

**Alison Harris Welcher Testimony for the Senate HELP Committee Hearing:
“ESSA Implementation: Perspectives from Education Stakeholders on Proposed Regulations”**

Thursday, July 14, 2016

Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, and other distinguished members of this committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. And thank you for your leadership in passing the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

For the past decade, I have dedicated my life to ensuring students in Charlotte, NC, have access to an outstanding education that inspires them to dream big and prepares them to become productive, successful citizens—first as a classroom teacher and, for seven years, as a school leader.

When I became principal of Ranson IB Middle School in 2011, it was one of the lowest-performing schools in the district. We had teenagers who couldn't read. There were classrooms full of kids where no learning was happening. I chose to lead Ranson because I am committed to serving students who desperately need our education system to help give them a fair shot at success.

Within four years, we moved Ranson from a report card grade of “D” to “C.” What that shift means for kids is that we exceeded all of our growth targets and were in the top 25 schools in the state on the growth composite index measure. There is a real difference between maintaining excellence and building it—and I am incredibly proud of the educators at Ranson for their tireless efforts that continue to this day. School transformation is hard, it takes time, and it is possible.

Most recently, I have had the privilege to work with Ranson and eight other high-need schools as the Director of School Leadership for Project L.I.F.T., a public-private partnership that supports educators, students, and families in Charlotte's west corridor.

I am honored to bring that experience to this committee to provide feedback on the U.S. Department of Education's proposed regulations regarding accountability systems, state plans, and data reporting.

ESSA ushers in a new era of local control for our education system—one in which states will have greater autonomy to define and set benchmarks for acceptable school performance and in which districts and schools will be charged with developing evidence-based, locally-tailored strategies to close achievement gaps and improve schools that don't make the cut.

For those of us working in the highest-need communities—where the challenges of school transformation have often been amplified, rather than alleviated, by one-size-fits-all accountability mechanisms—this shift presents an exciting opportunity for innovation.

But it also poses significant challenges that we need to address via thoughtful implementation.

The success of any school improvement strategy comes down to the capacity of our educators. And while many teachers and principals are deeply committed to serving our most vulnerable

students, not enough receive the training they need to effectively support students, their families, and one another in demanding turnaround environments.

Even when we are successful in attracting well-prepared educators to the schools most-in-need, if the conditions are not supportive and the school climate is dysfunctional, strong teaching and learning cannot happen. Though a safe, supportive environment does not itself result in academic gains for students, dramatic and sustained improvement simply cannot occur without it.

Addressing school culture requires strong leadership and a shared vision, as well as effective communication and collaboration between educators, students, families, and community members. Unfortunately, state accountability tools—particularly school report cards—have not historically lent themselves to clear, productive interactions between schools, families, and communities. Educators need better tools and resources, and parents deserve clear, transparent, accurate information on how schools are performing for all students.

Many aspects of the regulations the Department proposed in May are a good first step towards addressing these challenges. I want to highlight a few key areas where federal officials have an opportunity to leverage the regulatory process to promote strong practices at the state, local, and school levels.

The first is related to school leadership and school improvement in state plans.

Everything that happens in schools—setting high expectations for students, helping teachers grow and improve their practice, engaging families, managing change, *everything*—depends upon the caliber of our nation’s school leaders. They account for one quarter of a school’s effect on student learningⁱ, and a highly effective principal can increase student achievement by as much as 20 percentage pointsⁱⁱ. Clearly, strong leadership, school improvement, and student success go hand in hand.

As decision-making shifts away from the federal government, it is more important than ever that our nation’s schools be led by individuals who possess the skills and technical prowess to design and adopt school improvement strategies that truly make a difference for kids. The proposed regulations rightly ask states to develop plans that detail how they will strengthen the preparation, support, and development of not only teachers but also principals and other schools leaders—particularly those serving our most vulnerable students.

Moreover, the regulations require states to describe their strategies for ensuring historically underserved students have access to experienced and effective teachers. Principals are a key lever for ensuring students have equitable access to great teachers in every classroom, every year. Our ability to recruit, develop, and retain outstanding teachers is deeply connected to the quality of our school leaders. No one wants to work for a bad boss. In fact, 97 percent of teachers say school leadership significantly affects their career choices.ⁱⁱⁱ Teachers thrive—and *stay*—in schools led by outstanding principals and leadership teams and, together, these educators get stronger, sustained results for students.

The proposed regulations could address educator capacity and equity by asking states to ensure districts have strong plans in place to ensure all schools—particularly those identified for comprehensive support and improvement—are led by a well-prepared, well-supported principal. And, in light of the unacceptably high turnover rates of principals serving low-income schools,^{iv}

those plans should also address strategies for sustaining quality leadership over time—including system-wide efforts to make the principal role more effective and sustainable and to build robust leadership pipelines that can be tapped into for succession planning.

