

Testimony of Emanuel F. Harper IV  
French Teacher  
Herron High School  
Indianapolis, IN  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education  
February 28, 2013

Chairman Rokita and Ranking Member McCarthy: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on this important subject.

As a French teacher at Herron High School, It's my priority to expose students to different cultures as we become a more globalized society. I am also an adjunct faculty member for Best Practices in World Language for Marian University's Master of Arts in Teaching program. It's here where I prepare the next generation of transition-to-teach candidates on how to most effectively teach world languages. The community is also an important stakeholder as I am a founding member of the Indianapolis chapter of Stand For Children—a grassroots parent and student advocacy non-profit. And, as a policy fellow for Teach Plus, it is important that I help shape the policies that will affect my students.

Of all the great professions, there is no oath teachers take before entering the classroom. But deep within us is an abiding promise we do and **must** make. It is one that must transcend the rancor of socio-economic conditions and decades of preconceived conclusions, one we are entrusted to perform and must faithfully execute. It is one that if broken stunts our nation's prosperity and (more critically) a student's access to the American Dream. This promise we as

teachers must make is that every day we go into the classroom working towards ending the achievement gap that *has* and *continues to* jeopardize our students' futures.

Unfortunately we are here because this promise has not been kept. Fortunately there are at least two remedies—1) implementing stronger evaluative tools for teachers, appropriately weighing student performance and student voice and 2) giving more local flexibility in generating a culture that drives student growth.

I have a deep abiding love and respect for the teaching profession and my content. But as I began my first year teaching at my first school, I recognized that enthusiasm was the benchmark by which teachers were deemed effective. No longer was the focus on how you taught but how the administration *thought* you taught. It created a stagnant environment where students sat in their desks numb. Matt, a former student, exemplified this tendency until he realized that I wasn't going to let him give up. With a lot of effort on both of our parts, he became one of the best students in my class, pleading with me to Skype with him over Spring Break to work on more French. I assure you I obliged.

Yet, I knew there were areas of growth that were simply not being addressed. Without having an objective account of my practice with substantive measurements and indicators, I was left to tease out my performance based on what I "felt". It was unsustainable. I had to leave the school.

I spoke out against this ineffective practice by testifying before the Indiana House Education Committee in favor of a newly implemented Senate Act 1 which strengthens teacher evaluations.

This new act establishes higher standards for teacher performance, basing effectiveness not on degrees and years in a classroom, but on composites like student outcomes and observations. And it is schools like Herron High School, unlike the school I was formally at, where I currently work that are leading the way in this regard.

A public charter school located in the heart of downtown Indianapolis, Herron's mission is to create world class citizens of the 21st century. US News and World Report ranked Herron in the Top 30 Best High Schools in the United States. This was possible due to a rigorous evaluation tool that our Dean of Faculty Greg Lineweaver uses to measure our impact on students. With unannounced visits, we are continually assessed on our effectiveness. This maintains a constant loop of evaluation, critical feedback, and actionable next steps. In the evaluative process, non-tested subjects (such as French) undergo the same amount of scrutiny as tested subjects with curriculum and assessments analyzed for their fidelity to AP exams. Thus, with end-of-the-year performance conversations, teachers who continually meet our high instructional bar are rewarded with leadership opportunities and salary increases. Teachers who do not are removed from the classroom. Recruiting and retaining top talent translates to educating and preparing **all** students for college—our singular and overriding objective.

But if the system at large inhibits the cultivation and retention of great teachers, a more rigorous evaluative tool will be for not. Local flexibility in staffing will ensure that only the highest qualified teachers are selected to enter into the classroom. And at Herron, our Professional Development is built around using our teachers as experts to increase student performance. In-house, every Friday we dive into data about our students. We generate targeted cross-curricular

interventions for at-risk students and re-enforce the vertical alignment of our disciplines to challenge *all* students. No one finishes their crosswords in this space. It's eagerly anticipated, an opportunity to hone our mission of closing the achievement gap.

And this is why I know that I do not make the promise to close the achievement gap in vain. It *is* possible and *is* happening as we speak at Herron and hundreds of schools across the country. But action has to be taken **now** for our students to properly inherit what we all aspire to—the American Dream. And it starts with **me**. It starts with me testifying here and now on the importance of stronger evaluative tools for teachers. It starts with **us** allowing local schools and school districts the flexibility to innovate and retain talent to drive student success. It starts with affirming the right of every student to a high quality and rigorous education. And it must end with students like Matt. He is why closing the gap is important. Because despite his surroundings and background, graduating from high school and college empowered to do anything he chooses will be his destiny, but only when we do everything we can to ensure effective teachers in the classroom.

Thank you.