

Testimony before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce
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Dr. L. Chris Richardson, Superintendent of Schools
Northfield Public Schools, Northfield, MN 55057

Chairman Kline and Members of the Committee,

My name is Dr. Chris Richardson, superintendent of the Northfield Public Schools in Northfield, Minnesota. Over my forty-three year career in education, the first ten years were spent as a middle school teacher and instructional team leader, secondary principal, curriculum director, and for the last thirty-three years as superintendent of six Iowa, Nebraska, and Minnesota school districts. In 2012, I was selected as the Minnesota Superintendent of the Year.

My teaching and administrative experiences have been in diverse districts with enrollments ranging from 250 to 22,000 students K-12. I am currently completing my ninth year as superintendent of the Northfield Public Schools after leading the Osseo Area schools from 1997-2004. Northfield Public Schools has approximately 3,900 students K-12 of which approximately 83% are White, 12% are Hispanic and 5% other students of color. English learners comprise 8% of our students, 13% are identified for special education services and 25% qualify for free or reduced price meals.

During my career as a superintendent, I have led districts in responding to “A Nation at Risk” in the 80’s, “Goals 2000” in the 90’s and “No Child Left Behind” or NCLB during the last decade. In the last few years, districts in Minnesota and a number of other states have been operating under the waiver provisions granted by the Department of Education.

School districts across Minnesota and the country have seen some major positive impacts in the implementation of No Child Left Behind, the current ESEA act.

- First, the focus on student achievement data has moved school districts from implementing programs or making changes based on whether it seemed like the right thing to do, to looking in detail at how students are performing and making changes and modifications based on what that data shows.
- Second, schools have moved from examining and reporting only the average scores of all groups combined to disaggregating the data so that we look closely at how students in each subgroup are performing and respond with specific supports to meet the needs of all students.

- Finally, the focus on disaggregated data for each subgroup has clearly identified the achievement gap that exists in many school districts between our White students and our students of color, students in poverty, students with disabilities, and students who are English learners.

At the same time, NCLB is deeply flawed.

- First, the focus on reading and mathematics not only fails to consider the importance of science, social studies, the arts, health and physical education and vocational technical education, but totally ignores the development of 21st century workforce skills needed by our students.
- Second, the reliance on a test given at a single point in time as the sole measure of a student's class, school building, or district's proficiency or growth is inherently unfair. It is the equivalent of judging the worth of an elected official based on a single vote.
- Finally, the draconian sanctions placed on schools and districts that are identified as "in need of improvement" financially punishes those schools and students that face the greatest challenges.

So what needs to change?

- First, Congress needs to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as soon as possible, providing all schools and students with relief from the broken, outdated components of current law. While the waiver process has spared some states like Minnesota and school districts like Northfield from the unworkable sanctions embodied in NCLB, it leaves this country without a consistent focus and direction in education at a time when it is much needed.
- Second, the reauthorization must reestablish and recalibrate the federal and state roles in education. Federal investment in public education represents, on average, just ten percent of total district expenditures. As such, any reauthorization should ensure that federal policy establishes, at most, a proportional role, to avoid the proverbial "tail wagging the dog". The federal government must set broad parameters around testing and measurement allowing multiple measures of proficiency and growth determined at the state and local level. Additional federal parameters around disaggregation of data and identification of achievement gaps are needed as well as the need for district and school improvement plans, professional development and requirements for communication with constituents. Each

state in collaboration with local districts should have the authority and responsibility to implement and individualize these parameters based on their identified needs. Each state should be able to determine the suite of assessment tools that best measure proficiency, growth and college and career readiness. Each state with meaningful involvement of local districts should be able to establish structures for school improvement plans, and district goal setting of performance targets, achievement gap reduction and student growth.

- Finally, each state and district should have the flexibility to use federal funding in ways that provide the best opportunity to positively impact student success. District flexibility allows those closest to the students to address unique student needs in ways that are most effective for those students.

I would like to share three brief stories about what we are doing in the Northfield Public Schools that mirror the efforts that I believe are occurring across this country. These efforts reflect how local districts are using data to creatively address student needs and increase student success. They also demonstrate the power of giving local districts and schools the opportunity to develop and implement plans embraced by local teachers and staff that change the lives of students.

