

NCLB: Preventing Dropouts and Enhancing School Safety
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Introduction

Good afternoon, Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon, and members of the committee. On behalf of the North Carolina State Board of Education and the National Association of State Boards of Education -- NASBE -- I want to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to talk about graduation rates and what we need to do together to ensure that every child has the opportunity to graduate from high school ready for college and work in the 21st century.

In North Carolina we have taken great strides toward focusing on this vital issue, moving toward greater accountability with more accurate data, and reforming our system accordingly. North Carolina may be a leader in high school reform, but we are not alone in these efforts. My colleagues on state boards of education from around the country are engaged in similar efforts to improve the high school curriculum and raise student achievement. Over the last several years, as a national organization NASBE has undertaken multiple projects related to graduation rates and accountability. I am proud that NASBE and my state are partners with the Gates Foundation in redesigning high schools. We recognize that the institution of the American high school must undergo sweeping improvements in order to prepare all students for today's economy. High schools must reject the notion that students with different abilities should be prepared for different futures.

Today I'd like to share with you some of the actions we are taking, the lessons we have learned, and what the implications may be for your work at the federal level.

Overview of the Issue

Effective high school reforms must focus on the core issues of literacy, high school structure (including use of the school day and the school calendar), teacher quality, and dropout prevention. 21st Century high schools should ensure that every student takes relevant, challenging, and integrated courses taught by qualified teachers and has the opportunity to access online and higher education courses.

Among reform strategies, graduation rates and dropout prevention are perhaps the most pressing concerns at this time.

Nationally, we have learned a lot about graduation rates and their meaning. To reinforce the work of the Alliance for Excellent Education, the National Governor's Association graduation rate task force, and others, many states have begun to accurately measure and report graduation rates as a first step toward dramatically improving dropout prevention efforts and closing achievement gaps.

In North Carolina, the first step in addressing the dropout epidemic was the decision to calculate a four-year cohort graduation rate in keeping with the Governors Compact, rather than an annual drop out rate that only counted incidences of drop out during one year. The dropout problem needed to be more personal – it needed to represent the students who were in school in grade nine and absent at graduation. We do not include in our graduation rate any student we can't verify as attending another education institution, excluding the community college system unless students are attending it as part of a public high school program and not a GED program.

Indeed, in February we reported our first four-year cohort graduation rate of 68.1 percent, a dramatic downward revision from previous figures that has prompted state and local leader scrutiny of, and public attention to, reducing dropout rates.

Moving Forward: Beyond the Graduation Rate

Beyond simply calculating rates accurately, however, we must reform our educational systems to dramatically improve graduation rates and prevent and recover dropouts. It is not enough to have accurate rates -- we have to use that information to help students. And here I have to tell you that our experience is that this will take a systemic effort across numerous policy areas – to align standards with college and work expectations, ensure access to rigorous courses and early college opportunities, promote supports for struggling students in reading and other areas, promote interventions in our most chronically underperforming schools, and more.

Last year, our state board approved a framework for a more rigorous high school curriculum that will better prepare students to succeed in their post-secondary and workforce careers. Known as the “Future-Ready Core,” the framework consists of 17 courses, including four units of English and four units of math, our board has identified as critical to the economic and societal demands of the 21st century.

In addition, our General Assembly is funding literacy coaches at middle schools to ensure that students entering ninth grade are stronger readers. Many of our high schools are offering summer transition programs to ease students into the new high school environment. Also many of our high schools are implementing Ninth Grade Academies. These smaller learning environments offer additional support to students in English Language Arts, Reading, and Mathematics.

North Carolina students can also attend *Learn and Earn High Schools*. Students in these programs can earn an Associate Degree before leaving high school – a degree that will transfer to the university system and satisfy the first two years of a four-year degree. Governor Easley is asking the General Assembly to fund the final two years of college

for eligible students whose families qualify at two times the national poverty level. Those students would graduate from college debt-free. Strong incentives for staying in school such as the ones cited are being developed to keep North Carolina students from dropping out.

Nationally, many states and school districts have developed plans that create early identification systems for students who are considered “at-risk.” A few states have focused on dual enrollment opportunities and early college high schools, programs that are designed to encourage students to earn college credit while completing high school in an effort to take a preventive approach to curbing the drop out problem.

One approach to curbing the dropout rates some states are taking is to increase the compulsory attendance age, for example, from 16 to 18. However, in most cases a parent or guardian can allow a student to withdraw from school by signing a written consent form. Although this tactic has become increasingly popular among states, critics have argued that compulsory attendance laws take away freedom and make the case that teenagers who are kept in school against their wishes will not learn.

School systems are also making efforts to recover or regain students who have dropped out. This generally includes establishing truancy prevention programs, which offer services to help students overcome personal and social obstacles that have led to a decline in attendance. These strategies bring together schools, law enforcement agencies, families, the business community, and social services agencies.

School districts have also partnered with community colleges and the adult education community to entice dropouts to return by offering an alternative education path that allows students to recover credits and receive a diploma through nontraditional means. Recovery efforts are still in their infancy, but many education officials are now beginning to understand the importance of re-engaging the dropout population through nontraditional techniques. In North Carolina students can access credit recovery courses through the North Carolina Virtual Public School.

