



**Testimony to the Committee on Education and Labor of the U.S. House of Representatives
Hearing America's Competitiveness through High School Reform Washington, D.C.
May 12, 2009**

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon, and distinguished Committee members, thank you for inviting me to testify today. And, thank you to Congressman Fattah and Congressman Castle for their testimony and leadership in raising critical issues related to high school reform.

My name is Michael Wotorson and I am the executive director of the Campaign for High School Equity, otherwise known as CHSE. CHSE is a coalition of leading civil rights organizations representing communities of color that is focused on high school education reform. It was formed to address the unequal American public education system, which does not provide high-quality education to students of color and youth from low-income neighborhoods.

CHSE partners are united in the conviction that it is every student's right to receive a high-quality high school education that will expand opportunities for success in life.

CHSE partners include the National Urban League, the National Council of La Raza, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, the League of United Latin American Citizens, the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund, the Alliance for Excellent Education, the National Indian Education Association and the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center.

Our goal is to raise awareness of solutions to close the achievement gap for students of color and to build public will and support among policymakers, advocates and community leaders for policies that will increase high school achievement and graduation rates for minority and low-income students.

The Education Crisis

To say that the state of education in America is a disappointment would be an understatement of vast proportions.

Let's consider the facts:

- In 2003, our students ranked 15th among 29 countries in reading literacy, and 25th in mathematics.
- Seven out of 10 8th graders are not proficient in reading, and most will never catch up.
- Black and Latino 17-year-olds read at the same level as white 13-year-olds.
- Of incoming 9th graders, one-third will drop out, and another third will graduate lacking college and work-readiness skills — only about one-third will be adequately prepared for life after high school.
- Contrary to the model minority myth, many Asian Americans also face barriers in education. About 50 percent of Cambodians and Laotians, and about 60 percent of Hmong aged 25 and older who are living in the United States have less than a high school education.

Student achievement overall is low, but some students, the majority of which are students of color and low-income students, never get the chance to demonstrate their capabilities. Seven thousand American kids drop out

of school every day, which adds up to 1.2 million dropouts each year. African-American, Latino, American Indian and Alaska Native high school students have at best a six in 10 chance of graduating from high school on time with a regular diploma, compared to a national graduation rate of more than 70 percent of all students. Unfortunately, without disaggregated data to account for the 48 Asian American ethnic groups, it is currently impossible to accurately measure student achievement among Asian Americans in our country.

Research shows that about 2,000 of America's 17,000 high schools produce approximately half of America's dropouts. In these schools — commonly called “dropout factories” — less than 60 percent of ninth graders are enrolled as twelfth graders four years later. The nation's students of color are four times more likely than the nation's non-minority students to attend one of these low-performing schools, and three times less likely to attend a high school with very high graduation rates. In fact, dropout factories produce 81 percent of all Native American dropouts, 73 percent of all African American dropouts, and 66 percent of all Latino dropouts.

The fastest growing segment of the American public school population is comprised of more than 5 million English language learner (ELL) students, primarily Spanish-speaking students closely followed by students speaking Vietnamese and Hmong. This fast-growing segment of students, with the highest growth rates occurring in grades 7 through 12, is among the lowest performing in the country. In 2007, only 4 percent of 8th-grade ELL students could read at or above a proficient level, compared to 31 percent of non-ELL students. More than 59 percent of Latino ELL students ages 16-19 are high school dropouts.

The facts alone illustrate the stark reality of the crisis and the dramatic need for reform in our high schools. Yet communities of color and low-income neighborhoods continue to be torn apart by the tragic consequences of an unequal public education system that fails to provide high-quality education to all.

A Critical Civil Rights Issue

I echo the likes of Secretary Duncan and other education leaders when I say that education is the most important American civil rights issue of the 21st century. As a consequence of persistent inequity and segregation, we have two different school systems in America. On the one hand, we have a system that emphasizes high academic quality and serves the nation's privileged students. Yet another system exists that emphasizes academic mediocrity and largely serves low-income students and students of color. The one consistency in our education system is in our high schools that fail to provide students of color and youth from low-income neighborhoods with the high-quality education they need to succeed in college and in the modern workplace.

On a recent visit to Halifax County in North Carolina, I witnessed firsthand the duality of the American education system. Before I address the problem facing these students, let me give you a snapshot of Halifax County.

