Written Testimony to the
Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
"ESEA Reauthorization: Graduating America: Adolescent Literacy"
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Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to speak about a large and rapidly growing group of students in our nation's schools who are frequently misunderstood, inappropriately taught, or neglected altogether.

My purpose is to speak about the millions of adolescents whose literacy skills are so low that they cannot make sense of their classroom texts, frequently fail to graduate from high school, and are unsuccessful in transitioning into careers or postsecondary education. Specifically, I will address issues related to adolescent literacy, including (a) the nature and scope of the problem; (b) why literacy instruction is essential in middle and high schools; (c) how improving adolescent literacy performance is foundational to turning around low-performing secondary schools, (d) evidence that well-conceptualized and soundly implemented educational programs in and outside of schools can turn the performance of these students around – it is *not* too late to act; and (e) policy recommendations that would serve as the cornerstones of a sound strategy for dramatically changing the academic achievement for struggling adolescent readers and writers.

The term "crisis" is typically defined as a threat or perceived threat to an organization's high priority goals. The term is often used to describe social challenges that our nation faces. Frequent and inappropriate use of the term can cheapen its meaning. However, when describing the "literacy health" of many adolescents in our country, the term "crisis" is not hyperbole; it is a very accurate characterization of the realities with which we must come to grips when we consider the fact that our schools must produce graduates capable of successfully competing, and leading, in the global arena. If this crisis is not addressed in the next reauthorization of ESEA, the futures of millions of today's struggling adolescent learners will be foreclosed and our nation's economy and our nation as a whole will be weakened as will the fabric of the families and communities that will become the homes to these undereducated and underprepared individuals.

The Nature and Scope of the Problem

As little as 10 years ago, educators and policy makers had very little knowledge about what constituted the adolescent literacy problem. Limited information was available in the professional literature, and even less research had been completed on the characteristics of struggling adolescent readers and writers.

That landscape has changed somewhat in the last decade. Increased attention from private foundations (e.g., the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Gates Foundation, the Stupski Foundation) and even some federal agencies has begun to shed light on the magnitude of the problem.

Among the things we have learned are the following:

- Three out of 10 high school students do not graduate on time, and nearly 50% of students of color do not graduate on time (Gewertz, 2009).

- Six million out of 22 million of America's middle and high school students are struggling readers.

- According to the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress), 70% of middle and high school students read "below proficiency" – in other words, fewer than a third of adolescents have the literacy skills they need to succeed in school or beyond.

- Only one out of four 12-grade students is a proficient writer (Salahu-Din, Persky, & Miller, 2008).

- Forty percent of high school graduates lack the literacy skills employers seek (National Governors Association, 2005).

- Lack of basic skills by young adults costs universities and businesses as much as $16 billion annually (Greene, 2000).

- One out of every five college freshmen must take a remedial reading course (SREB, 2009).

- Nearly one third of high school graduates are not ready for college-level English composition courses (ACT, 2005).

- Over half of adults scoring at the lowest literacy levels are dropouts (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007).

Collectively, these findings resoundingly underscore the fact that insufficient literacy attainment negatively impacts students' opportunities for success in the classroom, leading to a higher likelihood of dropping out of school, as well as markedly reduced earnings as adults. There is no longer the same call for low-skill, high-wage jobs that there was in the past. In fact, the 25 fastest growing professions have far-greater-than-average literacy demands, while the fastest-declining professions have lower-than-average literacy demands. About 45% of all job growth between 2004 and 2014 will require high-level literacy skills.

Why Quality Literacy Instruction Is Essential in Middle and High School

In recent years, America's educational system has been successful in raising the reading and writing scores of younger children. For example, considerable evidence indicates that the federal investment in Reading First (and its predecessor, Reading Excellence) yielded positive reading achievement outcomes. Specifically, the NAEP reading scores for fourth graders have been improving since 2002, and the racial achievement gaps have, in many instances, been narrowed. These achievement gains are the largest in reading for fourth-grade students in 33 years and demonstrate that targeted federal investments that require schools to use evidence-based methods can produce significant growth in student performance.

