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Raising the Bar: Exploring State and Local Efforts to Improve Accountability
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Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to address you today. I've been asked to talk about innovative State approaches to accountability and ways in which States and school districts are taking the lead on education reform. I hope that you find my remarks useful as you continue your deliberations on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

About EdisonLearning

Before I discuss what we're seeing "on the ground," I want to provide some information about EdisonLearning to give context to my testimony. EdisonLearning is an education solutions provider dedicated to improving outcomes for students in elementary and secondary schools around the world. We currently partner with schools and organizations in 25 States, the United Kingdom, and the Middle East. Our core competencies, reflected in our extensive portfolio of K-12 solutions, are the product of nearly two decades of research, practice, and refinement based on quantitative and qualitative data. EdisonLearning has nearly twenty years of expertise in education reform, partnering with school districts, governments, and charter authorizers and boards. We are a State-approved turnaround partner in 12 States: California, Colorado, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Missouri, South Carolina, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

State and District Trends

Recent initiatives to provide States more flexibility and incentives for innovation have given us a glimpse of what States are doing with respect to accountability for student success and expanding transparency, including through new school grading systems, and providing interventions to turn around persistently low-performing schools. The following are some of the major trends in these areas that we have seen in our work with States, districts, and schools.

Partnering for Success

One of the most effective practices that we have seen is the use of external partners to improve the quality of public education. Several States have developed a Request for Proposals (RFP) process for approving external partners, using certain State and federal resources, and many require that low-performing schools partner with an approved organization and take legislatively defined steps to increase student achievement. Mass Insight's School Turnaround Group, which is a national leader in school turnaround research, counsels, "[a]n RFP (Request for Proposal) is a critical first step in vetting and selecting Lead Partners to manage school turnaround efforts."¹ By rigorously vetting providers through a competitive process, States can set a high bar for services, have better oversight of improvement efforts, and insulate districts from the costs associated with competitive procurement, while still giving districts the flexibility to select providers that best meet their needs. Some States also allow districts to choose partners that are not on the State-approved list if these partners offer proven improvement strategies. We have observed increased interest at the district level in partnering for professional development—often in specific content areas—and innovative approaches to instruction.

¹ School Turnaround Group (2011). *Forging partnerships for turnaround: Emerging lessons from state RFP processes*. Mass Insight Education.

Comprehensive Turnaround Partnerships

Comprehensive turnaround support continues to find an increasingly receptive audience at the State level. “Comprehensive” means different things in different contexts; it can range from hands-on instructional improvement services to full management of educational and operational components of a school. One State that is relatively prescriptive in its requirements for low-performing schools is Indiana, where we are currently working with four schools to increase student achievement.

Under Indiana law, if a school remains in the lowest performance category for five consecutive years, the State Board must consider assigning a “special management team” to operate all or part of the school. In addition, the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) has developed lists of approved “Lead Partners” and “Turnaround School Operators” that may provide targeted or comprehensive support to struggling schools.

Within this system, EdisonLearning is currently working closely with the IDOE to turn around one of the State’s lowest-performing high schools in Gary, Indiana. We conducted a comprehensive needs assessment of the school to determine what interventions were needed to accelerate achievement. Based on this “Collaborative Quality Analysis,” we developed a detailed plan to address the school climate and culture, which we found to be major factors in the school’s low academic performance. This year we have begun to implement our whole school reform model, with a focus on the school climate and community engagement. Our early “wins” point to long-term success. We have seen increased family and community engagement and significant achievement gains in Reading and Math in grades 11 and 12. We have also begun working with an intermediate school in Marion, Indiana.

Virginia has a similarly robust accountability system and conducted its own RFP process in 2009-10 to identify qualified lead partners. Only four organizations, including EdisonLearning, were deemed to meet the State department of education’s standards for high-quality, comprehensive school improvement services. When we partnered with our first Virginia schools in 2010, we met some resistance to our presence, but that quickly changed as we have been able to demonstrate our ability to turn around low-performing schools by strengthening school leadership, improving the use of data, and supporting standards-based instruction.