- In a county where the majority of residents represent communities of color (52 percent of residents are black, 3 percent are Native American, and 1 percent are Latino), nearly a quarter (23.9 percent) of Halifax County's population is below the poverty level, giving it the status as the county in North Carolina with the highest percentage (19.4 percent) of families living in poverty.
- In the 2007-2008 school year (the most recent data available), only 25.5 percent of children grades 3-8 are at or above grade level in reading, compared to 55.6 percent statewide; and only 39.7 percent are at or above grade level in math, compared to 69.9 percent statewide.
- No schools in the county — zero elementary, middle or high schools — met Adequate Yearly Progress standards under the No Child Left Behind Act.
- Of the 23,550 students who dropped out of North Carolina high schools in 2006-2007, students of color and those from low-income families were disproportionately represented. A recent report submitted to

the North Carolina joint State Legislative Oversight Committee found that the counties with the highest dropout rates were also the counties where the per capita income was significantly lower than the state average.

Upon my arrival in North Carolina, I was struck, again, by the vulgar realities that so many children face. The children in Halifax county are not faced with *a* challenge — they are faced with *an onslaught* of challenges as they try to learn the basic skills they will need to be successful in life.

Nearly one-third of the middle and high school teachers in Halifax have less than three years of teaching experience and almost one quarter of the middle school teachers left the school district (the state average is 15 percent) in the 2006-2007 school year. This makes it nearly impossible for the school district to build capacity among its teaching force. These children are not only growing up in poverty. They are growing up in a school system that expects little of them and they get little in return.

These students lack access to effective teachers and teachers in the county lack access to the ongoing support they need to succeed in the classroom. Low achievement expectations are furthered by classroom curriculum that is not nearly as rigorous as it should be to encourage excellence. In communities nationwide with similar demographic and socioeconomic profiles as Halifax, each high school student enrolled in a different high school is learning quite different skills, which, against their will, will predetermine the direction of their future. With so many factors working against them, it is hard for these children to envision a future; it's hard for them to *have* dreams much less fulfill them.

Too many American high schools fail to provide a high-quality education to the youth who should become our next generation of business and political leaders, yet ensuring that all students graduate from high school well-prepared for the future is necessary to the nation's global competitiveness and economic security. It is our moral responsibility to strengthen and improve our schools so that every child has the opportunity to meet high expectations and graduate high school prepared for work and college, and to fulfill dreams.

We know that dropouts are more likely than high school graduates to grow up in poverty, experience poor health, and be incarcerated. Unless trends in minority student achievement and high school graduation are reversed, our high schools will be complicit in creating a permanent underclass of individuals who cannot provide for themselves and their families, and are prevented from actively participating in our democracy. It is, unfortunately, the unfinished legacy of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. While *Brown* ensured that all children would have unfettered access to public education, it did not ensure equity in public education.

Policy Solutions That Will Make a Difference

American education policy must change now. CHSE advocates for policies that support making all students proficient and prepared for college and work, holding high schools accountable for student success and redesigning the American high school. College and work readiness must be a top priority, and we must create an environment in which all children can achieve that goal. CHSE believes that the federal government can help the nation make great strides towards achieving these goals by adopting the following policies.

Make All Students Proficient and Prepared for College and Work

Access to equal opportunity can only exist if all students are challenged to reach the same high expectations.

- States must align high school standards, assessments, curriculum and instruction with college- and work-ready standards. Teaching and testing should be based on what will lead to success in the future;

- We should guarantee that all students have access to rigorous and engaging classes in core subjects. Coursework should impart the knowledge and skills needed to excel in postsecondary education and career, and assessments should measure student learning against these criteria;
- States should be required to publicly report on access to college preparatory classes and course-taking patterns by income, race and ethnicity, both among and within schools; and
- Federal education policy that promotes culturally based teaching, a practice wherein teachers align instruction to the cultural practices and experiences of their students, is critical to helping all students succeed.

Hold High Schools Accountable for Student Success

If the purpose of high school is to prepare students for college and work, then high schools should be held accountable for meeting this expectation for all students equally. As it stands, there are few mechanisms for making sure that high schools accomplish this mission. A well-designed accountability system should help communities ensure that their schools are serving their children well.

There is a significant need to hold schools accountable for getting students successfully to graduation by including meaningful graduation rates in federal school accountability standards.