Despite the success experienced with early literacy initiatives, the NAEP data tell an entirely different story for middle and high school students. The literacy performance for 13- and 17-year-olds has remained flat for the last 37 years. Hence, some of the encouraging early gains appear to dissipate as students move into the secondary grades.

The most significant instructional and policy question is whether these losses in achievement can be prevented. Fortunately, compelling evidence is accumulating showing that gains made in early elementary school can provide a solid foundation upon which to build additional success when students reach secondary schools. Two examples of successful programs will be showcased in the following section. Before looking at these cases, however, it's important to understand why early investments in literacy education alone are not sufficient to guarantee strong literacy performance when students reach adolescence.

The literacy skills that students acquire in early elementary grades lay an essential foundation for later academic success, *but they are not sufficient in and of themselves.* The main reason is the fact that the demands of the curriculum change dramatically as students move into middle school and progress through high school, including the volume, abstractness, and complexity of text materials they must navigate. As demands change, so must a student's skill repertoire. Compared to the curriculum demands encountered in the elementary grades, starting in middle school, students are expected to respond to assignments that (a) are much longer and more complex at the word, sentence, and structural levels; (b) present greater conceptual challenges that affect reading fluency; (c) contain detailed graphics that often do not stand on their own; and (d) require an ability to synthesize information. On top of those factors, each content area (e.g., history, science, math, literature) often requires students to understand and use different types of strategies and approaches.

Because of the rapidly changing and dramatically different curriculum demands in the later grades, adolescents must acquire additional literacy skills if they are to survive, let alone thrive, in secondary school. While some students can independently make the necessary adaptations to respond to this changed landscape, many adolescents cannot – especially those who struggled in learning to read and write in the first place. These students need explicit, scaffolded, coordinated instruction to help

them acquire a set of strategies for dealing with the new literacy demands they encounter in middle and high school.

It is important to note that in many low-performing secondary schools, a large percentage of the struggling reader group (as many as 80%) have not acquired the necessary foundational word-level skills, including phonics, decoding, word identification, and fluency. Therefore, these students must receive intensive, explicit instruction to help ensure they master these essential foundational skills, as well as instruction in vocabulary and comprehension strategies. In other words, before these students can be taught the more sophisticated literacy skills described above, they must acquire the basic word recognition, decoding, and fluency skills that they should have learned during their elementary grades. The amount of time that must be devoted to intensive literacy instruction in middle and senior high school for these students is daunting. However, in the absence of doing so, the life trajectory for these students is dismal in light of the compelling correlations between literacy competence and employment, health, remaining clear of problems with legal authorities, and family stability.

Transforming Low-Performing Secondary Schools by Improving Literacy Attainment

If a large number of adolescents in a secondary school are performing poorly in reading and writing, in all likelihood, the school is a low-performing school. In other words, there is a direct and unmistakable correlation between the literacy performance of students within a school and how highly a school is ranked. This means that if our country wants to turn around its low-performing schools, it must make literacy improvement a central part of its overall school improvement strategy.

Foundational to improving any valued educational metric (e.g., high performance on state assessments, reduced dropout rates, successful transitioning to and success in careers and postsecondary education) is ensuring that students are highly proficient in the literacy skills that enable them to deal with rigorous course requirements in school and challenging career and postsecondary experiences. If students cannot read and write with relative ease, they will fail, and their schools will be among the lowest performing. *Schools will only improve as quickly as literacy proficiency improves.*

Transforming America's lowest performing middle and secondary high schools into productive learning environments in which students and teachers thrive requires a an aggressive, comprehensive, approach that targets instructional, personnel, and infrastructure factors. Some of these factors are highlighted below.

School leaders make instruction a top priority. School and departmental leaders are relentless in their pursuit of meeting important learning goals for all students. Creating conditions that are favorable for instruction and learning is a top priority and toward that end, leaders facilitate the development and use of protocols for observing, describing, and analyzing practice (Elmore, 2005).

