

**STATEMENT BEFORE THE
SENATE HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR AND PENSIONS COMMITTEE
HEARING ON THE REAUTHORIZATION OF THE ELEMENTARY
AND SECONDARY EDUCATION ACT**

Presented by

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Good morning. My name is Layne Parmenter and I am the principal of Urie Elementary School in Lyman, Wyoming. I would like to begin by thanking Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi and the Members of the Committee for your leadership and taking up the monumental task of reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). As the sole principal representative before you today, I am honored to share the perspective of our nation's elementary principals, especially those serving in rural areas. As you work to improve policies that will strengthen the ability of principals and teachers to lead schools to excellence, please know that principals wholeheartedly share your commitment to give every child a well-rounded education that will prepare them for college and successful careers. We know that next to good teachers in the classroom, principals are the driving force behind improved student achievement and learning outcomes.

In today's era of accountability, principals are no longer just building managers – they are responsible for setting a vision of school excellence that centers on teaching and learning. They must work tirelessly to gain the support of teachers, parents, and the entire school community to take part in a collective responsibility that will ensure the academic success of every child. They must devote their time day in and day out to improving school conditions. Successful school principals know their vision of excellence depends on the ability to provide high-quality professional learning opportunities so that all teachers are able to improve their knowledge and skills in the classroom. They also know school culture must sustain a cycle of continuous improvement so that every teacher and student can be their best. The job of a principal is not easy – it is complex and demanding, but is also rewarding and it **brings me** great pride to know that the strength of school leadership can make a difference in the lives of students each and every day.

For rural schools similar to Urie, the responsibilities of a principal are compounded by extreme poverty and the unique needs of the students that can rob them of their ability to learn well. Children come to school having had many different experiences: oftentimes unfed, clothed poorly, and lacking the social and emotional support essential for learning. Six out of ten Wyoming public schools are rural, and serve one-quarter of the state's public school enrollment. The rate of rural students qualifying for special education services is above the national average, and the household mobility rate in Wyoming is staggering, much higher than all but 8 other states across the nation.

These are challenging circumstances in times of dwindling resources that inhibit the ability of principals to meet the needs of all teachers and students. My school, one of several elementary schools in Uinta County School District, spans hundreds of square miles and serves 280 students in grades K-4, with nearly 30 percent of the students eligible for free or reduced priced lunch. We are one of the state's concentrated areas of poverty and face challenges similar to other rural districts. In spite of this, better than ninety percent of the students in my district graduate from high school each year.

In Wyoming, the correlation between high poverty rates and lower performance in high stakes testing, NAEP scores, and graduation rates is unmistakable. Despite these circumstances, I am proud to share that over 80% of the Urie Elementary School children in the third grade have met or exceeded state expectations in math, reading, and writing. Our students in fourth grade have met their learning goals, but we have much more work to do in developing reading and literacy skills. As the principal, it is my job to make sure that these learning needs do not go unrecognized. Comprehensive and on-going professional development opportunities for teachers in effective literacy instruction must be an integral part of our teachers' daily jobs. In spite of the fact that we work to achieve this goal with fewer resources and an increasing number of students come to school far from being eager or ready to learn, Urie has been able to make significant educational gains. We are proud of what we have been able to accomplish and proudly look forward to the work ahead.

I am here to tell you that rural schools are making great progress despite the economic adversity. But we agree with Secretary Duncan – the federal government has traditionally under-invested in the role of the principal, and as a nation, we need to do much more to support and empower the leaders of our nation's schools, no matter the circumstances they face.

School progress, which in no small part is made possible through excellent teachers and the contributions of the entire school community, however, depends on giving the principal greater authority, autonomy, and resources to make key decisions in their schools, especially in rural communities. As you consider the many options and reforms to ESEA, I respectfully urge you to remember the complex and important job of the principal and the unique challenges of those serving in rural areas. The Administration has put forward goals in the "Blueprint for Reform" that I believe principals agree with, and am happy to note that we are already working to fulfill the vision of many of the goals each day. But this work must be supported, especially for those in rural areas facing unique circumstances. In many rural and frontier areas, principals serve not only as the principal, but superintendent, curriculum director, counselor, math and special education teacher, facilities coordinator, and football coach. Where there is need for school improvement, we are the sole catalysts for change in our schools, and this depends on our capacity to best meet the needs of the teachers and students.

Low pay and tough conditions, just like low student performance, are by-products of poverty. These problems are compounded in high-poverty rural districts, which are often isolated and offer few other amenities such as good housing or job opportunities for spouses. Teachers tend to go where working conditions are easier, pay is better, and students face fewer challenges. But what I can tell you is that, where there is an excellent school, there is a great school principal.

Principals currently in the field are responsible for identifying and developing leadership to fill the pipeline and next generation of our nation's powerful school leaders. But they need more support helping aspiring leaders into the field. Approximately 50% of elementary school principals nationally have had five—or fewer—years of experience at their current jobs. In Wyoming that number is 61%. Turning around a low-performing school is an exceptionally daunting task. I don't think there's a secret stash of principals out there with the experience and expertise to turn around the lowest-performing schools, particularly for rural areas.

As we strive to improve our nation's education system, the role of the school principal has been questioned. We know that school leadership matters, and I can tell you that it is unlike any other job in the school community. It requires tenacity and a commitment to lead a learning community with unwavering standards of excellence, a profound understanding of effective instruction, student needs and obstacles to their learning, and, in the end, the ability to get the job of teaching and learning done. They must be afforded the resources, tools, and time to make great things happen, no matter the challenges they face. Principals and teachers alike must have access to on-going and job-embedded professional development opportunities. For principals, this means high-quality standards-based mentoring programs that will support them in the profession. Mentoring and on-the-job professional development programs could help fill a number of gaps in the current models of principal preparation and training, and help those new to the field advance, especially in the case where relationships change and a teacher moves from supervisor of students to supervisor of adults.

Elementary principals must now expand their knowledge base in early childhood education to better understand high-quality early learning activities and teaching practices, developmentally appropriate assessments and evaluating data to inform instruction, and forging new relationships within the community to build successful partnerships. Principals must learn how to best align programs that create a seamless continuum of learning that recognizes the social, emotional, and academic needs of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Federal policies must reflect and support the research and practice that has redefined what elementary principals must know and be able to do to lead early childhood learning communities.

This calls for greater federal investment in professional development opportunities for principals to learn about the value of comprehensive systems that will support the work of early learning programs in their schools and communities, and provide them the tools and resources to drive instructional leadership.

Now more than ever, it is clear that principals must be provided with resources to do their jobs. Rather than feeding into the cycle of depleting resources, schools that have the greatest needs must continue to receive targeted assistance to improve. While it may be unintentional, current federal policies direct much needed resources to urban areas with high concentrations of poverty and leave rural areas behind. We must redistribute the weight of Title I and other sorely needed federal aid to school districts that have the greatest needs in rural and frontier areas.

Finally, student and school performance in rural areas can be better gauged by an accountability system that shows the variety of ways in which children learn and succeed academically through the use of growth models. Student, teacher, and principal performance must be accurately measured and reflect the social and emotional development, language fluency and comprehension, creativity, adaptability, critical thinking and problem-solving skills of students – in addition to their proficiency in core academic content areas.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to share the principal perspective and the needs of schools in rural and frontier America. On behalf of all principals, I applaud the great work that you have begun to improve our nation's education system and how we can better meet the learning needs of our children. I look forward to the discussion today and answering any questions you may have for me.