



DEMOCRACY PREP PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Work Hard. Go to College. Change the World!

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Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, and esteemed members of the Committee,

Thank you for inviting me here today to speak with you about the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. In my role as Chief Executive Officer of Democracy Prep Public Schools, I have seen how many of the previous changes in the ESEA created the conditions under which thousands of children have gained access to high-quality public school seats in traditionally underserved communities. Nevertheless, Democracy Prep's growth reflects the urgency of the challenges facing these children and we understand that broader systemic change within our nation's public education system is needed in order to produce this response at scale. This ESEA reauthorization presents an opportunity to strengthen the reform aspects of this essential law for our most vulnerable children while recalibrating the balance between federal oversight and local decision-making to foster innovation and accelerate the expansion of effective schools.

Executive Summary

The animating objective of the reauthorization of ESEA should be to hold a high bar of accountability in exchange for autonomy – the fundamental theory of education reform. Decisions about what works best for students should be made at the school level by caring adults who best know the students and the community. However, and this is an important caveat, this relinquishment to the most local level of control can only work with massive amounts of transparency, data reporting clarity, and necessary accountability for adults who fail to perform for students. To that end, I humbly suggest that the reauthorization of ESEA include *(1) expanding the Charter Schools Program; (2) ensuring a portable funding model; (3) eliminating the federal Highly Qualified Teacher definition; and (4) maintaining an annualized testing requirement while insisting on local implementation.*

History and Mission of Democracy Prep

The mission of Democracy Prep Public Schools is to educate responsible citizen-scholars for success in the college of their choice and a life of active citizenship. Now in our ninth year, we have grown from a handful of classrooms on the third floor of a public school in Harlem, New York, to 14 schools serving 4,400 students across Harlem, the South Bronx, Camden, N.J., and Southeast Washington, D.C. Despite the challenges attendant to such a rapid expansion, we have refused to compromise quality. In 2010, our flagship school was the top-ranked middle school on the New York City Department of Education Progress Report; in 2014, having expanded our model in response to student demand, we operated four of the highest growth middle schools in New York City and one of the highest growth middle schools in the State of New Jersey. Our ability to grow at this pace, and with quality, would not have been possible without support from the federal Charter Schools Program, and for that, all of our students are grateful.

Democracy Prep's schools are uniformly composed of students who fall within one or more designated ESEA subgroup. By challenging students to do their best academically regardless of socioeconomic status, language proficiency, special education classification, or the academic level at which they enter the school, while providing support and accommodation for those who need it, we have continually strived to serve as a proof-point for what is possible in public education. Our students rise to the expectations we set for them — the higher our expectations, the higher the achievement of our students. Serving a student population of which only a single-digit percentage would be expected to earn a college degree, our flagship high school has now produced two classes of graduating seniors, 100% of whom were accepted to four-year colleges. Democracy Prep graduates are enrolled in such schools as Brown University, Vanderbilt University, Brandeis, Boston College, Howard University, Lehigh University, Pitzer College, Fordham University and my alma mater, Mount Holyoke College, as well as the US Naval Academy. This year's seniors have already received early acceptances to Princeton University, Wheaton College, Emory University, Smith College, Trinity College, and Dartmouth College.

Two Highlighted Innovations

Civic Engagement: Democracy Prep's mission of preparing active citizens is animated by the awareness that the founding purpose of public education was to prepare our nation's youth for self-government. Democracy Prep places an explicit focus on preparing students to become civic leaders in their communities: creating articulate public speakers who are able to advocate effectively for themselves, their

families, and their communities; developing avid, active, and aware adults who monitor current events; and empowering citizens who are able to navigate and influence complex social and political structures.

