

**Testimony submitted by:
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To

The United States Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

RE: "NCLB Reauthorization: AYP and Accountability"

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony to help inform the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. I am Mark Elgart, President and CEO of AdvancED.

AdvancED represents the unification of the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI), the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI), and the National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE). Founded in 1895, NCA CASI and SACS CASI are two of the nation's six K-12 regional accrediting associations. Together, we accredit 23,000 public and private schools and districts across 30 states and in 65 countries. Our network includes 15 million students and 3.5 million teachers. NSSE is the research and development arm of the regional accrediting associations and has provided schools and districts with resources and tools to support accreditation and continuous improvement since 1933.

AdvancED is dedicated to advancing excellence in education through accreditation, research, and professional services. As accreditation is the nation's oldest form of accountability and continuous improvement, I am pleased and honored to offer to the committee several findings from our hands-on work with schools and districts to help inform the work of the committee as it deliberates the reauthorization of ESEA.

Field-Based Observations

As you may know, a critical component of the accreditation process is the on-site quality assurance review. Every year, we conduct approximately 3,500 on-site reviews of schools and over 150 reviews of districts based on our accreditation standards. Schools and districts complete self-studies in preparation for the review, documenting their specific activities designed to meet our accreditation standards. The professional peer review teams review the self-studies, conduct interviews with stakeholders, examine performance data, make observations, and prepare a report highlighting their findings, commendations, and recommendations. The overall aim of the review is to assist schools and districts in their efforts to improve student performance and school/district effectiveness. Based on this hands-on work with schools and districts, we are in the unique position to share field-based observations that span multiple states and educational settings (urban, rural, suburban, public, private, and preK through twelfth grade). The observations that I will share are based on the general themes and findings we have identified through this extensive experience in the field.

Areas of Progress

Since the adoption of NCLB, we have noted the following important areas of progress that schools and districts have made:

- **Enhanced focus on student achievement data.** Schools and districts are focused on collecting and using student achievement data, especially those measures tied to Adequate Yearly Progress. Where we once saw pockets of schools and districts actively monitoring student achievement data, we now see this practice widely shared across all schools and districts.
- **More formalized support of the teaching and learning process.** States and districts are developing more systematic processes for reviewing and aligning standards, curriculum, and assessments to support the teaching and learning process in schools. Where in the past, we typically saw schools challenged to make sense of misaligned standards, curriculum, and assessments, we now see greater efforts on the part of states and districts to connect and align these critical elements of the teaching and learning process. While there is still a good deal of progress to be made in this area, we are seeing important steps in the right direction.
- **Greater emphasis and commitment to continuous improvement across all schools and states.** Schools and districts of all sizes and of all student achievement levels are recognizing the importance of implementing and sustaining continuous improvement efforts. Where we often found sporadic engagement in a planned process of school/district improvement, we are now finding more widespread commitment to and engagement in continuous improvement.
- **Heightened public awareness about student achievement.** Parents and community members are more aware of their schools' and district's achievement levels. We believe this is due in large part to school and district communication of the importance of state testing (e.g., sending home notices to parents about the testing, including test results in parent newsletters, holding parent nights to discuss achievement data – all practices that are shared across many more schools and districts than we have seen in the past) and to wide-spread media coverage of test results.
- **Greater interest and willingness to engage in collaboration across schools, districts, and states.** Where we once found schools and districts hesitant and sometimes even resistant to looking outside their communities for effective improvement strategies, we are now finding that more and more schools and districts are beginning to collaborate with and seek advice from colleagues and experts in like educational settings from across and outside their state. The tremendous growth in the number of districts pursuing our district accreditation framework is one example. District accreditation, introduced by NCA CASI and SACS CASI, is a powerful systems approach to examine how all the processes and functions of a district work in concert for the benefit of student learning. Districts want the insight and expertise of the national review team that district accreditation provides; and members of the national review team appreciate the professional learning that occurs when they visit another district outside their community and/or state.

It is our belief that these areas of progress have been enabled by the attention and focus of schools and districts on implementing the provisions of NCLB. Members of this committee and policymakers at all levels should be commended for creating an environment conducive to such progress.

Areas of Opportunity & Recommendations for Action

While we are seeing important areas of progress, we recognize that the work of improving student learning and school/district effectiveness is ongoing. From our on-site reviews of schools and districts, we see several themes and trends that point to opportunities for improvement in the focus of NCLB. Some of these opportunities reinforce areas that the committee is well aware of; we will highlight these areas briefly so the committee sees that our experience underscores your attention in these areas. We will focus, however, on three areas of need that we believe may be new to the committee and will help inform ways to strengthen NCLB for the ultimate benefit of students.

