

Testimony for Senate HELP Committee Roundtable on

“Fixing No Child Left Behind: Innovation to Better Meet the Needs of Students”

February 3, 2015

Robert Balfanz

Center for Social Organization of Schools, School of Education, Johns Hopkins University

Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray and members of the HELP committee, thank you for inviting me to testify and participate in a roundtable on “Fixing No Child Left Behind: Innovation to Better Meet the Needs of Students.” I want to begin by commending you for focusing on the inter-connection of innovation and accountability. Each of these needs the other to better meet the needs of students. The applied research and development work which I and my colleagues at the Center for Social Organization of Schools, School of Education, Johns Hopkins University have been engaged with during the past 20 years to keep all students on the path to high school graduation college and career ready, in partnership with hundreds of high poverty schools, scores of high poverty school districts, and over a dozen states, has made it crystal-clear that neither innovation without the guidance of accountability nor accountability without the support of innovation will get us the student outcomes we need. We have observed the greatest progress and gains in student outcomes, particularly among low-income, minority and at-risks students, have occurred when the talents and insights of those closest to work- the teachers, administrators, and student support personnel- have been unlocked to find and/or implement innovative solutions that work for their students. We have only seen this occur at scale and be sustained, however, when external accountability has consistently directed the schools’ attention to the most significant challenges their students face, nudged them to use evidence-based approaches, and provided support for implementation, training, and the time and person power to do the work. Thus, getting the inter-play between innovation, accountability, and support right and finding the most productive balance between federal, state, and local roles in this interplay through the re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is crucial to enabling all children in the United States to receive the education they need.

Lets look at some specifics. In 2001, at the very moment NCLB was being authorized, the nation's high school graduation rate hit its modern low at 71% and for low-income and minority students was in the upper 50's and low 60's. In short, at a time when it was already clear that there was no work in the economy that would let a high-school dropout support a family, more than one quarter of all students, and close to half of low-income and minority students, were leaving school essentially unable to become successful adults. Yet at this time, the imperative for schools, and in particular those with large populations of low-income, minority, and at-risk students, to focus on raising high-school graduation rates, was not consistently apparent, and hence the need to devote their limited time, energy, and innovative spirit to this challenge was not on most schools', school districts', and states' radar screens. In fact, the available, but as it turned out quite inaccurate data, seemed to indicate that, on the whole, graduation rates were a bright spot on the student achievement landscape

A close examination of the evidence and our experience working with hundreds of high-poverty middle and high schools, and scores of high-poverty school districts over the past 14 years, shows that in three key ways federal accountability and support help spur the innovation which has led the nation's graduation rate to rise by ten percentage points from a modern low to an all-time high through the course of NCLB and resulted in close to two million more students graduating from high school. What were these ways?

First, federal accountability to continually raise graduation rates provided local and state education leaders who sought to implement innovative means to confront the dropout crisis with a crucial tool to prompt principals, teachers, and student support personnel to devote their most precious assets- their time, energy, thought, and focus- to figuring out and implementing what was needed to enable more of their students to graduate. In short, federal accountability to raise graduation rates communicated to schools that, among all the competing demands they face, it mattered. The states and districts which made the biggest gains over the past decade were diverse and ranged from places like Tennessee to New York City. They all took different paths based on their local circumstances, but what they shared in common was that local innovation became paired with a federal imperative to improve, and in so doing created the conditions to bring improvements to a meaningful scale.

Second, the federal focus on and support for the lowest performing schools through mechanisms like school improvement grants and later priority schools nudged and enabled school districts to focus their innovative efforts on a key drivers of the dropout crisis-the relatively small sub-set of high schools (15%) which produced half the nation's dropouts. If the accountability goal had simply been to raise school

district graduation rates, short term gains would have been most easily obtained by focusing on stronger schools with capacity that had small sub-sets of students who struggled. By instead saying that the high schools with graduation rates below 60 percent and their feeder middle schools- or those that accounted for half the dropouts-needed to be a core focus of improvement efforts, federal accountability directed innovation to where it would have its greatest leverage and impact. Moreover, by recognizing that these are the schools which face the highest degree of educational challenge because they essentially only educate at-risk and high-needs students, and as such, typically require an infusion and/or re-allocation of resources to enable the development and implementation of evidence-based innovations, the federal government also helped solve a critical dilemma of the nation's school improvement efforts: who will be the steward for the highest-need schools and the highest-need students who attend them? The combination of federal accountability and support and local innovation has led to a remarkable decrease in the number of the lowest graduation rate high schools in the nation over the past decade- from around 2,000 to 1,200 and in so doing been a key reason why high school graduation rates have improved so much.