In addition, several other Virginia school divisions have expressed interest in turnaround or dropout recovery programs. The aggressive bipartisan effort of Governor Bob McDonnell to enact further reform measures in the Commonwealth has raised hope that more schools will have the opportunity to benefit from additional help in implementing turnaround strategies. Key among the new reforms is the creation of the Opportunity Educational Institution to enable State takeover of failing schools similar to Louisiana’s Recovery School District (RSD) and Tennessee’s Achievement School District.

As I mentioned earlier, EdisonLearning is an approved partner in 12 States. While some of these States have developed well-defined intervention systems to support low-achieving schools, others seem hesitant to follow through with the type of successful interventions that I’ve described. Federal policy should encourage comprehensive turnaround partnerships without dictating the specific strategies to be implemented. Where No Child Left Behind fell short was in dictating rigid turnaround options rather than giving States flexibility to implement promising, research-based strategies that would meet the needs of a particular school.

Targeted Partnerships

Another way in which States work with outside providers such as EdisonLearning is by partnering to provide high-quality, targeted embedded support, including professional development, training, coaching, and modeling. This trend is no coincidence. The advent of more rigorous State standards and their focus on preparing students for college and careers requires thoughtful unpacking, mapping, and pacing of curriculum and instruction to meet the call for college and career readiness.

State-run Districts

As we will likely hear today from State Superintendent John White, Louisiana pioneered the modern State-run model in 2003 when the legislature established the RSD, an entity that was originally focused on turning around low-performing schools in New Orleans. The RSD has fostered significant achievement gains and elimination of the achievement gap between students in Orleans Parish and those in the rest of the State.² It is a frequently referenced model for State intervention. Leading the next generation of State-run turnaround districts are the Achievement School District in Tennessee, District 180 in Kentucky, and the Education Achievement System in Michigan. Kentucky in particular has done an excellent job of holding its District 180 schools accountable for implementing ambitious improvement strategies.

Keeping It “In-house”

Another trend that we have seen is a State-level commitment to deliver professional development and turnaround support “in-house” through statewide or regional support networks. Unfortunately, these kinds of initiatives are logistically complex, and many States do not have the capacity to provide individualized support to thousands of schools. Large-scale turnaround is a formidable task, but qualified organizations like EdisonLearning can help States realize economies of scale in the delivery of high-quality school improvement supports. In Hawaii, where we support 55 schools across four islands, we work with clusters of schools to ensure fidelity to best practice while providing highly customized services.

Identifying School Needs

States, districts, and schools have embraced the concept of data-driven decision-making as an important component of school improvement. Data are the roadmap of a successful improvement journey; they tell us where we are, where we want to be, and what we must do to get there. Thus, many States and districts are requiring a comprehensive school needs assessment to inform improvement planning and implementation. We have seen RFPs that explicitly require a school diagnostic review. This is another area in which some States and districts have taken a Do-It-Yourself approach, with State or district teams conducting needs assessments themselves. In our experience, the objective eye of a third party is critical to the conduct of an accurate review. The collaborative nature of EdisonLearning’s own in-depth evaluation makes it an objective assessment that engages teachers and administrators and allows for meaningful customization of services.

Supporting English Language Learners

Across the nation, we are seeing greater focus on supporting English Language Learners. Subgroup reporting requirements have strengthened transparency and accountability for educating students whose first language is not English. Consequently, we have seen an increase in the number of RFPs that

² *Transforming Public Education in New Orleans: The Recovery School District*. The Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University <http://www.coweninstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/History-of-the-RSD-Report-2011.pdf>

explicitly require professional development and support to help teachers and administrators meet the needs of English Language Learners. Comprehensive strategies that extend beyond the classroom to engage and empower not only students, but also their families, have been the most successful. Similarly, strategies that foster integration rather than working in isolation yield better results. This is why EdisonLearning's philosophy is one of inclusion—we train *all* teachers together to support *all* students through differentiated instruction and intervention instead of creating instructional silos.

