Oral Testimony of
Tony Habit, Ed.D.
President, North Carolina New Schools Project

Before
The Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
United States Senate

Hearing: "ESEA Reauthorization: Improving America's Secondary Schools"

May 4, 2010

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Enzi and members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to testify today. I am pleased to be with you to consider the urgency for change in our nation's secondary schools. My name is Tony Habit, and I am president of the North Carolina New Schools Project.

I want to make special mention of Senators Burr and Hagan who serve on this committee; we are especially proud of their leadership on behalf of all North Carolinians.

We are fortunate to have leaders in our state who appreciate both the urgency for change and the magnitude of the change that must occur. Our governor, Beverly Perdue, continues to champion innovation in North Carolina's secondary schools with an education agenda that sets a paramount goal of raising the state's graduation rate and ensuring that graduates are fully prepared for college, career and life. Even as North Carolina faces another year of serious fiscal challenge, Governor Perdue's proposed budget calls for continued investments to improve educational outcomes as an essential strategy to advance the state's future workforce.

The North Carolina General Assembly shares this commitment. In 2009 they enacted legislation in 2009 to establish the JOBS Commission—Joining Our Businesses and Schools—that is co-chaired by Lt. Governor Walter Dalton and Representative Rick Glazier. The Commission is tasked with recommending the next phase of secondary school innovation with a particular emphasis on economic development.

We have also benefited from the generous support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

And, by many traditional measures, North Carolina is fortunate to have high schools that in relative terms have succeeded over the last century in moving from institutions that served very few to ones that strive to serve all students. For example, North Carolina is

ranked first in the country in the percentage of high school students taking advanced math courses at 80 percent.[1]

At the same time, our state has felt acute pain from dramatic economic disruption. In the first half of the last decade, for example, North Carolina lost nearly one-quarter of its manufacturing jobs.

There is strong evidence as well that our most recent high graduates are under-prepared for the demands they are facing in the "real world." In a poll commissioned by our organization, half of North Carolina high school graduates in college reported gaps in their preparation for college. One out of four report that they have enrolled in remedial—non-credit bearing—courses in college.

In addition, far too many high school students never reach graduation. North Carolina's cohort graduation rate in 2009 was 72 percent of the students who entered 9th grade in 2005. For African-American students, the graduation rate was only 63 percent.

Our organization, the North Carolina New Schools Project, is an independent, not-for-profit corporation that serves at the nexus of the leadership of Governor Perdue and our State Board of Education, public and private colleges and universities and the private sector.

The New Schools Project was established to accelerate the pace of innovation in our state and to ensure that all students have access to high-quality schools that will prepare them fully for college, work and life.

I want to update you on our progress, provide data about the performance of innovative new schools and note a few of our strategies going forward.

Today we have partnered with local school districts to create 106 innovative new secondary schools across our state. Two thirds of the schools are early college high schools. Early colleges are typically located on the campus of a college or university and students are challenged and supported to earn both their high school diploma and up to two years of college credit—at no cost. Students enrolled in early college typically are underserved in traditional schools – for many they'll be the first in their family to attend college and even the first to earn a high school diploma.

That's what is remarkable about the success of these schools.

We are also engaged in the creation of 36 schools that are based on the campus of conventional high schools in which one or more small, autonomous school are created within the same facility.

[1] National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2008). *Measuring Up 2008*. Available at http://measuringup.highereducation.org/default.cfm.

I believe that the results being achieved by North Carolina's innovative schools are persuasive evidence that secondary schools can be transformed into places of powerful teaching and learning where truly all students graduate ready for college and careers.

For example, a recent independent study of early college in North Carolina found that these schools are succeeding in erasing the achievement gap.

- By the end of 9th grade, little or no gap separated the performance of non-minority students from under-represented minorities in the core subjects of English I and Algebra I. Gaps of 10 points or more were measured for similar students attending traditional schools.

- Overall, the study's first-year analysis found that by the end of 9th grade, 83 percent of early college students had successfully completed Algebra I, compared to 67 percent of similar students attending other schools.

Early college is changing the live of students.

