

Testimony of Jonathan A. Kaplan
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Before the House Education and Labor Committee on
“Supporting America’s Educators: The Importance of Quality Teachers and Leaders”
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am honored to be here before the Committee and with this august set of witnesses. I am very pleased to speak with you today about the work we are doing at Walden University’s Richard W. Riley College of Education and Leadership to advance teacher quality and leadership in the classroom. For 40 years, Walden University has supported working professionals in achieving their academic goals and advancing positive social change. Based in Minnesota, Walden is a primarily online institution, is regionally accredited by the Higher Learning Commission, and currently serves more than 40,000 students from all 50 states and more than 100 countries. It is the flagship online university in the *Laureate International Universities* network—a global network of more than 50 online and campus-based universities in 21 countries.

Our school of education is named for Richard W. Riley, the esteemed former Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education and former governor of South Carolina. As the Committee knows very well, Secretary Riley has long been a leader and advocate for improving education for every American child.

Our Riley College of Education has graduated more than 28,000 educators and currently enrolls over 16,000 students from all 50 states. The Riley College offers programs ranging from teacher certification through Ph.D. We are proud of the diversity of our student body: the average age of a student in our school of education is 37; a

remarkable 78% of our students are women; and 31% are minority students. For our Masters programs in teacher education, our graduation rate consistently runs over 80%. Our students currently include 45 state Teachers of the Year.

On a personal note, my grandmother, Lee Kaplan, taught in the Rochester, New York public school system for more than 20 years. I learned from her how much pride – and personal accountability – each teacher brings to school every day. As President of Walden University, I share that sense of accountability. Schools of education play an essential role in educating teachers to be more effective in their classrooms.

I appreciate this Committee's interest in exploring ways to improve teacher quality and leadership. I would like to share with you three methods we use to drive better results for our students – and our students' students. We focus on (1) measuring and examining specific outcomes, (2) delivering programs that are relevant and practical, and (3) using technology to enable better learning outcomes.

1. Assessing Quality through Outcomes

At the institutional level, we measure our own success at Walden largely through the success of our graduates. Like other institutions, we do so in part through reviewing our students' learning outcomes, assessing their actual work products, and confirming that they know how to apply in the classroom what they have learned. At the Riley College, we are also increasingly focused on demonstrating our own students' success through other outcomes analyses. We are aware of the current interest among policymakers in this area. Let me describe two different efforts that are ongoing at Walden.

First, on an annual basis, we survey our graduates and their employers to understand the impact that that our graduates have had in their schools and classrooms as well as to understand the impact of our programs on their effectiveness as teachers. In our most recent data from 2008, we surveyed some of those employers and each of the 72 school principals or assistant principals who responded said they would hire another Riley College graduate as a teacher. We also learned from our 2008 surveys that more than 90% of our Masters of Education graduates who responded said that earning their degrees at Walden enhanced their professional performance. This data provides important benchmarks and tools for the school of education to measure *our* performance.

In addition to the surveys we conduct, we believe that it is also important to examine the impact that our Riley College graduates have on their own students' achievements. This is a process that requires significant time, research, support and coordination with school districts. Walden commissioned a third party to complete a longitudinal study in the Tacoma, Washington school district over 2005-08. The research demonstrated that students of Tacoma teachers who graduated from our Masters program in Elementary Reading and Literacy made greater gains in reading fluency – more than 14% greater – than students of non-Walden-masters educated teachers. We learned that, as it relates to our graduates, the improvements were most significant in first grade. The study also told us that the positive impact Walden graduates had on student reading fluency translated into more efficient use of instructional time. I want to note that we began this research uncertain about the outcome – the study may well have informed us that our program was not enabling our graduates to perform at a sufficiently high level.

We believe that accountability, in part, means measuring how you are doing, regardless of the results.

These are significant findings and ones that have implications not only for our teachers but also for administrators and schools of education in general. We have also used the results of this research as a mechanism for continuous improvement to enhance certain aspects of our program. We found this longitudinal study so helpful that we are exploring how we might conduct similar studies in other substantive and geographic areas.

