

**Testimony of Brandon Jensen  
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**Before the  
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee (HELP)  
United States Senate**

**Hearing on  
ESEA Reauthorization: Rural High School Reform**

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Senator Enzi and Other Members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting me to speak today. I am the new incoming principal at Cody High School in Cody Wyoming. At Cody High School we are striving to create a student-centered environment that provides multiple opportunities for students. Our everyday focus is embedded in our school mission: “Every student. Every chance. Every Day.” Cody High School offers a comprehensive academic program that includes Advanced Placement offerings, honors offerings, career and technical courses, and special education. We serve 681 students in grades 9-12, of which 20% are served by free and reduced lunch. Our attendance rate is above 95 percent and our most recent high school graduation rate is 92 percent, up 3% from the previous year. This data helps support the approach we are taking in trying to meet the needs of our students.

As a current high school administrator, I have been asked to share with you my perspective about how high schools have changed and adapted to meet the diverse needs of students. I would also like to share with you some of the things we are doing at Cody High School to engage students in their education and prepare them with the knowledge and skills they need for success in postsecondary education and the workforce. In my role as principal and assistant principal, I have been directly involved in transforming our school culture to one that is collaborative, learning-focused, and dynamic to better meet the needs of our students.

Today, I'd like to highlight some of the key components of our school's shift in culture and the success we are having with students from a rural high school. For your consideration, I will also touch on some of the benefits and challenges that are specific to small rural high schools as you reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

## **Cultural Shift**

Three years ago, we began to look at ways to better serve our students in a rapidly changing 21<sup>st</sup> century world and to better prepare them for life beyond high school. What we determined was that a real shift in the way we did things needed to occur for us to reach levels of student achievement previously unattained. We found our change agent in the implementation of professional learning communities as our model for school improvement. Our emphasis is on learning for all (students and adults), building a collaborative culture, and maintaining a constant focus on results.

Over the past several years, our fundamental purpose has shifted from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. The most profound impact this has had on our staff and students comes from the four crucial questions that drive all of the work we do:

1. What do we want each student to learn?
2. How will we know when each student has learned it?
3. How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?
4. How will we respond when a student already knows it?

These questions alone have provided us a new focus on student learning and are having a strong impact on how we approach teaching students, developing interventions that increase learning opportunities and ultimately, improving student achievement.

Another huge shift has occurred in the way we work with one another. We are making the move from teaching in isolation to one of collaboration. To most effectively answer our crucial questions, it is imperative that teachers work together in developing essential learning outcomes that are guaranteed to be learned, regardless of the teacher, and then work together to analyze and improve classroom practice. For learning to improve and for teachers to be able to be prescriptive to individual student needs, they need additional time to perfect their craft.

Professional development needs to be focused on our staff needs. The past two years we have been able to carve out consistent amounts of time during the instructional day to allow for this collaboration to occur throughout the year. This is a necessary to accomplish the amount of work required to answer our crucial questions. However, budget restraints and “one and done” professional development programs make it difficult to create real change in what we do. What we have found is that we have many teachers with years of experience and expertise that are valuable and accessible. By working together collaboratively, our teachers are expected to share ideas, materials, and effective strategies that meet the needs of all students.

The last cultural change has been a greater focus on results to judge our effectiveness. Teacher teams at Cody High School participate in an ongoing process of identifying current levels of student achievement, establishing goals to improve the current level, and then working together to achieve that goal while providing periodical evidence of progress. Our teacher teams have spent the past two years developing not only essential course outcomes for each course but are also creating common formative assessments that allow teachers to know if classroom practice is effective and to compare with one another to look for gaps in teaching and learning. This allows for teachers to identify areas of the curriculum that need more attention and to consciously look for successful practice by other teachers that they can replicate in their own practice.

### **Advantages and Challenges of a Rural High School**

There are both advantages and challenges of a rural high school. Cody High School prides itself on being big enough to offer a comprehensive high school program, including a comprehensive career and technical educational program, to meet the needs of all student groups. Yet it is small enough to allow for the development of relationships that support learning and student achievement. My belief is that these relationships are crucial to student growth and achievement. The greatest challenges rural high schools face is being able to appropriately serve the at-risk students that all schools have and need to reach. Staffing ratios in smaller/rural schools make it difficult to give these students the support they need. Many rural schools don't have the necessary resources to offer comprehensive curriculums and comprehensive career and technical experiences are generally lacking. When scores in math, science, English, and AYP drive a rural school's focus, the first things to cut out become the vocational programs that many of these at-risk students need. The benefit of these career/technical courses is that they allow for different types of learning and application of learning. These are generally the exact types of classes our at-risk students need and excel at. Cody High School has been somewhat successful in identifying at-risk students early and applying specific interventions and strategies that are proven to allow all students to experience academic success. Without additional resources, we have developed a transition school that provides key academic support to specific students who struggle in a regular classroom as well as teach them skills that are necessary for success in life such as collaboration, problem-solving strategies, study skills, and interpersonal interaction. We have also transformed our in-school suspension program into a student support center that teams with our transition school to help students who struggle with academic and attendance issues. While early in their

implementation, they have shown signs of being effective in helping our at-risk students and are part of the reason for our high graduation rate.

### **Key Recommendations**

I offer several recommendations for you to consider as you reauthorize the ESEA.

1. I believe that we need to look at how to balance the needs of the rural school with the needs of the urban school. Many of the issues facing schools in general today are similar in nature, but there are also some vast differences between rural and urban schools. As such, they cannot be looked at in the same light on every issue just as we expect all students to learn and achieve at the same rate.
2. I fully support the recommendation that states should be allowed to measure AYP for each student subgroup on the basis of state-developed growth formulas that calculate growth in individual student achievement from year to year. I also support states being allowed to use multiple measures of student performance in determining AYP and not just state assessments in language arts, math, and science.
3. In regards to graduation rates, I support student performance being measured by master of subject competency rather than by the ability to graduate in four years. Not all students entering the 9<sup>th</sup> grade arrive with the same levels of knowledge and ability and not all students learn and grow at the same rate.

Thank you again for this opportunity to speak to you today.