

**Testimony of  
Cassie Harrelson  
Secondary Math Teacher on a Special Assignment  
Aurora Public Schools, Colorado**

**Before the  
United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Education and the Workforce  
June 23, 2016**

Thank you, Chairman Kline and members of the Committee for inviting me to join you today.

My name is Cassie Harrelson and I am currently a math teacher on a special assignment working with special education teachers in Aurora Public Schools in Colorado. In my school district, our students speak over 130 different languages and our free and reduced lunch is at 71%. We are the poster children for being a diverse community. In my role I have the privilege of being in classrooms daily collaborating with teachers to best support students with disabilities. I also am an affiliate faculty member at Regis University facilitating coursework for educators around using assessments to support English Language Learners in language acquisition. My entire career in education has been spent working with students who are behind their peers on grade level academic standards. However, my experience in the classroom ranges from working in Aspen, Colorado in a school district that is labeled one of our top performing in the state to most recently in Aurora Public Schools who will enter year four on a priority improvement plan in July of 2016.

I strongly believe that every child, regardless of family income, ethnicity, or home language, deserves to attend a school with opportunity. This belief is what drives me daily while teaching students, working collaboratively with teachers, reflecting on assessment data and planning for the instruction that our students deserve. It is also why I am here today to speak on the promise of ESSA for not only our students in Colorado but across the nation.

My experience is similar to millions of educators in our schools across the country. Since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, we have thoughtfully engaged in some of the positives of NCLB such as problem solving when the disaggregated data has shown achievement gaps but we were also quickly caught in the one size fits all mentality of the law that did not work for our students. However, in December of 2015 both students and teachers were delivered the promise of ESSA. This was seen as an opportunity for educators closest to the students they teach at the state and local level to be included in the conversation on determining what our schools and students need to succeed. We were promised flexibility to trust the stakeholders on the ground who know our students, community assets and challenges to drive school improvement. There was an explicit shift from extensive federal directives that were experienced throughout the NCLB era to allowing local and state level decisions to be made. We were promised relief from extensive time

focused on standardized testing that was not timely or useful to guide meaningful instruction with our students. Instead we were promised more time for teaching and learning in the classroom.

I am excited about the flexibility and the promise of ESSA, I know the work will be complicated and take time at all levels. I am committed to getting implementation right; as I am certain that my colleagues at the local, state and federal level are as well. I ask that this time is honored. We must adequately engage in meaningful consultation and rich dialogue with educators, students, parents and community members to ensure the appropriate intersection of local, state and federal policy that is best for our students. The recently proposed federal regulations rightly focus on the importance of stakeholder engagement. We know that engaging educators, parents and community members up front will make for a successful process in the long run.

However, as a teacher, I worry that the extensive areas dictated under the proposed federal regulations take away my voice. We were promised that so many of these decisions would take place at the state and district level, ensuring that Colorado educators had a seat at the table to advocate specifically for our students. Yet, the proposed accountability regulations tell us that Colorado must have a summative rating system with three levels of proficiency overall and with each subgroup of students. I know this requirement is nowhere in the law and something we were supposed to decide at the state level.

As an educator in Aurora I have been excited for the accountability system to not only focus on student outcomes but also on closing the critical opportunity gaps that exist in so many of our schools. Yet, once again in the proposed regulations we see a return to increasing the focus on the standardized tests. By diminishing the importance and the lack of decision options of some of the indicators, including the student or school supports indicator, we will return to a system where we are overly focused on the numbers game of tests instead on focusing on what students need to succeed.

The proposed regulations call for English Language Proficiency goals that set expectations for attainment of ELP within a period of time after a student's identification as an English learner. As an educator, my concern with this is that in Aurora we have a diverse population in which some students arrive with comprehensive educational backgrounds, and some arrive with interrupted or limited formal schooling. Research tells us in the language acquisition process the task is much larger and will require more time. Currently, we do not distinguish language learners and the expectations of language acquisition based on students' first language acquisition levels or educational backgrounds. We would appreciate the opportunity to take a student's situation into account when setting individual goals.

In addition, while the law retains the requirements to ensure students are participating in the test they go beyond by dictating the actual consequences that a school must face. In Aurora, we do not have an active opt-out movement however our participation rate at the high school level is still only

90%. This means we will be subject to the proposed sanctions. And that is what they are, sanctions. All of them are designed to punish us rather than help us find solutions to solve the lower participation rate in our assessments. This was supposed to be determined at the state level but once again the department is taking away that opportunity.

Finally, as educators we were happy to see that decisions about our evaluations were moved back to the state and district level. We know that the most effective evaluation systems are about helping teachers improve their practice. Therefore we were happy to see that ESSA was moving away from the top down approach; an approach that was replicated in CO through Senate bill 191 due to the federal mandates. However, I remain concerned about the calls in the proposed regulations about the requirement for states to develop a system of continual growth and improvement. This seems in manner of the words to be a requirement for the continuation of the state teacher evaluation systems. This not only seems to go against the federal prohibition in the law against mandating teacher evaluation systems but it also goes against what we know to be best practice.

I ask that you honor your commitment to our students in ESSA in that you would honor educator voice at the local and state level, as we know our students best. Last week in Colorado, 42 school districts from around the state met for an ESSA Summit to create a shared understanding of ESSA and to develop a collective voice that will help shape our state policy. These district teams were made up of educators, school board members, superintendents and other administrators. We engaged in meaningful conversations about learning and experiences from the last decade, collaborated with other school districts and developed recommendations for Colorado's Department of Education and state legislature to meet the needs of our students, especially those most in need.

This is what the new law promised: engaging collaboration to design solutions and supports for our students to succeed. The last 14 years let Washington make these decisions, now it is time to give those with actual teaching experience the opportunity to have a say. This work is extensive but imperative so that that EVERY child, regardless of family income, ethnicity, or home language, has the opportunity to attend a great public school and succeed.