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Fixing No Child Left Behind: Supporting Teachers and Schools Leaders

Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, and members of the committee, thank you for inviting me here today to discuss how the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) can better support teachers and school leaders. My name is Christine Handy and I am the proud principal of Gaithersburg High School in Gaithersburg, Maryland. I also serve on the Board of Directors for the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and would like to speak on behalf of my fellow middle and high school leaders.

I was a special education teacher for ten years before beginning my career as a school leader. I have served as a high school principal for the past 16 years in a charter school, a small rural school, and presently, a large, diverse, comprehensive public high school in Montgomery County, Maryland. Gaithersburg High School has more than 2,200 students and 250 employees.

I attended The George Washington University's Education Leadership program to prepare for my first school leadership experience. The preparation program concluded with an internship experience where I had the opportunity to oversee a summer school program at a public middle school in Norfolk, Virginia. I continued in the doctoral program at The George Washington University and while my classwork focused largely on being an effective school leader, my research focused on leadership at the superintendent level. My preparation for being an effective school leader has depended primarily on professional development offered by the school district, the state department of education, and state and national principal associations where I have had the opportunity to attend in-person conferences, participate in online professional development, and learn by networking with colleagues from across the state and the nation.

Montgomery County Public Schools values professional development for school leaders and teachers and has allocated funds and staffing dedicated for this purpose. The district has a principal internship program to allow promising leaders the opportunity to serve as principals to gain valuable experience. Assistant principals also go through an intensive training program with mentors and receive ongoing professional development to ensure that they are prepared to lead schools.

At the state level, the Maryland Department of Education has dedicated Principal Academies for new leaders and ongoing teacher and principal summer workshops. The Maryland Association of Secondary School Principals, Maryland Association of Elementary School

Principals, and their affiliated national organizations demonstrate a dedication to professional development by offering ongoing workshops and conferences that are committed to the vision of providing excellent school leaders in every school.

Importance of School Leadership

Great schools do not exist apart from great leaders, and strong school leadership is essential for ensuring student success. For more than a decade, the Wallace Foundation has sponsored rigorous research on school leadership, which has led to the finding that there is an “empirical link between school leadership and improved student achievement.” Principals are recognized for their ability to influence a variety of factors that indirectly affect student outcomes and directly influence schools, including their ability to support teachers and create the conditions necessary for high-functioning schools. The research from the Wallace Foundation about successful schools is clear: A great teacher gets great results in a classroom, but only a principal can lead a school to success in all classrooms for each students’ success and create the culture for sustaining long-term improvements.

ESEA Reauthorization

Principals respectfully request that Congress work to refocus the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to help put in place state and local education systems that will provide robust, meaningful accountability together with sufficient supports for educators and schools. The law is in dire need of this redirection to provide high-quality educational opportunities and improved outcomes for all students.

Support for Principals

Today’s principals are expected to be visionary leaders, instructional experts, building managers, assessment specialists, disciplinarians, counselors, social workers, community builders, and more; they are also held directly responsible for student achievement in our nation’s schools. With the growing demands, changing demographics, and increased accountability to prepare students to be college and career ready, the job imposes excessive demands on time and burnout is common. If principals are to meet the growing and evolving expectations of this demanding position, they must be provided ongoing personalized professional development to meet their individual and school needs. This is true for all school leaders, regardless of their initial preparation or their length of service. To meet these demands, ongoing mentoring, job-embedded professional development, and the time to participate in professional learning communities to learn from their peers are necessary to support all school leaders.

Recruitment and Preparation

States and districts must be directed to put in place more rigorous efforts to recruit and prepare principals and assistant principals to be instructional leaders and improve student academic achievement in high-need schools through research-based programs. In recruiting the next generation of profession-ready school leaders, federal policy should support state and school districts to efforts ensure that:

- School districts put structures in place to ensure a principal continuum.
- Prospective principals commit to work in high-need schools in both urban and rural environments.
- Prospective principals reflect the increasing racial, ethnic, and economic diversity of our nation's students.

To ensure that new principals or assistant principals are profession-ready, candidates should have an advanced degree and demonstrated record of success as a teacher and teacher leader. Individuals with strong instructional backgrounds make better instructional leaders and are better able to relate to and lead teachers, as well as identify and model effective classroom practices.