Moving Forward: Implications for Federal Policymakers

But more broadly, we simply cannot achieve the overarching goals of the No Child Left Behind Act—100% student proficiency and closing the achievement gap—without effective high school reforms. Moving ahead, all of this suggests some important lessons for your work at the federal level. In summary, more support is needed for high school reform and to dramatically increase graduation rates, from codifying the right rates to supporting a range of efforts and interventions. This assistance should reinforce the wide-ranging work going on in the states, and promote continued innovation.

There are several effective systemic solutions that can be incorporated into state and federal policies. You hear a lot about the three R’s so I offer 3 R’s to help you remember my testimony today: Reform, Relevancy, and Reading.

Reforms must promote intervention and recovery efforts as part of the comprehensive restructuring of high school. Creating an “early warning system” can be helpful in preventing students from dropping out. Other initiatives can include identification and turnaround efforts at schools graduating low percentages of students. In North Carolina, with the help of Gates dollars, the Department of Public Instruction has added a turnaround division to work with low-performing high schools. This turnaround effort provides a leadership coach for the high school principal who also participates in extensive professional development offered through the University of North Carolina. Curriculum specialists broker needed content-based staff development for teachers who often times are inexperienced or new to the state and are unfamiliar with the North Carolina standards.

It is critical that states, schools, and districts have accurate data in order to address the dropout problem. Key to this effort is improving the ability of schools to calculate the precise number of students leaving school, along with developing robust state data systems.

We also need to more carefully scrutinize the milestone transitions in the middle of the P-16 continuum. A student’s move from elementary school to middle school, and the middle school to high school transfer are fraught with academic, emotional, and social strains on students, many of whom we would already consider “at-risk.”

These comprehensive reforms cannot succeed without the broad support of education stakeholders and the public. Just last week, the State Board of Education hosted a second retreat on high school reform. Over one hundred people representing education, business, nonprofit, and civic sectors gathered to discuss high school reforms. The purpose of the discussions was to measure the amount of progress being made in high school initiatives currently underway and to set strategies for scaling up promising practices and findings. In North Carolina, we believe that if high school reform is to be effective, the whole community must grasp the urgency for change and feel ownership of any new redesign.

The second “R” is relevancy. In crafting dropout prevention and high school reform policies, policymakers cannot lose sight of the real world impact and reaction of their best-intended efforts at the school and classroom level. We need to be sensitive to the unique circumstances, interests, needs, and demands of students and schools. States must provide access to the full range of curriculum offerings and courses of study to all students.

For example, NASBE will soon undertake a new national research project on student participation in high school athletics and the link between athletics and academics. In preparing for this project, we came to appreciate the recognition policymakers must give to the integral role athletics now often plays in the high school experience when crafting high school reform policies. In working to improve the quality of secondary schools, educators cannot ignore the significant influence athletics can have on academic decision-making, and vice versa. Any successful comprehensive high school reform—such as longer school days—must take into account the impact on athletic programs

because it is one of the primary considerations of many local communities across the country.

Finally, nothing can be accomplished unless we dramatically improve literacy rates among students, especially the reading skills of high school students. Individually, middle and high school students lacking the necessary literacy skills are more likely to dropout, go to jail, and be unemployed. More broadly, the national literacy crisis will seriously hinder this nation's ability to sustain its economy and well-being into the 21st century. I am pleased to have chaired a year-long NASBE study of adolescent literacy. The result was a report, *Reading at Risk*, detailing the status of student literacy rates across the nation and policy recommendations for a new vision of teaching and learning for all students.

You all are no doubt aware of the damning and dismal statistics. The scope of the literacy problem is staggering. According to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), approximately two-thirds of 8th and 12th-graders read below the proficient level. For minority students, almost half of African American and Latino 8th-graders read below basic level. Accordingly, it is estimated that about half of the incoming 9th-graders in urban, high-poverty schools read three years or more below grade level, meaning that large numbers of entering students cannot comprehend factual information from their subject matter texts and struggle to form general understandings, develop interpretations, and make text connections.

Nothing less than a new paradigm is required—one based on joint problem-solving, collaborative practice, and collective accountability that engages students in purposeful reading and writing in all subjects being taught.

Brenda Welburn, NASBE's Executive Director, has called reading a "basic human right." "An inability to read in today's world," she says, "is to be consigned to educational, social and economic failure—an existence entirely devoid of meaningful life, liberty, or the pursuit of happiness. School leaders have an absolute and unequivocal educational responsibility and moral obligation to ensure that every child learns how to read, and read well."

Conclusion

In today's world we, as education leaders, must communicate the message that a high school education—a high school diploma—has become a bare necessity and should be a minimum expectation, if not a basic right, for all students. We have an obligation to protect and promote this right. Effective, meaningful and rigorous high school reform policies are needed at the local, state, and federal levels in order to increase graduation rates, prevent dropouts and raise overall student achievement.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify on this very important topic. I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.