To advance these aims, Democracy Prep cultivates civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic dispositions in our students. By infusing civic and historical content into our all of our curriculum, we work to build civic knowledge cohesively and coherently in a manner that allows our students to become skilled negotiators of conflicting information, engaged community members, critical thinkers, and confident leaders. By incorporating Socratic seminars, oral presentations, and group discussions and by thoughtfully reducing the amount of teacher talk-time in classrooms, we work to develop poised public speakers who not only *can* lobby their elected officials, delivery oral testimony on the record at public hearings, and participate in Get Out The Vote campaigns, but in fact *must* do so in order to receive a Democracy Prep diploma. Additionally, we have required each of our high school seniors to pass the civics portion of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services Naturalization Test with a minimum score of 83% prior to graduation, and we were gratified last month to witness Arizona become the first state in the union to pass legislation requiring all high school students to demonstrate that baseline level of civic knowledge before being conferred a high school diploma.

Turnaround: The accountability regime established by No Child Left Behind has exposed long-festering achievement gaps and laid bare the inarguable fact that many public schools serving low-income students of color are failing those children. Public charter schools rightfully have not been exempt from such scrutiny. As strong charter school authorizers have increasingly utilized this data to make high-stakes renewal decisions, some have sought innovative alternatives that place at-risk students in excellent schools by replacing failed management with those with a track record of success. Democracy Prep is proud to be such an option for schools that are failing, indeed pioneering the approach in 2011 with our first turnaround. *At present, over 50% of the students enrolled at a Democracy Prep school in 2014-15 are attending a school that, in a prior incarnation, had been identified — largely thanks to federal accountability standards — as unlikely to provide them a reliable path to success in college, career, and citizenship.*

In 2011, Democracy Prep undertook New York State's first charter-to-charter school turnaround at Harlem Day Charter School, a failing elementary school in East Harlem, that was ranked in the 3rd percentile of all public schools in the City

and the lowest performing school of any kind in Harlem. In 2012, the Progress Report ranked Harlem Prep in the 96th percentile of NYC schools and in the turnaround's first year, Harlem Prep's scholars exhibited the greatest growth in English Language Arts (ELA) test scores in New York State and the greatest combined growth in ELA and Math test scores in New York City.

One year later, Democracy Prep was once again tapped to turnaround another failing charter school. In 2013, Freedom Academy Charter School in Camden, N.J., which had been placed on probation and slated for non-renewal by its authorizer, placed in the 94th growth percentile statewide on its New Jersey School Performance Report during its first year as a Democracy Prep school. In the current school year, Democracy Prep-led charter-to-charter turnarounds are underway in the Bronx and here in Washington in Congress Heights.

Turnarounds are painstaking efforts fraught with unique and often unforeseeable challenges. Overhauling a failing culture that has taken root within a particular building is profoundly difficult. Democracy Prep's approach to improving academic outcomes for the low-income, at-risk students who had previously attended requires the flexibility to implement a program responsive to the specific needs of our students while continuing to serve all of them.

In each of our turnarounds, we lengthen the school day and calendar year in order to provide extended literacy and math instructional blocks while building content-rich courses in music, speech, debate, art, physical education, design, and even Korean language into our regular academic program. We utilize student-level data (including nationally-normed assessments, as well as individually administered reading inventories) to allow us to meet students where they actually are and to inform all decisions around instruction, staffing, and spending. We implement a rigorous, college-prep curriculum and offer targeted tutoring and individualized support afterschool and on Saturdays for students who need additional attention. We focus relentlessly on school culture and maintain high expectations, not just for our students, but also for the adults charged with creating and maintain high standards with consistency and fidelity.

Recommendations for ESEA

Democracy Prep's success is predicated on a model in which decision-making is localized and schools are held accountable for demonstrating that students are acquiring the knowledge and mastering the skills they need to be active and engaged citizens. This model should guide the ESEA reauthorization effort. To

encourage innovation, schools and districts that use this flexibility to implement empirically sound programs that consistently improve academic outcomes for students — particularly low-income and at-risk students — should be incentivized to bring those programs to scale.

Consequently, the overriding objective behind ESEA reauthorization must be *preserving and strengthening* accountability measures that enable policymakers to make informed decisions about the effectiveness of underperforming schools and the scalability of successful models, while *eliminating or amending* provisions that inhibit flexibility and innovation and that prioritize adult compliance inputs over student learning outcomes. The accountability and transparency measures embodied in NCLB have catalyzed desperately needed reform efforts over the past decade-and-a-half. High standards maintained at the federal level have indeed had the desired effect of spotlighting schools, districts, and even states struggling to educate the future caretakers of our democracy.