Congress should enact policies to ensure that every principal and school leader enters a school with the skills and qualities necessary to effectively lead a school. Legislation should support principal preparation programs that require candidates to demonstrate leadership competencies through an assessment prior to entry into a qualified principal preparation and certification program that includes partnerships between districts and local preparation programs. This will help ensure that the preparation programs, including curriculum and residencies, are clearly aligned with the realities of school leadership and the “critical success factors” of an effective principal. Furthermore, qualified school leader candidates must complete a one-year principal residency program under the guidance of an accomplished school leader. Additionally, upon completion of their preparation program, aspiring principals should demonstrate a deep understanding of the domains of effective school leadership and related competencies through a performance-based assessment before commencing work as school leaders.

NASSP strongly supports the School Principal Recruitment and Training Act, and we're very pleased that Senator Franken will be reintroducing the bill this Congress. The level of preparation required by grantees in the bill is critical for every principal to enter the profession ready and properly equipped to improve student achievement and to be an effective instructional leader.

Professional Development

Professional development for principals has been largely overlooked by states and local districts, because the primary source of funds for principal development—Title II—bundles

principal development in a vast assortment of “allowable uses of funds.” As a result, according to a 2013 Department of Education survey, districts use only 4 percent of Title II dollars for principal professional development, falling far short of what states and districts should be doing to support principals to meet the increased demands as instructional leaders of schools. Meanwhile, a majority of the funds have been spent by districts to reduce class size, which some may say has little effect on teacher and principal quality—the named purpose of this section of the law. Research and evidence over the past 10 years substantiate the role of principals and prove that they have an impact on student performance, second only to teachers in the classroom.

Given their importance as the key catalysts for school improvement, ESEA and Title II funds must be refocused on providing professional development for principals and assistant principals in a manner that effectively supports their role as instructional leaders. This is even more imperative for those school leaders serving in high-need schools so that they have the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to improve school and student achievement, and support and improve the instructional practice of educators in the classroom. Furthermore, the law must afford principals proper training to help them improve teacher quality in their schools.

NASSP, together with the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), released policy recommendations in 2013 to better support principals in implementing new teacher evaluation systems. The report found that there has been insufficient training to complete teacher evaluations that will allow principals to differentiate performance and engage in a high level of instructional coaching, provide meaningful feedback to teachers, and use evaluation results to inform decision making in their schools.

We respectfully encourage you to include robust provisions in a reauthorized ESEA that will support principal professional development, including a requirement that districts who receive Title II funding allocate no less than 10 percent of the funds available for professional development for elementary, middle, and high school principals to improve instructional leadership. This must be a separate section of the reauthorized law to ensure that principals are afforded the recognition and proper support in executing their leadership role in schools successfully.

Principal Evaluation

Principals are concerned about the new evaluation systems that are being developed by states and districts that were a condition for receiving ESEA flexibility waivers. We feel that Congress has a responsibility now to provide guidance to state and local efforts in order to support effective principal evaluation systems that will lead to improved performance. An effective evaluation system is collaboratively developed; provides meaningful feedback to the individual principal; is based on multiple measures; and takes into account student growth as well as evidence of effective school leadership practices. According to the latest research related to principal evaluation, the nation’s most prominent principals organizations recommend that no

more than a quarter of a principal's evaluation be based on student achievement and growth. Further, any principal evaluation system must be tied to professional improvement plans for principals and have a strong focus on six key domains of leadership responsibility within a principal's sphere of influence. These domains are school leadership; student growth and achievement; school planning and progress; school culture; stakeholder support and engagement; professional qualities and practices; and professional growth and learning.

Pathways for Principal Leadership

In a reauthorized ESEA, Congress must provide support for school districts to enhance leadership capacity through a full range of leadership roles for assistant principals, early career principals, and veteran school administrators. In order to develop strong instructional leaders to mentor and support the pipeline of future school leaders, accomplished educational leaders must be supported to:

- Cultivate their understanding of leadership and school improvement processes to meet high levels of performance;
- Help novice principals gain a clear vision of instructional leadership;
- Engage stakeholders in developing and realizing excellence in instructional leadership; and
- Participate in meaningful community engagement and advocacy on behalf of their students, teachers and schools.

Sustained improvement in schools takes no less than five years to put in place, and leadership continuity during those five years is absolutely essential. Yet the most recent data indicates that one-fourth of principals leave after one and a half years, and half of all principals, leave after three years on the job. That means most high school principals are not in place long enough to see their freshman class graduate. But more important, those principals are not in place long enough to see their school improvement efforts all the way through. And efforts are rebooted with the arrival of each new principal. I submit that states and districts are already paying a significant cost for unfulfilled improvement efforts as a result of principal turnover. Those resources would be far better spent on the front end to support principals so they will stay on the job long enough to see their initiatives through. That leadership continuity is an essential condition for student success. And it is a condition the federal government is uniquely positioned to advance with its next reauthorization of ESEA.