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As a career public school educator, I am honored to appear before you today to share my experiences implementing innovative approaches for students. I would like to thank Senator Alexander, Senator Murray and the members of the committee for the opportunity to participate in the panel and contribute to the roundtable discussion about innovative approaches to improving education. My suggestions about fostering innovation in schools is based on my experiences at Hunters Lane High School within Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (Tennessee) over the past 7 years. By improving the school climate, focusing on communication with key groups and implementing innovations such as one lunch, the academy small learning community model, and blended learning, we have personalized our school to a place where student engagement is the central focus. This engagement has produced higher student achievement as measured by standardized tests, student attendance rates, reduction of disciplinary incidents and increased post- secondary education rates.

Questions 1: What is your school doing to implement innovative approaches to improve academic outcomes for students, particularly low-income and at-risk students?

I became principal of Hunters Lane High School, an urban high school in Nashville, Tennessee in July, 2008. Our school was in “corrective action” status due to failing to meet benchmarks for several consecutive years under No Child Left Behind. As a Title 1 school with over 80% of the student body receiving free or reduced lunch, our students come to us with many academic deficits caused by unstable housing, frequent changing of schools resulting from a high mobility rate, lack of parental engagement, and violence within the community. It has been our philosophy to approach education in a systemic way by providing supports to parents and families as well as students.

Over the past 7 years, we have been able to make many improvements as we have worked to turnaround our school. Our efforts have fallen into the following categories:

School Climate

Reduction of Student Disciplinary Incidents

In 2008, disciplinary incidents were out of control and there was little faith in the school within the community. We immediately re-instituted the “fun” things about high school that had been removed; pep rallies, dances, spirit weeks and informed the students that each one would be held accountable for his or her own actions, rather than a group penalty. What

occurred was the “ultimate paradox” where we actually regained control of the school by giving more freedom to students. There was an immediate reduction in disciplinary incidents that has continued each year so in 2014 there were 57% fewer disciplinary incidents than in 2008.

Communication with Key Groups

A principal has many groups of stakeholders. When I was appointed in 2008, I knew that I needed to invent a way to connect with 1700 students if I was to be successful in changing the school from a place where group fighting and gang problems were common place to a school where academic progress and being a community of learners was valued. I gave every student my personal cell phone number to “text” me. Students were intrigued by the novelty and tested me to see if I would, indeed, respond to every text as I promised. Students texted dress code questions and suggestions and would warn me if they “heard” there would be trouble at dismissal. Students immediately began to approach me in the hall and say, “I am the one who texted you about x” and by responding to each student, my credibility as a leader was established. Parents began texting me as well, as the banner with my phone number hangs prominently above the main office in the school lobby. One of the concepts I emphasize to principals when I talk about this method of communication is that this is not another thing for principals to do; it is simply a smarter thing.

To increase parental involvement and input, we developed the Parent Academic Achievement Team (PAAT) which is designed to provide input and ideas from a parent's perspective about how our school is serving our students. While we use annual anonymous surveys as part of our formal assessment process, the opportunities to get parents and the principal around the same table to talk about the quality of education has provided valuable insight to me and a great opportunity to build a communication pipeline for parents.

To communicate with school staff, we developed the HAWD? (How Are We Doing?) process that seeks to provide an avenue for honest dialogue about the things happening within our school. I conduct the process 4 times a year. The HAWD? system has provided a structured method for collecting information and for fostering trust among professionals. It allows school staff to collaboratively solve our problems.

In the spirit of gathering groups to meet to improve our school climate, we launched the G2BAW (Great to Be A Warrior) team. This group of students completed an application process designed to ensure a representative sample of students different from student government who would have a chance to weigh in about improvements to our school. Students have found these meetings that are scheduled twice per month to be a powerful example of how to be active within our democratic system.

Cultivating Business Partnerships

Under the academy model that all zoned schools in Nashville use, we have a specific, aligned, authentic priority to develop meaningful business partnerships. These businesses do not simply donate supplies under the typical model; rather, they are genuinely invested in the academic programming within our schools. We have over thirty partners that are aligned with our academies to provide our students with real world professionals in the field who work alongside our teachers to teach about the industry they represent. They also lead field trips and conduct teacher externships and student internships.

Innovative Practice

Academy Concept

Our district embraced the small learning community concept almost a decade ago, but the Academies of Nashville, a now, nationally recognized model for organizing large high schools began to thrive six years ago. Hunters Lane is one of 12 high schools that are organized into career based academies where teachers work in teams with one counselor and one assistant principal to personalize the learning environment, provide more intensive instruction, and connect real world business professionals to assist in teaching the curriculum through organized partnerships. Our academy concept follows the 10 National

Standards of Practice from the National Career Academy Model¹ with fidelity. Every student selects an academy based on his or her particular interests.

