Testimony to the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Children
and Families
By
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Good morning and thank you for inviting me to testify before this subcommittee. I join many others today in recognizing and thanking Chairman Chris Dodd for your outstanding contributions to this committee and to the lives of so many children and families across the country. Thank you.

I am Michael Casserly, Executive Director of the Council of the Great City Schools, the nation's primary coalition of large urban school systems.

Our 65 member urban school districts, which comprise less than one percent of the nation's 15,000 school systems, enroll some 30 percent of the country's students of color, English learners, and poor students.

Mr. Chairman, we have seen enormous progress in the education of our nation's children over the decades you have served on this important panel.

In addition to the landmark Family and Medical Leave Act and expansions to the critically important Headstart program, you have played a critical role in the passage of the Education of All Handicapped Act and its successor IDEA; the Eisenhower Math and Science program; the Magnet School Program; untold numbers of reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act; the overhaul of the Bilingual Education Act, and student loan expansions. You have also been a strong proponent of early childhood education, state school finance equity, and afterschool programming. And you were one of the first legislators to stand with us in calling for national math and science standards in education.

All of this legislation has played an important role in expanding opportunities for historically underserved populations and in boosting student achievement. Nowhere is this more evident than in the nation's major urban public schools.

The number of large-city students reading at the proficient level or better on NAEP has increased by 35 percent among fourth graders since 2002. And, the number of fourth graders scoring below the basic level dropped by 18 percent between 2002 and 2009.

In addition, the reading gap between the large cities and the nation narrowed by one-third between 2002 and 2009. We are now just ten scale score points away from national averages at both 4th and 8th grade levels. We are not only improving; we are catching up.

The gains are even more substantial in math. In fact, the number of large central city students scoring at the proficient level or better on math has <u>increased</u> by 45 percent among fourth graders

and 50 percent among eighth graders since 2003. And we have decreased the number of urban students scoring below basic levels by 24 percent.

Between 2003 and 2009, our large central city schools have narrowed the gap in math with the nation by 20 percent in both fourth and eighth grades.

Congress and this committee, in particular, should feel proud of the work it has done over many years, because it set the stage for these academic gains. It has been especially effective in articulating issues and defining priorities, and then building a legislative infrastructure around those priorities, including an emphasis on the instruction of poor children, students with disabilities, and English learners.

Congress has also been effective in targeting its scarce resources on school districts and schools with the largest concentrations of need. This targeting of funds, particularly under Title I, Title II, and Title III of ESEA, are critical to the ability of struggling schools to overcome the effects of poverty and other barriers.

The nation's urban schools have benefitted from this targeting and have used these dollars to help spur the gains I just described. The federal government's continued support for the concentration of limited dollars on high-need urban and rural communities is one of the wisest investments it can make.

The federal government's work to ensure civil rights and to conduct research on what works in elementary and secondary education has also been important, although clearly much more needs to be done.

Finally, Congress's efforts to build more accountability for results into public education have also been important, although they were hampered by the fact that not everyone was being held accountable to the same standards—something that the new common core should solve in time.

There is still considerably more work to be done, however, even in an era when the public is rethinking the federal role in education.

Research, in particular, needs to be expanded to better support school systems that are facing special challenges they are not necessarily able to solve by themselves, including new research on adolescent literacy, English acquisition, instructional interventions, reading comprehension, and teacher quality and incentives—to name but a few.

We know surprisingly little, for instance, about why some teachers are more effective instructionally than others. Nor do we have a firm grip on how to boost the effectiveness of teachers after their fifth year or so in the classroom.

Considerable research is also needed on effective instructional strategies to boost reading comprehension, particularly with students in grades 4-8. Nationwide, NAEP reading scores in the eighth grade have been surprisingly flat for many years, and educators have been left without much direction about what to do about it.

There are also national educational priorities that Congress should consider as it moves forward. Despite our rhetorical attention to science, for example, the nation's efforts to address our deficiencies in this area continue to lack coherence, definition, and leadership. Congress could change that.

At one point, Congress made dropout prevention a legislative priority, but abandoned the program after considerable squabbling about how it was structured. The nation, however, continues to lose too many young people before they can attain a high school diploma, much to their economic and social detriment and the nation's.

During the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind, Congress should consider an effort that focuses exclusively on dropout prevention, research, and demonstration—along with secondary school reform.

The research is also quite clear on the benefits of early childhood education, but we can't seem to muster the public will to create a system—public and private—that ensures that all children who need services can receive them.

Finally, I want to call your attention to a report that my organization released last week--"A Call for Change: The Social and Educational Factors Contributing to the Outcomes of Black Males in Urban Schools."

It looks at the academic well-being and college and career readiness of America's African American male youth. And the results are not anything we should be proud of as a nation.

On almost every indicator we looked at—spanning infant mortality to career advancement—our Black male young people were coming up on the short end, despite the fact that many city school systems--like Atlanta, Boston, New York, Baltimore, and others--were showing substantial progress.

We found that Black children were over twice as likely to live in a household where no parent has year-round, full-time employment.
Black children are three times more likely to be raised in a family living in poverty than white children.

Black male fourth graders nationwide were over three times less likely to read and do math at proficient levels than white males nationwide.

Black males are about twice as likely to drop out of school; are less likely to take advanced placement exams; and score on average over 100 points lower than white males on SAT college-entrance exams.

If these students make it into postsecondary education, they are far less likely to graduate in four, five, or six years than white males.

At the end of this progression—when the cycle begins anew—are unemployment rates among African American males that are twice as high as for white males, and imprisonment rates that are 6.5 times higher for Black males than for white males.

Congress may not be able to solve the complicated issues surrounding this situation, but it is hard to believe that additional thinking and investment in this issue and the problem of high school dropouts would not pay enormous dividends for the nation in both the short and long term.

That America squanders so much of its human talent does not bode well for the nation's ability to maintain its global pre-eminence economically, financially, politically, or morally.

Congress should be very proud of the efforts it has made over the decades to improve the access to and the quality of public education in this nation. But we still have so much more to do.

Thank you and I'd be happy to take your questions.