

**Testimony of Michael Wotorson, Executive Director, Campaign for High School Equity**

**“Elementary and Secondary Education Act Reauthorization:  
Addressing the Needs of Students of Color”**

**Hearing before the Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education  
Subcommittee**

**United States House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor,**

**Washington, D.C.**

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Chairman Kildee, Ranking Member Castle, and distinguished Committee members, thank you for inviting me to testify today.

My name is Michael Wotorson and I serve as executive director of the Campaign for High School Equity, otherwise known as CHSE. CHSE is a coalition of leading civil rights organizations representing communities of color that is focused on high school education reform. Our goal is to advance solutions to close the achievement gap for students of color and Native students and to build public will and support among policymakers, advocates and community leaders for policies that will strengthen high school quality and graduation rates for minority and low-income students.

CHSE partners include the National Urban League, the National Council of La Raza, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, the League of United Latin American Citizens, the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund, the Alliance for Excellent Education, the National Indian Education Association and the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center.

I am here today not only representing the nine national civil rights and education advocacy organizations that comprise our coalition. I am here to speak on behalf of the nearly 18.4 million students of color and Native students enrolled in public elementary and high schools in the United States. I am also here on behalf of the over 1 million students who choose to drop out of our nation’s high schools each year. CHSE believes in the very simple premise that in order to ensure all students unfettered and equitable access to educational opportunities and to arrest the high school graduation crisis among students of color, we must have a system of

education that challenges and supports all students to meet the demands of a college and of the modern workforce.

My remarks today therefore will be focused on the kinds of supports that high school students, particularly students of color and Native students, need to graduate prepared for college, work, and life.

### **Building on Past Successes**

The promise of a high-quality high school education is integral to our success as a nation. From meeting the president's goal of again leading the world in the number of college graduates, to competing in a global economy, to citizen participation in our democracy, education is a basic building block. The pending reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education (ESEA) Act presents a historic opportunity to build upon the promise and achievements of the 2002 reauthorization, commonly known as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, while remedying defects that have limited the law's effectiveness in eliminating educational inequities.

NCLB was a step forward. It greatly enhanced ESEA's potential to improve conditions for students of color, first by holding states, school districts, and schools accountable for the academic success of all students; and second, by disaggregating data for racial and ethnic minorities, language minorities, low-income students, and students with disabilities.

The simple fact is that the 2002 reauthorization of ESEA moved us significantly closer to strengthening educational quality for all students. In short, it eliminated the ability to hide the often tragic conditions student so of color face in our schools and consequences of our collective failure to educate all of our students at a high level. Today as a direct result of the 2002 legislation, the critical importance of school accountability is widely accepted and important attention is being paid to addressing achievement gaps, enhancing college and career readiness, and strengthening high school graduation rates for all students. The 2002 reauthorization of ESEA effectively changed our national conversation about educational excellence and equity. We must not retreat on these gains if we are to continue making important progress.

If we do intend to improve America's schools, ESEA needs to be strengthened in many ways. For CHSE, this means expanding the focus on how we address the unique needs of high school students of color, Native students, and English language learner (ELL) students. The pervasive and persistent inequities in our

public education system puts students of color at a disproportionate disadvantage as they continue to attend highly segregated schools, despite the decades old *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. For example, three out of every four of Latino students and 56 percent of all Asian Americans<sup>1</sup> attend segregated schools in which minorities comprise 50 percent or more of the student population.<sup>2</sup> Latinos and African Americans comprise 80 percent of the student population in extreme-poverty schools where 90 to 100 percent of the population is considered low-income.<sup>3</sup> We need to ensure that all American students have access to equitable learning conditions whether they come from high or low-income neighborhoods.

To ensure access to equal educational opportunities and reverse the graduation crisis among students of color, our system of education must challenge all students to meet the same high academic expectations. Indeed, a 2008 American Council on Education report revealed that counter to earlier trends, far too many of today's young Americans are realizing lower levels of educational attainment than in previous generations.<sup>4</sup>

In years past, our economy allowed high school students to find meaningful employment without the requirement of significant education and training beyond high school. Today, the increasingly global economy demands that American students are prepared to compete with students from around the world.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, American high school students do not measure up to their international peers. It is critical that as a society, we provide students with high caliber, relevant academic coursework to adequately prepare them for the increasingly international post-high-school reality of college and work.

