



Written Testimony
Dr. Amy F. Sichel
Superintendent of Schools
House Committee on Education and the Workforce
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Chairman Kline, Ranking Member Miller, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting me to testify today regarding the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and specifically how the No Child Left Behind federal regulations impact public schools throughout the nation, in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and specifically in the Abington School District. My testimony is from the perspective of a public school educator, with a breadth of educational knowledge and experience.

I am Amy Sichel, the Superintendent of Schools for the Abington School District in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania as well as an Adjunct Associate Professor at the Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania. I serve as the President of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators and am an elected representative of the Governing Board for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to the American Association of School Administrators. Abington School District is a suburban Philadelphia district with 7500 students and is both racially and socioeconomically diverse. I have over 35 years of experience as an educator, which includes 11 years as a school Superintendent, all within the Abington School District.

I am here to comment about the impact of the NCLB federal regulations and reporting requirements on school districts and will provide examples from our experiences in the Abington School District. Please know that the Abington School District complies with all federal regulations, those of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and that of our local school board.

It is important to begin by stating that some aspects of NCLB have had a positive impact on the schools throughout the nation and specifically the Abington School District. In Abington we have always believed in the importance of having academic standards and common assessments to drive accountability. Since the early 1990s, the Abington Schools have used a goal-setting approach based on a model of continuous improvement for all students. Beginning

in 2002, Pennsylvania's compliance with NCLB reinforced our long practice of accountability. In fact, the NCLB requirement to "dig deeper" by looking at the results for disaggregated groups as well as at the results for all students has improved our practice, strengthened teaching and learning, and produced incredible achievement results in Abington.

However, it is important to note that the present NCLB model has a myriad of weaknesses. To begin, the goal of 100% proficiency by 2014 is unrealistic. This is equivalent to a "one size fits all" model. As you know, public education in the United States is offered to everyone regardless of race, creed, economic status, etc. Public schools educate the best and the brightest as well as the students with the greatest educational needs and with the severest disabilities. For all students, the approach should be based on growth and tied to academic proficiency and standards. One test, at one snapshot in time with a goal of all students achieving proficiency, continues to reinforce a Pass/Fail model and does not promote improved growth in student achievement. An accountability matrix based on 45 cells of All Students with disaggregated groups to define Adequate Yearly Progress is unrealistic and archaic. Good teaching and learning require a standards-based curriculum, with benchmarks and accountability based upon multiple measures. A system based upon Passing or Failing a single target just leads to failure--failure of students, of schools, and of districts; creates a lack of credibility of educators by parents/guardians; and promotes an agenda that is not in the best interest of the American children.

A system of continuous improvement for all students is needed. It must include multiple assessment measures that are reliable and valid with attainable goals and the capability to document individual student and school growth. Let me share with you a quick review of what works in the Abington School District where the success for each student is expected, monitored, and being accomplished.

As I already mentioned, since the early 1990's, Abington School District has used a continuous improvement model to establish academic goals for each school. Prior to NCLB, Abington's principals and teachers were given annual goals, which were based upon the expectation that, when compared to the previous school year, at least 5% more students would be proficient as demonstrated by state-driven and local measures. All schools had improvement teams where administrators, teachers, and parents developed research-based strategies to foster student achievement. Abington School District's overall performance on standardized and state-required achievement tests has been significantly above state and national averages. With the enactment of NCLB, annual goals have been based upon the percents of students demonstrating proficiency as required by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In cases where a school has met or exceeded the state requirement, we have raised the bar for that school.

In reviewing disaggregated data for NCLB in 2005, it was revealed that two distinct achievement gaps existed: the achievement levels of African-American students and the achievement levels of Special Education students.

In response to this information, I developed a novel initiative called *Opportunities to Learn* (OTL), presented it to the board of school directors and, with their approval, began our work toward providing a rigorous academic curriculum for all students. OTL began with a district-wide committee consisting of more than 100 teachers, administrators, students, parents, school board members, and community representatives. The committee focused on issues related to identifying, collecting, and using student data to improve instruction and achievement; student placement in academic courses; support systems to help students achieve; and parental involvement. Under this initiative, the district developed and implemented a plan to “de-track” the secondary school program (grades 7 through 12); to include, to the maximum extent possible, students with IEPs in mainstreamed classes; and to organize the school day schedule to provide academic support opportunities, where needed, during the school day and not at the expense of the Arts.

