



House Education and Labor Committee

“Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965”

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**Written Testimony of Barry Stark
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Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon, and members of the committee, thank you for allowing us the opportunity to share our recommendations concerning the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the latest version of which is known as the No Child Left Behind Act. My name is Barry Stark, and I am the principal of Norris Middle School in Firth, Nebraska, where I have served for 10 years. Today, I am appearing on behalf of the National Association of Secondary School Principals where I serve as president. In existence since 1916, NASSP is the preeminent organization of and national voice for middle level and high school principals, assistant principals, and aspiring school leaders from across the United States and more than 45 countries around the world. Our mission is to promote excellence in middle level and high school leadership.

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)

In October 2004, NASSP formed a 12-member practitioner-based task force made up of principals and post-secondary educators representing all parts of the country to study the effects of NCLB on school leaders in the nation's diverse education structure. The era of reform ushered in by this legislation requires administrators to excel as instructional leaders working collaboratively with a variety of constituent groups. It is no longer sufficient to deplore the achievement gap; school leaders must be able to make decisions to improve teaching and learning for all students or face corrective action if their schools fail to meet mandated accountability measures. Closing the achievement gaps and increasing student achievement are certainly among the highest educational priorities of secondary school principals, and our members accept accountability for results. We have seen gains in student achievement that can be directly related to the law and to the emerging conversations about improved student achievement.

NASSP members have expressed concerns about the consistency, flexibility, and fairness, with which the law has been implemented as well as the law's provisions to help schools build or enhance capacity among teachers and leaders to meet student achievement mandates. The recommendations released by our task force in June 2005 addressed the disconnect that exists between policy created in Washington, D.C. and the realities that impact teaching and learning in the school building. NASSP strongly believes that these recommendations reflect a real world, common sense perspective that will help to bridge that gap and clear some of the obstacles that impede principals and teachers as they work together to improve student achievement and overall school quality, and close the achievement gap.

Growth Models

NASSP is pleased to see many of these recommendations in the discussion draft [on Title I] released by the House Education and Labor Committee last week. Specifically, we agree that states should be allowed to measure adequate yearly progress (AYP) for each student subgroup on the basis of state-developed growth formulas that calculate growth in individual student achievement from year to year.

Using a single score to measure whether a student is making progress ignores many issues, primarily the academic growth of the individual student. Yet the current law requires that schools focus on grade-level growth as opposed to individual student growth by requiring schools and districts to compare performance for different groups of students each year. For

example, under NCLB schools must measure growth of this year's seventh-grade students against the scores of last year's seventh-grade students. Such systems do not take into account differences in the groups of students and do not tell us whether our instruction has resulted in individual student growth.

In addition, focusing on a cut score may encourage a school to concentrate only on students who are close to meeting that goal and not on the education of those students who may have the greatest need. Individual student growth, reported over time from year to year, gives teachers and administrators the best possible data about whether the instructional needs of every student are being met. NASSP thanks the committee for granting the additional flexibility for growth models beyond the current safe harbor provision, which does not track individual student growth.

Multiple Assessments

NASSP is pleased that the discussion draft would allow states to use multiple measures of student performance in the determination of AYP, including state assessments in subjects beyond reading and language arts, mathematics, and science; end-of-course exams in a rigorous high school curriculum; and college enrollment rates. We strongly recommend that students be assessed on a regular, consistent basis to analyze what they have or have not learned, and that schools be held accountable based on these multiple assessments. Teachers can use the data from these assessments to develop effective strategies that address individual student academic weaknesses and to build upon student strengths diagnosed by the assessments.

Assessment practices that use diagnostic data, and not a "score," give educators an impetus to prepare, plan, and focus on student success – individually, student by student. To view standardized test results as a measurement of a school's success or failure misses the broader point. Simply stated, the purpose of assessment should be to inform instruction and improve learning. High-quality assessments that are diagnostic in nature are the key to improving instruction and thus student achievement. Hold educators accountable, but ensure that they have the resources, the preparation, the training, a strong curriculum, and useful assessment data to get the job done. If we can do that, then all our students will achieve, and our schools will have truly passed the test.

Graduation Rates

The discussion draft requires high schools to be accountable for improving their graduation rates, a goal which NASSP supports. We are very pleased that the committee is supporting a five-year graduation rate and allowing students with the most severe cognitive disabilities to be counted as graduates if they have received an alternate diploma as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Current law requires states to graduate students within the "regular" time, which most often has been determined to mean within four years, though the U.S. Department of Education has allowed some states to extend beyond this traditional timeline.

NASSP wholeheartedly believes that designating a four-year timeframe within which students must exit and graduate from high school goes against what we know about student learning and timelines designated by IDEA. In fact, we should be moving in the opposite direction, allowing students additional time to graduate if they require it, or less time if they have reached proficiency without penalizing the school.

Students that graduate in fewer than four years should be rewarded. This could be an area in the law to actually encourage excellence and the recognition of high-performing students could help schools that are nearing the target of 100% proficiency. Student performance should be measured by mastery of subject competency rather than by seat time currently imposed by NCLB. States that have implemented end-of-course assessments are on the right track and should be encouraged to continue these efforts. This feature would promote moving beyond the minimum requirements mandated by the law.

Ultimately, individualized and personalized instruction for each student must be our goal. NASSP has been a leader in advocating for such positive reform strategies through its practitioner-focused publications *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform*TM and *Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform*.

Title II

Striving Readers

NASSP would like to thank the committee for authorizing and expanding the Striving Readers program for students in grades 4-12. This vital program will help ensure that the 6-8 million students reading below grade level receive the literacy interventions they need to earn a high school diploma.

