

# Wyoming Community College Commission

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United States Senate

Heath, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee

Honorable Michael Enzi, Ranking Member

Hearing conducted in Gillette, WY

Testimony provided by Jim Rose

Executive Director, Wyoming Community College Commission

[Appropriate salutation depending on membership of the panel]

I sincerely appreciate this opportunity to address you this afternoon and provide testimony as you explore the vital and vexing issues of improving our public education system. In the context of today's hearing, I am particularly thankful to be able to provide a perspective from Wyoming and attempt to articulate some of the challenges and opportunities we face as a rural state.

## INTRODUCTION

I should say at the outset, there is a limit to my experience with secondary education: my only direct involvement was as a student in Goshen County Schools and graduate of Lingle High School and then as a school board member in Fremont County. Both of those experiences occurred more years ago than I care to admit. All my remaining educational experience stems from nearly thirty-years as a professor and administrator in postsecondary education and more recently, as the administrator of the state system of community colleges. While I have attempted to link what I am about to present to the secondary education system, my familiarity with the challenges faced by today's high schools is dated and derived from indirect involvement.

I believe that some of the important issues in this discussion can be framed by a new definition for the "Three R's". While defining competencies in readin', (w)ritin' and 'rithmetic' holds a central position in modern discussions of education reform, I would suggest three alternative R's to consider if we are to progress to substantive, meaningful improvement:

- RELEVANCE
- REMEDIATION
- RESOURCES

Let me begin with RELEVANCE.

But first, a qualifier regarding the scope of how postsecondary education may be related to secondary reform. A study recently published by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce<sup>1</sup> indicates that of the \$772 billion spent annually on postsecondary education, 65% of that total is outside the formal postsecondary system. Essentially, nearly two-thirds of postsecondary education is provided by employers, formally or informally, as well as through industry apprenticeships, certifications and public job training. Only slightly more than a third is provided by traditional institutions of higher education, be they public or private.

Given this landscape, what constitutes realistic and effective preparation for postsecondary education by high schools is subject to considerable interpretation depending on the specific route a student may follow. However, I believe it's safe to assert some relevant skills that high school graduates should possess to ensure success irrespective of the postsecondary education path chosen. And to my point, it is equally vital how those skills are perceived and mastered through relevant coursework connected to the interests and aspirations of students.

In 2007, MPR Associates in collaboration with a number of education-related entities produced "New Directions for High School Career and Technical Education in Wyoming: A Strategic Plan."<sup>2</sup> Among the many recommendations this document contains, are two that I believe merit consideration in this discussion. First, the plan recommends that students be guided in exploring and developing their own interests for future careers using the career pathways identified by the US Department of Education and adopted by the Wyoming Department of Education. Providing students with opportunities to relate high school courses to their individual interests and career aspirations enhances student engagement with their studies regardless of whether they intend to pursue a postsecondary degree or begin preparation to enter the workforce. As a corollary to this action, it is recommended that the separation between career and academic courses be deemphasized, since virtually all current data suggest that college and careers require essentially the same preparation at the secondary level. This leads to the second recommendation.

In order to enhance relevance and improve student engagement, as disciplinary divisions and career/academic barriers are dissolved, there must be investment in assisting teachers in the integrative process through professional development. The role of invigorating student engagement cannot practically be left just to career counselors, since by any measure their opportunity to provide career guidance to students is circumscribed by sheer numbers. Even in Wyoming, ratios of several hundred students per counselor preclude such practice. The teaching faculty in many cases provides the only real opportunity for guided career exploration. Effective, engaged learning will require minor refinements for some faculty and major shifts in classroom practice for others. Adjusting pedagogies to facilitate this integration will most certainly require commitment of faculty and administrators at the school level.

As you are aware, the National Governor's Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers have recently published their recommendation for common core standards and a number of states, including Wyoming, have adopted them.<sup>3</sup> A rigorous curriculum is certainly one necessary component in the agenda to improve public education in this country, but I believe a singular focus on standards as a panacea without acknowledging the need for curricular integration will allow a watershed opportunity in education to be squandered. More about this in a subsequent section.

### What is Wyoming doing to address this issue?

One example of an effort in Wyoming to improve student engagement and opportunity is work commissioned by the Wyoming Legislature earlier this year. The Wyoming Postsecondary Education Options Program (W.S. § 21-20-201) provides an opportunity for high school students to enroll in college courses offered during the normal school day on high school campuses (concurrent enrollment) or outside the school day at other sites or online (dual enrollment). The work being conducted this summer and fall is intended to provide a comprehensive review of this program and gain input from a full spectrum of education stakeholders. The outcome will be enhanced equity and accessibility for students and uniform accountability for the state.

This expansion of course offerings affords students in rural high schools especially, the opportunity to be academically challenged and explore career interests in spite of the inherent limitations that geography imposes on the breadth of coursework available to small districts.

