Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee (HELP)
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Testimony of Dr. Tim Mitchell, Superintendent of Schools
Chamberlain School District, Chamberlain, South Dakota

Good Afternoon Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi and members of the committee, my name is Tim Mitchell and I am the Superintendent of Schools for the Chamberlain School District 7-1 in Chamberlain, South Dakota. It is an honor to come before you today and share some thoughts on rural school turnaround. Specifically, the unique challenges faced by rural schools when implementing school improvement strategies as well as some of the conditions I feel are necessary so rural school reform efforts can be successful. I would also like to share some recommendations for how a reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act can support and promote successful school turnaround in rural areas.

Chamberlain School District 7-1

Located along Interstate 90, in south-central South Dakota along the Missouri River, the Chamberlain School District 7-1 is made up of parts of three counties, Brule, Buffalo and Lyman. The district covers 853 square miles. Part of the Crow Creek Indian Reservation lies within the district (Buffalo County-referred to as one of the poorest counties in the nation). The City of Chamberlain, population approximately 2,400, is the area's primary trade center. Chamberlain is the site of the school district's administration building, a senior high/middle school (Grade 7-12), and an elementary school (Grade K-6). The 2009-2010 Fall Enrollment was 858 students. Economically Disadvantaged students make up 46% of the student body, Native American students make up 36% of the student population, 17% of the students qualify for Special Education services and 59% of the students are identified as Title I. The Elementary School supports a School-wide Title I Program and in 2010-2011 the Middle School will be a School-wide Title I Program.

The district employs 140 full and part-time staff. About 95 are certified teachers, who bring Chamberlain School District 7-1 a wide range of experiences and educational backgrounds (average experience level 16.2 years). Including special service staff members, such as speech therapists, music teachers, guidance counselors and physical education instructors, the average pupil-teacher ratio in the district is 11.2 to 1. Class sizes are small which provides for more one-on one contact between teachers and students. The school district's administrative staff is made up of the superintendent, business manager, and two building principals. In the fall of 2008 a part-time assistant grade 7-12 principal was added. A special education director, transportation director, Title I director, buildings and grounds supervisor, technology director, special education social worker, and activities director serve in supervisory roles in the district.

Achievement Gains

In the spring of 2003 in the Chamberlain School District 7-1, 27% of Native American students tested were Advanced/Proficient in Math and 45% were Advanced/Proficient in Reading, only 49% of the Economically Disadvantaged student population were Advanced/Proficient in Math and 62% were Advanced/Proficient in Reading, only 7% of Students with Disabilities were Advanced/Proficient in Math and only 22% were Advanced/Proficient in Reading. The Native American, Economically Disadvantaged, and Students with Disabilities subgroups did not make Adequate Yearly Progress and the Elementary and Middle School were identified as being on No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Alert.

In the spring of 2009, 63% of Native American students tested were Advanced/Proficient in Math and 61% of Native American students tested were Advanced/Proficient in Reading, 62% of Economically Disadvantaged students were Advanced/Proficient in Math and 74% of Economically Disadvantaged students were Advanced/Proficient in Reading, 43% of Students with Disabilities were Advanced/Proficient, and 51 % of Students with Disabilities were Advanced/Proficient in Reading. In the spring 2008 the Native American, Economically Disadvantaged, and Students with Disabilities subgroups made Adequate Yearly Progress and the Chamberlain School District 7-1 had the first clean NCLB Report Card. Native American, Economically Disadvantaged, and Students with Disabilities subgroups continue to exceed the state average for proficiency in both math and reading. These types of achievement gains continue to be recorded as the district celebrates some of the highest student achievement gains in the history of the district.

The Chamberlain Turnaround Story

To identify what has helped Chamberlain School District 7-1 in the turnaround process has been a relentless focus on instruction and professional development; the cultivation of teacher and principal support; the use of researched-based instructional practices and strategies; and the conscious encouragement of collegiality and collaboration among all staff members. This has created a culture that encourages professionals to take risks and to take responsibility for themselves, their students and for each other.

The major theme of our story is centered on capacity building. Michael Fullan defines capacity building as an action based and powerful policy or strategy that increases the collective efficacy of a group to improve student learning through new knowledge, enhanced resources, and greater motivation on the part of the people working individually and together. You need to create conditions for people to succeed by helping people find meaning, increasing their skill development and their personal satisfaction while they make contributions that simultaneously fulfill their own goals and the goals of the organization. My own research in South Dakota found that the most innovative school districts are those that have the ability to sustain school reform, organizational change and increased student achievement have a greater professional capacity.