Each of our academy teams has business partners who have signed a formal agreement to support our students in their career academies. I work alongside our academy coach to recruit and explain our school vision and focus to our larger business partners. One of the aspects of all of our academies that we are most proud of is their feeling of social responsibility and their great desire to give back to our school and community.

One Lunch

Six years ago we restructured our schedule to allow the entire student body to go to lunch at the same time, just as college campuses do. Our students—all 1,700 of them, in grades 9–12 go to lunch. Students may eat in the cafeteria, at one of the picnic tables in the courtyard, or in a hallway. We also use this period to engage students in activities of their choice, to promote school spirit, and to encourage interactions between students and faculty—all steps that have proven to forge positive connections throughout the school. This also provides time for intramurals, student performances, tutoring, club activities, and even detention for those who get into trouble. We have an internet café and several computer labs available for students who need to use technology they may not have access to at home.

Blended Learning

In 2012-2013, my district decided to implement blended learning for all advanced classes at the high school level. We are an International Baccalaureate (IB) school so our advanced placement (AP) and IB classes were taught under a hybrid model where students receive and participate in instruction in both an online and traditional in class experiences. Almost immediately, my teachers began reporting that the blended model was providing higher levels of student engagement. When students become engaged with the curriculum and do their work, authentic learning takes place. The blended learning structure was so compelling and powerful that the teachers began selling other teachers on this idea and we decided to offer all classes under the blended environment during the 2013-2014 academic year. Now that we are in our third year of using blended learning, our students are very accustomed to going to the online classroom to view video clips, download presentations and even take tests. We have technology that students can check out of the library to take home and we have many computer labs available at lunch. However, we have found that most students prefer to use their phones to access the online classroom. I would love to see anytime internet access offered across the country so those who live in poverty can have an expectation to internet, just as we enjoy clean drinking water as an expectation in our country.

What blended learning allowed us to do was access the learner who is ignored in the traditional classroom; the technological learner. While we have learned to address the needs of visual, auditory and tactile learners, the

technological learner, typically has his needs ignored. In the blended environment, this type of student thrives. They are active in online discussions and are motivated to learn the curriculum at a deeper level. It is not unusual for my students to continue online discussions about the content into the weekend or late into the evening because they are connected to one another and their teacher in a structure that is safe and feels very natural to them. As easy as the world has made online shopping, banking and online communicating, the teenagers of today want to learn online as well.

Results

Attendance

Our school level attendance has increased nearly every year since 2008 with a low of 91% to a high in 2014 to 92.3%. The increases in attendance have been a direct result of the focus on social emotional learning, commitment to making our school a positive place and a haven for students and have resulted from the academic progress that students have seen that they can make.

School Level Performance on Standardized Assessments

In Tennessee, we have increased our standards and have added more high stakes courses at the high school level. Among our 6 high stakes courses, we have increased the percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced each year in 5 out of 6 courses. Of all of the zoned schools within our district, Hunters Lane has had the highest 3 year average of gains in students being

proficient and advanced. These gains have been a direct result of using student performance data to guide our instruction. Our teachers of core subjects meet with the administration weekly to review student performance data, plan interventions, and review student progress and this continual assessment has helped to push our students forward.

Post -Secondary Education Rates

Thirty-eight percent of the high school graduates in Tennessee go on to post-secondary education. We are very proud that our post-secondary education acceptance rates have surpassed 70% every year for the past three years. In May, 75% for the class of 2014 was accepted into the college of their choice with those students earning nearly \$4M in scholarships.

Question 2: How can we improve the federal law (No Child Left Behind) to encourage more states, districts, and schools to innovate?

According to a January 16, 2015 article published in the Washington Post by Lyndsey Layton² “Majority of U.S. public school students are in poverty” the majority of pre-K through 12th grade public school students have financial circumstances that make them extremely vulnerable. This startling statistic means that we have to reconsider the demands and expectations of what we want schools to accomplish in order to prepare high school graduates to be well equipped to meet the demands of being intelligent, educated contributors to our communities.