The plan resulted in each core subject area offering only two levels of rigorous college preparatory instruction: a college preparatory course and an Honors/Advanced Placement course. This approach was based on the research approach of Dr. Jeannie Oakes of the Ford Foundation and formerly a professor at UCLA and the model endorsed by Mr. Jay Mathews, education columnist for *The Washington Post*. Students were given increased opportunities to apply to take Honors/Advanced Placement courses. Courses in mathematics and science were strengthened, and expectations were raised so that all students would complete both Algebra I and biology in one academic year rather than over two years. Formative assessments for benchmarking were used to identify students’ needs so that all students who were not proficient on the previous administration of the Pennsylvania State System of Assessment (PSSA) received individualized support. These interventions included remedial courses during the school day in English/social studies and in mathematics/science, which complemented the college preparatory program and were included in students’ schedules. Local assessments were used to monitor progress. Planned courses of study were revised to emphasize Pennsylvania’s Academic Standards. Essentially, the goal of academic proficiency became the priority by providing rigorous college and career preparatory instruction to all.

Since the implementation of *Opportunities to Learn*, the disparity between the performance of the district’s All Student group and the district’s African-American and IEP disaggregated groups has been narrowed significantly. In particular, at the secondary level the disparity between the percentages of the All Student group and those of the disaggregated groups achieving advanced/proficient scores on the PA assessment in reading and mathematics has been reduced by anywhere from 7 to 36 percentage points. In mathematics the African-American group has increased from 54% to 60% proficient and the IEP group from 28% to 61% proficient in five years. The African-American group has risen from 63% to 68% proficient in reading, and the IEP group from 34% to 66% proficient in reading. This has all been accomplished with the percent of the All Student group achieving proficiency being far greater than the average percents of students who are proficient at both the state and national level.

In addition, cohort data for students with IEPs provide evidence that, as students moved from grade 8 to grade 11, the percentage of those who are advanced/proficient on the state assessment and on other measures increased as did the percentage of students passing courses. Most importantly, all Abington School District schools attained Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for the last three years and the elementary schools since 2002. The *Opportunities to Learn* initiative, with the focus on data-driven strategies, addressed the challenges and achieved these positive results. Also, we realized some unexpected positive results, for over the five-year period of the initiative, the percent of students graduating and continuing on to higher education increased from 80% to 90% with over \$4 million in scholarships awarded to the graduating class in June of 2011. The College Board recognized the Abington School District with an AP Honor Roll designation. This recognition reflects the district's increased enrollment in AP courses and continuing to maintain high results on the AP tests. There is no doubt that the disaggregated groups, as well as the All Student group, benefited greatly.

All involved have taken time to reflect about this initiative and its results, because it has not only benefited the students but has also increased our knowledge with respect to focused, carefully crafted, goal-oriented results based upon academic standards and multiple assessments as well as with respect to the role of leadership as in affecting system change. The staff, community, and the entire district administration rolled up their sleeves and demonstrated a commitment to the common goal of "Excellence is our Standard and Achievement is the Result!"

These successes and documented increases in student achievement lead me to ask you to reauthorize ESEA with the following provisions:

1. Invest in and support a standards-based academic model driven by assessment and leading to accountability.
2. In ESEA, support a growth model which focuses on individual student performance with multiple measures and approaches to promote and document student achievement. Use of standardized measures, formative assessments, etc., which are reliable and valid with multiple pathways to document student growth are required.
3. Allow states and districts to recognize and support different growth rates based upon the individual abilities and needs of students.
4. Base ESEA on believable and attainable goals and expectations for all students and subgroups congruent with state academic standards.
5. Encourage the use of research-based approaches based on "what works" to make instructional and organizational decisions.
6. Investigate and research school districts throughout the country that demonstrate that we can produce proficient students. Feature these districts and schools nationally and help others to replicate these successful models, demonstrating "what works."

7. Most importantly, place the locus of control for accountability at the state level with local districts developing assessment models based upon individual student needs for growth.

Local school districts, such as Abington, are moving in ways that improve academic outcomes for all children for we are accountable to our students, our parents, our community, our local school board, and our state. All too often successful models rarely receive attention and recognition. Please give us the benefit of the doubt and stop focusing on the punitive accountability measures prescribed by NCLB. This disheartens students, parents, teachers, and administrators and undermines the success of public education in this country.

Thank you for your time this morning.