The best way to build the capacity of a school district is to transform it into a professional learning community. This is the work of Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, and Robert Eaker. First, you need to make learning the fundamental purpose of the organization. You must establish a focus on learning not on teaching. Second, schools will not achieve a true focus on learning when teachers are working in isolation. You must create systems and structures that build a collaborative structure. Third, you must know if students are learning or not. You must have a system to monitor student learning and be governed by results.

A focus on learning means that the district has systems and structures in place to make sure students learn what they need to learn to be successful. We have created an intensive focus on learning by clarifying exactly what students are to learn by establishing an aligned curriculum. Once we established an aligned curriculum we provided support through an extensive professional development program to support teachers in their utilization of researched-based instructional strategies to deliver the curriculum. The next step was to establish a robust assessment system. Teachers have been trained in the creation and use of common formative assessment procedures to get instant feedback from students on how well they are doing. This feedback guides decisions as to appropriate remediation or enrichment that must be provided to ensure the learning occurs.

The next thing we recognized as a critical issue was that a district can not accomplish a high level of learning for all students unless all staff members work together collaboratively. The collaborative team has become one of the fundamental building blocks of our culture. Staff need to be organized into structures that allow them to engage in meaningful collaboration that is beneficial to them and their students. Extensive professional development was required to make the collaboration effective. Collaborative time can be squandered if educators do not use the time to focus on issues most related to teaching and learning.

To be governed by results means that teachers need to continually assess their effectiveness on the basis of results. They need instant, tangible evidence that their students are acquiring the knowledge and skills that are essential to their success. We have created a data system where curriculum and achievement data are stored together so teachers can get instant feedback to help them provide remediation and enrichment as needed. We have found that all students can learn if given the time they need. Our data analysis has helped use to design extended learning opportunities for various students so remediation and enrichment are provided in a variety of ways.

In the Chamberlain School District 7-1 we ask all the members of our organization to come to school each day and make the following commitments:

- Align and utilize the South Dakota Content Standards to provide a guaranteed and viable curriculum for all students;

- Develop, implement, and evaluate on a regular basis a School Improvement Plan that targets specific instructional areas and students identified by data analysis;

- Engage in meaningful, job-embedded staff development to enhance professional skills;

- Initiate individual and small group instructional programs to provide additional learning time for students;

- Provide families with resources, strategies, and information to help children succeed academically;

- Utilize a variety of researched-based instructional strategies to promote success for all students; and

- Develop and implement effective local assessments and administer state assessments as directed.

The Challenges for Rural Schools

The most pressing issues that are currently affecting small rural schools are isolation, capacity, the recruitment and retention of administrative and teaching staff, lack of quality pre-schools, NCLB punitive consequences that are designed more for urban schools and adequate financial resources in these troubling economic times. Add the lack of parental involvement, low graduation rates, the impact of drugs and gangs and poverty to many of the low performing rural reservation schools in South Dakota and the most pressing issues significantly increase.

The isolation geographically from large urban areas creates a continued shortage of high quality instructional learning opportunities for staff that are just not available in isolated rural areas. The lack of access to these capacity building activities seriously hampers the ability to support high quality instruction if the teachers are not supported. Any opportunities to network with others in their field are also limited. In a small rural school it is not unusual to see the superintendent hold many roles in the organization. They can also be the principal, grant writer, staff development coordinator, curriculum coordinator, coach, and then drive the bus. Can one person hold all these jobs and have time to build the capacity of the organization let alone build their own capacity to lead a high quality learning organization? This is why rural schools are asking that the proposal of making new federal dollars, with the exception of Title I that will remain formula driven, available only through competitive grants be reconsidered. The time and capacity are not available in rural schools to complete and submit competitive grants. Rural schools are at a great disadvantage in this type of competition with larger urban schools. In South Dakota, the lack of funding and an inability of the state legislature to pass standards have severely limited pre-school opportunities to make sure students are prepared for school. In some low performing districts Head start can only serve 25% of the eligible students. If funding and standards were available in South Dakota to provide effective and quality pre-schools more students would be ready and prepared to enter school. NCLB

consequences will also not work in small rural areas for many reasons. Threatening to close schools, fire administrators and teachers in areas that get few applicants is not a viable turnaround strategy.

It is hard to imagine how different a school district is when they serve 90-100% Native American students on a reservation in South Dakota. The history of distrust that native people have for educational institutions is still prevalent. Many of these districts are at a loss as to how to overcome the lack of parental involvement. It is hard to explain the impact of politics of the reservation schools. Many students see that it is possible to survive on the reservation at poverty level and it is hard to convince them they need to graduate when 80% of the adults they know do not have a high school diploma. Many of these schools do not have the resources to provide a safe environment for learning. Gangs and drugs have taken hold in these communities and continue to affect the overall learning in these situations. It has become almost impossible to provide a safe and secure learning environment.