Regarding state accountability systems, I am pleased they will now include an indicator that looks at “school quality or student success,” providing a more holistic picture of our students’ school experience.

When I first took the helm of Ranson, it was clear I had to make major structural adjustments before we could embark on the critical work of upgrading the instructional program and practices. In particular, I had to get all teachers on the same page that all of our students were capable of excelling and rebuild a sense of trust and safety among staff and students, alike. It was only after addressing our school culture and climate that we could more deeply focus on academics.

I have since visited countless schools that aren’t achieving great results because there are issues with the culture or conditions that make it extremely challenging for students to engage in learning and, frankly, make the work exhausting and unsustainable for teachers. Often these conditions are the result of or are exacerbated by gross resource inequities, which I am pleased the regulations require districts and schools to address in their plans to improve the lowest-performing schools and close large achievement gaps.

What gets measured gets done. Incorporating other measures of school quality into accountability systems means there is an incentive to focus on the underlying conditions for effective teaching and engaging learning. Add to the mix a strong focus on resource equity, and we get an accountability framework that is truly based on multiple measures and in many ways addresses No Child Left Behind’s overreliance on test scores alone.

At the same time, I appreciate that the Department’s proposed regulations keep the focus of accountability systems on academic outcomes, due to the statutory requirement to place “much greater weight” on the academic indicators in state systems. Ultimately, everything we do as educators to address school conditions is in service of helping our students grow, improve, and gain academic mastery so they are ready for their next steps in life. The parameters included in the proposed regulations place reasonable constraints on the school quality indicator and I urge the Department to retain those guardrails in the final version.

Finally, we must consider data reporting. Though report card data cannot tell the entire story of a school, it is critical that information on report cards is presented in a way that is easy to understand and captures as much of the full picture as possible.

School leaders rely on the underlying data from report cards to make decisions about how to marshal school resources to support teachers and students to reach our shared goals. We need timely data that are disaggregated by student subgroups and capture the performance and progress of all kids—keeping us focused on meeting the needs of our most vulnerable students and holding school system leaders accountable for ensuring we have the resources necessary to help all children succeed.

Moreover, we use report cards to communicate progress with families and community members. Parents deserve to know how schools are performing so they can hold us accountable, offer support, and make informed decisions about the learning environments that

will meet the needs of their children. They need snapshot data on key indicators as well as an overall summary. Ideally, these resources are radically transparent, including as much information as possible on student subgroups and school resources, while meeting the equally important charge of being easy to understand. Our job as educators is to engage with stakeholders and use the data to tell the story of our schools and advocate for our students.

As a practitioner, I also want to know which of my colleagues are working in schools that are getting results—for all kids and for individual groups of students—so I can seek them out to learn and collaborate, particularly if they are doing great work in areas where we need to improve.

Though not required by statute, my plea to policymakers is that they take advantage of the opportunity to ensure report cards and underlying accountability systems include growth measures, particularly for schools in transformation. One of the greatest struggles I faced as a principal was convincing parents and members of our community—many of whom attended Ranson when they were young and watched its slow decline over the course of many years—that we were truly turning things around. Educators making progress in the lowest-performing schools need support, encouragement, and recognition to keep up the momentum.

Ultimately, the purpose of our education system is to meet students where they are—whether they're three grade levels behind (like many of our students), at grade level, or above—and support their development. No matter their proficiency level, our job is to move students forward. That's called good pedagogy and that's what it takes to do right by all of our kids.

Thank you, once again, for the opportunity to share my perspective.

And thank you for your willingness to listen, learn, and ensure federal policies retain appropriate checks and balances on behalf of our nation's most vulnerable children while unleashing states, districts, and schools to execute plans that help all students grow, thrive, and fulfill their potential.

ⁱ Leithwood, K., Louis, K. S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*. New York, NY: Wallace Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/key-research/Pages/How-LeadershipInfluences-Student-Learning.aspx>.

ⁱⁱ Marzano, R. J., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. A. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

ⁱⁱⁱ Scholastic Inc. (2012). *Primary Sources: America's Teachers on the Teaching Profession*. New York, NY: Scholastic and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Retrieved from http://www.scholastic.com/primarysources/pdfs/Gates2012_full.pdf.

^{iv} U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. (2014). *Principal Attrition and Mobility: Results From the 2012–13 Principal Follow-up Survey (NCES 2014-064rev)*. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014064rev.pdf>.