

Testimony of A. Blaine Hawley
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Good morning Chairman Kline, Ranking Member Miller, and members of the Committee. Thank you for inviting me to testify this morning to provide the perspective of school principals on accountability in our nation’s public schools as the Committee considers the renewal of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), most recently reauthorized as the No Child Left Behind Act. My name is Blaine Hawley and I am the principal of Red Pump Elementary School in Bel Air, MD, which serves over 600 students in grades kindergarten through five in the Harford County school district. I have been an educator for the past twenty seven years; a principal for the past seven years and prior to that, a teacher, school counselor, and assistant principal.

I am very fortunate to be at Red Pump Elementary School, the first new school in the district in ten years. Red Pump opened earlier this month and welcomed students from the neighboring elementary schools for an inaugural journey into the new school year. Being a part of the planning and development process for Red Pump Elementary School before the walls were built has been an incredible experience. I devoted a great deal of my time over the past eight months designing the physical space to meet the needs of 21st Century students conducive to learning experiences appropriate for each age level.

In addition, it has been important to make connections with families and provide outreach so that students new to the school would be comfortable and able to understand the school's operations and procedures, and most importantly, making sure that parents could assist us getting children ready and eager to learn.

I have spent even more time working with all of the stakeholders in the learning community – teachers (including special area teachers in music, the arts and physical education), curriculum specialists, reading specialists, librarians, and even Central Office to be clear about Red Pump's vision for excellence – and laying the foundation for a culture that expects nothing less than excellence in teaching and learning. Now, we are focusing all of our attention to the teaching and learning inside the new classroom walls.

A school vision and mission are essential in laying the groundwork for an ongoing, long lasting quality educational program. Developing shared beliefs among all in our school community is essential to the success of our students. We are engaged in the process of creating the written vision and mission that will reflect what we believe and live at Red Pump about student achievement and learning with a focus on excellence through purposeful instruction in the classroom.

In both schools that I have led as Principal, we have understood the importance of the role the teacher plays in the classroom with data driven instruction and ongoing assessment of student progress. Our teachers work together as teams utilizing a protocol for examining student work as well as formative and summative assessments.

Through this process with their grade level team and building specialists, they make collaborative decisions that inform instruction. Teachers know and understand their students and provide a differentiated program for student success. Decisions about individual student remediation, enrichment, and intervention are part of this process. Reflection is also an important aspect of this protocol bringing teachers back together to evaluate the effectiveness of their instruction to ensure all students are moving forward. As a school, our School Improvement Team develops an annual plan to keep our focus on what is crucial for the students we serve in our school. Additionally, one of the charges of this team is to find the time necessary, often in creative ways utilizing all staff members, to allow critical time for teachers to meet together. We provide this time for teachers to purposefully study student work instead of faculty meetings before or after the school day as well as carving out other times during the day. This process includes a cycle of analysis, knowledge of research based practices, instruction, varied assessments and reflection.

School leaders like me take on a myriad of tasks and responsibilities that require expertise as an organizational manager and an instructional leader to meet effective leadership standards that include:

- The articulation of a clear vision of high expectations and how the learning community can achieve the vision;
- The creation of working conditions that minimize disruptions and expect teachers to work collaboratively to address student learning needs;

- The recruitment of effective teachers and support personnel to realize the staffing goals of the school;
- The design of systems to monitor individual student, grade, and school-level data to make instructional decisions;
- The alignment of resources to support and accelerate the school’s vision; and
- Coordination of active engagement with families and community organizations to positively impact student outcomes – both in and out of the school building.

Principals are confronted with a variety of complex tasks that require diverse skills, technical capabilities, high cognitive functioning and emotional intelligence. We must function under demanding circumstances, have strong coping skills, and a thorough understanding of the complex nature of the job. Principals are no longer just the single-faceted building managers of thirty years ago– we must create professional learning environments where all adults are constantly improving their skills and knowledge, and challenging one another to serve the learning and developmental needs of every student.

A well-established body of knowledge spanning the past thirty years proves what educators inherently have known – second only to a great teacher in the classroom, a quality principal will improve student academic achievement.

The most recent decade of research focused on the 21st Century challenges facing our education system and further confirmed the direct correlation between effective school leadership and student performance, as well as the increasingly complex nature of a principal's job to meet the developmental and cognitive needs of our nation's diverse student populations. The same research substantiates a glaring need to do a better job of preparing principals and other school leaders to meet the needs of teachers and students. There must be greater investment in programs that develop and support *all principals* in the profession in setting and fostering a vision that puts student learning at the center of school's culture.

