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HEARING BRIEF

## ESEA Reauthorization

### SENATE HELP COMMITTEE INAUGURAL HEARING ON ESEA REAUTHORIZATION

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March 10, 2010

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On Tuesday, March 9, the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions held its first in a planned series of six hearings on the topic of reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The title of the hearing, “ESEA Reauthorization: The Importance of a World-Class K-12 Education for our Economic Success” was a theme reflected in the testimony of all of the witnesses and questions from Committee members.

#### WITNESSES

- Andreas Schleicher, Head of the Indicators and Analysis Division, Education Directorate, Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, Paris, France
- Dennis Van Roekel, President, National Education Association, Washington, DC
- Charles Butt, Chairman and CEO, H-E-B, San Antonio, TX
- John Castellani, President, Business Roundtable, Washington, DC

#### MEMBERS PRESENT

Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA)

Senator Chris Dodd (D-CT)

Senator Michael Bennet (D-CO)

Senator Patty Murray (D-WA)

Senator Bernie Sanders (D-VT)

Senator Jack Reed (D-RI)

Senator Kay Hagan (D-NC)

Senator Jeff Merkley (D-OR)

Senator Al Franken (D-MN)

Ranking Member Mike Enzi (R-WY)

Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN)

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## **OPENING STATEMENT & DISCUSSION**

In Chairman Harkin's opening remarks he said the witness testimony from educators and experts would guide the "bipartisan process" underway to rewrite the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). He described his vision for this reauthorization as one that protects the goals of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) while fixing those elements of the law that are not working. He praised Ranking Member Enzi as his partner in this effort and reminded his colleagues of the tremendous stakes before them. In his view, "the competitiveness of our children and grandchildren in the global marketplace and the future well-being of our country" rest in the balance.

Harkin asserted that by 2014, a high school diploma would be inadequate preparation for 75 percent of new jobs. A concern that he asserted and was echoed by all witnesses and Members present was the lagging performance of U.S. students in college degree attainment; the country was once 1<sup>st</sup> in the endeavor, and now ranks 12<sup>th</sup> and is falling. Harkin endorsed the President's goal to restore the country former frontrunner position by 2020, and said the only way to reach that goal was to ensure that all children leave high school college- and career-ready. Acknowledging the serious shortfall in the production of scientists and engineers, Harkin said the education's problems stretch beyond that failing, with the U.S. ranking 19<sup>th</sup> in high school graduation rates.

Senator Enzi picked up on several themes raised by the Chairman. He agreed that NCLB has changed the way we consider student achievement in the Nation's schools and reiterated the importance of college- and career-ready expectations for high school graduates.

## **WITNESS STATEMENTS**

Andreas Schleicher emphasized the tremendous economic cost the U.S. suffers as a result of to the United States of the current achievement gap. For the 28% of students who suffer as a result of the gap, he estimated a cost of \$78 trillion over their lifetime. This was on top of their bleak future prospects. Unlike European nations, the U.S. education system is highly decentralized which accentuates the challenge of raising academic standards for all students. In his view, the Common Core Standards Initiative now underway might positively influence this effort. Schleicher pointed to what he terms the "single bar problem" of NCLB and urged a change via reauthorization to a multi-layered, coherent assessment system.

Schleicher emphasized the ability of those nations where students surpass the U.S. in academic achievement to attract the best and the brightest into the teaching profession. Improving academic outcomes for students is not just a matter of spending more money, but rather investing wisely. The U.S., according to Schleicher, spends more per student on education than other countries, with disappointing results.

Dennis Van Roekel, speaking for the 3.2 million teachers who belong to the NEA, asked the Committee to "step back" and consider the overall purpose of public education as they begin the task of rewriting ESEA. In his views this includes assuring equal opportunity, equipping students with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, assuring access to great teachers

and providing an education that reflects the needs of the whole child. NCLB had the unintended consequence of narrowing curriculum to math and reading. He noted that the accountability provisions of NCLB, though they need revision, are important and the NEA supports efforts to provide greater flexibility in how to reach the goal of overall student achievement. In Van Roekel's view, the most important ingredient in a successful school is collaborative planning that involves all stakeholders. The federal statute is imperative to eliminating barriers and disparities in public education. NEA stands ready to work with the Congress to rewrite the ESEA to make sure it accomplishes its intended purposes, according to Van Roekel.

Charles Butt spoke about his family's long history supporting public education and various charitable causes as the largest private employer in the state of Texas. He reiterated earlier testimony noting that gaps in educational achievement have imposed the equivalent of a "permanent national recession", referring to a recent McKinsey study on the economic effects of the K-12 education system. Looking back on the recommendations of the 1981 "Nation At Risk" report, Butt said that if by 1998, as a nation, performance of African American and Latino students had been elevated to that of white students, the country's GDP would be larger by over \$500 billion annually. He noted that in Texas only 20-25% of new jobs require a college diploma. He urged, however, the coming together of college ready and workplace ready graduates, noting the differences in their competencies, but asserting both are vital to driving the nations' economic engine.

