

**Opening Statement of Mitchell Zais  
Nominee for Deputy U.S. Secretary of Education  
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions  
November 15, 2017**

Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, and Members of the Committee, it is an honor to appear before you today. Thank you.

I would also like to thank President Trump and Secretary DeVos for their confidence in me. It was Secretary DeVos' vision and record of commitment to students and parents that inspired me to undertake this task.

I would also like to thank my family members who have been so supportive, some of whom are here today.

My wife, Susan, and I have been married almost 38 years. She is an Army daughter, Army wife, and Army mother. Throughout our frequent moves she made each house a home, thirteen altogether, an average of less than three years in each residence. Susan currently mentors a child in a high-poverty elementary school in downtown Columbia, South Carolina.

My son, Bradley, is a veteran of the war in Iraq where he fought as an infantry soldier with the famed 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. He now proudly serves in the South Carolina National Guard. His wonderful wife, Suzanne, is an elementary school teacher at an inner-city, public charter school in Charleston, South Carolina.

My daughter, Ashley, a stay-at-home mom, and her husband Michael, are here. Michael is an attorney with the U.S. Department of Justice.

Finally I would like to thank my older brother, Barrie, a paratrooper, Ranger, and retired infantry colonel with a Ph.D. from Duke. He has been my role model my entire life.

Growing up as an Army brat, I attended eleven different schools in thirteen years, including three high schools. Both of my children attended public school here in the District of Columbia – and they graduated from a public high school in rural South Carolina.

I come from a family of teachers. My parents met when both were teaching high school. My father was teaching PE and coaching; my mother was teaching what was then known as home economics. My brother and I both taught at West Point. My wife and daughter both taught English as a second language, and my wife was also an adult education teacher. My mother-in-law and sister-in-law were both career elementary school teachers. And, as I mentioned, my daughter-in-law is an elementary school teacher.

At an early age, I learned the vital importance of education from the examples of my father and uncle.

My father's parents did not have much education. They were immigrants from Eastern Europe. His mother got as far as sixth-grade, this father only as far as third-grade.

My father, the youngest of four boys, was the only one who finished high school. But, by working, with a small ROTC scholarship, several partial athletic scholarships, and with help from his older brothers, he was able to graduate from the University of New Hampshire. With his education, plus hard work, he ultimately became the NATO commander of the Greek and Turkish armies. And, to the best of my knowledge, he is the only Jewish four-star general in the history of the American Army.

Education was also vital to the success of my uncle. An orphan, he was adopted by a coal mining family in Pennsylvania. He quit school in the seventh-grade to work to earn money for them. To escape, he ran away from home on his seventeenth birthday and lied to enlist in the Army. Despite lacking a high school education, he earned an appointment to West Point. The

education he received there provided the foundation that ultimately led to his becoming the youngest two-star general in American history and U.S. Ambassador to France under President Kennedy.

So now, you understand my personal commitment to education.

You also know my record.

You know I believe that one size does not fit all in education and that no child should be forced to attend a failing school. Lower-income families deserve the same right that upper-income and middle-income families have always enjoyed – that is, to choose a school that is a good fit for their child. Upper-income families have school choice. They can choose to put their children in private schools. Middle-income families, by and large, have school choice. They can move to the suburbs or to highly ranked school districts if the local school is not a good fit. It is predominately low-income families that are trapped in perennially failing schools, with no escape and no options.

You also know that as State Superintendent of Education in South Carolina, I resisted what I perceived as well intentioned, but overly intrusive mandates from Washington. Just as one size does not fit all students, one size does not fit all states. I believe most education policy should be left to the states to develop solutions that best address their own unique circumstances.

The contentious issues involved in K-12 education seem to me to be pretty simple. Does one support the school system or does one support the school students? My stance has been clear: students come first.

Also, as a college president for ten years, I learned how difficult it can be to comply with the requirements imposed from Washington. I'm aware of the "Report of the Task Force on

Federal Regulation on Higher Education” and look forward to working to reduce the enormous administrative burden.

In closing, I have lived a life of service. For 31 years I served my country as an infantry soldier in the United States Army, with duty in Vietnam, Korea, Panama, and the Middle East. For ten years I served my faith as president of a faith-based college. And for four years I served the people of South Carolina as their elected State Superintendent of Education. I view possible confirmation as Deputy Secretary of Education as yet another chance to serve the nation I love so dearly, and the culmination of a career of service.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you. I look forward to your questions.