

Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, Members of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, distinguished guests...

My name is Jim McIntyre and for the past seven years, I have had the privilege of serving as the Superintendent of the Knox County Schools in Knoxville, Tennessee. The Knox County Schools serves nearly 60,000 students in 90 schools and is a uniquely metropolitan school system, as we serve an urban, suburban and rural population all within a single school district. The Knox County Schools enjoys a long, proud tradition of educational innovation and student academic success. Prior to my appointment in Knoxville, I served as the Budget Director and later the Chief Operating Officer of the Boston Public Schools in Massachusetts for eleven years.

I am truly honored to be invited to testify because of the importance of this dialogue and the impact that it can potentially have on the learning and future success of the children of our great nation.

Before I begin my formal testimony, please allow me a moment of personal privilege to acknowledge and thank Chairman Lamar Alexander for his exceptional life-long service to the great state of Tennessee and to the United States of America. Senator Alexander has been a strong advocate for high quality public education for literally decades, and his efforts are deeply appreciated by the Tennesseans he represents.

Question 1: What are we doing to implement innovative approaches to improve academic outcomes for students?

We are here to talk about innovation, and I believe the remarkable work being done by our teachers, students, staff and principals in the Knox County Schools is a model of innovation that is working. Let me first say that we are blessed to reside in the state of Tennessee where the policy environment for public education is as flexible and advantageous as any in the country. Building a flexible statutory and regulatory landscape has been quite purposeful in the Volunteer State, and I believe this type of freedom allows for innovation to flourish.

So, what are we doing that we feel may be innovative? First, our visionary School Board has adopted a five year strategic plan, entitled *Excellence for Every Child*, that articulates and embraces the concept of “**multiple pathways to success.**” We believe that every student can, and must, find academic success, but that it might take different options and pathways for individual students to get there. Therefore we have actively created alternatives to the traditional comprehensive high school.

For example, four years ago we opened (with the assistance of some Race to the Top seed funding) a new Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) magnet high school. With rigorous curriculum, a non-traditional setting, expert faculty, strong leadership, a wonderful school culture, and pervasive technology, the L&N STEM Academy has already been recognized as one of the top performing schools in the state of Tennessee.

In addition, this past fall, we opened a new Career and Technical Education (CTE) magnet school, called the Career Magnet Academy, on the campus of a local community college. The school focuses on four exciting potential career clusters, around which student learning is organized:

- Advanced Manufacturing
- Sustainable Living
- Teacher Preparation
- Homeland Security

With significant dual-credit and dual-enrollment opportunities built into the design of the school, we expect that most students will graduate from the Career Magnet Academy high school with an industry certification, significant college course work and/or an associate's degree. This extraordinary partnership between a public school district, a community college, and leaders in industry has led to a school where students will make a seamless transition from high school to post-secondary education, to a meaningful and fulfilling career.

We have also put in place a variety of other engaging high-quality options, from magnet schools that offer unique learning opportunities organized around communications, the arts, and the International Baccalaureate program, to a very non-traditional school in a shopping mall storefront that caters to students who need additional flexibility and support. These "multiple pathways to success" have helped the Knox County Schools to increase our four-year high school graduation rate from 79.3% in 2008 to 88.7% for the class of 2014.

Of course, high quality options are only available if high quality instruction is happening in our classrooms. Therefore, the Knox County Schools has also embraced **innovative practices in teacher professional development and support**. Several years ago our school system became acquainted with the TAP System (formerly the Teacher Advancement Program) which is a very successful teacher development and school improvement model. We began this exciting initiative with four TAP schools, and were able (with resources made available through the federal Teacher Incentive Fund grant) to expand the formal TAP program to 18 schools in our district. The schools that we invited to participate in the TAP System were typically among our highest poverty and most academically struggling schools. The results have been very positive, and we have seen strong academic gains as a result of this productive engagement.

