

The following are the prepared remarks of Carey Wright, Mississippi Superintendent and President of the Council of Chief State School Officers' Board of Directors, for the State of the States Address on Monday, March 5, 2018. These remarks are subject to change upon delivery.

It has been nearly a year since we as state chiefs came together and decided to take the lead to ensure we create a more equitable education system for all children. We published the Leading for Equity report, a set of 10 commitments we took as state leaders in education to advance equity for children in this country.

While they were published in February 2017, we know our work was well underway long before that.

I want publicly recognize Wisconsin Superintendent Tony Evers, CCSSO's President at that time. He led this organization to creating and signing on to the equity commitments. He brought us together to have the necessary conversation about equity and what it will take to create an equitable education for every child.

I am so proud to serve as President of CCSSO this year. Not just because we have renewed our commitment to equity through this report, but because we have not let these commitments sit on a shelf.

The 10 commitments are not just commitments. For us, they are actions and strategies and real work.

It's only been 12 months since they were published, but states – and CCSSO as an organization – has made so much progress since then. It is clear states are leading.

I know some of you may have heard – or read – differently in recent months. Perhaps you heard that states aren't doing enough. That we just recently got new flexibility but haven't embraced this opportunity in our ESSA plans? Or that some don't think state ESSA plans are strong, or innovative enough.

I haven't heard it in my state. I haven't heard it from my stakeholders or the 1,500 parents, teachers or others who provided input on my state plan through listening sessions, surveys and town hall meetings throughout the state. But I have heard it from some organizations based here in Washington, DC.

I have no doubt the organizations have the best interest for students in mind. We are all working toward the same goal, but I know that no one is more committed than the leaders of education in states across this country to achieve a better education for all children. So, I want to take a moment to set the record straight, and recognize the progress states are making to improve education in this country today, as well as take a look ahead at the challenges that remain and how we can tackle those challenges together.

To do this, I think we have to look at our commitment to equity and how we are advancing that. ESSA and the plans we submitted are important, but those are just one piece of the work we are doing for the kids in this country.

Let's take a moment and recognize the progress underway today, and take a look ahead at the challenges that remain.

The first commitment is to Prioritize Equity: Set and Communicate an Equity Vision and Measurable Targets

This means that chief state school officers demonstrate their commitment to equity by analyzing data to determine the greatest gaps and challenges and how to work with stakeholders to address these challenges in the strategic vision.

This is underway in a number of states.

We saw states renew their commitment to equity in their written plans for the Every Student Succeeds Act – and put pen to paper to outline strong plans for how they will improve education for some of our most vulnerable students.

Outside of ESSA, states are making remarkable progress.

In DC, State Superintendent Hanseul Kang's office publishes annual Equity Reports that show demographic information of students, break down suspension rates and student achievement scores into subgroups, and more. These reports are one way the District is working to increase transparency around how schools are serving traditionally underserved populations.

In Maryland, Superintendent Karen Salmon has taken the ten *Leading for Equity* Commitments and asked directors and managers within the state agency to review the commitments, make connections to their work, and regularly report on their progress in staff meetings.

Our own organization CCSSO created our new strategic plan for 2017-2020 in July. It is all focused on the 10 Leading for Equity commitments and how the organization is supporting states to make progress against these commitments.

Many of you know, the CCSSO Board of Directors is in the process of finding a new Executive Director. While this is a time of transition, it has been seamless because we have a strong, clear strategic plan guiding the work of the organization today and moving forward.

The second commitment is Start from Within: Focus on the State Education Agency.

This means that state education agencies are strategic about how their staff are organized and prepared to advance equity for all children.

Several states are making progress in this work.

In Oregon, the Oregon Department of Education created an Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion aimed at better supporting students and teachers across the state. Through this Office, Deputy Superintendent Colt Gill and his team work with stakeholders to create plans and strategies that will improve educational outcomes for traditionally underserved students. For example, the state has an African-American/Black Student Success Plan aligned with the state's strategic plan.