Students who attend college without having mastered basic skills cost our nation over \$2 billion a year in remedial coursework.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, many of today's employers lament that high school graduates do not have the skills necessary to be successful in the workplace. Clearly, we must restore the value of a high school diploma by increasing academic rigor. To do so, we must align state academic standards to college and work readiness so that as our nation's graduates leave high school, they are prepared to assume roles as America's college students, highly skilled employees, and leaders of tomorrow.

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<sup>1</sup> Orfield, G., and C. Lee. (2005) *Why segregation matters: Poverty and educational inequality*. Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University. Available at [http://bsdweb.bsdt.org/district/EquityExcellence/Research/Why\\_Segreg\\_Matters.pdf](http://bsdweb.bsdt.org/district/EquityExcellence/Research/Why_Segreg_Matters.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Orfield, G. and J.T. Yun, (1999) *Resegregation in American Schools*. Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University. Available at [http://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/deseg/Resegregation\\_American\\_Schools99.pdf](http://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/deseg/Resegregation_American_Schools99.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Orfield, G., and C. Lee. (2005)

<sup>4</sup> American Council on Education (2008). *Minorities in Higher Education 2008 Twenty-third Status Report*. Washington, DC: Author.

<sup>5</sup> National Center on Education and the Economy (2007). *Tough Choices or Tough Times: The Report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce*, Executive Summary. Accessed at [www.skillscommission.org/pdf/exec\\_sum/ToughChoices\\_EXECSUM.pdf](http://www.skillscommission.org/pdf/exec_sum/ToughChoices_EXECSUM.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Strong American Schools (2008). *Diploma to Nowhere*. Washington, DC: Author.

## **Policy Solutions**

CHSE believes that American education policy can prepare all students for college, work and life by creating an environment in which all children can achieve that goal regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. To do this, ESEA should aim high and address the critical needs of all high school students through the following policies:

### *1. Make All Students Proficient and Prepared for College and Work*

We should guarantee that all students have access to rigorous and engaging coursework in core subjects. Coursework should impart the knowledge and skills needed to excel in postsecondary education and career, and assessments should measure student learning against these criteria. States should in turn be required to publicly report on access to college preparatory classes and course-taking patterns by income, race and ethnicity, both among and within schools.

### *2. Hold High Schools Accountable for Student Success*

It is imperative that we hold high schools accountable for getting students successfully to graduation by including meaningful graduation rates in federal school accountability standards. Codifying in law the current graduation rate regulations would make a significant difference and would serve as a critical factor in determining the quality of a high school and it would be an effective use of resources.

Improving data systems is another critical component of a strong accountability system. They will not only improve the fairness and accuracy of accountability systems, including ensuring increased accountability for groups that are often marginalized, such as, ELLs, Native Americans and Southeast Asians, but will also allow schools to target services such as professional development where they are needed most.

Additionally, making decisions without the benefit of fully disaggregated data ignores the unique needs of students of color and ill prepares school administrators to allocate resources based on student and teacher needs. While many states disaggregate data, inconsistencies in collection and reporting standards leave entire groups of students out of the equation. For example, without fully disaggregated data, the needs of whole segments of the Asian American and Pacific Islander population are neglected. As a result, entire groups of these young people end up falling through the cracks.

We must also establish accurate and reliable assessments for ELLs. States have not yet implemented valid and reliable Title I or Title III assessments for ELLs, and the U.S. Department of Education has not yet provided sufficient technical assistance or guidance to the states in the development of appropriate assessment policies and practices. Both failures have severely hindered the effectiveness of NCLB for ELLs.

### *3. Redesign the American High School*

In order to address students' diverse needs, states and districts must provide their schools with the means to explore and implement new educational models, as well as other effective interventions such as literacy programs, personal graduation plans, and extended learning time.

### *4. Provide Students with Excellent Leaders and Teachers*

The federal government can support programs that establish incentives to recruit, train, support and retain effective leaders and teachers in high-poverty high schools. Federal education policy that promotes culturally based teaching, a practice wherein teachers align instruction to the cultural practices and experiences of their students, is also critical to helping all students succeed.

### *5. Invest Communities in Student Success*

The school environment is critical to student success, but we also know it is not the only factor that impacts a secondary school students' academic and social outcomes. Families and communities also play key roles. Students in low-performing schools often do not receive the same exposure to outside learning opportunities as their more affluent counterparts.. Our policy must harmonize the incentive and disincentive structures of the external and internal environments to support all students' ability to stay in school, excel academically, and develop into a productive individual.

