

**Testimony of Lisa Graham Keegan
House Committee on Education and the Workforce
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Mr. Chairman and Members, thank you very much for the opportunity to speak with you today. It is an honor.

I am well aware that this committee needs no introduction to the desperate state of affairs in American education. When I had the privilege a few years ago to offer insights for a McKinsey report on our achievement gaps, I was struck by their observation that the economic cost of under educating our youth was best represented as a permanent two trillion dollar recession.

And that analysis obviously offers only an economic barometer for a staggering loss of human potential. The enormity of our challenge can feel paralyzing, until we look very closely at the transformation already underway.

The reality is that genuine shifts in attitude, policy and practice began twenty years ago, and are dramatically reshaping American education. The changes are being driven by a vast network of formally and informally connected education leaders; hugely talented, intelligent, creative and relentless. They are using every possible avenue available to them...innovative practice, new laws, new technologies, and disciplined recruitment... in order to overcome a frankly calcified and outdated system.

This is not about one narrow policy, or a single set of political ideologies. This transformation is marked by a basic belief: our students can and should be leaders in academic attainment. No equivocation, no apology, no excuses.

The simplest description of what is going on around the country is that every state is moving away from the traditional system of one school assignment and one set of policies that govern practice for everyone in a school district. While states have not yet created wholesale revisions to assigned public education, they have allowed and encouraged these moves away from it. The key to understanding education in America today is to understand we are already deep in the midst of this desperately needed transformation.

For example, the shift from school assignment to parent choice is fairly radical. Nationwide, nearly one third of students no longer attend their "assigned" school. Just this week-end, Arizona's largest newspaper highlighted a school district in Phoenix where 75 % of students now opt out of their assigned school into another option. Instead of their assigned school, parents are choosing another

district school out of boundary, a public charter school, a private school, an online school, or simply to home school.

School choice has gone mainstream. As has teacher choice. This entire decades long transformation has been led by teachers and educators of every stripe. Finally. Again.

When our nation first envisioned a system of public schools, the quality of the system lay in the hands of the school teacher. He or she was hired to create the school, lead the school, and manage the school. The effectiveness of the teacher leader has always been the most important determinant of success in any school.

Over time, however, as systems began to centralize and hundred page contracts took the place of leadership, the role of the teacher has not become less important, but made less effective by illogical constraints. And it has been teachers who fought their way back to the head of this transformation.

Nearly every state has now created a way for teachers to create and offer their schools to students. We now have “franchises” of schools based on a particular learning style or philosophy. Some are private, some are public charter schools, some are district schools. Hundreds of thousands of students and teachers are benefiting the distribution of these successful school models, be they groups like the KIPP schools, Uncommon Schools, or the Noble Network of schools in Chicago, or hundreds of other teacher-led schools across the country.

The schools are marked by a specialization in instructional practice, or perhaps a focus on subject areas such as the arts or science and technology. These specialized schools mirror practices begun in magnet schools, and many of the best schools nationally are intra-district specialized schools. They are led by master teachers who want to lead, and who have the freedom to select their colleagues...who also choose them.

States are also welcoming new learning technologies and online schools, with fully half the states now offering full time on-line schooling. And online instruction has in turn led to the creation of “hybrid” schools, where technology and tradition blend to create some of the fastest pace growth in achievement we have seen to date. Again, those models were created by teachers who either created or immediately understood the potential of new learning technologies.

Most importantly, this evolution was not borne of an imposed structure. This movement grew, and continues to grow, from the talent, ingenuity, and perseverance of American educators. The biggest shift we see is that educators themselves have created pathways that allow them to serve students directly.

The energy in this movement gives its students and the nation so much more than simple achievement gains. The energy feeds on a belief in excellence, in potential, in the power of being able to contribute to your community. The education revolution is immediately identifiable not by a type of school or governance, but by its belief in the students it serves. And that makes all the difference. Where they are succeeding, we must find every way possible to help.

And this is a critical moment for our educational transformation. What all of us do next will either advance or hinder acceleration in achievement. And while it is always refreshing to listen to national leaders espouse affinity for locally controlled solutions versus top-down mandates, caution is in order. Where education is concerned, the most successful local action has had to develop outside the traditional confines of “local control”.

Because unfortunately, “local” lost out long ago in school districts, and “control” took over. School district control is dominated by the interests of national organizations whose power dwarfs that of their individual members or the communities they are meant to serve. And that has to be taken seriously. In a world where rapid improvement must be the imperative, the question is how best to break through illogical yet calcified structures. Or more specifically, how to allow those who are willing... to break through.

Current school district regulations that prevent individualized personnel arrangements, prevent a school leader from walking in to observe a classroom, prohibit the use of student achievement data when assessing teacher performance, or prevent dismissal of clearly incapable teachers, are all still hallmarks of “local control”.

And the organizations who support those regulations do not sit silent when their colleagues choose to opt out and create something more powerful for students. It has been a battle, and the “on the ground” realities have shifted. Ironically, true local control has moved to schools of choice, and true teacher leadership and potential exists outside the teacher contracts originally intended to empower their work.

Hopefully what happens now at every level, is that we focus on clearing the way for those who seek to excel. Sometimes it takes nothing more than aligning terms. About 15 years ago, the Congress took decisive action in support of state initiatives to proliferate public charter schools by defining them in federal law as local education agencies. That simple action not only put the schools and their students on equal footing for federal education grants, it enabled a fledgling movement to withstand the opposition of national organizations.

As the transformation in schooling occurs nationwide, there will be many such opportunities for support. These initiatives are not top-down, they are entrepreneurial in nearly every sense. But they fight traditional regulation in ways we often don't recognize until they explain it to us. There is potential for a serious and effective partnership to accelerate excellence here, albeit one that walks a fine balance.

Where schools and innovative practices are proving successful, and where parents are seeking them in numbers that far outweigh available space, there is no time to waste. It's a great place to start. Let's start with the known cures, and allow them to flourish. We have to ask these leaders what it will take, and try to make sure they get it.

Thank you.