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Education and the Nation: Examining the Challenges and Opportunities  
Facing America's Classrooms

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Good morning, Chairman Kline, Congressman Miller, and Members of the Committee, and thank you for having me here today. I applaud the bipartisan spirit that surrounds the education debate currently underway in both chambers, and I am hopeful it will continue.

I'm here today because I believe we can do a better job of educating children in this country. In particular, I believe that we can do better by our low-income students, who today graduate from college at one-seventh the rate of high-income students. I believe that there are people in this country — entrepreneurs, innovators, reformers, brave system leaders — with bold ideas that can change children's lives. And I believe that the decisions you make will matter in how many of those ideas come to fruition.

Actually, these are not just beliefs. They are facts that I've witnessed through my work at NewSchools Venture Fund. We are a nonprofit venture philanthropy firm, which means that we find social entrepreneurs who can deliver breakthrough results for low-income kids, and we help them grow strong organizations. Their work ranges from training teachers to operating networks of public charter schools to inventing technology for the classroom, but they're united by a commitment to achieving measurable results for kids. And the fact is, their work is changing outcomes for children.

I've also seen the same facts from a very different vantage point, as President of the State Board of Education of California for the past three years. And both of these experiences have taught me that there are things only the federal government can do—and that reformers in the field urgently need those things to happen if we are going to speed the pace of change and innovation in the communities that need it most.

### **Objective of this testimony**

The single thought that I hope to leave you with today is that there is a smart, appropriate role that the federal government must play in education policy, if we are going to see reform at the pace our children need. For our big systems, reform is an unnatural act. Yet there are thousands of people with bold ideas

for change, working in entrepreneurial organizations or in districts or in states, who need the support and cover that only you can provide. Without that, the status quo will remain just that, to the disservice of our country and our kids. With an appropriate federal role, you can do more than just drive funds to the most important work. You can make it easier for local leaders to do things that are essential, but politically difficult.

In fact, there are certain things that *only* the federal government can do:

1. The federal government can **establish a level playing field** that creates accountability for all the players – states, districts, schools, and outside service providers alike. As more and more states sign on to voluntary common standards, the conditions are being created to accelerate reform and innovation. The federal government can play a vital role by easing the transition and ensuring integrity.
2. The federal government can help focus attention and resources on kids who are underserved. **Protect the unprotected.**
3. The federal government can serve as a spark to **foster innovation**, as it does in defense, energy, and medicine. It can provide incentives to ensure that we don't meet 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges with 19<sup>th</sup> century tools and practices, and can get the highest leverage from the federal dollars we spend on education.

## Why this matters

To understand why these principles are essential, I'd like to give you a concrete idea of what I mean when I talk about work with kids that genuinely changes life trajectories. Too often, we are told that until all of the challenges that a low income community faces are solved, it's unreasonable to expect really strong results from a school. I'd like to offer you the stories of two people who believe differently.

First, Don Shalvey. A decade ago, Don had just left his post as the superintendent of a small school district in Northern California. He believed great schools could be a force to change lives in the toughest communities. He built Aspire Public Schools: a network of charter schools dedicated to the idea that a "College for Certain" philosophy, strong school culture, high standards, close attention to data, and good management would translate into better results for kids. Today, that idea has turned into 30 public schools serving more than 10,000 students. The overwhelming majority come from poor, minority communities in desperately underserved urban areas. Yet in 2010, 100% of Aspire graduates were accepted to college, and Aspire stands as the highest performing school system serving low-income kids in the state.

Second, Norman Atkins. As the founder of another outstanding charter network called Uncommon Schools, Norman knew the enormous importance of an outstanding teacher—and he knew that for too many beginning teachers, the road into the profession is rocky. He set out to build a new organization that would "bring about transformational change in teacher preparation," helping to close achievement gaps. That organization, Teacher U, brings together three of the most effective school organizations

serving low-income kids in New York City: Uncommon Schools, KIPP, and Achievement First, in partnership with Hunter College. Last summer, Teacher U graduated its first cohort of teachers. These beginning teachers graduated with something that few preparation programs even measure: evidence that they had helped their students make a year or more of academic progress over a year of time. That idea—that both the graduates of a teacher training program and the program itself should be accountable for measurable impact on kids—sounds self-evident. But in fact, it’s a revolutionary idea, and one that has the potential to change things for kids across this country.