For redesigned high schools, which face greater challenges in improving student outcomes:

- Nearly three quarters of the redesign high schools with senior classes in 2008-09 (17 of 23 schools) achieved graduation rates outpacing those of comparison schools in their districts with similar student demographics.

- Seventeen of the schools also had graduation rates above 80 percent, with eight of the 17 with rates of at least 85 percent, compared to North Carolina's overall graduation rate of 72 percent for the class of 2009.

Lessons Learned on the Road to Meaningful Change

The achievements of hard-working teachers and administrators in these schools result from the New Schools Project's comprehensive approach to reform. Each partner school is expected to adopt our five core Design Principles—attributes that are associated with effective schools across the country. Teachers and administrators also participate in a systemic approach to professional development that transforms the way teachers teach and students learn. Historically professional development in schools has been fragmented and unaligned, with uneven impact on teaching and learning.

Along the way we've learned a few things.

Changing Beliefs:

First, the greatest single barrier to school success is the beliefs among adults in the school. Low expectations are a cancer that can weaken a school enough to make significant changes in teaching impossible. The beliefs of adults lead to tracking students according to perceptions of their capabilities beyond high school. Teachers must develop the mindset and skills – with ample support – to educate all students at a high level.

Setting College as the Goal:

The overarching goal of North Carolina's innovative high schools is to ensure that every student graduates college-ready. First, we expect students to meet the admission requirements of the University of North Carolina system. Second, we expect them to earn college credit before finishing high school.

This college-ready imperative is intentionally provocative. It forces faculty to unite and collaborate. The small size of our schools allows teachers to meet the academic needs of students in ways that a 2,000-student high school cannot.

Managing for Significant Change:

Changing the roles of adults in schools often causes conflict and undermines the school-change process – if not derailing it altogether. Most schools and districts lack the expertise or organization to manage change and innovation.

Further, since communities and educators must together embrace the need for change, the absence of resources and expertise means that well-intentioned efforts can be undermined by relatively few, well-organized citizens or disgruntled educators.

The New Schools Project supports the change process while also building the knowledge and skill within schools and districts to become change managers themselves.

Rethinking Leadership:

Finally, a new generation of student-focused schools calls for a new model for school leadership. Too often the principal in a traditional high school is a building manager first and an educator second. Schools that place teaching and learning above all else are led by principals who keep an unrelenting focus on high quality teaching and learning.

New, proactive initiatives to identify, recruit, place and support principals to lead schools are required.

Strategies Going Forward: Aligning Innovation with Economic Development

Our pressing priority is scaling the success of innovation across districts and regions. One strategy is to link innovation with economic and workforce development.

In cooperation with government, the private sector, higher education and others, we are developing ways to connect new schools to promising growth sectors of the economy with high-wage, high skill jobs. This emphasis includes the development of networks of STEM—science, technology, engineering and mathematics—focused secondary schools, the incorporation of one-to-one computing and rethinking the role of career and technical education in a way that help all students become both college AND career ready.

We think that achieving cost-effective, scalable solutions in secondary school innovation demands greater collaboration among schools that share a similar focus. New Schools is creating groups of schools with shared themes keyed to North Carolina's economy such as biotechnology, health and life sciences, aerospace and energy. Each of these schools will incorporate engineering and technology to achieve mastery of science, mathematics and the skills essential in the innovation economy.

For example, Duke Medical Center will soon host a secondary school focused on health and life sciences and that also incorporates engineering. An agricultural research center in a poor, rural region of the state will soon host a new school focused on biotechnology and agribusiness. NC State University will soon host an early college themed around engineering and sustainable energy. In each of these examples, the schools will be part of a network of similarly themed schools, and each will have strong ties to the private sector in the development of academic content.

These clusters of STEM schools also will incorporate one-to-one computing and integrate core academic courses with courses aimed at work readiness.

The North Carolina New Schools Project believes that a clear and unwavering focus on the bottom-line goal of graduating all students ready for college, career and life in the 21st century drives real change in the classroom. In that same spirit, we believe that the Elementary and Secondary Education Act must be aligned to support that same goal.

Again, thank you for this opportunity to speak with you. I welcome any questions or comments that you may have.