Our experience reinforces the committee's focus on and prior testimony in the following areas:

- **Providing accountability while maximizing flexibility.** With over 100 years experience in accreditation, we know the power of accountability to improve educational quality. At the same time, the experience from our on-site reviews of schools and districts show that there are multiple pathways to ensuring quality. What works in one school/district, may not work in another. We strongly support holding schools/districts accountable to meeting the objectives of NCLB while allowing them maximum flexibility in determining how best to meet those objectives. Several organizations, including the Council of Chief State School Officers, have addressed this issue in depth. We believe their focus reflects the needs and reality we have experienced in the field.
- **Expanding the concept of Adequate Yearly Progress to include longitudinal student data and other measures of progress.** As the committee has heard from schools, districts, and a range of advocacy groups, schools need multiple ways in which to demonstrate progress. An accurate assessment of growth in student learning requires more than one measure. We work with our schools to help them “triangulate” their data, meaning they have at least three assessments to determine student progress in key areas. This provides a more accurate determination of what is happening in the school and enables the school to better determine the impact of instructional interventions. We know the committee is exploring alternative growth models in addition to AYP. We strongly support this direction and emphasize the importance of multiple measures to determine growth, including both summative and formative assessments.
- **Addressing the debate regarding the manner in which student subgroups are identified and monitored.** We have seen that schools and districts are spending a significant amount of time debating whether and how students should be categorized into different subgroups. This is time that would be far better spent on helping each student succeed regardless of his/her subgroup. For example, schools are struggling in the areas of students with severe cognitive disabilities who most likely will not earn a regular diploma and therefore are treated as dropouts under NCLB's calculation of graduation rates. The overall success of these students' meeting their goals is chiefly ignored. Another concern of our schools is with the subgroup of English language learners where the expectation of overall subgroup improvement is diminished by removing these students from the subgroup when they become proficient in English, thus creating a hardship in meeting the target for this subgroup. We have helped schools and districts disaggregate student achievement data for several decades. The benefit of disaggregating student achievement data is that it makes transparent to all stakeholders any gaps in achievement among student groups. This helps the district/school focus its improvement efforts. The focus needs to shift from categorizing students to meeting the needs of each

student. The current law has resulted in an unintended focus on the former rather than the latter.

- **Getting achievement data into the classroom so that it can inform instruction.** We continue to see that this is a challenge for schools and districts. Often, the district has good data on student achievement, but it is not translated in a timely manner or in a meaningful way to teachers. Schools and districts would greatly benefit from any incentives, which support the voluntary implementation, particularly across state lines, of robust student information systems that reach the classroom level. Many good examples exist that could be used as models for schools/districts across the nation.
- **Providing support to schools/districts with transient students and providing continuity of learning for these students.** Our schools and districts with highly mobile student populations continue to struggle to show gains in student achievement. They need focused support to meet the unique needs of these students. At the same time, the students need to be able to rely on a structure that provides continuity of the learning experience despite their move from school to school. Lacking state or national coordination of such a structure, students “start over” every time they move to a new school and data about prior performance is often lost or difficult to acquire.

In addition to the items just highlighted that reinforce many of the areas that have already been brought to the committee’s attention, we would like to inform the committee of three areas of need that we have seen through our work with schools/districts that impact the success of their improvement efforts and thus the overall success of NCLB.

1. Ineffective strategies for improvement

Doing the same thing harder. Our on-site review teams place a key focus on reviewing the improvement plans and processes of schools/districts. We focus particularly on the school’s/district’s chosen strategies for improvement. Through this review, we have found many common challenges that are impacting the effectiveness of improvement strategies. In large part, many schools/districts are employing the same strategies they always have to improve student performance. They are doing the same thing harder and with more focus, but with the same results. Schools/districts need help identifying effective, research-based strategies that they can implement in their education setting that help them progress beyond current practices.

Uneven implementation. In addition, most strategies that schools and districts are using to improve reading, writing, and math performance suffer from inconsistent and uneven implementation. There may be pockets of strong implementation but practices are not implemented across the school or system. We know from our experience that the schools and districts that experience the most success in improving student achievement have implemented strategies consistently across and within grade levels. For example, in these schools and districts, all staff members are using shared strategies, adapted as developmentally appropriate, to improve reading. From a student’s perspective, the same reading concepts are reinforced in all classes and as he/she progresses through his/her schooling.