There is an old adage that states, “What gets measured, gets done.” There is no place where that is more evident than in schools. No Child Left Behind brought some improvements to education in the sense that we all began tracking our data, working to ensure equity between different groups of students, publishing results for families and communities to review and an understanding that “every kid counts” in terms of test scores. Unfortunately, the over reliance on test scores has led some schools to be so concerned with testing, that what is getting done, is in essence, only what is getting measured. This is one of the most destructive unintended consequences of a well-intentioned public policy in the history of our country. The reality is, kids are more than a test score. When parents take children to the pediatrician, physicians also track data on the child and report to parents that their baby is measuring in a certain percentile for height and weight and head circumference. They use this data to evaluate if the child is showing signs of an undiagnosed illness or developmental problem or to report that the child is developing as expected. Regardless of the data the parent receives, the parent loves the child anyway. Parents are not concerned with helping a child grow so he can measure in the 60th percentile rather than the 30th percentile. The parent wants growth for the purpose of the child developing, evolving into who the child will become instead of who the child is now. This should be the only purpose of testing.

Unfortunately, we have used testing to blame children, communities, teachers and schools and have been quick to condemn schools as failures or

successes based on a child's performance on one day or a series of days when we know that child development is a continually moving target and testing is merely a "snapshot" of a child's progress that should be used as part of a bigger picture of the child's development. Rather than evaluating schools and student achievement on a test on one day or week, adopting a more summative, portfolio approach, would give students an opportunity to demonstrate what they know, rather than a standardized test that only measures what they have not learned yet.

There is a place for testing and I do not advocate the abolishment of standardized assessment; however, it must be part of comprehensive view of a child's development and one part of what makes a teacher and school successful. If we truly want schools to be centers of innovation where school personnel can develop new answers to problems then we must re-focus our emphasis on serving students rather than testing them. Until we stop publishing lists of so called good school or failing schools, we will not provide an environment where educators have freedom to innovate, to learn from best practice, to approach things differently, because they are held captive by the fear of how every initiative will impact test scores.

Innovation and creativity result from safe environments. When educators are given an opportunity to think meaningfully about what students need, rather than on how to get them to score well on a test, we will begin to see an explosion of innovation. In my 21 year career, I have worked in two Tennessee

districts within the same 50 mile radius. I have served children in six different schools including schools classified as rural, inner city, suburban, affluent and poor. What these communities need is flexibility to do what is in the best interest of their youth and as amazing as it sounds, there are significant differences in what children need who are literally only miles away from one another. No Child Left Behind needs to allow communities to decide how to spend funding to close achievement gaps and advance student achievement, rather than schools and districts trying to fit their square needs into circular funding holes.

If we want to serve children, particularly children who live in poverty who comprise the majority of those in public schools then we need to follow the tenets of best practice in child development and provide an education that meets the needs of children wherever they are. There is research based, proven programming that should be incentivized through No Child Left Behind to help communities advance including the following six suggestions:

- (1) Commitment to the Whole Child: The demands of the 21st century require a new approach to education, one that recognizes that academic achievement is but one element of student learning and development, and only a part of any complete system of educational accountability. A comprehensive approach to learning recognizes that successful young people are knowledgeable, emotionally and physically healthy, motivated, civically inspired, engaged in the arts, prepared for work and economic

self-sufficiency, and ready for the world beyond their own borders. A whole child approach to education is one of the best ways to prepare students for this challenging future, and to be college, career, and citizenship-ready. Such an approach seeks to ensure that each child, in each school, in each community is healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged. It includes access to a challenging and engaging curriculum, safe and trusting classrooms and schools, and a climate that supports students and their families. A whole child approach starts with the earliest learners and continues through high school, and promotes the long term development and success of each student.³ It is also consistent with assessment by a portfolio approach where students are assessed throughout the school year rather than on one or one series of end of course tests.

- (2) Universal, free pre-K: We must develop a way to offer incentives to States and districts to provide universal, free pre-Kindergarten. Some children enter kindergarten without being able to identify letters and colors while others are already beginning to read. What we know about children who live in poverty is that they are often exposed to fewer words, they hear less language and so their vocabulary may be limited. Universal, free pre-K would provide children with opportunities to learn the structure of school, be exposed to text rich environments, engage in developing the skills to prepare children to be literate and begin the complex task of meeting a young child's social, emotional needs. Universal pre-K allows

children to begin to explore their world with other children and to learn ways to communicate, share, develop relationships and even solve conflict in a warm, friendly setting with teachers who are trained to meet the needs of young children. Universal pre-K would help to ensure that every kindergartner has the pre-requisite knowledge to be successful in school from the first day. Once kids get behind, it becomes very difficult for them to ever catch up. As a high school principal, I am held accountable for the drop-out rates of my students; however, the reality that few want to admit is that some of our children begin the process of dropping out long before high school and every drop out becomes disengaged long before they become truant.