The expansion of the TAP System to 18 schools has been extremely beneficial, but our willingness to learn from this model and disseminate its best practices to all our schools has been truly transformational. In 18 schools we are implementing the formal TAP System, but now in all 90 of our schools, we have embraced the key strategies that make TAP successful, specifically:

- Teacher Leadership (Mentor, Master, Lead Teachers & Instructional Coaches)
- Teacher Collaboration (Professional Learning Communities, Teacher-Led Professional Development, Teacher Peer Excellence Groups, etc.)
- A Developmental Teacher Evaluation and Accountability System, and
- Strategic Compensation

The implementation of these key tenets has led to a systematic approach to continuous improvement of instruction across our school system, and to high levels of student learning, engagement, and success. Some of these instructional strategies have been applied to support early literacy in our school system, and leading indicators are showing enhanced success in reading outcomes in the earliest grades. We are fortunate in the Knox County Schools to have extremely talented teachers who are willing to embrace any reasonable strategy that might help them better prepare our students for a bright future.

We also recognize that in order to truly meet our goal of *Excellence for Every Child*, we will need to better meet the individual learning needs of every one of our more than 58,000 students. We will need to support students who are struggling, continue to challenge students who are excelling, close achievement gaps, and help every one of our students achieve their full potential. It can sometimes be difficult to accomplish that level of differentiation in a traditional classroom of 25-30 students or more. Therefore, we have started an exciting new **Personalized Learning Environment (PLE) initiative**, which has begun to transform teaching and learning in several of our schools with the support of comprehensive instructional technology.

Because we always grapple with limited resources in public education, we began our PLE initiative with a very small pool of dollars for technology, and so we conducted an internal competition called the School Technology Challenge (STC). Interested schools were asked to apply for the resources that would provide pervasive technology in their classrooms, and tell us how they would utilize that technology to significantly enhance teaching and learning. Teachers literally had to sign off on the school's application, signing a statement that they would agree to additional training, and that they would work to learn and integrate the technology into the classroom. Eleven schools were initially chosen from about thirty that applied.

Today, eighteen months later, we have expanded to 13 schools where the instructional technology has been deployed as a 1:1 initiative (one computer for each student and one for each teacher) in grades 4-12 and a blended learning model in K-3. Surprisingly, this "technology initiative" really isn't about the technology at all: it is about what our teachers and kids can do when they have these teaching and learning tools available to them inside and outside of the classroom.

Just this past week, we hosted our first ever PLE showcase, and the instructional work that is happening in our PLE schools is truly remarkable. Teachers are able to be more creative, innovative and interactive with their instruction, and students are more engaged and their world and their learning resources have been greatly expanded. While we are still very early in this effort, leading indicators point to enhanced student learning and academic growth.

While these instructional efforts have been incredibly beneficial, we recognize that in some of our schools and for some of our children, there are distractions outside of the classroom that impact student learning inside the classroom.

Students who have health issues, family challenges, dental problems, or unmet social-emotional needs, for example, are typically not going to be as ready for success in school as their peers. We are concerned that some of these dynamics may contribute to pernicious gaps in achievement that are defined by income, race, disability and/or language.

To attempt to address these needs, we have begun what we call our **Community Schools** effort. This structure recognizes that the school truly is the center of the community, and that if we can extend learning opportunities for children, while also meeting the non-academic needs of our students and their families, our children will come to the classroom ready to learn and ready to succeed.

This innovative public-private partnership has been helped along by funding from the federal 21st Century Schools grant. We have now implemented our Community Schools concept in eight of our schools. The program leverages community partners and local universities to support extended student learning opportunities, to offer fun and engaging educational activities, to ensure student health and dental needs are addressed, and to serve an evening meal to the entire family. The preliminary results are very promising, with some positive increases in attendance, some downward trends in disciplinary referrals, enhanced parent involvement, and encouraging academic progress.

Finally, none of these innovations will be effective without great school leadership. The role of the school principal has become increasingly challenging and complex, and at the same time increasingly important, as the principal has become the lynchpin in ensuring continuous improvement in our schools. Therefore in the Knox County Schools, we have been very intentional about how to identify and grow the next generation of great school principals. One of our most important strategies has been to partner with the University of Tennessee (Go Vols, Senator Alexander!) to create our **Principal Leadership Academy**.

