing a separate ESEA funding stream for school improvement programs to assist districts and schools, and adequate funds so that students have the benefit of assessments that measure higher order thinking skills.

The new demands on teachers are becoming astronomical. This causes frustration, burnout, and low retention rates. Besides teaching, teachers have extra pressure on them to get every child to meet high standards on one assessment (humanly impossible ones in some cases). They have to learn and use new technology, which involves time and equipment. They have to keep extensive data to show progress at all times, which takes time. They are held accountable for their students’ results. They have to continually earn credits to maintain their certificate, which again takes time and money. With more demands being put on teachers, we do not have a high retention rate. A lot of educators leave the field within five years. That increases the size of classes and the demands for those remaining, which in turn adds to the frustration and burnout rate.

Keys to turning this situation around include:

- Providing states and school districts with the resources and technical assistance to create an effective program of professional development and professional accountability for all employees;
- Providing federal grants that encourage districts and schools to assist new teachers by pairing them with an experienced mentor teacher in a shared classroom;
- Providing financial incentives--both direct federal subsidies and tax credits--for retention, relocation, and housing for teachers and support professionals who work in schools identified as "in need of improvement" or high-poverty schools, and stay in such schools for at least five years; and
- Providing hard-to-staff schools with an adequate number of well-trained administrators and support professionals, including education support professionals, counselors, social workers, school nurses, psychologists, and clerical support.

It is not easy to turn around schools that are struggling to meet their goals; however, our students deserve no less. Working collaboratively, policymakers, educators, and administrators can implement strategies that will help schools become better so that students reach their full potential.