

**United States Senate**  
**Subcommittee on Children and Families**  
**July 29, 2010**  
**Hearing**  
**The State of the American Child**

**Testimony of Assistant Secretary Thelma Meléndez de Santa Ana**

Thank you, Chairman Dodd, Ranking Member Alexander, and Members of the Subcommittee for this opportunity to testify on behalf of the United States Department of Education. Mr. Chairman, I especially want to thank you for your decades of leadership in Congress, as a champion for our country's most vulnerable children and families, and the founder of the Senate's first Children's Caucus.

My name is Thelma Meléndez de Santa Ana, and I currently serve as the Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education. I come to this position with experiences as a superintendent, a principal, and a classroom teacher, most recently as the Superintendent of the Pomona School District in California. In each position I've held, I have been focused on what will improve teaching and learning, to help ensure the success of all of our children.

I appreciate your leadership in convening these hearings on the "State of the American Child." It's critical that we all be aware of the challenges facing the nation's children and families, particularly in these tough economic times. We have to see the roadblocks in order to overcome them.

Many of us believe that education is the one true way out of poverty for disadvantaged children. In fact, education is critical not just to the success of an individual child, but also to the success of the country. There's no doubt that an educated workforce is the key to remaining competitive in a global economy and that an educated citizenry is necessary to ensure national prosperity and the common good.

While we have made great strides as a nation, we have a lot of work to do. The achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and their more affluent peers is far too wide. And far too many young people fail to graduate from high school on time – especially young African American, Latino, and Native American students.

Nationally, about 70 percent of students graduate from high school on time with a regular diploma, but just over half of African-American and Latino and American Indian students earn diplomas within four years of entering high school. In many states, the graduation gap between white and minority students is stunning; in several, it is as much as 40 or 50 percentage points. And, only 13 percent of Latinos and 17.5 percent of African Americans hold a bachelor's degree. We must do better. That is why the President and I announced the Administration's program to reduce America's high school dropout rate, which we announced with General Colin Powell and Alma Powell, the Chair of the America's Promise Alliance – who testified at your first in this series of

hearings. Our goal is that by 2020, we will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world – and reaching that goal will require focusing attention not only on high school dropouts, but all along the educational continuum.

This goal is the basis of this Administration's cradle-to-college-and-career strategy for education reform. Our plan begins with stronger early learning programs and services, making sure children enter school ready to learn. Further, we must ensure that more students enter high school with strong grounding based on high standards and effective teaching in elementary and middle school, so they are on a path to graduate from high school ready to succeed in college and a career. And, finally, we must work to make sure that more students earn a college degree that prepares them for a meaningful career.

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is an essential means to this end. Our reauthorization Blueprint for Reform includes a focus on high-quality teaching and learning, improving equity and excellence, and building capacity at the state and local levels. We've centered the goals of the Blueprint on closing the achievement gap and raising the bar for all students. This is a moral and economic imperative.

The years prior to kindergarten are critical in shaping a child's foundation for later school success. Research demonstrates that learning begins at birth and that high-quality early learning programs help children, especially high-need children, arrive in kindergarten ready to succeed in school and in life. Early learning is an essential part of our strategy for meeting the President's 2020 goal. As the Secretary says, we have to get schools out of the catch-up business.

The Department's early learning agenda focuses on children from birth through third grade, with seamless transitions between preschool and elementary school. Our proposal for reauthorizing ESEA supports a continuum of learning that will help to close the achievement gap and ensure that every student graduates from high school ready to succeed in college and a career.

Our approach builds on the great efforts of the nation's governors and the chief state school officers by supporting implementation of state-developed college and career ready standards. But improving teaching and learning doesn't end with standards – it only begins there. We've got to support high-quality assessments, state- and locally developed curricula, and professional development and communities of collaborative support for teachers and principals that are aligned to those standards. And we need to ensure fair and rigorous accountability, measuring every student's growth towards college and career readiness, as growth and progress are critical elements of any picture of how our schools are doing.

In order to close the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and their more affluent peers, we must provide better educational opportunities for all students.