This highly selective, intensive 15-month principal preparation fellowship takes high potential aspiring principals, and pairs them with an outstanding and successful mentor principal with whom they work side-by-side four days a week. On the fifth day, the fellows attend classes and seminars at the University of Tennessee taught by both professors and practitioners, learning the theory and research behind effective school leadership.

At the end of this Leadership Academy experience, the fellows emerge from the program with a master's degree and/or a Tennessee principal license, the knowledge and skills needed to be an effective school leader, and the network and support to work through the tough challenges they will inevitably face. As school leadership has become one of the key levers of success in public education, this investment in future leaders is one of the most important strategies we have put in place.

All of these innovative strategies have been developed and implemented by the outstanding teachers, staff, principals and district leaders in the Knox County Schools, and supported by our student-centered School Board and our engaged community. While we still have much work to do, we have seen extraordinary academic results, including a nearly 10 point increase in our high school graduation rate, gains on annual state assessments, increases in the number of students taking and passing Advanced Placement (AP) exams, overall district value-added academic growth scores that are at the highest attainable level, and "straight A's" in achievement on our state report card for two years in a row.

Question 2: How can we improve the federal law to enhance innovation?

I believe that the federal role in public education should be limited but effectual. The reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) should set some important high level expectations and requirements, and then allow broad flexibility to support and foster educational innovation in our states, districts, and schools.

I think perhaps first and foremost that means greater autonomy for states and school districts in spending federal dollars. In particular, states, districts, and schools that have demonstrated success should have very few constraints and requirements. This autonomy should apply not only to alleviating restrictions in how money is spent, but also to providing relief with regard to paperwork, reporting, and compliance monitoring.

One extreme example of the kind of bureaucratic minutiae that sometimes drives federal spending requirements, was the summary exit meeting of a Title I district monitoring visit that I attended in recent years. This is when monitors visit the district to audit your compliance with federal law and regulations. The bulk of the hour-long meeting to report the findings of the visit was literally spent discussing the need to improve our district's procedures for inventory tags on computers bought by Title I monies. Not a word was mentioned about how to improve teaching and learning with those resources.

I feel the type of flexibility needed is analogous to when I have an extraordinary school principal in place who is leading a school toward impressive success for all students. In those cases, really I feel that my job is to support that great leader and get out of her way.

Former U.S. Secretary of Education Dr. Rod Paige recently told me a story about how as a college football coach he had a defensive back on his team who later went on the Football Hall of Fame. I asked what Coach Paige had done to support his success. Dr. Paige said the young man was so talented that his “coaching” was actually holding him back, so the best thing Dr. Paige ever did for him was to stop coaching him and let him do his thing! Given some latitude, the player continued to learn, tried new strategies, and sometimes failed. But in general, as a result of this freedom, this gifted athlete obviously excelled.

Similarly, there are schools, districts and states that are making such tremendous strides in student learning and success that they should be given the broad latitude to spend funds and innovate as they see fit. That’s not to say they should not be held accountable, but let’s let them take their innovation and success for a spin and see what kind of superlative results they can achieve for kids!

Simply put there are too many strings attached to federal dollars. States, districts and schools should be allowed to spend federal dollars in any way that clearly aligns with and supports their instructional strategies and academic goals. And then they should be held accountable to make progress toward meeting those goals.

In the Knox County Schools, we recently ran into a challenge where we couldn’t co-locate an innovative and successful afterschool program with one of our community partners because of regulations associated with the 21st century school grant that said two programs that utilized those dollars could not be located in the same building. Talk about a detriment to collaboration and community engagement.

So, more flexibility on how federal dollars can be spent would be very helpful. (...and more federal dollars to be flexible with wouldn’t hurt either!)

Second, I believe there should be a federal role in ensuring that all states have both high standards and appropriate accountability systems. Now please hear me on this: I unequivocally believe the federal government should NOT be in the academic standards business, and should NOT suggest or require any particular set of standards. But I do believe that children in Mississippi and Tennessee have the absolute right to high expectations and rigorous standards every bit as much as their counterparts in Minnesota and Massachusetts. This to me is an important civil rights issue and a fundamental question of fairness and opportunity.

