

Opening Statement of Johnny Collett
Nominee for Assistant Secretary for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
December 5, 2017

Thank you, Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, and Members of the Committee. I am humbled by the President's nomination and grateful for the Secretary's trust. If confirmed, I am eager to serve our nation's millions of children, youth, and adults with disabilities and their families as Assistant Secretary for the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS).

I am thankful for the support this nomination has received from many national organizations, current and former colleagues, teachers, principals, parents and families who work every day to improve outcomes for individuals with disabilities. I hold this in trust and will work as hard, as strategically, and as collaboratively as I can to ensure that we deliver on the promises we have made to individuals and families in this country.

The mission of the office which I have been nominated to lead is to "improve early childhood, educational, and employment outcomes and raise expectations for all people with disabilities, their families, their communities, and the nation." This mission is consistent with what I believe, how I have led, and, frankly, who I am.

Before I get into other comments that I'm thankful to have the opportunity to share with you today, I would like to tell you about an encounter I had recently at a local store in our hometown. While in the check-out lane, I heard someone call my name from across the store. When I turned, I immediately recognized the individual as one of my former students. We shared updates about our lives, and had a good, though brief conversation. When I got in the car, I mentioned something to my wife that I would like to share with you at the beginning of these proceedings. What stood out the most to me about seeing my former student that day, is that he appeared *happy, proud* of what he had accomplished, and clearly *confident* about his future.

Now, I expect that we will talk about a number of things today, and I'm looking forward to responding to your questions. But I want to be honest about something from the beginning. . . . Regardless of the particular matters at hand or the specific issues that we may discuss, the lens through which I will process and respond to your questions will be that of the child, the student, or the adult with a disability, and what will ensure that they have an equitable opportunity to be successful. While we all – individually and as a nation - have a stake in the success of children, youth, and adults with disabilities, *no one has more of a stake in their success than they do*. This will be my lens today, and each day that I serve in this role, if confirmed.

Before I began my career as an educator, I was a church pastor for about ten years. While a different role, to be sure, it was during those years that my commitment to individuals, their particular strengths and diverse needs, and the supports that would help them achieve the life they envisioned, was firmly established. That commitment continued to be shaped as I began my career in public education. I came into the teaching profession through an alternative route. In fact, I began my education career as an emergency certified teacher. I quickly achieved full

certification and have continued since then to be guided daily by a growing and intense focus on individuals with disabilities and their families, their strengths and needs, and how we best support them to achieve the outcomes that we, and most importantly they, envision.

I'm proud of the work I did as a high school special education teacher, the work I then had the pleasure to lead as the state director for special education in Kentucky, and the work I have most recently led as the director for special education outcomes at the Council of Chief State School Officers. But, if I may, what I am most proud of is to be my wife's husband, my children's father, my parents' son, and my brother's brother. From my view, the extent to which I have been, or will be successful, will be measured most importantly by my faithfulness to God and, as a result, my faithfulness to them.

Through all of the work I have been honored to lead, I have demonstrated a commitment to raising expectations and improving outcomes for children, youth, and adults with disabilities, and to collaborating meaningfully and effectively with any and all who have a stake in their success. If confirmed, I will continue to demonstrate these commitments.

To summarize, while the challenges and opportunities we face are complex, my philosophy is pretty simple. I believe that ALL children, youth, and adults with disabilities in this country deserve an equitable opportunity to be successful in school and beyond. But there is only one way for all to mean "all". For all to mean ALL, it has to mean EACH. And, to ensure that *each* child, *each* youth, and *each* adult with a disability has equitable access to the opportunities, resources, and supports they need to be successful, requires that we must have *different, deep,* and sometimes *difficult* conversations. Perhaps I'm being naïve, but I believe we can do that, and do it effectively, in service to individuals with disabilities and their families.

And, it is my view that the kids we run into at the store, or wherever, *deserve nothing less* from the adults who are charged with their care and who have promised to help prepare them for life after they leave our system of education.