Nationwide, 29 percent of eighth graders read “below basic” on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. These students, who are in the bottom quarter of achievement, are 20 times more likely to drop out than students at the top. In addition to impacting dropout rates, low literacy achievement prevents students from succeeding in high school and college courses in all subjects. The National Center for Education Statistics found that 53 percent of undergraduates require remediation. One-half of these students required a remedial writing course and 35 percent took remedial reading. In addition, the National Association of Manufacturers reported that businesses spend more than \$60 billion each year on remedial reading, writing, and mathematics for new employees.

Districts applying for Striving Readers grants would use funds to create and administer diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments to improve literacy; develop adolescent literacy plans for each school served; provide professional development for teachers in core academic subjects; train school leaders to administer adolescent literacy plans; and collect, analyze, and report literacy data. Districts may also use funds to hire literacy coaches, acquire materials or interventions, train parents to support literacy initiatives, and connect out-of-school learning with in-school instruction.

The goals of Striving Readers are very much in line with *Creating a Culture of Literacy: a Guide for Middle and High School Principals*, which NASSP released in 2005. The guide was written for principals to use as they team with their staff to improve their student’s literacy skills by assessing student strengths and weaknesses, identifying professional development needs, employing effective literacy strategies across all content areas, and establishing needed intervention programs.

Congressman John Yarmuth (D-KY) and Congressman Todd Platts (R-PA) have been true leaders in adolescent literacy, and NASSP would like to thank them for their hard work in ensuring that the Striving Readers program has a permanent place in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Graduation Promise Fund

NASSP is a national leader in high school reform and in 2004, created a framework upon which to improve our nation's high schools called *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform*. The handbook offers successful research-based successful practices, real-life examples of high schools at various stages of reform, a step-by-step approach to lead change, obstacles to avoid, and resources from which to draw. NASSP offers *Breaking Ranks* for all high school principals regardless of school size, geographical location, or where they are in the school improvement process.

High schools have historically been the stepchild of school reform efforts and, for far too long, have not received an adequate share of funding and other resources from the federal government. But successful high school reform requires real strategies and significant resources for implementing systemic improvement and raising individual student and schoolwide performance levels. This is why NASSP is so pleased that the discussion draft authorizes the Graduation Promise Fund to assist low-performing high schools in implementing the comprehensive schoolwide improvement plans required under Sec. 1116. The school improvement and assistance measures outlined in this section mirror many of the strategies advocated by NASSP. They include ongoing, high-quality professional development for school leaders; schoolwide literacy and mathematics plans; programs to increase academic rigor; extended learning time; and practices that serve to personalize the school experience such as smaller learning communities and professional collaboration among principals, teachers, and other school staff.

As a middle level principal, I would be remiss if I didn't remark on the missing "M" in ESEA. Elementary schools and secondary schools are mentioned throughout the discussion draft, but there are exactly 15 references to middle schools or middle grades in the entire bill. The draft also tends to use the words "secondary school" interchangeably with "high school," which is very confusing for middle level educators as well as states interpreting federal law. NASSP respectfully requests that the committee clarify in all sections of the bill whether the term "secondary school" includes grades 5-8.

Mr. Chairman, I'm wearing many hats today, and now I would like to speak to you as a representative for the Middle Grades Coalition on NCLB, of which NASSP is an original member. In the formal comments submitted by the coalition last week, we expressed our support for the goals set forth in the Graduation Promise Fund as they pertain to low-performing *high* schools. However, we are seriously concerned that the draft proposal has not addressed the urgent need to turn around low-performing *middle* schools.

The draft requires school districts to identify those students in the middle grades who are at high risk of dropping out of high school and to provide intensive supports for these students, but this really doesn't go far enough to address the more than 2,000 middle level schools that feed into

the nation's "dropout factories" – those high schools graduating less than 60% of their students. High school reform will never succeed in a vacuum, and many of these middle level schools are in need of the same comprehensive whole-school reform that is offered to high schools under the Graduation Promise Fund.

The future success of NCLB rests largely on the shoulders of middle level leaders, teachers, and students. Students in grades 5 through 8 represent 57% (14 million) of the nation's annual test takers, but middle level schools are not receiving adequate federal funding and support to help these students succeed. If Title I funds were distributed on the basis of student populations, middle level schools (representing 23% of the nation's student population) would receive approximately \$2.92 billion of the current Title I allocation. Yet, of the \$12.7 billion appropriated in FY 2005 for Title I, only 10% is allocated to middle schools. While we fully support continuing the drive to help students succeed in the preschool and elementary grades, the needs of our struggling students in our lowest performing middle schools must not be ignored.

Therefore, I strongly urge the committee to support the Success in the Middle Act (H.R. 3406), which Congressman Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ) plans to offer as an amendment during the committee markup. Under the bill, states are required to implement a middle school improvement plan that describes what students are required to know and do to successfully complete the middle grades and make the transition to succeed in an academically rigorous high school. School districts would receive grants to help them invest in proven intervention strategies, including professional development and coaching for school leaders, teachers, and other school personnel; and student supports such as personal academic plans, mentoring, intensive reading and math interventions, and extended learning time.

NASSP and the Middle Grades Coalition on NCLB believes the comprehensive middle level policy articulated in H.R. 3406 is necessary to address the fact that only 11% of 8th grade students are on track to succeed in first-year college English, algebra, biology and social science courses (ACT, 2007), fewer than one-third can read and write proficiently, and only 30% perform at the proficient level in math (NAEP, 2005). Adopting the Success in the Middle Act as an amendment to the committee bill hand-in-hand with the Graduation Promise Fund would strengthen NCLB by providing the support necessary to turn around our nation's lowest-performing middle *and* high schools by giving our struggling students the help they need from preschool through graduation.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared testimony, but I would be happy to answer any questions you or the other committee members may have.

Thank you again for this opportunity.