

Testimony to the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

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Chairman Alexander, Senator Murray, members of the committee, I thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. The children of Louisiana are as smart and as capable as any in America. This is the fundamental premise of Louisiana's ESSA plan.

Louisiana Believes

Well before Congress started debate on ESSA, educators in Louisiana were implementing *Louisiana Believes*, the state's plan to provide every child a path to prosperous future.

We have brought together child care, Head Start, and pre-kindergarten in one unified system of standards, support, accountability, and parental choice.

We have aligned learning standards, curriculum, assessment, and professional development, providing students a knowledge-rich classroom experience as challenging as any in America.

We now prepare every aspiring educator in our state by way of a yearlong residency, while they are college seniors, under the tutelage of a full-time mentor, so that every graduate of our colleges of education is validated as an effective teacher before their first day of full employment.

We provide all graduates a pathway to a funded next step in education, by expanding Advanced Placement and other early college courses, by revitalizing the career and technical

system through the state's Jump Start initiative, and by becoming the first state in the nation to require that all graduates choose affirmatively whether or not to apply for financial aid.

Finally, we focus on students stuck in persistently struggling schools through comprehensive improvement efforts like the Recovery School District in New Orleans and the Baton Rouge Achievement Zone, and by providing low-income families a wide array of school and course choices, all held to comparable standards of academic quality.

No state in the nation made greater gains on the most recent 4th grade National Assessment of Education Progress in reading than did Louisiana. Of the 17 states that administer the ACT to all students, Louisiana has climbed far to a rank of 10th, and more students graduated high school this year than in any year in the state's history. Of those graduates, more than three quarters completed federal financial aid forms, indicating an aspiration to continue their education.

Community and Stakeholder Engagement

These accomplishments should not mask the stark realities in our state, however. Louisiana remains a state with low overall relative levels of education attainment.

With the enactment of ESSA, therefore, the state Department of Education began communicating with the public about the development of a state plan that would address the most persistent challenges in our state's schools. Our process included two series of statewide meetings involving more than 200 organizations, nine public meetings of the state's accountability commission, and three drafts of the state's plan posted for public comment. Louisiana's plan was ultimately approved by the Department in August, and its provisions will

be considered by the state board of elementary and secondary education for placement into regulations this October, some 18 months after the start of the process.

ESSA: Addressing Urgent Challenges

The plan's foundation is the idea of academic mastery. For nearly two decades, our state's school rating system had defined excellence – an “A” rating – as being one in which the average student in a school demonstrated “basic” command of literacy, mathematics, and content knowledge. The most fundamental and essential shift in our plan, therefore, is the difficult but necessary move to redefine an “A” school in Louisiana as one in which students typically achieve full “mastery,” comparable to NAEP “proficient,” making an A-rated school in Louisiana an A-rated school in any state, by any measure.

Second, we recognized that as our state moved toward higher academic expectations, gaps between historically disadvantaged student groups and their peers revealed themselves to be larger than had been previously understood. Teachers in Louisiana will now receive a “growth to mastery” target for every student, indicating the progress all students will have to make in order to be on track to A-level performance. Schools may also now use a series of free, online “check-up” tests created by the state and aligned with the state's end-of-year assessment, allowing teachers and parents to take stock of student progress throughout the year, and allowing school systems to dispense with wasteful, costly, and misaligned testing. Finally, the state established requirements for intervention when subgroups of 10 students or more persistently struggle and a framework for this process that calls on schools to partner with external organizations with track records of results.

Third, we came to grips with daily inequities in the very courses and experiences offered students across our state. Our state plan, therefore, includes the development of an Interests and Opportunities index within the state's school rating system, evaluating the school's effort at providing all students fair access to courses too rarely offered. We further made use of the Direct Student Services provision of Title I, expanding the course offerings student experience every day, and building on Louisiana's nationally recognized Course Access initiative.

Fourth, we addressed the reality that a vast number of students, most African-American, attend schools that are persistently struggling by any definition. Using ESSA's evidence requirements as a foundation, we have established essential academic conditions that school systems applying to the state for Title I funding must meet. For persistently struggling schools Louisiana will require the support of intermediary organizations, from around the state and across the country, with proven track records of radical school improvement.

Finally, our plan acknowledges that the educator profession is being outcompeted for talent by fast-growing and better-compensated professions that similarly require bachelor's degrees. Using statewide Title II funds, Louisiana's plan includes an upward pathway for educators through the profession, including certified and compensated undergraduate resident teachers, the certified and compensated mentors who develop those residents, and content experts who shape schools' approach to curriculum. Our plan also includes a groundbreaking system of measurement and accountability for institutions that prepare teachers. This transparent system includes regular on-site review of preparation program quality, a measurement of graduates' effectiveness in the classroom, and incentives for placing proven educators in the hardest-to-staff schools.

Conclusion

I cannot vouch for the quality of planning that has occurred in all 50 states. Nor can I testify to you that Louisiana has yet achieved an education system that is fair, just, and excellent for all of its students.

However, I can testify to you that the progress our state has seen to date indicates that a plan that is backed by research, that embodies principles enacted in the world's highest achieving education systems, and that is focused on the students who most need our attention, will yield improvement in America's schools. This should not be up for debate. The question, especially now in this new era, is the willingness of leaders at every level to make it happen.

I appreciate greatly the opportunity to share our state's story with you today.