

Lifelong Education Opportunities

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U.S. Department of Education

Secretary of Education

Testimony

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on the importance of lifelong learning, an approach to education that I believe has become increasingly critical for both individual and national success in our ever-changing, technology-based, globally competitive economy.

Little more than a generation ago, a single skill or occupation could last a lifetime, comfortably supporting a worker through young adulthood, the family years, a college education for the children, and on into retirement. Things are different today, and more than any particular skill or body of knowledge, education must be about learning to learn, about gaining the skills to learn and adapt throughout a lifetime of change. Our schools and colleges, and the kinds of programs and services they provide, must reflect changes not only in the skills and knowledge that students need to obtain, but in the new ways in which today's and tomorrow's students are going to learn. This is what we are trying to encourage at the Department of Education, leveraging a relatively small Federal investment into creating a new kind of education system, one based on accountability, choice, and a continuum of opportunity stretching from early childhood to middle age and beyond.

#### READING: THE PREREQUISITE FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

No Child Left Behind has been President Bush's signature education reform initiative. It incorporates what I believe should be the core elements of any system of lifelong learning: expanded student and parental options and choice, a focus on what works rather than on what is the latest fad, clear accountability for results, and freedom for educators to use Federal funds for the programs and activities they believe are needed in their local schools, rather than on how people in Washington decide they should spend the money.

Better instruction in reading is at the heart of No Child Left Behind. The President recognized long before he came to Washington—with a little help from his wife, Laura—that reading was the place to start if we truly want to ensure that no American—child, teenager, or adult—is left behind by our education system.

Thanks to programs like Reading First, which draws on scientific research to help ensure that all children can read well by the end of the third grade, we are making progress in improving reading skills. But we have a long way to go. According to the National

Assessment of Educational Progress, more than one-third of all 4th-graders continued to read below the Basic level in 2003, while more than half of African-American and Hispanic students fell below that level.

By 8th grade, reading scores on the NAEP are better, with three-quarters of all students at or above the Basic level, but nearly half of African-American and Hispanic students continue to read below the Basic level. These numbers really hurt, because by the end of 8th-grade, students tend to find themselves at a crossroads, with one path leading to high school graduation and postsecondary education, and the other path—far too often—leading to growing frustration with school and ultimately to dropping out altogether. I don't think I have to remind the Members of this Committee what this latter path means for both lifelong learning and lifelong earnings.

In light of the NAEP data, it also should come as no surprise that a great many of those students who do graduate from high school need remedial classes in reading at the postsecondary level. For example, a recent RAND study noted that almost half of the students in the California State University system—which typically enrolls students graduating in the top third of their high school class—require remediation in English. And, of course, students who are unprepared for college-level work tend to graduate at lower rates than those who are prepared.

The message here is that it's very hard to overestimate the impact of reading skills—or the lack of those skills—on lifelong learning opportunities. That's why improving reading skills has been such a critical part of all of our major education initiatives, and why I hope the strong connection between reading and lifelong learning will be a key principle that Members take away from this hearing.

#### THE STRONG FOUNDATION OF NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

No Child Left Behind remains the linchpin of our educational improvement strategy, and the key foundation for ensuring that all Americans are prepared to take full advantage of lifelong learning opportunities. The law emphasizes the early grades; demands that all students, regardless of background, are on grade level in core academic subjects like reading, mathematics, and science; insists on annual testing to help parents, principals, and teachers identify weaknesses in time to do something about them; and ultimately will ensure that all students are proficient in reading and math and thus prepared for further education and training throughout their lives.

And we believe the law is beginning to work as intended. States and school districts are reporting high scores, achievement gaps are narrowing, more schools are making adequate yearly progress, and districts are focusing as never before on improvement strategies involving groups of students previously ignored and left behind. And when schools do not improve, students and their parents have new options, including transferring to a better-performing school or obtaining high-quality supplemental educational services.

I think we are justifiably proud of the work we are doing and the results we are getting as we continue to implement No Child Left Behind in concert with our State and local partners. And we plan to stay the course, as reflected in the President's request of a \$603 million increase for the core Title I Grants to Local Educational Agencies program for fiscal year 2006.