Butt got a very positive response from the audience when he described the greatest challenge facing public school teachers today is a student body that is "over entertained and distracted". He said this results in pressure on teachers to be "more powerful" than ever before in order to engage learners in the important task of education.

The final witness, John Castellani, spoke on behalf of the Business Coalition for Student Achievement (BCSA), a joint venture of the Business Roundtable and the Chamber of Commerce. The diverse members of this coalition are united in the belief that improving America's K-12 education system is necessary to providing a strong foundation for global competitiveness. Viewing the reauthorization of the ESEA as a top priority for the Congress, the business community believes all students should graduate from high school without the need for remediation, prepared for college and the workplace. According to Castellani, the recession, the staggering unemployment rates and the reordering of the world's economy following the global financial collapse "have brought the U.S. weaknesses in education into sharp relief". Citing U.S. Department of Education statistics, he asserted only 19 percent of ninth graders graduate from high school; 28 percent of students pursuing 2 year degrees finish in 3 years; and for students pursuing bachelor's degrees, that percentage is only 56 percent within 6 years.

Castellani's testimony was accompanied by ESEA recommendations from the BCSA that identified several "needs" for a new law: 1.) the need for internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare U.S. students for college and the workplace; 2.) the need to hold all schools accountable for student success and closing the so-called

“dropout factories”; 3.) the need to measure and reward teacher and administrator success; 4.) the need for a client-centered approach to public education; 5.) the need for data systems that inform instruction, improvement and interventions; 6.) the need to invest in school improvement and encourage innovation; and 7.) the need to establish a dedicated strategy and funding stream to improve STEM education.

## MEMBER QUESTIONS

The first question from Senator Harkin related to how other countries attract the most talented graduates into teaching. Schleicher said the key is creating an environment that appeals to “knowledge workers”. Van Roekel pointed to the need to reform how teachers are paid and to address issues such as class size. Schleicher rebutted that point, saying that class sizes in the U.S. were generally lower than those in the countries that surpassed them in terms of student achievement.

Senator Enzi asked what changes might be considered that would not add to the cost of public education. Butt noted that Texas scores on the so-called “nation’s report card”, or the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), exceed those in California even though California spends significantly more per pupil, verifying the point that money is not always the answer, though certainly schools need adequate resources. Senator Dodd asked for more information about what individual businesses can do to improve outcomes for students and then commented on the important role of principals.

Senator Alexander talked about his effort as the Governor of Tennessee to work with the teacher union to establish a system of rewards for outstanding teachers. He asked Van Roekel to explain the position of the NEA regarding the Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) program, demanding a simply yes or no in response. Van Roekel explained that the NEA in fact supports TIF, as long as teachers are involved in the development of the program and rewards are not based on the results of a single high stakes test.

Senator Murray described legislation she had introduced to promote innovations that would lead to better preparation of students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace. She asked the witnesses to outline exactly what students need to learn in K-12 education to be college- and career-ready. The ability to think critically was most important, according to the witnesses.

Senator Reed turned again to the data presented by Schleicher, asking if racial and economic disparities are taken into account in these international comparisons. Schleicher said, “Up to a point.” That led to comments from Senator Sanders on the shortcomings of U.S. social policy that does not allow adequate childcare or attention to the needs of new parents and the fact that the country spends more money putting young people in jail than providing a high quality education.

Other topics addressed by Senators more in the form of comments than questions included limitations to current assessment systems and the need for their revision (Merkley); a need for the dedication of more federal resources for the recruitment and

training of principals and teacher leaders (Franken); and the challenge of scaling good ideas across school districts (Bennet).

In response to these remarks, Butt noted a national apathy toward public education, as well as an over confidence about the U.S.'s position as a leader in the global marketplace. In his view, it has been the move of the establishment away from the public schools that has led to their decline. Parents and grandparents lose interest in local schools once their children leave and where resources allow, individuals often chose private education. Van Roekel added that turnover of staff and school leaders also made implementing comprehensive reforms challenging for many districts. These comments resonated with the audience and with the Members.

In closing, Senator Harkin mentioned the strong research base that exists for a greater investment of education dollars in children right from birth and said that issue would be addressed as the Committee works to reauthorize the ESEA.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Committee will hold a series of hearings on ESEA reauthorization. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan will appear before the panel on the morning of March 17<sup>th</sup> to discuss the Administration's blueprint for rewriting the law. For more information, including testimony from witnesses, visit:

<http://help.senate.gov/hearings/hearing/?id=201fe113-5056-9502-5d36-207b90e58b96>.