School culture is centered on student learning. Student learning is of paramount importance for all educators and each assumes a deep sense of responsibility and ownership for student growth. A school environment that is encouraging, inviting, and personalized is the norm. Staff demonstrate a sense of collective efficacy. That is, they

believe that as a whole, they can organize and execute actions necessary to have a positive effect on students. In addition, there is a strong bond of trust between colleagues, parents, and students (Hoy, Tarter, & Woolfolk, 2006).

Instructional practices are evidence-based. Recommendations recently released by the Institute of Education Sciences (Kamil et al., 2008) and the Center for Instruction (Torgesen et al., 2007) about evidence-based instructional practices are the standard against which current practice is evaluated and improvement goals are set. Instructional practices seen in high frequency across classes include explicit vocabulary instruction; direct, explicit comprehension strategy instruction; guided discussion to determine the meaning of text; and instruction in essential content knowledge and concepts with scaffolded supports.

Multi-tiered instructional supports are in place. Because some students require more intensive and explicit instruction of content and skills, schools provide scaffolded instructional supports to enable these students to build the skills that they will need to independently thrive in content classes (Ehren, Deshler, & Graner, in press). That is, Instructional arrangements of increased intensity are made available to students, differentiated to address individual student needs. This instructional model is referred to as a multi-tier system of supports (MTSS), and where it is implemented with fidelity, failure rates are reduced.

Literacy instruction is integrated in all classes. Content teachers from core classes (math, science, language arts, social studies) know that for students to understand and master critical course content, they must be taught how to navigate discipline-specific content materials (Lee & Spratley, 2010). Therefore, teachers provide a "reading apprenticeship" in which they give students multiple models of how to use high-leverage learning strategies to process discipline-specific text materials and focus classroom talk on how to make sense of discipline-specific text materials (e.g., Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009). In addition, the strategies that struggling readers learn in supplemental reading classes are reinforced in content classes so students are able to transfer what they have learned to other classes throughout their day.

Instructional decisions are driven by student, classroom, and school data. The power of data in informing instruction at the student and classroom level is widely recognized as essential for student success (Learning Point Associates, 2006). Data systems are implemented and continually refined to be more responsive to teachers and administrators as they work to improve instructional impacts. In addition to data on how students are responding to instruction, highly effective schools collect actionable data to help them gauge how fully and efficiently they are using available resources (e.g., are all slots in the supplemental reading classes being fully utilized), what factors operate within a school that "impede" progress toward specified goals, and how closely literacy services within a school are aligned with the reading and writing profiles of students. For example, data collected during school-wide professional development can provide valuable feedback relative to the speed of implementation of a new instructional practice, the fidelity of implementation, and the sustainability rate over time. These and other measures help sharpen the focus of work on improving

literacy outcomes and, therefore, are used by the school's Literacy Leadership Team to drive school-wide literacy improvement.

Continual learning for all staff is a high priority. Data-driven, ongoing, job-embedded professional development along with instructional coaching supports is made available to all teachers and administrators (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009). When applicable, the content of professional development sessions are evidence-based. In addition, accountability systems are in place to ensure that application and follow-up coaching is provided to improve the probability of implementation. As part of these initiatives, school leaders receive professional development on literacy interventions, and the knowledge that they gain will form the basis of expectations they will set and supports they will provide to their teachers.

Student transitions from middle school to high school are carefully planned. Success in high school is greatly influenced by how successfully students transition into and succeed during their ninth-grade year (Roderick, 2006). Hence, emphasis is placed on ensuring that students are prepared socially and academically to transition from middle school into high school. Supports (e.g., counseling, mentoring) are in place to catch and prevent potential failure. Such actions are aimed at the ninth-grade year because of the high correlation between setbacks during the ninth grade and students eventually dropping out of school.

Positive behavioral supports are in place to ensure high productivity. High-quality instruction and learning occur in school environments that are orderly and where teachers and student feel safe to interact and to freely participate in the learning process. Productive learning environments are built, fostered, and maintained by implementing school-wide disciplinary practices. School-wide positive behavioral supports provide schools with an operational framework for achieving these outcomes (www.pbis.org).