Principals must be committed professionals with the ability to handle any number of challenges in a short period of time during the day – a recent study revealed what those in the profession already know – that principals typically engage in over forty different tasks in single day, likening the principals' school day to that of a Member of Congress on Capitol Hill running from hearing to hearing, and jumping from issue to issue. But just as you must be accountable to the constituents you represent at the end of the day, principals are accountable for all students – no matter the circumstances of the child and whether or not they come to school prepared, eager, and ready to learn.

My fellow colleagues and I who serve as principals know that being held accountable for student achievement is an important part of our job, but measures of student achievement must be comprehensive and accurately reflect the local context in all dimensions of student learning.

Many see our work as a calling. We are not finger-pointers, disgruntled complainers, or spotlight-seekers. And we don't pass the buck. The fact of the matter is clear-cut: We are, always have been, and will be highly accountable for what teachers teach, what students learn, and how schools perform.

Principals accept the responsibilities for making sure our nation's schools provide a safe, healthy and high quality education for every child – and showing the results to prove it. Principals have and do face continuous school-based challenges to overcome that promise to be equally-significant in the coming decade and beyond.

Add to this, the pressure on principals that has never been more intense:

- We are expected to ensure that schools perform at ever-higher levels with ever-shrinking budgets which all of you know far too well;
- We are committed to preparing students to succeed in a world adults can scarcely imagine, especially now, as all of us try to keep up with the latest technological advances, for better or worse;
- We must juggle and adhere to often conflicting state guidelines, priorities, and federal mandates;
- And, most importantly, we are required to operate – day in and day out – in today's one-size-fits-all federal approach to accountability with little room for state and local input into such systems.

Although, this one-dimensional snapshot of student and school success is seriously flawed, we have been doing our best over the past decade to measure up. However, we are now experiencing the true consequences of misguided federal-level policies with reports that over 85% of our nation's schools are on the verge of failing. Principals know and common sense suggests this is simply not the case.

The debate no longer persists and the question has been answered. From the principals' perspective, our current AYP system is too prescriptive, sanctions incorrectly categorize schools and have put into place what we believe are unintended consequences: an over misidentification of failing schools.

While the policies of the No Child Left Behind Act have done much good for helping states set high standards and helping us learn more about our unique populations of students through disaggregation of data to make better instructional decisions, our nation's all-or-nothing yardstick for measuring school and student performance is simply flawed. As a result, we are now facing the unintended consequence of a misidentification of failing schools, and punitive labels acquired from a federal mandate that inaccurately measures student performance from an across-the-board, single snapshot in time.

Principals live firsthand with this problem, which we hope the Committee will address comprehensively in the reauthorization process. Principals support reasonable solutions that will effectively put more balance, fairness, and accurate measures of student and school performance into our accountability system.

As the Committee considers adjustments to correct our current blunt instrument accountability measures mandated from Washington, principals encourage you to take into account that:

- The appropriate federal role in education is to promote equity and provide targeted resources to assist states and local districts. Federal policies should ask us to set high expectations, but also must support state- and locally-developed accountability systems, curriculum and instruction to best meet the needs of the students in the local school context.
- Principals support assessments so that we can measure the progress of our students. But, federal policy must encourage and support state and local assessments that include growth models and multiple measures of student performance (both formative and summative) to accurately gauge social and emotional development, language fluency and comprehension, creativity, adaptability, critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
- Assessment data should be used to inform instruction, be fair, flexible, authentic, and reflect students' progress toward academic proficiency.
- Standards, curriculum and assessments must be closely aligned to be effective, and any assessment data must be available in a timely manner for practical or instructional use.
- Standardized assessment scores must never be used as the sole or primary criterion to measure student performance; to rate, grade or rank principal, teacher, or school effectiveness; to allocate funds; or to take punitive measures against schools and/or school personnel.

- State and local systems know there are a variety of ways in which children succeed and their achievements must be measured in multiple ways to accurately capture their emotional and social development, language fluency and comprehension, creativity, adaptability, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, in addition to proficiency in the core academic content areas.
- Measuring these factors and the many others that contribute to improved student outcomes must provide a complete picture, not by an up or down, pass-fail, standardized test score that is designed at the federal level and that has no regard for the multitude of ways students progress. Assessment using a single metric produces a one-dimensional view of the child, the teacher, the principal, and the school.

Simply put, those of us in the field who are working every day in our educational system want the federal government to give us the opportunity to have more input into the development and implementation of the accountability mechanisms.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony. I look forward to answering your questions.