Third, direct federal support to spur, grow, validate and spread local innovations has been important. Through competitive grants, most recently exemplified by the Investing In Innovation program (I3), the federal government has served as an able venture capitalist in fostering the innovation needed to improve the American education system. States and school districts have faced declining budgets over the past half-decade and perennially face tight budgets. In this environment it is very difficult for them to invest in innovation without federal partnership. Moreover, for innovations to achieve their full potential they need to be validated, and who they work for, and under what conditions established. Local school districts, typically do not have the ability, resources, or patience to do this work. Their concern is focused on if it works for them, not if it continues to work under other circumstances. Yet if we don't know this, much time and effort may be wasted implementing reforms that are not likely to succeed in a different environment.

Two Examples of Innovations to Better Meet the Needs of Students

So now let's look at two examples that tie this all together. The first is called Diplomas Now. This is innovation aimed at the most challenged middle and high schools which drive the dropout crisis. These are schools in which nearly all the students, not just a few, need first and foremost a good lesson from a skilled teacher in every class, every day but also additional supports to enable them to attend school regularly, stay focused in class, and get their schoolwork done. These are schools where often a

quarter to a half of students are chronically absent- missing a month or more of school, where more students are suspended in a year than graduate, and where the typical student has a D average. Diplomas Now was created to meet this challenge head on, by combining evidence-based whole-school improvement focused on teaching and learning, with enhanced student supports which are guided by an early warning system so that, in a much more efficient and effective manner, the right support can be gotten to the right student at the right time. Diplomas Now is also an innovative partnership between school districts, middle and high school principals, teachers, and student support staff, and three experienced non-profits with evidence-based approaches: Johns Hopkins University's Talent Development Secondary School Improvement model, City Year's Whole School, Whole Child student support program and Americorps members, and Communities In Schools integrated student support model. Talent Development works with the school leaders and school teachers to create more effective ways to organize the school day, accelerate the learning of students who enter school multiple years below grade level, and provide teachers and administrators with the training and support they need to lead and drive school improvement. The City Year programming and Americorps members help solve the scale problem of student need. What do you do when, as is often the case, there are hundreds of students in a high-needs secondary school who need tutoring, mentoring, role models, and someone to check in how they are doing and how their school work is coming every day? The infusion of 10 to 15 corps members, each nagging and nurturing 15 or so students through the school day, enables schools to provide these supports at the scale needed. Communities In Schools enables schools not to be overwhelmed by the intensity of student need. In high poverty environments, it is beyond astounding the circumstances some students must overcome just to get to school every day. The impacts of homelessness, food insecurity, exposure to violence, and/or the absence of stable adult support can be immense. Schools are often ill-equipped to respond to them, and, as a result, can respond in manners which ultimately consume a lot of adult time and attention and make matters worse. In the Diplomas Now model, Communities In Schools directly case-manages the highest needs students but also increases the school's capacity to handle them by developing a web of community supports tailored to the specific needs of students in the school. All of these efforts are glued together in weekly Early Warning Indicator and Intervention meetings organized initially by a Talent Development school transformation facilitator in which a team of teachers who share a common set of students, the City Year Americorps members who work with them, the Communities In School site coordinator, and school administrators and student support staff, continually monitor students to see who needs additional supports, pool adult knowledge to design the most impactful intervention, look for patterns

to guide preventative efforts, and examine and fine-tune the effectiveness of on-going whole school, small group, and individual interventions.

Diplomas Now shows how impactful innovations are developed, validated, and scaled when the private and public sectors work hand in hand. Diplomas Now was launched and provided ongoing support by a number of private funders, most notably, the PepsiCo Foundation. However, it has been scaled to ten of the largest city school districts and is being validated by undergoing the largest randomized field trial of a secondary school innovation in our nation's history as the result of a federal Investing in Innovation (I3) grant. Its local implementation in a number of schools has then been further supported by school improvement grant (SIG) funds. And, most importantly, it's working. On average, across over 40 high-needs middle and high schools, over half of the students who have signaled they are falling off the path to graduation by poor attendance, behavior, or course performance have been put back on track. Just as significantly, in nearly every one of the major city school districts where the model has been implemented, some of the most iconic low-performing schools in the district are breaking away from similar schools and becoming flagships for school improvement in their districts. In short, Diplomas Now is an example of an innovation which is leading to significant improvements in student outcomes in some of the most challenged schools and school districts in the nation.

A second example comes from the states. Over the past decade we have worked with or learned from many states, including Tennessee and Washington State, as they sought to implement and scale a powerful new innovation: Early Warning Indicator and Intervention Systems to Keep Students on Track to High School Graduation College and Career Ready. The core idea of an early warning system is that students signal early and often that they are or are not on the path to high school graduation, college and career ready. Research conducted at CSOS and by the Chicago Consortium for School Research, among others, has shown that in high-poverty environments it is often possible to identify between 30 to 50% of the students who will drop out, absent effective interventions as early as the 6th grade, and 75% or more by the end of 9th grade. It is also possible to see who is on track to success in college by the end of 9th grade as well. These on- and off-track signals can then be used to closely monitor students' progress and enable intervention at the first moment students show signs of falling off-track, rather than after they have failed so many courses or missed so much school that they need to repeat a grade or even dropout and then need to be re-connected. What makes early warning systems a truly powerful intervention is when they are used to tap the insights and innovative intervention ideas of the adults who know students best, i.e., their teachers, administrators and student support personnel, and when

these adults organize the school into a multi-tiered intervention system with school-wide prevention activities (to enable students to come every day, stay out of trouble, and get their work done), targeted small-group interventions for students who need more support, and, finally, case-managed and professionally provided supports for the highest-needs students. The final power is provided when the interventions are regularly evaluated for their effectiveness and when the adult early warning systems team uses the data to identify the most strategic level of intervention, which is often not the individual, but the classroom, grade, school, or even district.

