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Good morning honorable members of the House and Senate Education committees. Thank you Chairman Smucker and Chairman Saylor for collaborating on these series of hearings on the Every Student Succeeds (ESSA) Act and providing me with the opportunity to testify.

ESSA provides Pennsylvania with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to pause and reflect on what has gone right - and wrong - since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act. We have a chance to make necessary changes that accelerate the pace of reform and build the public education system that we all want — a system that ensures all students have access to a 21st Century education that will prepare them for success in college and in their careers.

I understand that much of the work surrounding ESSA will be handled by the executive branch, but I am also aware that federal guidelines require the legislature to consult on the development of the state's plans. Therefore, I respectfully submit my recommendations to you this morning with the hope that they will be considered as part of your plans to ensure that PA's ESSA regulations are grounded in credible research and benefit every student.

My testimony will focus on one specific area of ESSA: accountability and interventions in the lowest performing schools. To begin, let's review the key differences between NCLB and ESSA as it relates to this topic:

- **First, some key pieces remain**. States must still use their accountability metric to identify their lowest performing schools, and they must develop a comprehensive plan to intervene in these schools.

- **What has changed is the flexibility in how to define "lowest performing" and "interventions" in each state.** As you may recall, under NCLB the goal was to reach 100 percent proficiency in math and reading by growing student achievement each year and making Adequately Yearly Progress. That's gone. **Now states can choose their own metric to measure student achievement, and their own short-term and long-term goals.** Under NCLB, there was a federally prescribed escalating series of interventions. That's gone too. Under ESSA, states must intervene in schools that meet one of three categories:

    - The bottom 5% of schools based on the state's accountability metric;
    - High schools with less than 67% graduation rate; or
    - Schools with underperforming subgroups that do not improve after a state-determined number of years.

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I predict stakeholders will spend a lot of time debating the fairest way to measure performance and identify the lowest performing schools. This is an important and complicated debate, but it misses the tougher question.

Whether we continue evaluating schools by using the School Performance Profile, an altered version of that system, or a completely new metric, chronically underperforming schools will likely fall into one, if not all, of the three intervention categories defined in ESSA. As evidence, more of than half of the secondary schools in the bottom 5% based on the School Performance Profile were also in the bottom 5% of other commonly used metrics: graduation rates, attendance, college readiness, and AP participation.

The tough question that I am here today to discuss is; "What are we going to do with the lowest performing schools that have been defined as such through ESSA?"

Intervening in underperforming schools is the hardest work in education policy. State and federal officials have been trying to turn around failing schools for years. The most recent example is the School Improvement Grants (SIG) program.

In 2010, President Obama announced a $3.5 billion initiative to turn around the bottom 5 percent of the nation's schools through the SIG program. Money flowed through the Pennsylvania Department of Education, which in turn allocated the funds to our lowest-performing schools via competitive grants.

As a condition of funding, schools were required to implement one of four improvement strategies ranging from least aggressive to most aggressive: Transformation, Turnaround, Restart and Closure.

Of the 54 schools that have received SIG funds in Pennsylvania since 2010, 46 schools chose to implement the Transformation model, the weakest of the intervention initiatives. **These 46 schools received more than $101 million over their three-year grant period, with the average grant per school coming out to more than $2.2 million.**

When we examined the student performance of the 29 schools that received grants between 2010-12, to implement the Transformation model, this is what we found:

- On average, **math proficiency decreased** by 3.2 percentage points
- On average, **reading proficiency decreased** by 2.2 percentage points
- **Only 10 schools saw gains in both** math and reading
- **8 schools had decreases of more than 10 percentage points** in either math or reading

There are three lessons to take away from this very disappointing data:

1. More money does not guarantee increased achievement;
2. If given multiple options, districts will always choose the LEAST aggressive and most politically safe turnaround strategy; and

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3. The failure rate of turnaround work nationally and at the state level is high

Take for example, a district turnaround initiative that is taking place just 40 minutes down the road from here. The York City School District is currently in its fourth year as a fiscally distressed district under Act 141. Though York City was eligible for a turnaround through this law because of its financial situation, it became clear that the district was failing to provide their students with a quality education, prompting a separate turnaround.

Governor Wolf appointed Carol Saylor as the new Chief Recovery Officer in 2015, at the same time that the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) spent $140,000 to hire Mass Insight, a Boston-based non-profit, to complete a diagnostic audit of the district. Mass Insight published the 63-page report in July 2015. Based on the recommendations, the Chief Recovery Officer was supposed to begin creating 90-day plans and submit an amendment to the 2013 recovery plan.

Eight months the only efforts to implement that plan included:

- Hiring a communications officer to improve the District's social media presence;
- Extending the superintendent's contract for three years with a 2.5% salary increase; and
- Forming a committee to discuss the overhaul of the existing curriculum.