- (3) Mental health Support Offered in Schools During the School Day: Many children have serious mental health needs that often go undiagnosed, untreated and unchecked. According to the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention:⁴ “Based on the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine report (Preventing mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders among young people: progress and possibilities, 2009) that gathered findings from previous studies, it is estimated that 13 –20 percent of children living in the United States (up to 1 out of 5 children) experience a mental disorder in a given year and an estimated \$247 billion is spent each year on childhood mental disorders. Because of the impact on children, families, and communities, children's mental disorders are an important public health issue in the United States.” It is often difficult for

families to access providers who specialize in childhood psychiatric and psychological treatment and transportation and other barriers often delay treatment. To prepare children to be successful when they graduate from high school, we must treat those who suffer from mental health issues as part of educating the whole child.

- (4) Community Schools: Schools are often the central point of a community and they house the most important resource a community has for sustaining its future; children. The Coalition for Community Schools is an alliance of over 200 national, state and local partners all committed to uniting schools, families, and communities for young people's success:

The research is clear that many factors impact academic achievement, including the effects of poverty; school climate; school discipline; and chronic absence. Under The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the development of the whole child (including cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and civic capacities) has suffered. The narrowed curriculum under NCLB caused budget tradeoffs that often eliminated non-tested subjects and funding for specialized instructional support personnel. Teachers and principals have taken on more responsibility and accountability with fewer supports at a time when student needs are increasing. Standards were lowered, achievement gaps have stayed stagnant, and the U.S. remains mediocre in math and reading compared to other developed countries. (Coalition for Community School

Practices⁵) We need for the community school structure to be implemented in districts as a way to make the schools a resource for not only schools, but families, as well.

- (5) Investment Professional Development for Educators: Educators are being charged “to do more, with less” in a social environment that in many ways has been openly hostile to them. We must stop blaming teachers and schools and recognize that schools are a reflection of the communities they live in. Where there is violence in the community, those children, through no fault of their own, know that violence, experience it, own it, and sometimes emulate it. Educators need professional development funding included in every initiative, not as an after-thought or a “if we can afford it” line item. Those on the front lines, who leave their own children every morning to teach other people’s children need the benefit that advanced professional development provides. Good teaching is about integrating new strategies with current, effective practice and not merely replacing old with new. If we want teachers to be able to serve the kids of the future, with all their strengths and their many challenges, then educators must be a partner in the selection and implementation of professional development initiatives.
- (6) Anytime, Internet Access for All: The demand for internet services and Wifi is strong for Americans across the country; however, the lack of access to the internet often creates barriers for those who live in poverty. Since our communication has become very dependent on using online

resources, those without access do not have the same opportunities as others to communicate with teachers, apply for jobs, research, pay bills, and even engage in higher education. If we could offer financial incentives to States and communities to encourage them to provide low or no cost internet to all families, we would reap the benefits of no longer having a digital divide.

In conclusion, we have a critical opportunity to revise ESEA to provide schools with more supports to serve students and less focus on testing them. This begins with a commitment to the whole child. To immediately stop standardized testing being used to sort and select children and blame or demonize schools, and rather include testing, at a developmentally appropriate level, as one of many tools used to measure student achievement and school performance. By eliminating the digital divide by providing anytime internet access for all, implementing universal, free pre-K, addressing the mental health needs of children with trained professionals during the school day, incentivizing the community school model and providing comprehensive, meaningful professional development to educators you will open the door to creating conditions that foster innovation while eliminating the fear of how every implementation dip will impact the test scores for that year. This will not occur without respect being given for the professional educator. If school and district personnel are not seen as a resource, a partner, as the literal “straw that stirs the drink” in districts and schools, we will not see the groundswell of innovation that is possible. Educators have been maligned, criticized and

blamed in communities across the country in political circles. This can be stopped with a recognition that what teachers contribute cannot be measured by a mere test score. Teaching is not factory work. It is dynamic and it is individualized and our country's commitment to public education is the absolute cornerstone of what has made the United States of America great. I would like to thank Senator Alexander, Senator Murray and the members of the committee for considering my perspective and thank you for the work you do leading for all citizens.

Endnotes

¹ National Career Academy Coalition. (2014) “The National Standards of Practice.” Retrieved from <https://www.ncacinc.com/nsop>

² Layton, L. (2014, Jan 16). Majority of U.S. Public School Students are in Poverty. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/majority-of-us-public-school-students-are-in-poverty/2015/01/15/df7171d0-9ce9-11e4-a7ee-526210d665b4_story.html

³ ASCD. (2015). “The Whole Child Initiative.” Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/whole-child.aspx>

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014, May 16) “Children’s Mental Health – New Report”. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/Features/ChildrensMentalHealth/>

⁵ Institute for Educational Leadership. (2015) “Coalition for Community Schools”. Retrieved from <http://www.communityschools.org/>