One place where the power of local innovation and federal accountability came together with powerful results was with early warning systems in Alabama. Alabama was an early innovator and early adopter of early warning systems and became one of the first states to develop a statewide early warning indicator system called the Alabama Graduation Tracker and make it available to all school districts. Alabama invested in dropout prevention training and dissemination of evidence-based practices. Efforts to raise the state's graduation rate were also promoted and endorsed by the governor, state legislature, business community, and chief state school officers. All these efforts had impact, but it was not until federal accountability in the form of the U.S. Department of Education 2008 graduation rate regulations, which led to all states adopting substantial graduation rate targets and annual improvement goals as part of their accountability systems, that every high school principal in the state received the signal that raising high school graduation rates mattered. It was then that the state-led innovations combined with the nudge of federal accountability to result in Alabama having one of the largest recent gains in graduation rates, moving it from behind to ahead of the national graduation rate.

Using ESEA Re-Authorization to Strengthen the Powerful Nexus of Innovation, Accountability and Support

It is an exciting time to be re-authorizing ESEA. We know so much more today than we did in 2001 about what works, for whom, under what circumstances, and how best to address the needs of low-income, minority, and at-risk students. If we are able to follow the evidence and push through our frustrations with what did not work with NCLB, we will be able to craft an ESEA that unleashes the innovative spirits of our nation's educators at the local and state level, while keeping the focus on the students, schools, and districts most in need of improvement and support. More innovation is clearly needed. Substantial progress has been made in improving the outcomes of low income and at risk students; over a million more are graduating and millions fewer are found in the lowest levels of achievement. Many more are succeeding on advanced placement tests and graduating prepared to

succeed in college. But innovation and improvement have not visited all schools nor reached all students during the past 14 years. Half of the African-American students who continue to fall off track to high school graduation do so in about 600 unreformed high schools, concentrated in 15 states. In the least effective of these schools, a third or more of students are still retained in 9th grade, suspended, and/or identified for special education services, and the percent scoring proficient on achievement test can be in the single digits. Similarly, while most states have shown progress in raising graduation rates, a few are going in the wrong direction. Moreover, in the knowledge economy of the 21st century, the bar will continually rise on what our students need to know and be able to do. Hence all our schools will need to become institutions of continuous improvement. The exciting news is that recent advances in evidence-based practices and the learning sciences indicate that we have barely begun to scratch the surface of what is possible in terms of teaching and learning. This means the ability of our students and teachers to improve is no impediment to the nation's ability to achieve the outcomes it needs.

So, what is the federal role in strengthening the innovation, accountability, and support nexus? The evidence reviewed here and our experience working with hundreds of schools over the past 20 years indicates that it will be important to keep what has worked, i.e., graduation-rate accountability and annual testing, as well as a federal stewardship and investment in reforming the lowest performing schools. Where there is need for fresh insight is in creating accountability systems which push attention and innovative responses to the places, educational challenges, and students who need them the most, while providing the room and space for people closest to the challenges- the teachers, administrators, and student support personnel- to innovate. The ability of those closest to the challenge to successfully innovate, in turn, needs to be nurtured with wide dissemination of existing evidence-based practice, seed capital, and training and support to help develop, implement, validate, and spread the innovations.

This can be achieved in part by improving, maintaining, and even expanding the existing Investment in Innovation (I3) program. But Federal efforts need to go beyond this. The tiered evidence approach to funding, which provides graduated funding levels to enable both development of new innovations and the validation of existing innovations, and as well as the scaling of proven evidence based strategies and programs needs to be built into most competitive grants . At the very least, a nudge needs to be built into the competitive process so that applicants gain an advantage by implementing evidence based innovations.

However, to really unshackle the American genius for innovation and help usher in an era of sustained educational improvement, the federal government needs to get serious about supporting an innovation

and evidence agenda in both how Title 1 funding gets spent at the school level and how it invests in developing the evidence base for federal education programs. Some percentage of Title 1 funds should be directed towards the development and implementation of evidence-based practices at the school and district levels. The federal government, in turn, could greatly expand the range and type of evidence-based practices schools could use their Title 1 money to support by allocating one penny of every federal dollar spent on education towards an evaluation system of federal education programs to establish what works, for who, under what circumstances. Taken together, all these actions would create a powerful continuous improvement ecosystem in which innovation, accountability, and support catalyze each other to provide all students with the learning environments and opportunities they need to become successful adults, productive workers, and engaged citizens.