



Testimony of James Willcox  
Chief Executive Officer, Aspire Public Schools  
U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and  
Secondary Education  
*“Education Regulations: Burying Schools in Paperwork”*  
March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2011

Good morning Chairman Hunter, Representative Kildee and members of the Committee. Thank you for having me here today.

My name is James Willcox and I am the Chief Executive Officer of Aspire Public Schools. We are the largest public charter school management organization in California. Today we operate 30 public charter schools in low-income communities across the state and serve nearly 10,000 students.

I’m here today to do two things. First, I want to affirm the fact that it is of the upmost importance that we, as an operator of public schools, serve as responsible custodians of public funds. Proper and adequate oversight over all public dollars is integral to the success of our educational system. We must do this in order to maintain the public’s confidence that our tax dollars are used wisely and responsibly. Secondly, I am also here to testify to the fact that, at times, oversight and compliance can make it more difficult for federal funds to flow where they are most needed and to serve the purpose for which they are intended—to support our students.

As a charter school organization, flexibility is a key ingredient to our success. It is this flexibility that allows us to devote more resources to the classroom because we are unburdened by many of the regulations of state and federal categorical programs.

This is unfortunately not the case for most of our colleagues in traditional public schools. We believe that traditional public schools would and should benefit from the same type of flexibility that we enjoy as charter schools. For us, one of the most powerful opportunities that charter schools have created is the opportunity to demonstrate what might be possible with a shift from a compliance-driven system to one that is focused on outcomes—with student achievement as its first priority. Of course, it’s our view that a more flexible, outcomes-focused approach should also demand higher levels of accountability. We believe that this is a powerful marriage of concepts—concepts that are at the heart of the promise of public charter schools.

But even with the higher levels of flexibility that we enjoy, our schools still cannot access federal funding that we are qualified to receive. With limited resources and staff time, we

routinely make decisions to forgo federal funding that is available to our students. Why? Simply put, our teachers, administrators and staff members do not have the time or resources necessary to apply for and manage the compliance and reporting for many federal grants programs—programs that are desperately needed by students that are served by charter management organizations just like ours.

In this time of budget constraints, all of us know that every dollar counts. As a non-traditional system of free, open-enrollment public schools, we depend primarily on federal and state funding to fulfill our commitment to our students and families—a mission to provide small, personalized high-quality public schools to students and families who want and need more high-quality public school choices. At Aspire, we are also very clear on what happens in our schools—we call it “College for Certain.” We are focused on preparing our students not only to graduate from high school, but to graduate prepared to attend and succeed in college and in life.

Across our 30 schools, we are succeeding. Last year, one hundred percent of Aspire’s graduating seniors were accepted to four-year colleges or universities. In five years, we will be graduating at least 500 college bound students each and every year. Preparing our students for college success is critically important, even more so when you consider that most of our students are the first in their family to attend college. Only half of low-income students who graduate from high school move on to institutions of higher learning. Sadly, many don’t graduate at all. Our teachers, parents and administrators are working tirelessly to reverse this trend and the results they are achieving are truly remarkable.

On the 2010 Academic Performance Index, which measures the academic performance of California schools, Aspire schools earned an overall score of 824 out of a possible 1,000, making us the highest-performing public school system serving low-income students in the state of California. In addition, we were recently recognized as one of the world’s 20 most improved school systems by the management consulting firm McKinsey & Company. These results and recognition are a testament to our team and the determination of our students and families to change the odds that are too often stacked against them. As an organization, we believe this is more than a reason to be hopeful—it is a reason to demand more of ourselves to deliver on the promise of public education in every community across the country. It is a reason to focus more on outcomes for all of our students and a reasonable, less burdensome set of compliance requirements for all of our schools.

In California, more and more families are demanding high-quality public schools for their children. Even in these incredibly tough economic times, Aspire is trying to help. We intend to continue bringing our high-performing educational model to even more low-income families across California.

Our ability, however, to fulfill our intentions to continue opening new schools and serving more students is in large part driven by the flexibility we have to direct the majority of our funding to

where it matters most—our students. Today, federal funding accounts for 12 percent of our total public revenue and amounts to approximately 10 million dollars of restricted funding.

At any given time, having the flexibility to allocate your budget to meet the most pressing needs of your students is powerful. In this difficult financial environment, flexibility in school budgets is critical to protect our students from the tough times around them. Traditional public school districts across California and the country have far less flexibility when it comes to the very tough tradeoffs schools are being forced to make.

That said, an already difficult fiscal climate in California is made even more difficult for our organization because many of our funding streams come with a cost, and that is time and paperwork. At any time, this matters because resources should flow to classrooms where the front line work of educating our children is happening every day. In a time like this, it matters even more.

I would like to give you two examples where oversight of federal funds moves beyond what we believe is necessary to ensure proper stewardship of taxpayer money and enters into the realm where it becomes overly burdensome.

