

Testimony
Dr. Gary M. Amoroso
House Education and the Workforce Committee,
U. S. House of Representatives
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Chairman Kline, Ranking Member Miller and Members of the Committee:

It is my honor to testify today and I am reporting from a public school administrator's perspective.

My name is Gary Amoroso and I currently serve as the superintendent of the tenth largest school district in Minnesota, the Lakeville Area Public Schools, home of Chairman Kline. We are a district of 11,048 students located about 25 miles south of the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St Paul. I speak to you from my 34 years as an educator, which include 27 years as a school administrator.

I am here to provide testimony about the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Legislation and present personal insights about local impact. Before I begin, however, I would like to make my beliefs about education perfectly clear - I believe in accountability and I believe in opportunities for all students to achieve academic success. I have dedicated my career to this mission and the testimony I bring to you today comes directly from my life's passion.

From an assessment standpoint, the most troubling aspect of the current system is its dependence on a single standardized assessment to determine a school's adequate yearly progress. The goal of increasing the overall number of students proficient in Reading and Mathematics is certainly admirable. Further, the subsequent culture of accountability has resulted in greater attention to individual student needs. However, the use of a single summative test as an indication of a school's "progress" misses the underlying intent of the law.

So by focusing solely on proficiency, schools that implement innovative changes in delivery models or researched based strategies to meet individual needs often go unrewarded. In one Lakeville school, for example, math instruction was restructured through additional staff time and professional development to meet the needs of struggling ELL students and resulted in significant gains in achievement. Under the current accountability model, the school retained the label of a failing school and was unable to continue this program due to funding restrictions.

Reauthorization should recognize the fact that education is not simply about getting 100% of students over an artificial bar. The latest research in assessment suggests its purpose is not to simply offer a summative indication of what was learned but to provide an understanding of what is yet to be learned and how to best go about learning it. This is an important distinction. The accountability model should reflect that purpose, shifting from summative measures to growth-based assessments that identify student needs, set individual growth goals, and track progress towards those goals. We have implemented these measures locally and our students have made remarkable progress. Again, let me stress the importance of success in learning for ALL students.

From a funding standpoint, the current system of sanctions for Title-I schools has been especially frustrating. It has resulted in a diversion of dollars from individual student-assistance programming to mandatory set-asides that are often unused. This eliminates any flexibility that districts may have to use the funds.

For example, over the past two years, 3 elementary schools have been placed on the "In Need of Improvement" list resulting in a mandatory set-aside. Over these two years, 1722 students have had the option to transfer to another school. Only one student opted to do so and declined the right to receive funded transportation. As a result, a substantial portion of the funding was unused for its original intent of providing additional academic support. I do not believe this is serving the best interest of our students.

In the absence of set-asides, school districts could better meet the individual needs of students through innovative programming such as the Response to Intervention approach, curriculum-based formative assessments, and professional learning communities. These programs provide a means to identify student needs and the most advantageous approach to meet these needs, but come at significant expense. In Lakeville, these programs have been implemented at three schools only though grant funding. I say with certainty that ALL students in Lakeville would benefit if we had the flexibility in funding to provide these programs.

Reauthorization should revisit the system of sanctions based on proficiency to allow districts to focus on student-centered needs and to make allocation decisions free of mandatory set-asides. This, in effect, offers local control to educators to make decisions, which truly allow all students to succeed. I do understand and appreciate the time constraints of the Committee in making modifications to the law. I respectfully request you to seriously consider that schools need reauthorization relief now.

I am very appreciative of this opportunity to provide testimony to the Committee and for its willingness to consider improvements in the No Child Left Behind Legislation. I will consider it a privilege to respond to any questions you may have.