With all these issues the stigma of being a failed school really has a negative impact on these small, rural, and isolated communities. Many of these school districts have administrators and teachers who are dedicated and working very hard everyday to try to improve the learning in these situations. Many of these school districts currently have trouble holding onto administrators for more than one or two years. In many rural schools the superintendent is the principal so then the entire administration is lost or they simply move a short distance to another school district. With all the hard work they are making progress and show growth but they know that they will never be able to reach the bar. In these situations the principals and staff need to stay as the turnaround process may be slow but growth is being realized. Threatening to fire administrators and teachers and close the school in isolated rural areas does not make common sense. We need to give State Education Agencies the flexibility in working with these small, rural situations.

The Condition Needed for Success

The turnaround process in the Chamberlain School District 7-1 was funded through the use of a mixture of local, state and federal revenue sources. Federal revenue sources (Title I, Title II Part A & D, Title IV, Title VI and Impact Aide) provided by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act have provided much needed funding for capacity building activities as well as to implement researched-based educational programming that have significantly helped to increase student achievement for Native American, Economically Disadvantaged, and Students with Disabilities. These funds were provided under the current formula grant program. I would hope that additional dollars can be found to increase funding for Title I because the current proposal is for level funding. Most rural schools like Chamberlain also have a limited capacity and shifting to more competitive grants for new federal dollars I believe would be inherently unfair to rural school districts. Relying on competitive grants could take the much needed funding from small rural schools. It would be very difficult for us to compete with school districts that have a greater capacity and expertise in this area. I would recommend that Congress continue to grow formula grants to support a more reliable stream of funding to support turnaround efforts in rural schools. I do want to mention

that The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds were also utilized for the 2009-2010 school year. I would certainly like to thank the committee and Congress for the strong investment they have made in education through this program. Capacity building, which is an essential component to our turnaround success, is resource intensive and adequate funding is critical.

To engineer a successful school turnaround you need to create a structure of supporting operating conditions. The federal government has to be flexible and allow rural school leaders to make decisions regarding staff, schedules, budget and program based upon the mission, strategy and data for each unique rural school. The turnaround process must be locally controlled.

External efforts to improve schools invariably focus on structural changes. Meaningful, substantive, sustainable improvement can only occur if it becomes anchored in the culture of the organization. Bringing about cultural change in any organization is a complex and challenging task. The challenge facing educational leaders and teachers is to become skillful in the change process. That is why I support federal resources targeted to provide training to improve the effectiveness of teachers and leaders in high-needs schools especially in rural areas as outlined in the blueprint.

ESEA Recommendations

Accountability as we know it now is not helping our schools. Its measures are too narrow and imprecise and the consequences are too severe. NCLB assumes that accountability based solely on test scores will reform schools. I believe this is a mistake. A good accountability system must include not just a simple test score but other measures of student achievement. It should also include a review of the resources being provided to schools to assess their ability to build capacity to be successful.

Consider the distinction between positive accountability, where low scores trigger an effort to help schools and punitive accountability where we focus on firing staff and closing schools. In a strategy of positive accountability consistent, researched-based, proven steps are taken to improve low performing schools. There are many examples across the nation that point to this strategy as being very productive. This is something that small rural schools can do if given the resources to make it happen.

In the NCLB era and included in the new "Blueprint for Reform" you will find recommended turnaround models that are very prescriptive and propose consequences that include firing of principals and staff and even closing schools. This is punitive accountability where low scores simply provide reasons to trigger dire consequences for staff, students, parents and communities. The four turnaround models are not appropriate for a majority of rural and small schools. It would be very difficult for a small rural community in our nation to implement any of the four prescribed models. I support the recommendation of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) that proposes a 5th option for school turnaround. This is to be able to implement a research based intervention model, reserved in the blueprint for Reward districts. This should be available for the lowest-performing districts. This would be an example of a positive

versus punitive nature that would allow schools and districts to receive a school turnaround grant to implement a researched-based capacity building option. They would need to supply information as to how they are going to implement a turnaround process that is a replication of what other successful turnaround schools have implemented and how it is appropriate to their situation based upon a thorough data analysis.

We have known for years that we need to improve schools but I have some grave concerns about some of the school reform efforts in vogue today. Efforts that set out to improve schools by applying more and more severe sanctions. The problems confronting quality rural school development have never been the result of lack of effort or lack of caring among educators. We have taken good people and put them in struggling systems. It is time to quit blaming the people and to transform the system. Educators are ready to play a key role in this transformation. If there is one thing educators know, and many studies have confirmed, there is no single answer or silver bullet. We simply must turn our attention to the research behind what makes a great school in rural areas and replicate the successful practices already in place in those schools. We must turn our attention to improving schools by focusing on learning and reviving the conditions that make learning possible.

Thank you for your time today and I would be happy to answer any questions