## **Title I Funding**

As a public school system that serves more than 70 percent low-income students, we rely on Title I for three percent of our total operational funding. As you know, this program provides financial assistance to schools with high numbers of low-income children to ensure that our schools have the resources they need to ensure that all of our students are achieving academically.

To qualify for or renew Title I funding requires copious amount of paperwork. For each employee funded with Title I monies, we must fill out a personnel activity sheet each month. We must then outline their salary for that month and describe how much of that salary is from Title I funding. Each staff member and his/her principal have to sign these forms on a monthly basis. Across our 30 schools, teachers, principals and administrative staff spend approximately three hours per month filling out compliance paperwork. These are hours taken from supporting our teachers, assisting our families or preparing our students for success in college.

In addition to these monthly reports, we must submit two 30-page reports each year outlining our adherence to Title I under No Child Left Behind. We work to compile these lengthy and cumbersome reports for each school.

Beyond these monthly and periodic reports, we also go through a rigorous annual auditing process. For our audits, we are required to use what is known as “level of effort” calculations, showing that we are using Title I funds to supplement our regular education program, not simply as unrestricted funds for our operating expenses. In order to do this, we pull hundreds of

receipts and invoices from our files. This process involves five staff members and, as you can imagine, a ton of paperwork.

We understand and appreciate the intent to ensure that funding for low-income students is used appropriately, and I hope we can work together to ensure that oversight and compliance does not excessively dilute our effort to focus on what matters most—the achievement of the students we are trying to serve. In short, I hope a new process can be implemented that is less concerned with detailed accountability for inputs and focused more and more on our collective responsibility to deliver high-performing students for some of our most underserved communities.

## **National School Nutrition Funding**

The National School Nutrition program is critical to Aspire families. Currently, more than 6,800 of our students receive free or reduced priced lunch from this invaluable resource.

In order to receive free or reduced priced breakfast and lunch, each year parents must fill out an application, which is then submitted to the program director. Our program director manually enters this data in the computer system to determine whether or not the family qualifies for the program and then communicates the results back to the individual schools to relay to our families. This is a very time consuming process for both staff and administrators during the first few weeks of school, which is one of the busiest times of the school year. Monitoring and implementing this program requires daily tracking of food, students and intake. There is also a large amount of paperwork involved in observations, health inspections and food distribution.

The National School Nutrition Program is one example of a program that is a vital service for our families. It is, however, also a program that is managed by a dedicated staff member and generates more than one and a half hours of daily paperwork at each school site. While ensuring oversight of taxpayer monies is important, it takes time and resources from our classrooms. The costs we incur to staff the various elements of the compliance program come from our schools' operational budgets, lessening our ability to support our students in the classroom. By reducing paperwork in small amounts throughout the food service process, our teachers and staff will be able to redirect that time to their students. One specific example might be multi-year eligibility for our students, or simply establishing eligibility when a child enters school.

Title I and the National School Nutrition Program are two federal programs that support our students, teachers, administrators and school sites in accomplishing our goal of “College for Certain.” When funding streams come available, Aspire is forced to determine if the compliance costs outweigh the benefit of the money. In the past, we have chosen to refrain from receiving federal funds because the compliance requirements of many federal grants do not justify the amount of resources that it would take to apply for and manage these funds.

## **Conclusion**

In order for our schools to continue to grow and provide a high-quality education to students who need it the most, we need your support. Only through streamlining federal grant and reporting processes will Aspire be able to access funding that will ensure that California's low-income population can send their child to the public school of their choice. It is my hope that we can shift our collective mindset to focus on dollars in classrooms and outcomes achieved.

I believe that we should assume a posture that recognizes that compliance and regulations takes resources away from our students. I also believe that the burden of proof should be on rule-making, not on schools, to prove that the costs of oversight don't overly burden our schools—and most importantly, overly dilute the purpose for which the funds were intended. We should focus additionally on lightening the burden of compliance around inputs (what we do) and focus more on what we want schools to achieve with federal funding. Simultaneously, we should implement rewards and recognition for schools and organizations that achieve positive student outcomes—potentially lightening the load when schools have proven that they are able to achieve the intended outcome or objective of federal programs. On the flip side, I also believe that we should consider greater accountability for those schools that fail to serve our students well.

On behalf of nearly 10,000 students we serve in California, I would like to end my comments by thanking you for having me here today. The opportunity to speak with you about the challenges that we face, knowing that you are listening, knowing that you are eager to help and always asking the question “How can we better support our students and our schools?” is inspiring for our families and the communities we serve. I am constantly reminded of our incredible work and the heroism of our teachers and team when I visit our schools and I would like to extend an open invitation to visit an Aspire school to find out what happens when your federal dollars go where they are needed the most—our students. Thank you very much. I would be happy to answer your questions.