## A NEW FOCUS ON HIGH SCHOOL

At the same time, we recognize that change takes time, and while we are seeing progress in the early grades, our high schools are continuing to leave far too many students behind. This is clear from the high school graduation rate. According to one source, only 68 out of every 100 ninth-graders in public schools graduate on time with a regular high school diploma. American companies and universities currently spend an estimated \$16 billion on remedial education annually.

To a great extent, these data reflect the fact that high schools are too often doing the same thing that they have done for the last century. They are not, for instance, harnessing new technologies effectively to deliver instruction. Nor are they taking advantage of new ways to bring the highest-quality teachers, such as professionals who have up-to-date knowledge and experience, into our classrooms.

In response, President Bush has proposed a \$1.5 billion High School Initiative aimed at giving States, districts, and principals more flexible, effective tools for improving high schools than they have under the existing array of uncoordinated, narrow-purpose programs that the initiative would replace.

The Initiative includes two major components. The first is a High School Intervention program, which would give States, school districts, and schools the flexibility to support a wide range of locally determined reforms aimed at increasing student achievement, eliminating achievement gaps, and ensuring that every student graduates with a meaningful high school diploma. Schools would implement targeted interventions designed to meet the specific needs of at-risk students, which would be determined by individual performance plans based on 8th-grade assessment data and student interests. Interventions could include dropout prevention, integration of rigorous academic courses with vocational and technical training, and efforts to increase college awareness and preparation. They would focus, in particular, on the students who are most at risk of dropping out or leaving school without the skills and knowledge necessary for further education or employment.

The President also is asking for \$250 million for new High School Assessments to increase accountability for high school achievement and give principals and teachers new tools and data to guide instruction and improve student performance.

In addition to the High School Initiative, our 2006 budget request contains a set of complementary proposals targeting secondary education. These include a \$175 million

expansion of the new Striving Readers program to improve the skills of teenage students who are reading below grade level, a \$120 million Secondary Education Mathematics Initiative to train teachers to raise mathematics achievement for at-risk high school students, and funding to expand support for the Advanced Placement and State Scholars programs, which help strengthen high school curricula.

## EASING THE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE

Both the State Scholars and Advanced Placement (AP) proposals reinforce the idea of education as a continuum: our Enhanced Pell Grants for the State Scholars program would reward students for taking a rigorous high school curriculum by helping them pay for college, while increasing the availability of AP courses would make it possible for high school students not only to study and master college-level material, but also to get college credit for their efforts.

Similarly, our new Community College Access Grants program would provide \$125 million to support dual-enrollment programs under which high school students would earn both high school and postsecondary credit for taking college-level courses. The program also would encourage States to facilitate the transfer of community college credits to four-year institutions.

Each of these programs helps to ease the transition from high school to postsecondary education and training, both academically and financially. Our colleges, just like our elementary and secondary schools, need to meet the changing needs of their customers, the students. These days, many students do not fit the traditional mold of those who enter a two- or four-year college immediately out of high school and then work full-time toward a degree. They are, instead, folks who are already in the workforce. Many of them cannot take time off from work, and they need new ways of obtaining a higher education that fit in with all the demands on their time. Higher education programs that make effective use of technology are one way of doing that. We need to be taking a much closer look at these innovations as we move into the future.

## PAYING FOR COLLEGE AND JOB TRAINING

The high cost of college and other postsecondary education and training continues to be an obstacle to lifelong learning for many students, particularly for those from low-income families. Indeed, for too many secondary school students, doubts about their ability to pay for postsecondary education can be a strong disincentive to even bother staying in school and obtaining a high school diploma.

This is why President Bush has placed such a high priority on strengthening the Pell Grant program, which helps students from low-income families pay for postsecondary education and training. The President's 2006 budget proposal would raise the maximum Pell Grant award by \$500 over the next 5 years, from \$4,050 to \$4,550, while restoring the financial stability of the program by eliminating the cumulative Pell Grant funding shortfall. For new students who have completed a rigorous high school program of study,

our enhanced Pell Grants proposal would result in eligible students receiving an additional \$1,000. Thus, a low-income student could qualify for a total of \$5,050 next year and \$5,150 for his or her second year in college.