Expanding the Charter Schools Program: Democracy Prep has consistently and purposefully demonstrated that higher spending does not equate to better results. Inadequate resources are not the challenge; Democracy Prep operates its schools on public funding, and our turnarounds have yielded significantly better outcomes than have the district turnaround efforts funded by School Improvement Grants. As a charter network, Democracy Prep receives a significantly lower per-pupil allocation than do the district-run schools that produce worse results for the same families, often — by virtue of New York’s innovative approach to allocation of space in public school facilities — on the same floors of the same buildings.

Democracy Prep’s growth has depended on access to the Charter Schools Program funding. Nearly every school that Democracy Prep has opened has received the funding, whether via a State Education Agency or directly. In contrast, our turnarounds are not generally eligible for SIG funding, due to overly unwieldy definitions of “failing.” The CSP program has allowed Democracy Prep to grow from an idea to a national proof point, with nearly 5,000 students on the path to college and citizenship in 2015.

Charter schools and charter management organizations should be eligible to apply for competitive federal grant programs that are open to local educational agencies. This funding stream offers networks and schools like Democracy Prep an opportunity to equitable funding without private philanthropy.

Ensuring a Portable Funding Model: Democracy Prep strongly believes in a funding framework tied directly to the school students attend. Charter schools should receive the same per-pupil allocation for each student they educate, including all title funding. Any opportunity to ensure that every state has an equitable funding model for charter schools is of paramount importance.

Eliminating the Federal Highly Qualified Teacher Definition: Given the pace at which Democracy Prep has expanded, doubling in size as a network prior to the start of the 2014-15 school year, the need to identify, develop, and retain talented adults with the mettle to thrive in our demanding *no excuses* environment has become increasingly pressing. Such a challenge would be daunting enough were we simply assessing each applicant on his or her mission alignment, content knowledge, classroom management, lesson plan execution, team orientation, and ability to engage and inspire children. Layering on an additional bureaucratic consideration is unnecessary, as each state has its own licensing requirements that must also be met. This additional requirement does not enhance outcomes for students and is ultimately a compliance-based checkbox.

Although grappling with HQT designations is not preclusive for operator like Democracy Prep, it may indeed be so for others who understand the importance of the work but cannot reconcile doing what they believe to be best for kids with creeping compliance obligations that thwart those efforts.

Maintaining an annualized testing requirement with local implementation: The students who have benefited most from having access to a seat in a Democracy Prep school would be the ones most ill-served by any dilution of federal accountability measures, including any weakening of the annual testing mandate for grades three through eight. Testing drove demand for market-based reforms; parents who had previously lacked access to information about their children's schools started advocating more insistently for higher-quality school choices. Reverting to the previous regime, loosening the reins on annual testing, and depriving parents of this information would harm the same students who have benefited from access to schools like those operated by Democracy Prep.

The annual testing regime provides a mechanism to arm policymakers with the information they need to make high-stakes decisions about intervention, closure, and replication. In exchange for this meaningful and tough accountability for student outcomes, policymakers should relinquish decision-making authority around what to teach and what to test to the individual most intimately familiar

with a specific environment. States and districts need to hold principals and superintendents accountable while empowering them to make curricular choices, structure their own internal assessment calendars, and determine who should be at the front of their classrooms.

In closing, the reauthorization of ESEA offers us all a chance to recommit to the most important aspects of public education — our children. I encourage this committee to recommend legislation that preserves policies that promote high standards and accountability for student outcomes. I also recommend considering revisions to those policies that support local decision-making authority. In fact, this is what Democracy Prep attempts to do in every school we operate. Decisions about what works best for students should be made at the school level by caring adults who know the kids and the community the best, but only when there is necessary accountability for adults who fail to perform for children.

Thank you for allowing me to join you today. It is most certainly an honor to speak with you today about the work of Democracy Prep and the work of ensuring that we have a bright future for every one of our children.