

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF JANET BARRESI,  
OKLAHOMA STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC  
INSTRUCTION**

TO THE U.S. HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND THE WORKFORCE

*APRIL 7, 2011*

Chairman Kline and Honorable Members of the Committee on Education and the Workforce, I am pleased to offer testimony today on education reforms and to address how I believe we can better promote flexibility and innovation.

I took office in January amid a bipartisan groundswell of support in Oklahoma for education reform. Most Oklahomans recognize we're in crisis in education in our state.

In March, we learned that nearly 43 percent of first-time freshmen who entered Oklahoma's public colleges in the fall of 2009 were not prepared for college.

In January, results from the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that 72 percent of Oklahoma fourth-graders taking the test and 75 percent of eighth-graders taking the test fell below "proficient" in science.

And research by Stanford economist Eric Hanushek that compared top-performing math students all over the world showed that Oklahoma ranked far down on the list near developing or struggling nations like Bulgaria, Chile and Thailand.

These results are like a dash of cold water. We understand mediocre doesn't cut it anymore, and we're taking action.

Just three weeks ago, I launched the 3R Agenda — a commitment to new fundamentals for the 21st century. The new 3Rs for our state's future are: Rethink, Restructure and Reform.

RETHINK is a complete reassessment of how we're delivering education to empower parents, children and teachers, and to embrace new tools like digital learning.

RESTRUCTURE involves a transformation of Oklahoma's State Department of Education.

I'll focus more on the third 'R' — REFORM — because it is the primary reason I am here today.

We're now at the halfway point in our State Legislature's annual legislative session, and significant progress has been made on a number of reform bills.

It appears we will implement a grading system for schools and school districts — an annual A through F report card just like students receive, so that parents can determine how a school is performing without having to interpret obscure or confusing metrics.

We will also likely end social promotion after the third grade — so students aren't entering their most critical learning years unprepared.

And I am urging passage of legislation enacting tuition tax credits in Oklahoma to offer parents more and better choices. Under the legislation, business and individuals could qualify for tax credits for contributions to eligible scholarship-granting organizations, and those organizations, in turn, would offer scholarships to qualifying families in need.

But just as we embark on legislative implementation of the 3R Agenda, we are mindful of potential obstacles if the federal government is too inflexible. I am also hopeful that, while policymakers debate the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind, reformers will follow the lead of states like Oklahoma.

A few examples.

Under the current implementation of No Child Left Behind, the Adequate Yearly Progress yardstick evaluation is rudimentary and does not provide meaningful information to parents. But most importantly, it does not recognize the ultimate goal of college and career ready status for all students facing the 21st century workplace. By contrast, Oklahoma's new A through F school report card system will offer easy-to-understand results for parents, and it is based on a number of different measurements that incorporate gains and improvement.

Another example: As Oklahoma seeks to end social promotion after the 3rd grade, many districts would like to fund portions of this effort with federal funds. But it appears this would not be possible currently because of federal restrictions on supplementing versus supplanting. This demonstrates the ways in which entrenched federal guidelines present some barriers to innovative state policies.

On the one hand, the U.S. Department of Education has issued guidelines that on the surface seem to offer states more flexibility to meet local needs. But there seems to be a disconnect between good intentions at the top level and what actually occurs in practice.

And let's consider the simple reform of tuition tax credits. Federal law offers parents in low-performing schools the opportunity to transfer to another public school. This isn't true choice. Oklahoma's reforms will offer parents an array of more choices — rather than only the option of transferring from one public school to another. I urge reforms that follow this same pathway by incentivizing states to provide an array of options for students.

As all participating states prepare to transition to Common Core curriculum standards, more flexibility is also needed in the use of federal funds for professional development that would support effective instructional practices. Additionally, broadening the scope of the designation of Title programs to include a wider array of subject matter, such as STEM initiatives, would help enable states to offer a more challenging curriculum.

Mr. Chairman and honorable members of the committee, the bottom line is this: we can turn our crisis in Oklahoma into an opportunity, but only if we are prepared to embrace the kinds of bold reforms that fundamentally transform our education system for the better — and only if the federal government is prepared to work with states like ours to allow the flexibility we need in order to innovate.

Thank you.