## REMEDICATION

According to data published last month by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and the Southern Regional Education Board<sup>4</sup> nearly 60 percent of first-year college students who are fully eligible to attend college must take at least one remedial course. Estimates of the Bill and Melinda Gate's Foundation's Strong American Schools estimates that this remedial education costs students and states up to \$2.3 billion annually.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the fiscal toll, the likelihood that a student will complete a bachelor's degree if required to complete even just one remedial reading course is only 17%; for a math course, it is 27%.<sup>6</sup>

In Wyoming, the picture is not quite so bleak, but there is still reason for concern. In data collected in 2008/2009 for the Hathaway Scholarship Program, nearly 15% of scholarship recipients were required to take at least one remedial class. Since the Hathaway Program is a merit scholarship program, the fact that more than one scholarship student in seven must take at least one remedial class suggests there is still need for improvement.<sup>7</sup>

For too long, those of us in postsecondary education have looked critically upon our secondary peers and intimated that the preparation problem is solely in the purview of K-12 education. We have resisted any suggestion that we are at all culpable for this disconnect between what high school students receive and higher education demands. Fortunately, there is growing recognition that secondary and postsecondary education must work in tandem if lasting, substantive improvement is to be achieved.

### What is Wyoming doing to address this issue?

The Wyoming Community College Commission, the Wyoming Department of Education, school districts and the University of Wyoming are currently considering joining with over thirty other states in a consortium designed to develop a common assessment instrument. This test will be used to evaluate student progress and mastery of the common core standards referenced above.

More specifically, the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium<sup>8</sup> seeks to develop a common assessment system, used in grades 3-8 and 11. The exam given in the junior year will allow for addressing any deficiencies during the remaining year of high school. For their part,

postsecondary institutions who participate in the consortium agree to accept the results of the assessment to determine placement in college coursework. No longer will separate placement exams be used by member colleges and universities as part of the matriculation process.

Thirty-one states have signed on and agreed to adopt a single, summative assessment exam that will allow schools to evaluate students using the same test that will be employed by postsecondary institutions.

## RESOURCES

In spite of what you may be thinking—here comes the pitch for more dollars—my choice of resources as the third “R” has less to do with the amount of funding and more to do with how resources are employed to achieve the most benefit for our entire education system.

By almost any measure, Wyoming has been blessed recently with extraordinary fiscal resources to support public education at all levels. For example:

- Our K-12 system is among the highest funded systems per capita in the country, with nearly \$1.5 billion appropriated for the current biennium.<sup>9</sup>
- Public support of our postsecondary system, (UW and the seven community colleges) in terms of \$/FTE is the highest in the nation. Total revenue per FTE in 2009 was \$17,460, while the US average was \$10,998.<sup>10</sup>
- When represented as a percentage of public higher education revenue, Wyoming has the lowest net tuition of all the states.<sup>10</sup>

I would submit that ours is not a challenge of resource quantity, but rather of how the abundance that we have can best be invested to create opportunities leading to fulfilling, productive lives. Perhaps the most important component in evaluating the efficacy of how resources are applied in pursuit of these goals is comprehensive, current data.

Innovative new approaches to addressing present and current challenges in education will only be effective if it is possible to establish objectives and metrics by which success is to be measured and achievement established. Data are the *sin qua non* to this process. Without a comprehensive, longitudinal data capacity, we will continue to resort to speculation and inference rather than accurately and equitably assessing our performance. There are, of course, concerns of individual privacy which must and can be addressed, but no longer can we afford to merely employ anecdotal evidence as a proxy for assessing performance.

### *What is Wyoming doing to address this issue?*

The Wyoming Community College Commission Statewide Strategic Plan was completed early this year, presented to policymakers for consideration, and approved as the guiding document for the future of Wyoming’s community college system.<sup>11</sup> A product of three-years of study, first by a governor-appointed commission and then a legislative taskforce, the plan sets out ambitious goals for continuing to strengthen linkages between the K-12 system and the seven community colleges.

The plan also mandates continued collaboration among all education sectors as an essential for continued progress. Partnerships with workforce services and other human service agencies

continue to provide new avenues to jointly address the education and training needs of Wyoming citizens. For example, the community colleges and the Department of Workforce Services have recently cooperated in deploying the Career Readiness Certificate, providing a nationally recognized credential to assist employers in the hiring process and giving job seekers a means to quantify their proficiency in applied mathematics, reading for information and locating information.

## CONCLUSION

Relevance, remediation and resources—three components that I believe merit examination for the role they can play in reforming our secondary education system. Relevance, achieved through integration of career and academic pathways into the learning process and professional development opportunities to enhance educational practice. A reduced need for remediation through better alignment of secondary and postsecondary curriculum and the employment of common assessment instruments. And effective application of resources through more comprehensive and effective use of data to improve our understanding and guide our decisions. I believe that by attending to these three areas, we can achieve higher levels of success for all students and ensure a brighter future for all of Wyoming and the nation.

Thank you for this opportunity.

## REFERENCES

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8. *The SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium*; State of Washington, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, June 2010. [ <http://www.k12.wa.us/SMARTER> ]
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