This country needs more schools like Aspire, and more teacher training programs like Teacher U. But how fast that happens depends enormously on the kind of support and cover reformers at the local level receive. In the Newtonian logic of school reform, to every good idea, there is well-financed opposition. We lack some of the basic conditions that make innovation and reform possible. And we don’t always spend taxpayer funds on the things that matter most. Here are the things that the federal government—and only the federal government—can do to make a difference:

## 1. Establish a level playing field

*The federal government can establish a level playing field that creates accountability for all the players – states, districts, schools, and outside service providers alike. As more and more states sign on to voluntary common standards, the conditions are being created to accelerate reform and innovation. The federal government can play a vital role by easing the transition and ensuring integrity.*

The federalist experiment in the United States is premised on the notion that states should serve as experimental laboratories, and be responsive to local concerns and priorities. We can gauge the result of these experiments, however, only if we have a common yardstick with which to measure them. The federal government will serve a vital, appropriately limited role in education policy if it can build on the remarkable momentum behind voluntary common standards. Already 44 states have chosen to adopt these common academic standards.

The impact of these changes is to create a far more open space for strong reforms and innovations to spread across the country. By way of example, take the work of BetterLesson, which is applying social networking technology to helping teachers share ideas and lessons. Under the common core, teachers in North Dakota, New Hampshire and California can all work together and connect lessons to a common set of standards—where, a few years ago, they would have been in separate curricular worlds. Likewise, producers of digital course content can build one set of materials rather than fifty. Individually, these points may seem small, but together, they translate into a national market for innovative ideas and instructional supports.

The federal government has a series of opportunities to support this vital work, and to keep it honest. Federal funds can support the transitions that states must make, and can be directed in particular to professional development for teachers around the common core, as well as to support the development of assessment systems that will enable states to measure student progress and to hold states and

districts accountable for high goals. The federal government should ensure transparency and integrity in these measurements—these ideas are vital to a level playing field for all.

## 2. Protect the Unprotected

*The federal government can help focus attention and resources on kids who are underserved. Protect the unprotected.*

Broad, comprehensive accountability, as discussed above, is essential to meaningful reform. However, there is a second essential element that the federal government can and must play in improving education specifically for underserved populations. The federal government has unique ability to shine the spotlight on the needs and progress of such populations, which include students living in poverty, particularly in rural and urban places, as well as racial and ethnic minority groups, English Language Learners, and those with special needs.

As noted earlier, No Child Left Behind was not a perfect law by any means. However, one of its most valuable contributions was the transparency created by requiring states to report student achievement by subgroup. Until NCLB, it was relatively easy for states, districts and schools to mask the achievement gap that persists among subgroups of students by hiding the data. The federal government put a spotlight on this problem and it must continue to do so. No other entity has the capacity to focus attention and accountability on the needs of these groups. The visibility that NCLB gave to the performance of these subgroups has been an enormous driver of reform. The federal government should continue and deepen its rightful role shining a spotlight on the needs of underserved children.

The vital work of the federal government in this area does not end at accountability. On the contrary, it has the unique power to create incentives for states, districts and other organizations to develop new solutions that meet the needs of specific underserved groups.

## 3. Foster Innovation

*The federal government can serve as a spark to foster innovation, as it does in defense, energy, and medicine. It can provide incentives to ensure that we don't meet 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges with 19<sup>th</sup> century tools and practices, and can get the highest leverage from the federal dollars we spend on education.*

The federal government plays a unique role in sparking innovation. We understand that innovation is a vital public good in defense, energy, and medicine. It's hard to imagine arguing that education is less important to our economy and national strength. We should treat innovation as a national public good in education too—a system that's just as vital to our national strength. Education entrepreneurs start small, but their ideas have the power to transform our entire vision of public education in this country. They provide alternatives to the traditional (and outdated) methods of doing things, and catalyze the

entire education system to revisit the ways in which they educate kids. Moreover, smartly targeted incentive funds have the power to drive change disproportionate to their dollar amounts, and to create political cover when reform is politically difficult.