2. Providing Relevant and Practical Programs

I just spoke about institutional and other outcomes as a measure of teacher quality. At Walden University, we also believe that providing our students with practical classroom tools and analytical skills is increasingly important to ensure effective teaching. We have a strong belief that our programs need to not only have a strong theoretical and content grounding, but must be highly relevant, practical and engaging.

Our curriculum is developed by our faculty, but done so in collaboration with practitioners, national experts and experienced instructional designers. This allows us to prepare teachers no matter where in the U.S. they may teach and, in order to do that effectively, it takes more than one person's perspective. This process also allows us to seek input to design and then teach courses and programs in areas in which this country has a growing need. Gathering all of that expertise, grounding the courses in the latest research strategies, and putting it together in a coherent curriculum based on the best

practices for adult learning enables us to prepare teachers to be successful in a variety of diverse learning environments – not just one particular local school district.

To provide the Committee some examples, we offer courses on topics that include classroom management, working with struggling readers, meeting the needs of diverse learners, integrating technology in the classroom, adolescent literacy and technology, and creating an effective learning environment. Teachers learn research-based strategies that they can then apply in their classrooms immediately and to good effect. In fact, 95% of our graduates who responded to our survey found the Walden teacher education curriculum relevant to their daily work.

We also encourage self-reflection in our curriculum. In addition to giving teachers the necessary skills and tools – all grounded in theory – we also teach them how to be reflective about their own teaching and how to utilize research to enhance their effectiveness in the classroom. For example, our Masters’ program includes an Action Research course where our Riley faculty teach teachers problem-solving methodology so that after graduation, they can continue to learn and improve their practice. In our programs, teachers are asked to use authentic data from their classrooms and are taught how to use that data to make informed decisions that drive better instruction. This is essential in today’s environment of increasing accountability and greater reliance on data to measure and improve student achievement.

As a school of education, our philosophy is that you have to provide the opportunity for teachers to learn and apply 21st century skills so that a teacher’s own learning doesn’t stop when their degree ends.

3. Using Technology to Enable Better Learning

As the U.S. Department of Education recently learned through a study of its own, online learning is just as effective a method of education, if not more so, than on-ground learning. This is in significant part because of the required frequent interaction between the faculty and their students. From our own experience at Walden, we know that interactivity and engagement online is a particularly effective teaching tool in the field of education. Allow me to share one example.

In our education programs, we supplement our required, on-ground field experience with a technology called Virtual Field Experience. In a traditional field experience, prospective teachers observe a classroom setting in a local school. When we brought together our faculty and other experts to develop our teacher licensure program, one of the shortcomings they described was that prospective teachers may observe a terrific teacher in such a setting, or they may not. In addition, depending on the particular school district where the student is located, there may not be an opportunity for these prospective teachers to be exposed to a diverse set of learners.

Using the Virtual Field Experience technology, our students have the opportunity to observe best practices and diverse teaching styles from classrooms across the country. Each video segment includes an analysis component that allows our students to hear first-hand the master teacher's engaging explanation of what's working and what isn't working in the classroom. It also enables our faculty to highlight the best teaching practices from a diverse group of master teachers around the country. This is not the most cutting edge technology. Rather, it is an effective means to supplement the teacher

preparation curriculum at our Riley College. As a leading online institution, we measure the value of our technology by the results it delivers.

Conclusion

At Walden, we are proud of the fact that over 40,000 teachers and other educators have chosen our programs over the years with the goal of increasing their knowledge and skills. We feel both privileged and responsible in our role as educators of such a significant number of this nation's teacher workforce. In this capacity, Walden University generally, and the Richard W. Riley College of Education and Leadership in particular, feel a significant obligation to be able to demonstrate that our graduates are effective and, in turn, are making a positive impact on the children whom they teach. I thank you again for the opportunity to testify today.