The appallingly low rate at which American high schools graduate minority students could be reversed by increasing the accountability of states and school districts to adhere to standards that promote positive outcomes, including graduation and college. A strong system of accountability would include:

- Codifying in law the current graduation rate regulations to make a significant difference in holding high schools accountable for the success of all students, particularly students of color and youth from low-income neighborhoods, and as a critical factor in determining the quality of a high school and effective use of resources;
- Ensuring that every state continues to make progress on developing longitudinal data systems that will allow them to measure student progress over time. Improved data systems will not only improve the fairness and accuracy of accountability systems, including ensuring increased accountability for groups that are often marginalized, such as Native Americans and Southeast Asians, but will also allow schools to target services such as professional development where they are needed most;
- Publicly reporting disaggregated racial and ethnic data to highlight subgroups of students;
- Investing in technical assistance and evidence-based school improvement tools;
- Using high-quality, valid and accurate assessments for all students; and
- Disseminating high school data and other information through media and other information channels that reach communities of color.

I would like to underscore that a critical element of any accountability system is to ensure that states and districts have quality data systems capable of collecting disaggregated data, that they publicly report disaggregated racial and ethnic data that include subgroups of students, and that all data is used to inform educational decision making. Making decisions without the benefit of fully disaggregated data ignores the unique needs of students of color and ill prepares school administrators to allocate resources based on the needs of students and teachers. While many states disaggregate data, inconsistencies in collection and reporting standards leave entire groups of students out of the equation. For example, without fully disaggregated data, the needs of whole segments of the Asian American and Pacific Islander population are neglected. As a result, entire groups of these young people end up falling through the cracks.

Redesign the American High School

Implementing a variety of quality high school models shown to support different learning styles, cultures and student situations is critical to achieving success for all students. The federal government can encourage, incentivize and require systems that support high-quality high schools by urging the following policies be adopted.

- Integrated student supports that utilize both in-school and community-based services can enhance the rate of success for minority and low-income students;
- Instructional practices such as culturally competent learning techniques should be designed to meet the needs of diverse learners. More students thrive in the classroom when culture is integrated into their coursework, creating an environment where all students can excel, regardless of race or socioeconomic status. Data reveal that learning in an environment that incorporates native language, culture and traditions increases student mastery of and achievement in science and math;
- Legally and educationally valid criteria to appropriately inform decisions regarding student eligibility for services in special educational, services for English language learners, college preparatory curricula and gifted and talented programs;
- Consistent standards and practices such as improved identification and assessment systems to facilitate English language learners integration into the public education system; and
- Access to computers and other learning technologies that can be used to complement in-class instruction.

Provide Students with Excellent Leaders and Teachers They Need to Succeed

Secondary schools designated as needing improvement tend to have fewer school resources and poorer working conditions; they also disproportionately serve students of color and are located in areas of concentrated poverty. Schools with these challenges require especially strong leaders. And, it is often difficult to recruit high-quality teachers to low-performing schools.

The federal government can support programs that establish incentives to recruit, train, support and retain effective leaders and teachers in high-poverty high schools.

Invest Communities in Student Success and Provide Equitable Learning Conditions for All Students

Creating high-performing high schools that can give all students the support they need to succeed is no small task, and it requires changing the school as well as an investment from the community. Community-based organizations (CBOs) play a critical role in providing much-needed wrap-around services, particularly for students of color. The federal government should support the creation and expansion of multilingual parent centers, CBO-based afterschool and summer programs, business-school partnerships and other community-based support services needed to help students stay in school and graduate.

Moreover, high schools in the poorest communities deserve an equitable share of resources. In addition to adequate targeting of federal funds, we must ensure that the neediest schools have access to effective teachers, the best research and practice and services to meet the needs of all students, particularly English language learners.

Urgent Call to Act Now

Clearly, there is much to do, and we must gather the collective will to do it. The will should be driven by need as well as a likely return on our investments. If we can implement these policies that will drive reform of high schools, we *can* make a difference. Reforms work. One only has to speak with students from the Gaston College Preparatory high school, a Knowledge is Power Program charter school in Gaston, North Carolina, that also serves a high percentage of low-income students, just down the road from Halifax County. As a result of innovative and effective approaches to high school education, every senior in this high school, which boasts a 100 percent graduation rate, has been accepted to at least two colleges or universities. This should not be an exception in American high schools. Frankly, it should be the rule.

The pending reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is a critical opportunity to institutionalize the reforms we all know are so important. Congress can ensure better support for high schools and ensure strong accountability for improving results for high school students, particularly for students of color and those from low-income families.

Waiting any longer to reauthorize ESEA amounts to shutting the door on thousands of American high school students and their dreams of a successful future. And as important, the high cost of dropping out is borne not only by the individual but by all Americans, who pay an economic and social price when students leave high school without a diploma. CHSE urges swift passage of an improved ESEA that strengthens accountability as a core element of reform and includes critical support for high schools. Only then will we graduate every high school student prepared for college and the modern workforce.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity and privilege to testify before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.