In Vermont and Wisconsin, state chiefs Rebecca Holcombe and Tony Evers offer implicit bias training to their staffs at the state education agency and are taking steps to make sure their staff know how to have conversations about race and poverty and educational equity.

In Mississippi, we restructured the state education department so that staff roles were aligned with our priorities, and we established a rigorous recruitment process to ensure we hired the best people who also reflected the racial makeup of our student population.

The third commitment is Measure What Matters: Create Accountability for Equity.

This means states should design accountability systems and interventions in low-performing schools that will help meet the state's goals to achieve equitable education systems.

The Every Student Succeeds Act provides states with an opportunity to do this, and many have seized the opportunity.

Today, at least 35 states are now including a measure in their accountability system focused on making sure all students not only graduate college-ready but also prepared for a career, such as completing dual enrollment or earning an industry-recognized credential.

Thirty-eight states revamped their accountability systems to include some measure of student or teacher absenteeism.

Other states have proposed bold, innovative ways to achieve equity through accountability.

In Tennessee, for example, Commissioner Candice McQueen revised the state's accountability system to now base 40 percent of each school's rating on the results of its low-income, special education, and African-American, Hispanic, and Native American students. This places an impetus on districts and schools to ensure that they are providing an education that reaches each and every student in Tennessee.

In Connecticut, Commissioner Dianna Wentzell has moved beyond the traditional academic measures of test scores and graduation rates. She's also adding additional measures such as entrance into postsecondary after high school, physical fitness and access to the arts.

And we know we cannot stop at accountability.

Which leads me to commitment No. 4: Go Local: Engage Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and Provide Tailored and Differentiated Support

States also are leading the way to work with stakeholders in how to intervene in those schools that are not best meeting the needs of students.

Across all 50 states and DC, the outside organization Results for America identified 162 promising practices for building and using evidence to improve student outcomes in its review of state ESSA plans.

We know conversations about promising practices continue today. They didn't end when we submitted our ESSA plans. You can point to D.C., Illinois, New York, North Dakota, and many more states in which committees and subcommittees are continuing to meet and talk through how to implement the ESSA plan – especially around school improvement.

In Illinois, for example, Superintendent Tony Smith recognizes the importance of school and district leadership to turn around low-performing schools and is working to put them in the lead through the new IL-EMPOWER improvement process. Beginning with a needs assessment and equity analysis, schools and districts will work with their community to create a plan, based in evidence and data, that meets their local student needs.

In South Carolina, Superintendent Molly Spearman is providing a catalogue of resources to local districts and offering Transformation Coaches to support schools in the implementation and monitoring of the interventions that will work best for them.

The fifth commitment is Follow the Money: Allocate Resources to Achieve Fiscal Equity

If you have worked in education, you know none of this is possible without funding. We all recognize money isn't the only solution, but it definitely helps. Money and resources also can exacerbate the inequities we see in our education system today.

It's our role as state leaders to ensure public education funding is distributed equitably.

This isn't easy – revamping a state funding formula might be one of the biggest challenges in a state. Yet we are seeing great progress in several states across the country.

In California, Superintendent Tom Torlakson has put in place the Local Control Funding Formula, one of the most ambitious efforts in the nation to serve low-income students. It provides \$10 billion in extra funds annually to school districts so they can better serve students from low-income families, foster youth, and English Learners. A recent study by the Learning Policy Institute found that California's Local Control Funding Formula not only led to increases in teacher salaries and instructional expenditures, but also have led to increases in high school graduation rates and academic achievement, particularly among children from low-income families.

In Nevada, under Superintendent Steve Canavero's leadership, the Department has allocated \$75 million a year to provide intensive supports to schools with high populations of English learners and low-income students.

The 6th equity commitment is the one I personally am passionate about. Start Early: Invest in the Youngest Learners.