Innovation is sometimes understood as a synonym for technology, but in fact refers to any variety of new ideas, systems, products and processes that create better results. It's hard to think of a place where it is needed more than in our education system, which in too many important ways remains a relic of the 19th century system from which it stems, rather than a reflection of the 21st century world it aims to serve. In some part that is a reflection of an elaborately refined system for defending the status quo, and in some part, of our national lack of attention to research and development in education.

Yet we know that where we innovate, we can change lives. Among schools in our own portfolio, 91% of graduates enroll in college, compared to a national average of 55% for low-income students. We see organizations like Teacher U and the Urban Teacher Center breaking the mold on how we train teachers—and inviting accountability. We see organizations like Mastery figuring out new approaches to turning around chronically underperforming schools. We see organizations like Presence Telecare, which has developed remarkable online technology that allows speech and language therapists to help students thousands of miles away. We see programs like School of One that are using technology to help teachers tailor education to each child's individual needs. And the list could go on and on.

## Creating Meaningful Reform

A smart federal policy will create incentives that identify and support the growth of innovative work in areas where it is badly needed – new school designs, particularly within the freedoms afforded by the public charter school structure; new approaches to training and developing teachers and principals; new ideas for instructional technology and better assessments. (Charter school funds can also support not only growth of strong schools, but can be conditioned on strong state-level accountability.) Incentives can help to combat the inertia that favors traditionally structured systems over entrepreneurial approaches. And importantly, incentives can overcome political opposition by entrenched interest groups, and force hard conversations about how to improve and transform the education system. In truth, this is the most important role the federal government can play – providing a backstop that allows meaningful conversation to take place, with all stakeholders at the table.

For example, California applied for but did not receive a Race to the Top grant. Yet, the mere offer of federal incentives was enough to force hard conversations with all key stakeholders in the education system. In the span of one year, California passed laws to allow for the “parent trigger,” to allow parents to force changes to failing schools. It passed a law to allow for open enrollment within a school district, providing parents with choice among public schools within the districts where they live. California also passed a law tearing down its “firewall” that prohibited tying student data to teacher data. Nobody

forced California to do this, but the federal incentives provided enough cover for state legislatures to stand up to the forces of the status quo.

## Recommendations

Chairman Kline, Congressman Miller, and esteemed Members, on behalf of a wide community of entrepreneurs and innovators dedicated to improving public education for low income children, I want to offer a set of recommendations in keeping with the roles set forth above. I present these within the frame of an appropriate, limited and smart role for the federal government in education, focused on continuing and expanding the kind of innovation and reform that is changing lives today in local communities across this country. In the broadest strokes, we urge you to define a role for the federal government that creates appropriate yardsticks and accountability with a focus on measurable academic results, and to safeguard its integrity. I urge you to preserve and intensify the spotlight you shine on results for specific groups of underserved children. I urge you to make a real priority of supporting innovation in education, in part by creating incentives that foster innovation and creating political cover for local reform.

The following are specific programs and policies that we believe will aid the cause of reform and innovation in education for low-income children:

- **Charter Schools Program:** We urge you to support and fully fund the federal Charter Schools Program to support the growth of high-quality charters, and permit funds also to flow to nonprofit organizations with a demonstrated track record of supporting the development of strong charters. This gives the federal government capacity to help grow local organizations.
- **Teacher training and development:** Over the past 10 years, we've spent more than \$30 billion under Title II(a) of ESEA using preset formula grants. This money is supposed to help teachers with professional development, yet few would argue that all these dollars are spent well. Consider using a portion of these funds to drive the growth of smart new ideas and organizations. Likewise, incentive funds can be used to shake up the one-size-fits-all evaluation of teachers that treats them, as The New Teacher Project terms it, like widgets. Incentive funds can help to drive better teacher evaluation, which includes measurable student achievement, and connections between performance and compensation. Lock-step compensation based on seniority devalues the profession.
- **Use incentives to remove barriers to innovation:** Continue to fund innovation in education the way the government supports R&D in defense, medicine and energy. Help states clear away policies, such as fixed student teacher ratios and seat time requirements that prevent the spread of effective technologies that help students learn and teachers teach.

Thank you for the honor of speaking before you today.