High quality early learning programs and services are so important to ensuring equity and excellence for a child's educational future. Studies show that at least half of the achievement gap between poor and more affluent children already exists when they enter kindergarten. The larger the gap, the harder it is to close later on. That is why the Administration's fiscal year 2011 budget request included \$9.3 billion over ten years for the Early Learning Challenge Fund, to support and encourage States to reform and raise the bar across their early learning settings. Many in Congress worked to include the Early Learning Challenge Fund in the Healthcare and Education Reconciliation Act earlier this year. We remain committed to working with Congress to advance funding for this important initiative in fiscal year 2011.

Research also tells us that teachers are the most important in-school factor in student success, but access to effective teachers is not equal. We all know that high-poverty and high-minority schools are being short-changed – often being taught by less experienced, less well-prepared, and less effective teachers. We need to make sure that the best teachers teach where they are needed the most. We want to spur the creation of more effective pathways for preparation of teachers, meaningful career ladders and stronger efforts to retain great teachers, and we want to support educators in their instructional practice and reward them for all they do. Our proposal will provide funds to develop and support effective teachers and leaders and make sure that every child has the opportunity to learn from excellent teachers.

In order to address the greatest achievement gaps and the lowest graduation rates, our proposal drives efforts and resources to our lowest performing schools.

We have set a goal of turning around 5,000 of our lowest performing schools – the bottom 5 percent in each State in the country. These are schools where achievement has been low for years and isn't improving. Many of these schools produce a disproportionate percentage of our high school dropouts. In fact, fewer than 15 percent of all high schools, about 2,000 schools, produce a majority of our nation's dropouts and approximately two-thirds of Latino and African American dropouts.

Thanks to the Recovery Act and annual appropriations, we have already committed \$4 billion to support local efforts to turn around these lowest performing schools through School Improvement Grants – up to \$6 million to help each of these schools. Through our Blueprint and our annual budget request, we will continue to seek resources and support to turn around our lowest-performing schools.

Our plan also recognizes that diverse learners, including English Learners, migrant, rural, and homeless students, students with disabilities, and other vulnerable populations have specific needs that must be addressed through additional support. For example, to better support English Learners (EL), we are encouraging states to develop English language proficiency standards and high-quality assessments that prepare EL students to succeed. We also expect schools to understand the diversity of their EL populations and better differentiate their supports for subgroups of EL students.

Further, thanks to SAFRA, we are increasing college access and opportunities for more students, providing \$40 billion in increased Pell Grants to help more students go to college. And, the Department has undertaken efforts over the past two years to simplify the Federal student aid application process so that all students can get the aid for which they are eligible.

Finally, our proposal strives to help build capacity at the state and local levels for making the reforms necessary to close the achievement gaps. Our plan recognizes that capacity is a critical element as states, districts, non-profit organizations, and communities undertake major changes to improve education for all their students. Through our initiatives, like Race to the Top, which provides grants to states for systemic reforms, and Investing in Innovation, or i3, which provides grants to districts and non-profits to develop and scale up promising instructional practices, strategies and supports, we can make great improvements and pioneer new models. Our proposal supports a comprehensive approach to students' needs, including through Safe and Healthy Students and support for afterschool programs. We maintain important formula funding, and structure competitive programs to target the areas that most need those funds.

We also propose to increase support for strong family and community engagement and efforts to create open, welcoming avenues for parents to engage with teachers, schools, and programs. We believe that family and community engagement should be a requirement for schools and districts, especially as they seek to improve. And that's why we propose to double Title I funding for family engagement. In addition, through Promise Neighborhood grants, we will support the development and implementation of a continuum of effective community services, strong family supports, and comprehensive education reforms in high-need communities, to improve children's education and life outcomes.

Through his fiscal year 2011 budget request, the President has demonstrated that he is absolutely committed to children and to improving their education – he has proposed historic increases for education programs – the largest increase ever requested for ESEA – to ensure that students can succeed and that our country can maintain its place as a global power.

I think we can all agree that the current state of education is not good enough, especially when certain segments of our population, our most vulnerable children and families, continue to struggle. We must all do better. And that's why we must continue to work together in a bipartisan way to reauthorize and improve ESEA as soon as possible. Our children simply can't afford to wait.

Once again, thank you Chairman Dodd, and thanks to the Committee for this opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.