



ESEA Reauthorization: Meeting the Needs of the Whole Student

Thursday, April 22, 2010

Written Testimony of Lynsey Wood Jeffries, on behalf of Higher Achievement

Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi, and members of the Committee. On behalf of Higher Achievement, I thank you for this opportunity to testify about meeting the needs of the whole student. Higher Achievement provides an after-school and summer program that aligns with schools' educational goals and coordinates with schools and communities to prepare middle school students for success in high school and beyond. In my 10 years as both a volunteer and staff member with Higher Achievement, I have worked with hundreds of students and seen the value of this approach firsthand. Our organization has seen concrete results for more than 35 years and I believe that Higher Achievement is particularly qualified to discuss the benefits of and approaches to extended learning opportunities.

Question 1: About Higher Achievement

Higher Achievement's rigorous after-school and summer academic program gives youth from at-risk communities their best opportunity to succeed in middle school — and in life. Our research-based program challenges middle school students to meet their full potential in three key areas: academics, social skills, and leadership. When students get the skills and support they need to invest in their own success, they discover that they can be scholars. On average, 95 percent of Higher Achievement scholars who complete the program advance to top academic high schools and 93 percent graduate from college.

Founded in 1975, Higher Achievement currently serves more than 600 scholars per year and, in partnership with local schools, operates achievement centers in Washington, DC; Alexandria, VA; and Baltimore, MD. The organization is expanding to an additional five cities in the next five years, with plans to serve 2,300 scholars per year by 2015. Higher Achievement is funded by support from foundations, businesses, government, and individuals. The organization has been honored with numerous national awards.

Unique aspects of our program:

- Year-round, multi-year commitment
- Intervention during the high-risk middle school transition
- Every child has three weekly mentors
- After-school and summer curriculum is aligned to school standards
- Close partnership with schools

- Measurable results, continual data-driven improvement
- Project-based learning, college trips, field trips, and academic competitions to make learning fun

Question 2: How Do We Measure our Effectiveness

Higher Achievement provides 650 additional hours of academic instruction and mentoring during out of school time, on top of the 900 hours students spend in school. This intensity pays off with a proven track record of tangible results:

- 77 percent of scholars improved or maintained As and Bs in reading, and 65 percent in math, in one year.
- 100 percent of scholars improved their DC CAS (standardized test) score by an average of 20%, compared to an average improvement of 3 percent among DCPS students overall.
- 89 percent of scholars improved their school attendance or maintained perfect school attendance.
- 89 percent of scholars reduced their number of days tardy to school or maintained zero days tardy.
- 95% advance to top academic high schools.
- 93% graduate from college.

Further, Higher Achievement is the subject of a ground-breaking, randomized, longitudinal study by Public/Private Ventures. Funded by the William T. Grant Foundation and Atlantic Philanthropies, this rigorous evaluation started in 2006 and will conclude in 2011, comparing Higher Achievement participants to an equivalent control group.

These results are a testament to Higher Achievement's model. This data demonstrate that quality out-of-school time programs cannot only stop the "middle school slide" that widens the achievement gap – they can reverse it.

Tariq: A Portrait of Achievement

Numbers show that our proven model can lead to measurable outcomes that our scholars deserve – success in high school and beyond. Tariq's story shows what that outcome means in practice.

Tariq should have been a statistic. He grew up the sixth of eight children in Southeast DC the late 90s. In our nation's capital, 57% of DC students drop out of high school and 91%¹ do not finish college. In Southeast, the community is riddled with violence.

This was Tariq's reality. But, his conditions did not define him. Tariq beat those odds with the help of Higher Achievement and his mentors. He dedicated his afternoons, evenings, and summers in middle

¹ Gates Foundation, "Double the Numbers" 2008.

school to Higher Achievement and it paid off. With the help of Higher Achievement and his mentors, Tariq was placed in a top high school. Since graduating high school, he has been busy. He has completed competitive internships with Microsoft and Deloitte, studied abroad in Madrid, led the student government, and started several nonprofits, including Access Sudan, a human rights advocacy group. Next month, Tariq is graduating from Stanford University, with honors. Booz Allen has been holding a job for him for four months.

A testament to his compassion, at age 21, Tariq gives often and generously to Higher Achievement and will mentor with us when he returns to Washington. In his words, *I grew up keenly aware of poverty and hopelessness but also feeling incredibly empowered, and compelled to change the world in the ways that I can.*

After-School and Summer Instruction

By drawing attention to “meeting the needs of the whole student,” this Committee has recognized that although improvements to students’ in-school experience are critical, our students need more. This is especially true for students living in underserved communities. We agree that every student should graduate from high school ready for college and a career. To realize this shared goal for our public education system, we need to provide high-quality out-of-school time educational opportunities that can be aligned with academic outcomes during the school year.

At Higher Achievement, our curriculum is paced slightly ahead of the public school standards and it is delivered in small groups (3:1 ratio) by volunteer mentors. Every child in our program has three weekly mentors, who teach lessons in math, literature, and elective seminars. Further, our scholars compete in academic contests that make learning fun, including a spelling bee, literary love poetry contest, debate contest, and more.

Higher Achievement does not stop with after-school programming. Our underserved scholars, and truly all students, need more. It is abundantly clear that we need to increase our national commitment to quality summertime programming. More than half of the achievement gap between lower- and higher-income youth can be explained by unequal access to summer learning opportunities.² Low-income students lose more than two months of grade equivalency in math and reading during summer months³.

At Higher Achievement, we counteract this “summer learning loss” with our Summer Academy, which complements the after-school program and connects students’ academic experience with their expectations for the future—including overnight trips to top universities like Penn State or Virginia Tech. The summer lessons in math, literature, science and social studies are aligned to the school standards at

² Alexander, 2007.

³ Cooper, 1996.

an accelerated pace. So, for example, if a student just finished 6th grade, she will learn 7th grade material in the summer. Further, our Summer Academy is replete with fun academic contests: Model UN, mock trial, science fairs, and the Olympics of the Mind, to name a few.

The school year should not be the only time when young people are focused upon their education and future. In underserved communities, where the “summer learning loss” compounds existing achievement gaps, summer programming is critical.

Aligning After School and Summer Work with School Standards

When Higher Achievement enters a school district, we bring a commitment to our scholars and their community. We commit to help the scholars translate their hard work into opportunity. We meet this commitment by partnering with schools, districts, and communities to ensure that our programming is aligned with the standards that the students will have to meet. For example, Higher Achievement eighth graders study mass transit systems in order to practice setting up and solving linear equations and inequalities with one or two variables—a discrete math skill they are expected to master during their eighth grade year.

Out-of-school time programs can and should be expected to measure their success in the context of a student’s general academic success. The most effective OST academic experiences are those that align with what students learn in school, and act as a true partner to families and schools in supporting a child’s academic growth. Higher Achievement does this by working closely with teachers of the students it serves, and with each family to monitor individual progress, and adjusting each student’s learning plan accordingly.

Conclusion

The difference between the child who drops out of high school and the child who goes to college is not talent, but lack of opportunity. Equal access to opportunity is every child’s right – and yet it does not exist. Therefore this must be our call to action.