

Testimony of Kevin Huffman
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for this invitation. I am honored to be a participant in today's discussion. I will keep my remarks somewhat brief and leave time for questions.

I will start by noting that policies affecting the lowest performing schools are among the most challenging and vexing that legislative bodies must tackle, and I commend you for your commitment to examining this challenge so thoroughly.

I am here to talk about how Tennessee approached two facets of our work with low performing schools, recognizing of course that Tennessee and Pennsylvania are different states with different challenges. I will limit my commentary to my experiences in Tennessee, but I hope you will find these experiences helpful as you consider your own potential paths here in Pennsylvania.

In 2010, Tennessee created the Achievement School District as part of the state's Race to the Top application to the US Department of Education. While Race to the Top required some effort to delineate supports for low performing schools, the program did not require interventions as extensive as the creation of a special district. However, Tennessee faced several realities. First, the state's overall academic performance was low and stagnant. Second, the lowest performing schools - the very bottom of the academic performance curve - were struggling to such an extent that in most cases, fewer than one in five students performed on grade level on state tests, and in some cases fewer than one in ten students reached proficiency. Third, while the state's public schools were approximately one-fourth African American, in the bottom five percent of schools, 92 percent of the students were African American.

Then Governor Bredesen, a Democrat, worked with a bipartisan legislature to set out ambitious policy reforms, including the creation of the ASD. When Republican Governor Bill Haslam entered office in 2011, he made the ASD one of his education priorities. It was created under true bipartisan circumstances.

As we began working on the ASD in 2011, we did so with a healthy dose of skepticism about the efficacy of state intervention in school districts. In short, we did not believe that a state taking over an entire district made good policy sense in Tennessee, as it simply substituted one bureaucracy for another. Therefore, under No Child Left Behind, we did not make any effort to take over a full school district even when this was a possibility.

However, we did believe that intervention at an individual school level, if done with the appropriate effort to give autonomy to a great school leader, could lead to better outcomes. We also believed that the state could do more to provide districts with autonomies to turn around their lowest performing schools.

We therefore created a plan to ensure that while the ASD had the authority to take over schools in the bottom five percent of performance in the state, we would do so gradually. In the interim, we helped the largest school districts in the state set up what we called Innovation Zones - zones within the districts, run by the districts, that provided for more autonomy in staffing and management decisions.

To give you a sense of how the ASD works, it is a state entity with the ASD superintendent reporting to the state commissioner of education. The state creates a list of the lowest performing five percent of schools every three years. This list is based on state scores over the previous three years in reading, math and science. These schools are then eligible for takeover by the ASD, which can choose to run the schools itself, or as charter schools with the support of a high functioning charter management organization.

When a school comes into the ASD, the district has full staffing autonomy, meaning it can ask all staff to re-interview for positions with the school. It maintains control of the district for at least five years, and potentially longer if parents of the school choose to have the ASD continue to manage the school.

Additionally, because it is difficult to take over and run schools - especially schools that have struggled for many years - we chose to move slowly. While 83 schools were immediately eligible for the ASD, we began with just six schools in the first year, and have proceeded gradually. Next year, just over 30 schools will be in the ASD. We anticipate there will be over 50 schools in the 2017-18 school year. Additionally, we focused the growth of the ASD strategically based on the schools' feeder patterns. In a number of cases we saw feeder patterns in which most of the elementary and middle schools feeding into a single high school were on the bottom five percent list. It made sense to try to address whole feeder patterns in these circumstances.

At the same time, districts opened their Innovation Zones and began their district work to turn around low performing schools without state intervention. This has created a healthy partnership and competition that allows all of the programs to learn from each other.

The initial results are promising. Schools that were in their second year in the ASD last year performed quite well. This year, a larger number of schools will get a second year of test score results, and we expect that when this year's test scores are released, those schools will also demonstrate strong progress.

In the Innovation Zones, we also see strong potential. In Shelby County (Memphis), the I-Zone schools have performed at a very high level for two years in a row in terms of growth. The Hamilton County and Metro Nashville results are more mixed, but in aggregate, the I-Zone schools have performed well.

In fact, the combination of the ASD and the I-Zone growth ensured that when we ran the list of the bottom five percent of schools for the second time, there was substantial change. The threshold for performance increased. Additionally, Shelby County had significantly fewer schools on the list, while Metro Nashville had a large increase in schools. The Metro Nashville increase was not due to worsening performance in their schools, but due to significantly improved performance in Shelby County. This is exactly the kind of effect we would hope to see, as increased attention at the school level improves results and puts pressure on other schools to also improve.

Overall, Tennessee's academic performance has increased significantly over the past four years. On the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress, Tennessee had the largest growth of any state in the country. Additionally, Tennessee had the largest growth for African American students of any state. While we attribute this to a number of reforms, we believe that putting significant focus on the bottom performing schools has helped change the conversation and helped raise performance.

I will wrap up by noting some of the key lessons from our work in Tennessee. First, the most chronic underperforming schools need attention specific to the school level. School districts have a large portfolio of schools, and we needed to put attention and energy not just on districts, but specifically at the school level for schools that simply were not working for our children.

Second, the interplay of the ASD and the I-Zones has been very important. It was important to give districts the tools - and the opportunity - to take on some of the turnaround work themselves. At the same time, I do not believe the I-Zones would be as successful absent the threat of ASD takeover, which has sharpened the districts' focus.

Third, these schools reached the bottom five percent due to a long trajectory of low academic expectations and interventions. While more resources were, and are, helpful, these schools were not significantly under-resourced relative to their peers; putting more money without a change in strategy would not have yielded significantly changed results.

In closing, this is incredibly hard work. If it were easy, we wouldn't have chronically underperforming schools. We believe that the ASD and I-Zone work in Tennessee has enormous potential. It is early and we are not declaring victory, but the early results are promising. We certainly felt that it was unconscionable to look at the results and do nothing, and I am proud that we dove into the hard work.

I genuinely appreciate your invitation today, and wish you the best of luck as you seek the right strategy for your state. Thank you.