### *6. Provide Equitable Learning Conditions for All Students*

Persistent disparities in the allocation of key education resources often bar low-income and minority students from receiving the high-quality education they deserve. Research demonstrates that, across states, school districts that enroll the highest percentage of students of color and low-income students receive fewer resources than school districts serving white and affluent

students.<sup>7</sup> Resources must be distributed equitably, used effectively, and directed to where they are needed the most.

### *7. Support the State-led Common Core Standards*

The state-led effort on common standards can be a critical first step in reforming the American educational system. If developed and implemented effectively, high common standards can help to improve our education system with significant benefits for students of color. The federal government should support states when necessary, as these standards have the prospect to challenge all students to reach the same high expectations.

### *8. Expand Learning Opportunities Beyond the School Day*

Often, increasing the engagement of older youth requires more than just time beyond the traditional school day. The innovation and enrichment that can take place beyond the regular school day can help students stay engaged in school and graduate.

I would like to speak in more depth about a few areas of interest: turning around low-performing schools, student supports needed to help all students succeed, and effective teaching.

## **Turning around Low-performing Schools**

Our nation's students of color are four times more likely than non-minority students to attend a persistently low-performing school, and three times less likely to attend a high school with very high graduation rates. In fact, dropout factories produce 81 percent of all Native American dropouts, 73 percent of all African American dropouts, and 66 percent of all Latino dropouts.

Despite these alarming statistics, the majority of low-performing high schools are left out of school improvement efforts because many are not eligible for Title I support, the trigger for school improvement efforts. In fact, only 61 percent of dropout factories are eligible for—and, many analysts believe, even fewer actually receive—Title I funds. Even if they do receive Title I funds, many dropout factories will likely not be identified as “in need of improvement” since graduation rates are not significantly factored into the determination of a school's success or failure. For example, 41 percent of dropout factories made AYP in the 2004–05 school year.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Carey, K. (2004). *The funding gap 2004: Many states still shortchange low-income and minority students*. Washington, DC: Education Trust.

<sup>8</sup> Balfanz R. et al., (2007). Are NCLB's measures, incentives, and improvement strategies the right ones for the nation's low-performing high schools? *American Educational Research Journal* 44: 559–93.

We have an opportunity right now to ensure that low-performing high schools benefit from attention, resources, and aggressive reform by making sure high schools are eligible for Title I, are held accountable for graduation rates in addition to academic achievement, and are included in school improvement calculations and intervention strategies.

### **Invest in Interventions that Work**

Creating high-performing high schools that give all students the support they need to succeed is no small task, and it requires changing the school in addition to a community investment. To truly serve the needs of America's diverse learners, high schools must be redesigned by:

- implementing a variety of quality high school models shown to support different learning styles and student situations;
- providing integrated student supports that utilize both in-school and community-based services (for example, high-quality high school counselors, graduation coaches, social workers, and health care and mental health services);
- promoting strategies (such as literacy coaches or native language instruction) and targeted interventions (such as afterschool programs or block scheduling) that improve student numeracy and literacy skills without sacrificing access to high-level academic subjects;
- promoting instructional practices designed to meet the needs of diverse learners such as reflexive learning and culturally competent learning techniques; and
- ensuring that legally and educationally valid criteria are used to appropriately inform decisions regarding student eligibility for services in special education, services for ELLs, college preparatory curricula, and gifted and talented programs.

CHSE believes that community-based organizations (CBOs) play a critical role in providing much-needed wrap-around services, particularly for students of color and Native students. The federal government should support the creation and expansion of multilingual parent centers, as well as CBO-based expanded learning opportunities including afterschool and summer programs, business-school partnerships and other community-based support services needed to help students stay in school and graduate.

Throughout a reauthorized ESEA, we must remember that successful strategies for high school students differ from those of younger students. High school students

are inherently more mobile, have competing demands on their time—including sports, clubs, jobs, and family responsibilities, among other differences—and therefore, require different strategies, activities, and supports than elementary and middle school students. For example, expanded learning initiatives and services for older students should use innovative practices and partners to better develop student assets by providing leadership and community service opportunities, work experience, academic credits and stipends. Policy must support and drive high-school based supports such as expanded learning programs.