This is the commitment I have chosen to focus on as President of CCSSO this year.

High-quality early childhood education is critical if all children are going to make progress and be successful, especially low-income children.

We have to make sure every child shows up in kindergarten not only ready to learn, but prepared to learn. This is how we as state leaders can prevent achievement gaps before they ever surface.

Every time I talk about this, I am reminded of the community in Petal, Mississippi. You are going to hear much more about this later today and the model they have become for our entire state.

But in Petal, a group of teachers at the primary school recognized in the late 90s that too many kids were showing up in kindergarten unprepared to learn. Some didn't even know how to hold a book.

These teachers decided to do something about it. The principal and a couple teachers got in a car and drove to the local Head Start Center and started a conversation. They asked, how can we help you?

Next, they drove to the local private daycare providers and started the same conversations.

Those conversations continue today.

Because of these teachers, because of this ongoing dialogue, Petal is one of the top-performing districts in the state. Parents are moving to Petal so their kids can go to school there and succeed.

They also have become a model for our Early Learning Collaboratives Program we have opened up across the state – where public schools work with Head Start and private providers to close gaps before they ever begin.

This is what state leadership can do. As state leaders, you have the leverage to start conversations across private and public providers and foster productive conversations about high-quality early learning.

I am excited that CCSSO launched in January the Promoting High-Quality Prekindergarten Network, a group of 8 states working together and with national experts to improve the funding, access and policies that support state-funded preschool programs for all students.

The 7th commitment is to Engage More Deeply: Monitor Equitable Implementation of State Standards and Assessments.

This means while most states are not directly responsible for running schools or hiring teachers, we do have an important role to ensure local schools and districts have the support they need to implement standards and assessments equitably.

A significant innovation in recent years has come out of Louisiana. Thanks to Superintendent John White's leadership, that state is giving teachers and local districts the support they need to not only understand higher academic standards but also to better understand which textbooks and other curricular materials best meet those standards.

Research has shown that low-income students are less likely to have access to high-quality content or textbooks in the classroom than students in higher income communities. This inequity in part accounts for the significant achievement gap between these students and their more affluent peers.

It is our job as state leaders to ensure teachers have access to both high-quality materials and the training and support they need to use them well so they can have the greatest impact on student achievement.

That's exactly what they are doing in Louisiana, where they have enlisted the help of teachers to review, develop, and promote what they call "Tier 1 curricula." The state promotes the use of the Tier 1 curricula across the state so all schools and teachers have access.

I am proud that Mississippi is learning from Louisiana's great work and how we can better support our local schools and in providing all teachers with access to high-quality instructional materials.

Realizing in Mississippi that the decisions around curriculum are made locally, we have been working with teachers on how to recognize high-quality materials, and we led an initiative in which teachers developed exemplar lessons to share statewide.

Across every commitment is a common thread: the importance of the teacher in the classroom. Without effective teachers, we know our students cannot be successful. Therefore, Commitment No. 8 is **Value People: Focus on Teachers and Leaders**.

This can mean a number of things, but to us as state leaders, it means making sure every child, especially low-income students and students of color, have a quality, effective and experience teacher.

It also means investing in our current and future workforce so they are better prepared to meet the needs of all learners, who are increasingly becoming more diverse.

CCSSO's immediate past president Melody Schopp of South Dakota led on this equity commitment over the past year. She specifically focused on creating ways for state chiefs to elevate the voice of teachers in state policy discussions.

Last year, South Dakota piloted a Teacher Table – an opportunity for teachers to join policymakers and other stakeholders to study data on its teaching workforce and come up with solutions to tackle its particular teacher recruitment and retention challenges.

After a successful pilot, other states like New York and Florida are now exploring similar models.

Other states have made significant progress in this area.

In Ohio, the state developed an educator equity plan in 2015, similar to other states. Under the leadership of Superintendent Paolo DeMaria, the state is hosting equity labs across the state to support local districts in examining their data and finding ways to increase equitable access for all students.