It's Not too Late to Improve Outcomes for Struggling Adolescents: Two Success Stories

All too frequently, educators and policy makers incorrectly conclude that nothing can be done to change the trajectory that struggling adolescent learners are on. In essence, they write off tens of thousands of students as educational casualties. Such a position is not only morally wrong; it flies in the face of a mounting body of evidence that underscores the fact that well-designed instructional programs for struggling adolescent learners in middle and high school can bring about dramatic changes in literacy attainment.

The following two examples illustrate this claim. They have been chosen to show some of the exciting results that can happen in individual classrooms, and across entire schools, in terms of improving the literacy performance of struggling adolescent learners.

Example 1: Midwest Middle School – Dubuque, IA

The Problem: A group of sixth-grade students with learning disabilities who were reading two to three years behind grade level were showing no signs of progress from the beginning of the school year in August to November.

Toward a Solution: Because instructional time was limited, a decision was made to change the type of reading instruction these students were receiving. An evidence-based program (*Fusion Reading)* designed by researchers at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning was adopted. This program taught students a targeted number of high-leverage learning strategies to improve their ability to decode difficult words, read fluently, master discipline-specific vocabulary, and comprehend complex reading assignments. The teacher received appropriate professional development and follow-up coaching. Students received 60 minutes of instruction daily. The program was taught with high fidelity.

The Results: Six months after instruction began, all students showed growth on their Measures of Academic Progress scores and 83% of them met their target growth goal. The gains that they made were statistically significant (.004) with large effect size gains (1.71). Overall, these students are approaching the mean score range for the norm group. This means that the achievement gap for reading is closing in a dramatic fashion. With the new skills these students are acquiring, they will be able to enroll in rigorous classes because they can independently navigate and cope with the demands of their reading assignments.

Example 2: J.E.B. Stuart High School – Falls Church, VA

The Problem: In the early 2000s, J.E.B. Stuart High School was labeled a "failing school" because of its poor academic record. The passing rates on the state assessment were as follows: Reading – 64%, Algebra I – 32%, Chemistry – 44%, and History – 27%. Stuart High has an enrollment of 1,500 students. The student body has a 30% mobility rate, 70% of its students were born outside of the United States, 25% are English Language Learners, 13% have disabilities, 86% are from minority backgrounds, and 54 % qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

Toward a Solution: After looking at the poor record of student achievement, all of the educators at Stuart High School knew that drastic changes had to occur to give their students a chance to graduate and be college or career ready. High expectations were set, and a host of measures were put in place to change the culture and prevailing practices within the school, including a heavy emphasis on explicit vocabulary and comprehension instruction, ongoing discussions related to text, intensive strategic tutoring, multi-tiered interventions, extended learning time, heavy use of technology, and shared leadership. A core belief of the entire staff was that reading proficiency of every student was essential if they were to benefit fully from their high school education and become career and/or college

ready. Hence, all teachers and administrators at Stuart High proudly say that they spell hope "R-E-A-D."

