

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. While Louisiana is far from having achieved the educational system to which its students, educators, and citizens aspire, we are proud of improvements we have set in motion and of the accomplishments of our students. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has provided our state a chance to take stock of our greatest challenges and to draw on evidence from across the nation and around the world indicating how they might be solved. The children of Louisiana are as smart and as capable as any in America. They have been given gifts no lesser than those given to any child on this earth. And they deserve a plan that calls on us to provide all of them an education that is excellent by any standard in the world. 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. This plan has five pillars, all modeled off of plans and policies in the world's highest achieving education systems:

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 in English, mathematics, science and social studies, providing students a knowledge-rich classroom experience as challenging as any in America. This work in particular has been led by 6,000 Louisiana Teacher Leaders, all of whom I am proud to call colleagues.

We now also 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 educator singularly dedicated to the resident's development, so that every graduate of our colleges of education is validated as an effective teacher before his 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. In mathematics, our 4th grade students made the second-greatest gains. 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. Perhaps most remarkably, of those graduates, more than three quarters

completed federal financial aid forms, indicating an aspiration to continue their education through workplace training and higher learning.

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. If our state is to thrive and to compete, we must do more.

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. Beginning in the summer of 2016, we held meetings with dozens of school leaders, education associations, business and community leaders, civil rights organizations, and advocacy groups to start a dialogue about our ESSA state plan. We then hosted 13 regional public town hall-like meetings around the state, with individuals representing more than 200 organizations. In September 2016, in response to the feedback we received, we released a draft ESSA framework that outlined our state's most pressing challenges and opportunities to address them.

Throughout the subsequent fall and winter, the Department conducted another round of statewide meetings. The statewide Accountability Commission also held nine lengthy public meetings leading up to the drafting of the ESSA state plan to consider detailed accountability policy options. Based on stakeholder engagement, collaboration, and feedback, we posted for comment a second, more detailed draft ESSA framework in February 2017. Later that month we posted for public comment a first draft ESSA state plan, and on March 14, 2017, after receiving

updated guidance from the USDOE about required state plan components, we posted a revised draft state plan.

March 29, 2017, our state board held a special meeting for the purpose of considering the draft state plan. During a seven-hour public meeting, we received public comment from 115 individuals. The board voted to endorse the draft state plan, directing the Department to make specific adjustments in response to comment received and to submit the plan to the U.S. Department of Education. That plan was ultimately approved by the Department in August, and its provisions will be considered by the state board for placement into state regulations this October, some 18 months after the start of the process.

ESSA: Addressing Urgent Challenges

The research, inquiry, and dialogue that launched Louisiana’s plan started with a simple question: what are the greatest academic and developmental challenges facing students and educators in achieving a prosperous future? Our plan is a response to that question and a blueprint for how schools will contribute to a solution.

That 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. While those decades saw growth in education attainment of a generation of young Louisianans, our system too often perpetuated the false promise that a basic body of knowledge, a basic ability to read, and basic reasoning skills are adequate to succeed in institutions of higher learning or in professions that offer the opportunity for upward mobility. 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. This required a redoubling of our commitment to serving struggling students of all backgrounds. To call educators toward serving the most struggling students well, we installed a calculation of annual student growth in our school rating system for the first time. 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 a clear and unambiguous requirement 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. Schools play an essential role in helping students to develop lifelong interests and opportunities. But even today, the options presented to students for exploration of the arts, foreign language, advanced coursework, and applied education vary widely, in ways

unfair to children in rural communities and low-income urban settings. 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, offering school systems statewide the chance to focus grant funding on expanding the course offerings student experience every day, and building on Louisiana's nationally recognized Course Access initiative.

Fourth, we addressed the reality that even today, more than a dozen years after the horrible events of Hurricane Katrina, a vast number of students, most African-American, attend schools that are persistently struggling by any definition. Twelve years ago, nearly half of the state's F-rated schools existed in the city of New Orleans. Today that figure is under 10 percent, but in their place are struggling schools in smaller cities and in remote regions of our state. Our plan to address this dire circumstance draws on lessons from research of the nation's most successful efforts at comprehensive school improvement. 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 in diverse situations.

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. This competitive strain puts schools at a disadvantage and disadvantages students in low-income communities, who are least likely to be assigned a proven professional educator.

Louisiana's plan seeks to restore teaching's competitive edge and to professionalize this most noble of professions. Using statewide Title II funds now available for training aspiring teachers, Louisiana's plan includes a lifelong, upward pathway for educators through the profession, including certified and compensated undergraduate resident teachers, the certified and compensated mentors who develop those residents, content experts who shape schools' approaches to curriculum, and school leaders who are proven developers of teachers and curriculum. Our plan also includes a groundbreaking system of measurement and accountability for institutions that prepare teachers, overseen by a newly created research consortium led by our colleges of education. 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.