

**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE SENATE HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR AND
PENSIONS COMMITTEE FIELD HEARING ON THE ELEMENTARY AND
SECONDARY EDUCATION ACT (ESEA) REAUTHORIZATION:
RURAL HIGH SCHOOL REFORM**

Friday, July 23, 2010 at Gillette, Wyoming

Introduction

Good afternoon Chairman Harkin, Senator Enzi and members of the committee. My name is Kevin Mitchell and I am the superintendent of schools in Park County School District #1 (PCSD#1) in Powell, Wyoming. Thank you for inviting me to testify at this hearing today. It is an honor to represent our school district and the rural school districts in Wyoming and across the nation.

Our school district is comprised of four elementary schools, one middle school, one comprehensive high school and one small alternative high school. We serve about 1,600 students in an area of 1,458 square miles. Powell has a tradition of educational excellence, but we also understand the need to make sure we continually strive to improve our efforts to provide the quality of education our students deserve. The Board of Trustees has adopted a strategic planning process that guides the efforts for continuous school improvement. A copy of the strategic plan placemat is attached with this report. The goals of the strategic plan are:

Goal 1: Increase Student Achievement

- a. Ensure that all students will be prepared for Algebra I by the end of 8th grade.
- b. Ensure that, at the end of 3rd grade and all subsequent years thereafter, students will be reading on grade level.
- c. Attain 100% graduation rate.

Goal 2: Ensure Effective and Efficient Operations

- a. Develop a systematic approach to identify and evaluate the operational processes of the district.

Goal 3: Strategic Communications with Stakeholders

- a. Implement a district-wide communication plan.

As you can see, the student achievement goals are very bold; however we believe we can reach our goals with the support of our stakeholders. A detailed plan on the actions needed to achieve the goals has been developed to guide our work.

High School Reform

Powell High School (PHS) offers a strong curriculum of core academic classes, supplemented with art, music, health and physical education and career and technical education class offerings. There are many other elective classes offered also that include AP classes. We have a partnership with Northwest College to offer dual and concurrent enrollment classes to our high school students.

Powell High School has adopted or is in the process of initiating strategies to ensure that our graduates are prepared for college or a career. Grade level academies have been established to provide opportunities for small groups of teachers to develop relationships with students. Many high school drop-outs didn't have a personal connection with anyone in the school. Each teacher is assigned a small group of students to meet with to discuss their academic progress and assist the students with any problems they might have. The academies also allow the teachers a common planning time to discuss student achievement data to monitor student achievement.

PHS is also in the process of developing a project-based approach as an instructional strategy. This strategy develops skills that students need to work together for a common goal. Standards in more than one curricular area may be addressed along with career skills in one assigned project guided by at least two teachers. The integration of technology is mandatory in all of the project-based classes.

Powell High School also offers a strong school to work program. This program allows students time to work in local businesses. This program is coupled with a job shadowing program. These programs offer students an opportunity to develop job related skills and to also determine if they want to pursue a specific career. PHS implemented the Reconnecting Youth program two years ago to address identified at-risk students that have poor attendance and are not on track to graduate. The initial results of this program are positive.

PHS also has a variety of programs to offer at-risk students. An after school program, partially staffed by student tutors has been very successful in assisting students in need of academic assistance. A Lunch Intervention Program (LIP) was established this year for students that are failing a class. The students are assigned to eat lunch in the media center where they complete missing or incomplete assignments with the assistance of a tutor. A project-based summer school was added this year. Students failing reading and/or math were invited to summer school where they completed a project of local interest, "Roundup Ready Beets." The students researched the controversy over "Roundup Ready Beets." They had to meet the standards in math, reading and writing in the project. They presented their projects to the public at the conclusion of summer school. PHS received very positive remarks from the students and the public that attended the presentations.

The Shoshone Learning Center is our alternative high school. The center serves as an alternative setting for students that have dropped out of high school or do not meet the norms of PHS. The center delivers the curriculum via distance education. The center is staffed by a teacher, a para-educator, a part time principal and an administrative assistant. The center is also used by PHS students that want to take a class that is not offered at the high school or to complete a credit recovery class. The Shoshone Learning Center had a graduating class of thirteen students that may not have graduated without this opportunity.

Most of these programs mentioned above are either fully or partially funded using federal funds we receive from consolidated grants. Title I, neglected and delinquent, special education and general funds are allocated to provide these programs for our students.

Opportunities during the reauthorization of ESEA

The reauthorization of ESEA is very important, especially to rural school districts and particularly to rural high school reform. Secondary schools can be resistant to embrace change. The federal government could assist local school districts in high school reform by providing support to teachers and principals in the following areas:

1. Professional development in identifying the needs of high school students and how to make sure all students have a personal connection to the school.
2. All students must complete a rigorous core curriculum of reading, writing and mathematics. All students must be prepared for college in these three areas. One assessment could be developed to measure a student's skills and knowledge in these areas. Even the so called "vocational professions" such as plumbers and electricians need these skills to complete the training necessary for their chosen profession. This curriculum should certainly be supplemented by the sciences, history, music, art, drama, foreign language, health and physical education, technology and the list goes on. However, all students in a rural area must be equipped with these college ready skills. This practice would eliminate the need for remediation classes at the college level. Students and their parents are not making the appropriate class choices to insure they are college ready. We must make these choices for them. Small rural high schools cannot offer a large offering of curricular choices to students, but they can all offer this rigorous core curriculum. You never know when a person may choose to attend college after years of not needing or choosing to attend college. ESEA should support the efforts of this core curriculum such as the recently released common core standards and leave the rest of the curriculum choices to the local Board of Trustees.
3. IDEA and Title I funds are critical for school districts. These grants should remain formula driven and not be turned into competitive grants where small rural districts are at a disadvantage to compete for these funds. At-risk students live in all corners of the nation and funding for children of poverty or special needs should not be determined by how well a grant application was written. Increasing funding for IDEA and adding Title I funds specifically for high schools would assist rural districts in meeting the needs of our students in poverty and our low performing schools.
4. The Department of Education could offer more regionally located professional development opportunities in rural areas. This would provide better customer service for our students. Attending very expensive conferences in large cities shouldn't be the only offerings to see how model schools improve student achievement. Referring someone to a link on a website is not customer service. The development of personal relationships with the Department of Education, the State Department of Education

and the local districts would be most helpful and could be accomplished by face to face interactions.

5. The development of effective high school principals must be a priority. I believe the high school principal has the most difficult job in education today. They need quality professional development and support from the local district and from the state and federal levels. Professional development offered regionally by the Department of Education or in partnership with a local university is much needed. Providing real examples of education reform that increases student achievement that includes a plan for implementation, followed by on-site coaching during the implementation phase would be very effective in assisting principals with education reform at the high school level.
6. Moving to a customer service model versus a compliance model would be most helpful. Firing a principal and half of the staff of a 200 hundred student high school in rural America will not provide the change expected. In fact, that would be a tragedy in a small rural community.
7. Assist districts in developing partnerships with local stakeholders in educating our youth. Programs such as “Ready by 21” could be developed in most communities with the assistance of the federal government and could be funded as a part of ESEA. This would include educational agencies from preschool to graduate school. A collaborative model for educational agencies to work together for the common good is needed. It is too easy to point the finger at someone else for not doing their job. Joining them in the work to develop a better understanding of the barriers to success would actually benefit our students.

Educators are not afraid of accountability. We certainly aren't in Park 1. There does need to be a realization that there are too many students that aren't ready to attend school or do not receive any support outside of the school setting to become career or college ready.

Thank you again for offering me this opportunity to share my comments with you. I would answer any questions that you might have for me.