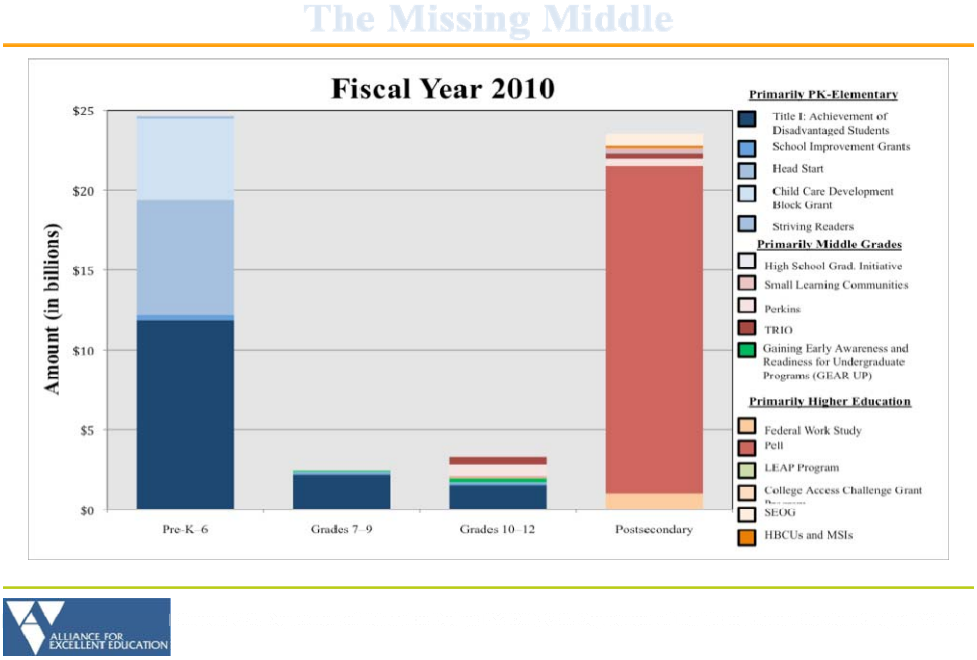
The Results: Over a five-year period, dramatic improvement was seen on virtually every indicator, each directly tied to the significant improvement in the core literacy skills of the student body. Specifically, on the state assessments, the pass rates became as follows: Reading – 94%, Algebra I – 98%, Chemistry – 88%, and History – 96%. The International Baccalaureate (IB) enrollment increased from 18 to 48%, and the school exceeded the international average pass rate. Student performance never dropped below 80%. In other words, a school with high poverty, high diversity, 70% second language, and a 30% mobility rate outperformed elite private schools on the IB examinations.

Federal Policy Recommendations

Reauthorization of ESEA represents an opportunity to make a long overdue course correction in the proportion of federal investments that have historically gone to adolescents in middle and high school settings. As shown in Figure 1, federal education policy has long overlooked grades 7-12. As illustrated, early investments and postsecondary investments each total about $25 billion annually. However, investments made to bolster the educational achievement of adolescents in middle and secondary schools are each under $4 billion annually. The Alliance for Excellent Education refers to this as "the missing middle" (Miller, 2009)

Investments in America's youngest children should continue to be a high priority as ESEA is reauthorized. But these investments should not be made at the expense of the needs of older children. An econometric model developed by Nobel Laureate James Heckman (an economist from the University of Chicago) demonstrates that with no investments at all, high-risk children will attain a graduation rate of 41%. With early investments alone, the graduation rate rises to 66%. However, when investments are made from early childhood through adolescence, the predicted graduation rate rises to 91%!

Figure 1.



Large numbers of our country's adolescents are on a trajectory that is leading them to dropping out of school and/or entering the work force grossly ill prepared to obtain and keep employment that will support them and their families. Traveling on this trajectory will greatly enhance their probability of ending up in jail, divorcing, and not being a contributing member of their community. While the adolescents on this trajectory differ in many ways, most of them have one thing in common: *they lack the necessary literacy skills to successfully navigate the complex world in which they find themselves.* One of the primary roles of public policy is to put in place programs and structures that will address problems that disadvantage invidual citizens and as well as our nation as a whole. Public policy intervention is needed to reverse the poor literacy performance evidenced by many adolescents. The lives of these students and the economic vitality of our country will be the benficiaries.

The following recommendations are designed to dramatically alter the path that too many of our struggling adolescent learners are on.

Recommendation #1: Increase funding for middle and high schools. The neglect of financial support for students in grades 7-12, compared to the earlier grades, that currently and historically has existed, must be reversed immediately. Without such investments, serious progress in turning around low-performing secondary schools, dramatically reducing the current dropout rate, and making more students career and college ready will not occur.