Rethinking High School

The importance of an effective high school design cannot be ignored. For this reason, EdisonLearning is one of the few school improvement partners that truly differentiate school improvement services for elementary and secondary schools. In addition to innovative blended learning programs and creative uses of technology, we have noted the following trends:

- RFPs explicitly seeking expertise in improving high schools (as opposed to lower grade levels)
- Greater emphasis on competency-based and experiential learning
- A focus on the Common Core
- Increasing willingness to offer flexibility and wrap-around supports to students whose life circumstances place them at risk of disengagement
- Attempts to minimize the need for remediation in post-secondary education

The recent shift in graduation reporting requirements highlighted the need for high school reform. What is needed now is a set of policies that promote innovative, data-driven approaches to secondary education in conjunction with accountability systems that reflect a new post-secondary reality. One way in which States and districts are working to improve outcomes is through the expanded use of technology; however, as educators work to engage students in an increasingly digital society—especially at the high school level—many are still finding policies written for an analog world. For example, blended learning programs typically emphasize competency-based learning, while longstanding policies focus on the amount of time spent in the classroom.³

Improving Education through Technology

EdisonLearning is already working with many districts to incorporate innovative educational solutions within its school improvement strategies, including individual online courses and blended learning environments. For example, at our partner school in Gary, Indiana, students not only have access to traditional coursework in the brick-and-mortar classroom, but they can also enroll in a rich variety of online courses including core subjects and electives with a STEM emphasis. Consistent with the school's focus on college and career readiness, our courses require students to use technology in the classroom the same way it is used in the real world: to enhance productivity, efficiency, creative expression, communication, and access to information.

In our experience, the most compelling example of the effective use of blended learning is for the engagement of students who have dropped out of school or are at risk of doing so. Through a strategic partnership with Magic Johnson Enterprises, we have been able to serve students who want to graduate but find the obstacles overwhelming. In order to adequately support these students, our Magic Johnson Bridgescape® Academies combine 1) a blended instructional model, 2) an individualized instruction path for each student, and 3) the counseling and coaching necessary to earn a high school diploma and

³ Bailey, J., Ellis, S., Schneider, C., Vander Ark, T. *Blended Learning Implementation Guide*. Digital Learning Now.

achieve success beyond graduation. EdisonLearning currently partners with districts in 6 States to operate 17 Magic Johnson Bridgescape® Academies.

In order for these types of innovative solutions to be successfully incorporated into a strategy or framework for school improvement, there must be mechanisms in place to allow for flexibility and innovation. Examples of such mechanisms include seat-time waivers, competency-based credit, and a general recognition of online and blended learning. Ohio was the proving ground for the Magic Johnson Bridgescape® dropout prevention and recovery model because it pioneered special accountability provisions for high schools designed to re-engage dropouts. The results were overwhelmingly positive:

- 64% of eligible students received their high school diploma and continued on the path to post-secondary education and the world of work.
- Eight out of ten of our Ohio Magic Johnson Bridgescape® Academies made AYP.
- 74% of students in the program at the end of the 2011-12 school year returned for the 2012-13 school year and continued working toward a high school diploma.

Conclusion

There is a role for the federal government to play in incentivizing data-driven reform, and we commend efforts to promote innovation that leads to better outcomes. At the same time, our experience tells us that 1) these incentives could be made more effective in several ways, and 2) ultimately, reform cannot happen if States, districts, schools, and communities do not buy into it and are not held accountable for it. Specific lessons that we've learned from our partnerships are:

- Incentives for improving low-performing schools are a necessity—regardless of where they come from, and so is funding to support them; however, these incentives are most effective when States and districts use the money to identify and implement proven strategies to improve the quality of education and increase student achievement.
- Prescription must include specific consequences for low performance, including partnering with experts to improve teaching and learning. Such provisions must be mandatory rather than permissive or precatory.
- The external partner requirement must be triggered early. The longer a school struggles, the greater the chances of a self-fulfilling culture of defeat will settle in, making change even more difficult. Early intervention is key in improving schools.
- When States develop lists of approved partners from which districts and schools may choose, they have better oversight of improvement efforts.
- Federal incentives help, but States and districts must collaborate with each other to lead reform efforts.
- State-run districts must have a clear mandate, ambitious timelines, and dedicated funding. They must be eligible for federal funding.

Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act presents a tremendous opportunity to further innovation that leads to measurable, sustainable improvement for all students. We all agree that schools must be held accountable for teaching *all* students and cannot walk away from failure. The next generation ESEA must balance the need for greater State and local flexibility with the need to encourage increased accountability and transparency.