The President's proposal also would allow students attending 2- and 4-year degree-granting institutions to receive more than one Pell Grant in the same year, giving them more convenient and flexible options for completing their course requirements and obtaining their degrees.

In order to fund the extraordinary new investment the President has proposed for the Pell Grant program, over \$19 billion over the next 10 years, we had to take a hard look at the current student loan programs and identify savings. Our student loan reauthorization proposals include strategic reductions in subsidies to financial participants in the Federal Family Education Loan (FFEL) program that fully pay for our Pell Grant enhancements and for improvements in the loan programs, including higher loan limits for first- and second-year students, better repayment terms for all students, and expanded opportunities for distance education.

In addition, we are proposing a new program of Short-Term Training Loans, which, in fiscal year 2006, would support up to \$284 million in loans to an estimated 377,000 students, including dislocated, unemployed, transitioning, or older workers. This program, which would be administered jointly with the Department of Labor, would help workers and students acquire or upgrade job-related skills through short-term training programs that currently are ineligible for Federal student assistance.

## WORKFORCE INVESTMENT ACT PROGRAMS

A major piece of business currently before this Committee is the reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. The Department of Education administers programs covered by WIA in two important areas, Adult Education and Vocational Rehabilitation. The Administration fully supports the enactment of a WIA reauthorization bill that improves the quality, accessibility, and accountability of federally funded Adult Education programs and that continues our Vocational Rehabilitation programs.

The Department's Adult Education program and our reauthorization blueprint for that program are critical to any lifelong learning strategy because, while we believe the No Child Left Behind Act and our high school initiative will result in a much better education for current and future generations of school children, many current adults are out of school and lack the academic skills they need to succeed in the workforce. Some are immigrants who seek English language instruction in order to advance in their jobs and adapt successfully to life in America. States have reported improved results in Adult Education in recent years, but outcomes overall remain unacceptably low. For this reason, the Administration's blueprint for the reauthorization sets higher expectations for State performance and insists on greater State and local accountability for results, including consequences for States that do not meet their agreed-on adult education performance levels. Our proposal also promotes the development of State standards and

curriculum frameworks to help instructors become more effective in the classroom. And, in order to give adult learners a broader array of choices, we would expand the number of workplace literacy programs, improve the capacity of community- and faith-based organizations to provide adult education, and promote greater use of technology to deliver services.

In the case of the Vocational Rehabilitation programs authorized under the Rehabilitation Act, our focus is on improving employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities, particularly those with the most significant disabilities. While many individuals with disabilities are obtaining jobs and remaining employed, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities is still unacceptably high. Not only are people with disabilities much less likely to be employed than people without disabilities, but the more severe the disability, the less likely a person is to be employed. Moreover, there is wide variation among the States on performance, measured against the evaluation standards and indicators used by the Department in monitoring the States. Better tools are needed by the Department to strengthen accountability for improved results. Finally, an important component of the President's proposal for WIA reauthorization is the WIA Plus Consolidated State Grant (WIA Plus) program. In addition to the base consolidation of four Department of Labor programs, this proposal provides Governors with the option to consolidate up to five additional Federal employment and training funding streams, including Adult Education and Vocational Rehabilitation. Through increased flexibility and accountability, this proposal would: improve the employment outcomes of individuals served through the consolidated program; serve more individuals; improve access to a full array of educational and job training, employment, and supportive services available from all funding streams; and ensure a connection to a workforce investment system that is directly linked to and accessed by employers.

## CONCLUSION

Lifelong learning is no longer an option, but a necessity, both for individual success and for our continued national economic prosperity. President Bush, with the help of the Congress, has laid the foundation for a comprehensive Federal approach to both preparing our citizens for a lifetime of learning and encouraging our education system to continuously make available opportunities for education and training, from early childhood through middle age and even the retirement years. We look forward to working with the Members of this Committee to help build on that foundation.

Thank you, and I will be happy to take any questions you may have.