Disconnect from professional development. In order for strategies to be implemented effectively and consistently, all staff members need relevant professional development in the strategy. We have found that this rarely occurs. In practice, most school and district professional

development is disconnected from the school/district improvement strategies. In many cases, staff may attend any professional development offering that relates to their content area and/or area of interest. Without clear and focused professional development in the chosen strategies for improvement, it is not surprising that improvement strategies are implemented inconsistently and/or only in specific departments or grade levels.

Disconnect from assessments. Schools and districts need to identify appropriate assessments that will effectively monitor the impact of instructional strategies on student achievement. This alignment of strategies with assessments is critical to informing the improvement process. We have found that schools and districts struggle with this alignment. They often use existing assessments without checking to see if there is alignment between what they want to know about the impact of the intervention and what is actually assessed by the test instrument. They may switch assessments in the middle of an intervention making year-to-year comparisons difficult; or they may not assess at predictable intervals which impacts the reliability and validity of the data collected. The end result is that many schools/districts are not sure if their improvement efforts are working.

All of the above contribute to a weak link between improvement strategies and student achievement. To address this overall issue, we recommend providing schools and districts with greater access to research and best practices, support for implementing school/district-wide interventions, incentives to link professional development directly to improvement strategies, and training to support the effective use of assessments to gauge and inform improvement efforts.

2. Lack of articulation within and across grade levels and schools

In our work with schools and districts, we have found that many do not have in place methods to ensure smooth articulation of students from grade to grade and from school to school. When a student leaves one grade for the next, there is often little to no sharing of information from the sending teacher to the receiving teacher about the student's talents and needs and effective strategies for reaching him/her. As a result, a substantial amount of the knowledge about a student that is gathered over the course of a school year is lost when the student transitions to the next grade or school. The receiving teacher/school then spends significant instructional time having to recreate that knowledge rather than building on it. We have seen several innovative schools and districts working to address this challenge through student information systems that contain a wide range of information about student performance, behavior, and aptitudes. These systems provide a repository of useful information that teachers can access, use, and update to capture what is working for and what still needs to be addressed for each student. Several schools/districts are also using student portfolios that follow students from grade to grade and school to school that provide detailed information on the students' education progress to date.

The issue of articulation between and across grade levels and schools is critical because the lack of it contributes to isolated rather than systemic improvements. We recommend provisions and incentives to encourage schools and districts to build systematic methods for ensuring smooth transitions for students as they progress through their schooling.

3. Lack of adequate attention to preparing students for success in life

Schools and districts across the country are focused on improving reading and math performance. As we work with schools to help them improve in these foundational areas, we are finding that

many are limiting their focus to meeting minimal achievement targets on state tests rather than preparing students for success in life. While improving test scores is an important way to demonstrate achievement, it should not be the end goal. We are seeing promising and sustained results from schools and districts that are applying reading and math skills to the skills that students will need to be successful in the next school or life transition. These schools and districts recognize that success entails having the knowledge and skills to perform well today and in the future.

Several schools and districts with whom we work have over ten years of experience in implementing an improvement model designed by NCA CASI, called Transitions. The model involves the credentialing of individual students in key academic areas, employability skills, and career awareness based on expectations articulated by employees and post-secondary education institutions. Students must be credentialed in each area at critical points in their schooling before moving to the next grade or school. Individualized learning plans are developed at minimum, for students who are not credentialed and in some case, for all students. The credential levels are established by a broad cross section of teachers, business leaders, higher education representatives, parents, and community members. Helping students earn credentials in all areas at each juncture in schooling becomes a critical focus of every member of the school that is reinforced by the community. In one community, for example, the local businesses will only hire students if they have earned their credentials in all areas.

In the aim to improve reading and math test scores, we do not want to lose sight of the overall focus of education to provide students with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in life. We therefore recommend that the concept of student preparedness for the next school or life transition become an overriding objective of the committee's work as it reauthorizes NCLB so that the focus goes beyond holding schools accountable for raising annual state test scores to partnering with communities in helping students become lifelong learners for the 21st Century.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our experiences with you. We are ready and willing to provide additional information and support to the committee in any of the areas highlighted in this testimony. We are eager to work with you to craft legislation that will further enable our nation's schools and districts to maximize the success of every child.

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