Recommendation #2: Support current legislative initiatives related to adolescent achievement. Three bills currently before the Congress would favorably impact adolescent academic performance. The support of each would create a context

conducive to significantly moving the needle on the adolescent literacy problem. First, the conceptual framework embodied within the "Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation Act" or LEARN Act is sound and deserves strong support. The preK through 12 comprehensive nature of this proposed act affords schools the opportunity to put in place a literacy plan that is coordinated and integrated across all grade levels. As such, it recognizes that literacy instruction is, indeed, necessary at all age levels, not just the earlier ones.

Second, the Graduation Promise Act would support state-led systems for high school accountability and improvement. States and school districts would identify low-performing high schools, and a rigorous diagnostic analysis would be used to identify and tailor research-based reforms to turn them around.

Third, the Success in the Middle Act is designed to prevent students from becoming dropout statistics through the use of early warning systems that identify at-risk students and offer them support so they continue in school and graduate.

Therefore, it is imperative that all three bills be passed.

Recommendation #3: Support the development and adoption of state-led common standards that embed literacy standards throughout the content areas. Our ability to prepare students to succeed in the marketplace is directly dependent on their ability to meet a set of uniformly high standards. Currently, there is so much variation across state standards that it is impossible to align them to college and career readiness benchmarks. State-led common standards in the core academic areas will result in setting one high bar to ensure that students have sufficient literacy skills to be ready for college and careers. To reach this goal, it is essential that standards within each of the academic disciplines include specific literacy competencies that students must meet.

Recommendation #4: Encourage states to develop a comprehensive literacy policy. To accelerate the rate at which schools embrace and seriously implement measures to improve adolescent literacy outcomes, each state's education agency must develop a detailed plan to work with districts to help them implement state policies relative to adolescent literacy and then monitor districts' progress. Among other things, states should identify the reading skills students need in order to improve reading achievement and to meet state standards in key academic subjects through high school.

Recommendation #5: Invest in professional development in literacy instruction for current and prospective teachers and administrators and encourage states to revise certification and licensure standards. Of all of the factors that contribute to postive student outcomes, the competence of the teachers who teach students is most important. That is, student behavior will change only to the degree that teachers possess the essential instructional competencies to enable their learning. Discipline-specific teachers must be prepared to integrate literacy instruction into their content instruction. Similarly, reading and writing specialists must demonstrate competencies in adolescent language and knowledge of explicit, intensive instructional pedagogies and supplemental teaching methods. Finally, school administrators must be prepared to lead schoolwide literacy improvement efforts and create the kinds of instructional conditions that promote literacy attainment.

Recommendation #6: Invest in ongoing research and evaluation. In order to close the large achievement gap that exists for struggling adolescent learners and given the shortage of time available to teach them, teachers need evidence-based instrucational practices that are more powerful and efficienct than the ones currently available. Collectively, the existing research base on adolescent literacy is relatively scant, significantly hindering the headway that needs to be made with struggling adolescent learners.

A sampling of the types of research questions that must be answered include (a) What are the best strategies and/or combination of strategies to use with adolescents demonstating various learning profiles? (b) How should instruction be designed to meet the unique needs of adolescents with disabilities and English Language Learners? (c) How can teacher preparation and professional development programs be reconfigured so secondary-level teachers can efficiently acquire the necessary competencies to infuse literacy instruction into their classes? and (d) What are the unique issues confronting low-performing rural secondary schools versus low-performing urban schools and what turnaround strategies work best in each setting?

While some investments have been made through IES and NICHD to support research on adolescent learners, these investments have been infinitesimally small compared to the investments these agencies make in younger children. Thus, few of the proposals submitted to these agencies in adolescent literacy end up being funded. Strategies for engaging larger numbers of researchers to conduct resaerch in adolescent literacy need to be identified and implemented.

Conclusion

The dismal literacy attainment of so many of our country's adolescents underscores how critical it is that the newly reauthorized ESEA include measures to address this problem. Education policy that focuses on improving the quality of instruction that takes place in our nation's classroom can have the most immediate, significant and long-lasting impact on student outcomes. The needle will move on adolescent literacy performance when policies are enacted that call for the use of instructional practices that are grounded in sound research. Keeping this focus in mind will provide a basis for all policy recommendations that follow:

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