

Testimony of Dr. Billy Cannaday, Jr.
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Before the House Education and Labor Committee
September 10, 2007

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon and members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify today regarding college and work readiness and the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. I am testifying on behalf of the Council of Chief State School Officers and in my capacity as the Superintendent of Public Instruction in Virginia.

First, thank you for using reauthorization as an opportunity to place a greater emphasis on strengthening the nation's high schools, including providing new incentives for states to align standards with college and work readiness. States are leading the effort to align high school with the knowledge and skills our young people will need to succeed in the global economy, and we welcome your support in this important area.

In Virginia, for example, we are working with the American Diploma Project, the College Board, and ACT to align our standards with college- and work-readiness expectations. Additionally, the State Board is in the process of developing two new diplomas – a technical diploma and an advanced technical diploma – to increase rigor and better prepare young people – and the commonwealth – to compete for the technical jobs of the 21st-century global economy.

Strong support for these diplomas from Virginia Governor Tim Kaine, the Virginia General Assembly, and our business community reflects the commonwealth's commitment to strengthening high schools, improving post-graduation opportunities for students, and responding to the needs of our communities.

This work is a clear example of state efforts to raise the bar, and it is an example of the kind of innovation and judgment that the new ESEA must permit and encourage in all areas.

As you know, the nation's education system has changed dramatically since passage of No Child Left Behind. Every state has worked to lay the foundations for standards-based reform, including systems of accountability, data-reporting mechanisms, and standards for teacher competence and quality. In Virginia and in many other states, this effort began well before President Bush signed NCLB into law.

This transformation in our public education system has not come easily, and we must continue to press steadily ahead. Much work remains to be done before we can declare victory. Implementing the next generation of standards-based reforms will require an equal or greater commitment of resources, time, and human capital.

As state leaders, we want you to know that the scale of our success will depend on our ability to work with you in partnership to fundamentally reform federal education policy. The revised ESEA must acknowledge the know-how, commitment, and judgment of successful educators at the state and local levels, especially those in states that have already significantly raised student achievement.

Congress rightfully jump-started the education reform process five years ago, but NCLB's framework is now outdated and in some cases is hindering, instead of supporting, educational innovation both at the secondary and primary levels.

The revised ESEA must not only provide new support for promoting alignment, strengthening accountability, and enhancing dropout prevention; it must also: (1) spur continuous state and local innovation; (2) facilitate increased state capacity; and (3) provide greater resources for ensuring that every child in America receives a high-quality education.

Achieving these objectives for high schools, middle schools and elementary schools will require a new state-federal partnership – one that encourages innovative strategies for improving student achievement and closing achievement gaps. Congress should set a floor, not a ceiling, for state education policy, and then empower state and local educational agencies to produce results on behalf of all children by developing innovative solutions to challenging educational and social issues, such as closing the achievement gap and boosting graduation rates.

We agree that the law should be reauthorized, because there is no time to waste and no margin for error in our quest to prepare all kids to succeed when they leave our care. But before completing reauthorization, we must ensure that we are getting the law right by avoiding the notion that a single formula for success can be codified in federal law for every local and state context.

Achieving our shared education goals will require that we make room for sound education judgment and encourage continuous improvement across the states. Providing flexibility for such innovation across the law, tied to a re-invented peer review process, will help move us toward reauthorization and build on the foundations of NCLB without sacrificing meaningful accountability.

In this city there are interest groups and think tanks that believe that latitude for state and local innovation is incompatible with real accountability. I'm here today to say that that notion is dead wrong. Creative, experienced educators do not fear accountability – they welcome it. All that we ask is for the freedom to move forward with innovative, peer reviewed strategies without being strangled for months or years by a rigid one-size-fits-all structure dictated from Washington.

Reauthorization offers an opportunity to return children to the center of our efforts to reform and improve public education. Discussions between state and federal officials over specific testing policies and other details of reform should focus on the best interests of the students in question and not become a test of wills.

States need flexibility as they tackle difficult issues, such as how best to include non-English speaking children in state accountability systems. States that have led the way in raising student achievement through standards-based reform should at least get the benefit of the doubt when questions arise about specific aspects of implementation.

If we get reauthorization right, ESEA will spur innovation and spread promising practices, and American education will have made a major difference for millions of kids five years from now. If we get it wrong, state and local decision makers may spend years trying to sort out how to implement prescriptive federal requirements that may make sense in some contexts and fail miserably in others.

We appreciate this opportunity to testify, and want to commend you for seeking to remedy many key issues in your discussion draft. The draft language addresses a number of critical areas for improvement, such as differentiating consequences, implementing growth models, and using multiple measures. These issues are vital to strengthening the framework of the law, and helping state and local educators focus on the students who need the most support.

I also want to thank you for incorporating several of the important recommendations offered by CCSSO and other state education organizations. We agree, however, that the language is a work in progress, and believe some provisions of the draft are too prescriptive. We look forward to continuing our collaborative dialogue with you in order to address these and other challenges as the reauthorization process continues.