An evaluation of New York City programs<sup>9</sup> found certain common elements in successful high school effort, and they differed from those that made elementary and middle school programs successful. They include:

- the use of creative, age-appropriate strategies to recruit youth and encourage their continued participation;
- the employment of staff who could relate to youth and staff with expertise in activity content areas;
- activities designed to meet the developmental needs of older youth, for example, through the provision of career- and college-oriented activities and leadership opportunities; and
- partnerships to increase the fiscal and other resources available to the program.

### **Adopt Effective Teaching Policy Strategies and Distribute them Equitably**

High-quality teachers are the single most important factor influencing student academic outcomes, including graduation.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the presence of an effective teacher trumps almost every other intervention, including class size reduction, in improving student outcomes.<sup>11</sup> Students, especially students of color and Native students who have traditionally been underserved by the system and are most likely to benefit, are not being taught by effective teachers.<sup>12</sup> In order to address this disparity, CHSE believes that it is critical that all students, especially those most at risk of dropping out of high school, should have access to effective

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<sup>9</sup> Russell, C. A., Vile, J.D., Reiser, E. R., et al. (2008). "Evaluation of the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development Out-of-School Time Programs for Youth Initiative: Implementation of Programs for High School Youth." New York: New York City Department of Youth and Community Development. Available at [www.nyc.gov/html/dycd/downloads/pdf/ost\\_hsprograms\\_report-6-08.pdf](http://www.nyc.gov/html/dycd/downloads/pdf/ost_hsprograms_report-6-08.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Carey, K. (2004). The real value of teachers: if good teachers matter, why don't we act like it? *Thinking K-16*, 8, 1. Available at [http://www.calread.net/documents/summit3/articles/real\\_value\\_teachers.pdf](http://www.calread.net/documents/summit3/articles/real_value_teachers.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Jerald, C., Haycock K. and A. Wilkins (2009). Fighting for quality and equality, too: how state policymakers can ensure the drive to improve teacher quality doesn't just trickle down to poor and minority children. Washington DC: The Education Trust. Available at [http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/publications/files/QualityEquity\\_3.pdf](http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/publications/files/QualityEquity_3.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Gordon, R., Kane, T., and D. Staiger (2006). Identifying effective teachers using performance on the job. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution. Available at [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2006/04education\\_gordon/200604hamilton\\_1.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2006/04education_gordon/200604hamilton_1.pdf).



teachers. Next week, CHSE will release policy recommendations related to effective teaching. Our vision contemplates teacher effectiveness policies that:

- *Are based significantly on growth in academic achievement for all students,*
- *Improve classroom instruction and leadership decision-making,*
- *Include and support high school specific solutions,*
- *Ensure teachers (and school leaders) are culturally competent ,*
- *Ensure Teachers of Diverse Learners are prepared and well-resourced; and*
- *Invest in Research*

While we know that teachers are a critical determinant of how a student will perform academically, research shows that the students most likely to benefit are not being taught by effective teachers.<sup>13</sup> Highly effective teachers are more likely to be teaching in more affluent schools and schools with smaller populations of students of color.<sup>14</sup> Therefore CHSE supports teacher effectiveness policies that ensure that effective teachers are equitably distributed to give *all* students a fighting chance at learning.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the last reauthorized ESEA surfaced a number of troubling academic disparities amongst student subgroups. Prior to disaggregating data for racial, ethnic, and language minorities, low-income students, and students with disabilities, the depth of academic achievement gaps remained relatively hidden. While NCLB was a step in the right direction, clearly, there is still much to do, and we must not only do it right, we must do it NOW.

The educational interests of students of color and Native students should be fully considered in the deliberation over ESEA. In order to meet the needs of these students CHSE and its partners urge Congress to ensure better support for high schools and strong accountability for improving results for high school students.

All students—especially students of color, Native students, ELLs—stand to benefit from a reauthorized ESEA. Waiting any longer to reauthorize ESEA amounts to shutting the door on thousands of American high school students and their dreams of a successful future. CHSE looks forward to continuing to work with this

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<sup>13</sup> Gordon, R., Kane, T., and D. Staiger (2006). *Identifying effective teachers using performance on the job*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution. Available at [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2006/04education\\_gordon/200604hamilton\\_1.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2006/04education_gordon/200604hamilton_1.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Gordon, R., Kane, T., and D. Staiger (2006).

Committee and the full Congress to ensure the timely renewal of this critical civil rights legislation.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity and privilege to testify before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.