It wasn't until the Wolf Administration was questioned about the status of the new recovery plan at a House Budget Hearing in March 2016 that the amended recovery plan became public. .

The last sentence of that plan is: "Ultimately, districts that fail to meet the performance measurement criteria will be ***subject to more intensive interventions***." The York City School District's improvement plan thus identifies specific measurable goals that the district aspires to meet by the 2018-19 school year, but fails to outline the interventions if the District does not meet its goals.

So, the key question for all of us here today should be: What are the interventions we need to put in place for PA schools that are failing to educate our children?

In our research, we have found that three core strategies must be on the table in any successful school turnaround initiative:

1. **Planning**
   Research shows that school improvement plans (SIP) are often poor in quality, more likely to wallow as compliance documents than serve as catalysts for real change and, when put in action, are not implemented with fidelity. Mass Insight's diagnostic audit at the York City School District was well done and provided research-based and practical recommendations for change. The problem has been that the district lacks the political will and capacity to change the operations,

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staffing and learning structure at the district. As a result, the plan so far has yet to yield real change. Planning is only effective to the extent that the district has the capacity and drive to execute the final plan.

2. **Staffing flexibility**

School improvement efforts must be paired with staffing flexibility to enact significant change, including the ability to retain high quality teachers during layoffs. In the first year of Philadelphia's Renaissance initiative, the district tried turning around one of its most struggling comprehensive high schools. The district brought in a strong leader who, in turn, recruited mission-driven teachers who voluntarily transferred to be part of this ambitious turnaround. The district invested millions in supporting and training the new staff. But at the end of the year, the district was forced to furlough some teachers. Since most of the teachers at the turnaround school were young, 80% of the teachers at that school were furloughed. All of the momentum for that turnaround was gone and a few years later, the district closed it. Similarly, Pittsburgh tried innovating with a unique approach to offering for high-quality options for students. They recruited the district's best veteran teachers to transfer to a struggling school and pair with a novice teacher in a mentorship role. They predicted that students would benefit from having two teachers in the room instead of one, and that the novice teachers would develop into highly effective teachers. The summer before the program was set to begin, the district learned that it had a small deficit and would likely need to do a small round of layoffs. The full cohort of novice teachers would be furloughed at the end of the year. Since it would be wasteful to invest time and money in developing teachers who would ultimately be furloughed, the district eliminated the program.

3. **Charter conversions**

Just as more money is not a silver bullet, charter schools are not the answer for every struggling school. But a successful turnaround system must include the option of a change in school management. Charter schools have more flexibility over their budget, curriculum, and personnel, allowing them to implement turnaround strategies with greater ease and efficiency than their district-run counterparts. Across the country, the districts making the most progress on turning around the lowest-performing schools have relied on a portfolio of district and charter options, including Memphis, Camden, Washington DC, and New Orleans. In Pennsylvania, Philadelphia has been experimenting with both district-run and charter turnarounds since 2010. Charter turnarounds operated by Mastery have made remarkable progress and have even become national models, whereas most of the district-run schools have seen limited gains.

Recently, the Commonwealth had an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to accountability through the merger of Westinghouse Academy and the Wilkinsburg School District.

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For those unfamiliar, Wilkinsburg Borough School District in Allegheny County, one of the lowest-performing high schools in the state, struck a deal last year with Pittsburgh Public Schools to transfer their students to Westinghouse Academy, arguably the worst performing high school in the district, beginning in the 2016-17 school year. Despite concerns from reform groups that neither district had any plans or measures in place to improve the quality of instruction at Westinghouse, the Governor and the legislature issued Pittsburgh $3 million for costs associated with the merger.

- Did the administration or the legislature require Westinghouse Academy to develop a turnaround plan? No.
- Did the administration or the legislature ask the Pittsburgh Public Schools to provide staffing flexibility for Westinghouse? No.
- Did the administration or the legislature approach top-charter providers in the region, like City High Charter School, to explore a conversion or even consult on best practices? No.

Whether it's the Westinghouse/Wilkinsburg merger, the York recovery plan, or the School Improvement Grants, what we see again and again is that absent meaningful policy tools provided by the state, districts will punt on making the difficult decisions necessary to really improve schools.

In conclusion, the federal government is empowering states with more autonomy to determine key accountability provisions under ESSA. The word "accountability" is perhaps the most often used word in education policy circles. But we have very little agreement about what that word means to us. Under Secretary Rivera's leadership, the Pennsylvania Department of Education is already convening stakeholder groups to define it. PennCAN's belief is that true accountability means requiring meaningful interventions in the lowest performing schools.

Among the many types of intervention, the state must include at least three to ensure success: planning, staffing flexibility, and charter conversions. This is the hardest but most important work in education reform. Low-performing schools aren't concentrated in one or two cities – they are distributed throughout the Commonwealth. We have a responsibility to taxpayers and to families act with a sense of urgency to improve these schools.

Thank you for your time.

Jonathan Cetel
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