In Pennsylvania, Secretary Pedro Rivera has focused strongly on school leadership. He launched the Superintendents' Academy—a year-long, equity-focused professional development opportunity that has reached approximately 140 school leaders.

I am also excited to share that later this month, CCSSO will launch a new network of states focused on systems-level changes that will lead to diversifying the education workforce and supporting future and current educators in effectively teaching students of different cultural backgrounds.

Over the past year, I have recognized the important of Commitment No. 9 more than ever. No 9 is to **Improve Conditions for Learning: Focus on School Culture, Climate, and Social-Emotional Development.**

Schools have become much more than places where children come to learn math, reading, science or arts.

They are community centers in a small, rural town.
They are places of safety and comfort for many kids.
For too many children, they are the only place they get a meal.

That is why we recognize that to achieve equity we have to provide safe, supportive school environments where every child is free to learn.

Going forward, CCSSO will be establishing a working group of state chiefs to focus on the issue of how we follow through on our commitment to ensure every school is a safe, supportive environment for students and teachers.

In light of the recent tragedies in Parkland, Florida and Benton, Kentucky, and far too many mass shootings that have taken place at schools across this country in recent years, we have heard a call to action from our state leaders and recognize it is time to come together as state chiefs to find solutions for our children.

This work will not be easy. School safety sits at the intersection of many complicated issues, but CCSSO and our state chiefs welcome the difficult conversations that will move us forward in making schools safer for every child.

This work is just beginning and we expect to have more information to you and your states in the coming weeks.

Regarding school climate and culture, the Iowa Department of Education under Director Ryan Wise’s leadership is now administering the Conditions for Learning survey and using it as part of its school accountability system. This is one way the state is making sure student voice is considered when evaluating school climate and culture.

In Minnesota, the state has taken several innovative steps under the leadership of Commissioner Brenda Cassellius. The department recently repurposed funding to create a new position focused on equity and supporting districts in working with local communities to meet the needs of students. The Department also developed a [toolkit](#) to help schools create environments where transgender and gender nonconforming students are safe, supported and fully included.

In Oklahoma, Superintendent Joy Hofmeister and her team decided to make use food as an academic intervention and ensure greater access to the federal school, summer, and afterschool nutrition programs for any school identified as needing improvement.

Last but not least, we know that students should have options regarding how and where they go to school, taking into account the needs of their local community.

That brings us to Commitment 10: **Empower Student Options: Ensure Families Have Access to High-Quality Educational Options That Align to Community Needs**

Regardless of where they live, all students must have access to advanced coursework and educational options that best meet their learning needs.

In North Dakota, Superintendent Kirsten Baesler is working to accomplish this through a new law that creates a system that allows parents to enroll in schools outside of their zoned districts if they want. The goal is to ensure students can get access to the right educational resources at the right moment in their education.

In Florida, the Department of Education facilitates all public schools—both district and charter—to share best practices so both sectors can learn from one another in how best to serve students and parents.

Conclusion

As you can see through these 10 equity commitments, we are making progress. States are taking the lead. We are working to make improvements for the students in this country.

We are not doing it alone. In each of these examples, you can see state chiefs working with teachers, parents, legislators, state board members, governors and other key stakeholders to ensure we make decisions that are in the best interest of kids.

At the meeting this week, we are going to take time to celebrate some of these promising practices and learn from each other:
On equity and implementation, career readiness and financial transparency and so much more.

This meeting also is an important time for us to dig and have conversations about the work ahead. We know we are not finished – far from it.

We will not be finished until we create an education system in each of our states where every student has access to the educational resources and rigor they need at the right moment in their education across race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, sexual orientation, family background, or family income.

This is an important moment for CCSSO. This is an important moment for our country. I am proud to see states leading on this critical issue, and I am proud to lead with each of you.

Thank you.