

Emphasis on High School Reform,
A Major Step Forward in the Reauthorization of NCLB

Statement for U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Education and Labor
from
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I am James McPartland, research professor and co-director of the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University. I have specialized in research and development at the high school level for high-poverty student populations.

It is a great honor to appear before this committee to comment on the new prominent focus on high school reform in the legislation to reauthorize No Child Left Behind.

This focus is a major advance in federal assistance to public schools serving high-poverty populations because (1) it offers major support to a large group of needy students at the high school level, who have not previously had access to significant federal resources under NCLB, and (2) it follows the most recent powerful research on how to best direct assistance with the most promising interventions and the most effective accountability. My comments are directed to the research support for the key elements for high school reform in the draft legislation, and offer two suggestions for modification that would further strengthen the legislation.

1. Focus on Neediest Students

The focus on specific high schools with high dropout rates is backed by research that shows the most serious dropout problems are concentrated in a small fraction of the nation's high schools. Recent studies indicate that more than half of the students who drop out had attended 15 percent of the nation's high schools, so targeting these schools will attack the majority of the problems. These schools exist in all regions and every state of the nation, and involve high numbers of poor and minority students. Indeed, two-thirds of African American and Hispanic students who drop out attended this 15 percent of the nation's high schools. Solving the problem in these schools would eliminate the gap in dropout rates between these minority groups and white students.

Thus, the legislation's focus on the schools with highest dropout rates is highly cost effective in targeting resources to solve this problem.

2. Research-based Reform Initiatives

The draft legislation also wisely identifies the key components of comprehensive high school reforms to receive federal support that research has shown are needed to turn around unsuccessful high schools. These components include (a) school organization for a personalized learning environment, (b) instructional interventions to motivate students and close skills gaps, and (c) teacher support systems to ensure strong implementation of needed changes. All of these components have been found to be needed in a comprehensive package where each reinforces the others to impact student attendance, academic achievement and graduation.

The draft legislation recognizes how school organization interventions can create the conditions for positive student-teacher relationships, strong staff morale and high expectations for student behavior that lead to good student attendance and engagement with their studies, and course success that starts in the ninth grade and continues for the rest of the high schools years. These organizational changes include separate ninth-grade academies with small teams of teachers sharing the same students, upper-grade career academies that integrate college prep academics with occupational applications, and block schedules with extended class periods in core subjects and time for teacher team planning. While such organizational improvements can foster a positive learning environment of school safety, good student attendance and increased course passing, other changes are also needed to raise the intellectual demands and student success at high standards and to support teachers during reforms.

The draft legislation also requires that instructional programs must be strengthened to help poorly prepared students accelerate their learning and appreciate the value of their studies for later goals. This means a college-prep curriculum of high standards for all, with extra help for needy students, opportunities for active student learning that challenges mature thinking skills, and integration of career choice and applications within a core academic program.

In addition, the draft legislation recognizes teachers as an essential ingredient of effective high school reform, by requiring advanced professional development and teachers support systems for all staff. Not only are teachers to be a significant part of the reform planning processes for their inputs and buy-in, but will also receive specific supports to build skills and sustain commitments. These supports include mentors for new teachers and expert coaches on new instructional approaches, as well as time for teachers to work together in learning communities to perfect new, effective classroom approaches.

While the legislation calls for each key component for a comprehensive reform package, it allows for flexibility if a school is already strong in some areas, but needs improvement in others. The designations of high-priority schools and priority schools give leeway in how resources are deployed to meet local realities of program strengths and weaknesses.

Thus, the draft legislation carefully aims reform resources at the specific change components that research shows can produce impressive improvements in high school learning environments and student outcomes.

3. Adequate Resources for Strong Improvement

In the draft legislation, a Graduation Promise Fund will provide adequate resources to bring targeted schools the full way toward effective reform.

It establishes an estimate of \$700 per student each year in additional resources to plan and implement the required comprehensive high school reforms in exchange for strong research-based interventions and clear accountability. Our extensive experience with more than 100 high-poverty high schools has taught us that this amount is the minimum needed to turn around the most troubled sites. Resources are needed for planning time to redesign the school and train staff, as well as for implementing new instructional approaches with new curriculum, smart professional development using expert coaches and time for teachers to work together through the year. It would make no sense to require powerful changes but to shortchange the costs to put them in place and make them work. This bill avoids the error with adequate resources for school reform.

4. Strong Accountability Requirements

The bill also promotes high school reform by greatly strengthening the accountability requirements with graduation completion rates sharing importance with test score achievement as the end goals of reforms. Research has shown that educators' primary concerns with test scores can set up perverse incentives to attend less to the promotion and graduation of all students. The bill makes sure that participating high schools must both graduate their students and prepare them with core academic skills to be successful. The bill also sends the right message about calculating the true graduation/dropout rates by using available data on the ratios of seniors to freshmen four years earlier. Research has shown this to be a practical and valid indicator for planning and accountability purposes.

5. Two Changes in Bill Language to Address High School Realities

Two modest modifications in the draft legislation are needed to better fit the true conditions of high schools in terms of the time line for implementing and evaluating comprehensive reforms and the time flexibility for some students to complete their program.

A four-year reform implementation plan is needed for high schools, while a three-year plan will work for elementary schools. Four years fits high schools because reforms must set the foundation in the ninth grade which will take four years to show full gains in graduation rates. Shorter plans will unfairly concentrate evaluations on students who have experienced only partial reforms without the key first year, and will ignore the time that high school staffs truly need to plan, implement and refine comprehensive reforms. Indeed, a year before implementation is usually critical for an inclusive planning process and summer training and ninth-grade student transition activities to launch the major change interventions.

In the same vein, bill modifications to allow some students to use an additional year to earn graduation will deal with high school realities, but must be crafted to allow flexibility without giving unnecessary loopholes. A rule that at least 75 percent from each race-gender subgroup earns graduation in four years would retain high expectations for all, but allow some ninth-grade repeaters and other second-chance learners to earn graduation and count toward their school's success.

6. Move the Legislation Forward with Focus on High School Reform

The draft legislation is an excellent reflection of what recent research says that high-poverty high schools need and what will work to transform those 2,000 high schools that are the worst “dropout factories” into schools where all students will have a strong chance to close their skill gaps and earn their high school diplomas. Moving ahead now with this new important emphasis on high school reform will literally save thousands of American students each year from dropping out with all the means in success for the individuals and for American society.

References

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