The Northfield Public Schools has been implementing professional learning communities (PLCs) for several years. Every teacher in every building is part of a grade level or subject area PLC which meets for one hour every week during the school day. Each PLC is responsible for analyzing the data about the students they serve, and developing and implementing goals and instructional strategies for addressing student needs.

The work of PLCs has resulted in the implementation of Response to Intervention or (RtI) in every elementary building. Each building PLC team, with the help of an RtI coach, combs through the data about students, identifies students who are not on track to succeed, determines scientifically based interventions, and implements those interventions with fidelity over multiple weeks. Many of the students are back on track in six weeks and others receive additional interventions to support their learning. The bottom line is that this process has significantly reduced the number of elementary referrals to special education in all buildings with only 20 initial referrals this year in comparison to 80-90 referrals on average in each of the last five years. More importantly, it provides these students with the skills to continue to access the regular curriculum at grade level, so they don't fall behind.

At the high school level, a PLC team determined that a number of incoming ninth graders were struggling academically and therefore at risk of failing one or more classes as freshmen. Longitudinal data told them that failing one or more classes as a freshman significantly increased the chances that these students would not graduate on time or would drop out later in high school. The PLC developed the Academy and selected a group of struggling students. Academy teaching staff worked with a smaller number of students while other teachers took on larger numbers of students who were not at risk. The struggling students were taught for half of their day by a team of teachers who carefully monitored their performance and supported them both during the day and after school with a seminar providing follow up, tutoring and individual instruction in addition to their regular classes. After several years of implementation, the percentage of freshmen failing one or more class has dropped from almost 25% down to less than 8% and our four year graduation rate now exceeds 96%.

Less than a decade ago, Latino immigrant students in Northfield who make up 12% of the student population were struggling with a graduation rate of only 36% while the graduation rate of our White students was over 90%. Few Latino students attended a postsecondary program. Staff members worked with the community to develop a program to address the achievement gap and to support Latino students and their families. Working collaboratively, we implemented the Northfield Tackling Obstacles and Raising College Hopes (TORCH) initiative to provide academic and social support, mentoring, career exploration, and connections with post-secondary education opportunities for Latino youth in grades 9-12.

The first goal of TORCH is to improve academic success and school/community connectedness through individual academic counseling; one-on-one mentoring; transitions to more academically-rigorous classes; bridging the Digital Divide; youth service; student leadership opportunities; and regular family check-in's. The second goal of TORCH is to increase access and participation in postsecondary education through career/college exploration and workshops; summer enrichment activities that improve academic skills; college visitations; ACT and Accuplacer prep; assistance with college/financial aid applications; and communication with graduates.

Over the past six and a half years, TORCH has seen remarkable results. Today, the Latino graduation rate in Northfield has climbed to over 90%. There has been an 1100% increase in TORCH graduates who have accessed postsecondary education programs and earned bachelor's degrees, associate's degrees, and postsecondary certificates. Based on our success, TORCH expanded in 2007 to serve all Northfield youth in grades 9-12 who are racial minorities, low-income, and/or

potential first-generation college attendees. Many of our Latino students fit into all of these categories. High school success also required stronger academic and social supports for TORCH-eligible youth in middle school so TORCH expanded to middle school students in grades 6-8 providing academic and social support and an even stronger foundation for future success.

The bottom line is that teachers and administrators in Northfield and districts across Minnesota and the nation have continued to step up to address the academic needs of the students we serve, just as we did before NCLB was implemented. We also know that the power of professional learning communities for teachers and personally connecting with kids and families is just as important as academic instruction in ensuring student success. We understand the political and funding issues you face and sincerely hope you understand the complexity of the education effort we undertake every day with every student.

A reauthorized ESEA needs to provide the broad federal parameters that maintain the focus on continuing to use the data we have about children to increase student proficiency and reduce the achievement gap. At the same time, it needs to provide the assessment, programming and funding flexibility to each state and school district necessary to support the professional expertise – and unleash the creativity of – our educators, the teachers and administrators, working in our classrooms and schools every day to make instructionally sound decisions driven by a never-ending desire to improve student learning. Please work to find that compromise. Our children and our future depend on it.