Therefore, while the standards themselves should not be dictated, I think states having to demonstrate that they have adopted rigorous, college and career ready standards is a reasonable requirement under the law. But states should have absolute autonomy and discretion as to the content, substance, structure and requirements of those standards.

Further, I believe that states should have broad flexibility in developing accountability systems that help them to meet their educational goals. In fact, I think the federal government has gone too far in dictating the structures and requirements of state accountability systems. However, I do believe that there is a federal role in ensuring that each state adopts an appropriate accountability system that is reasonably related to meeting its individual state educational objectives and achieving its academic standards.

I would like to see the federal law allow more flexible and less punitive accountability systems. But I would also like to see a mechanism to ensure that every state has created an accountability system which will lead to continuous improvement, developmental teacher evaluation and support, and a focus on ensuring high quality education for all students. The particulars of the accountability system should be left up to the individual states, but having a reasonable accountability system in every state should not be left up to chance.

Now, we reach perhaps the thorniest issue: assessment. I believe the federal requirement for annual state-wide assessment of students has been a necessary pre-requisite to educational improvement, and should be continued.

If there had not been the annual assessment requirement, and particularly the information it provides, the remarkable story of the transformation of Tennessee schools simply would not have happened. Tennesseans saw a grave disparity between their state assessment scores and results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and decided to make our schools better. And we have done so... the rigor of our standards has been radically raised; we have put in place an annual developmental teacher evaluation system; and we have seen the effectiveness of instruction and therefore student learning improve markedly.

Annual state-wide assessments have allowed Tennessee to develop measures that give a more nuanced picture of student academic progress. Rather than focusing exclusively on academic achievement at a particular point in time, having annual summative assessments has allowed our state to also consider student academic growth over time. Further, having annual testing enables state-wide comparisons and benchmarking, and allows teachers, principals, superintendents and state officials to have a true picture of how ALL students are progressing academically, which can inform instructional and educational decisions.

I don't believe that some of the concern and push back regarding perceived over-testing is a function of the federal requirement. I believe it is more a function of the combination of federal, state and local mandates and decisions that together may sometimes feel overwhelming. This is certainly a concern that we need to carefully examine and work to address at the state, local, and even school level, but I do not believe the federal requirement needs to be discarded.

However, I do appreciate the concept of innovation that Senator Alexander has introduced, recognizing that perhaps there might be a small number of successful, high capacity states and districts that could potentially be given some ability to pilot innovative practices in assessment. There are lots of interesting ideas out there -- some that I'm not sure I'm completely sold on yet -- that deserve a chance to be tried on a limited basis so we can see if they work. From competency-based models, and grade-span assessments, to cohort analysis, and even statistical sampling, these concepts seem worthy of narrow, controlled experiments in student assessment.

So, I don't think the federal government should abandon the annual assessment requirement and leave assessment completely at the whim of states and districts. I believe the default should be annual summative state-wide standardized assessments, but let's perhaps allow a very limited number of successful states and districts to try out some of these intriguing practices and determine if they are beneficial. It seems to me that this type of narrow "earned autonomy" strategy would be consistent with the spirit of innovation that we are discussing today.

Finally, in addition to removing barriers to innovation as discussed above, I believe there is an important role for the federal government in incenting, catalyzing and investing in innovation. While not universally acclaimed, competitive grant funding programs such as Race to the Top and the Invest in Innovation (I3) grants have fostered important conversations about how best to serve our children in public schools across America. Several of the innovations in our school system noted earlier, were initiated, funded or encouraged by federal competitive grant opportunities. So, while in general I would ask for more flexibility for the "formula" grant funds that are sent to states and districts (the vast majority of federal spending on education), I do believe that a continued modest federal investment in "R&D" grant opportunities is appropriate and beneficial to fostering innovation in America's schools.

In summary, I believe the federal role in public education should be very limited: setting high-level expectations for states and districts but allowing broad flexibility in spending and absolute autonomy in educational strategy. The reauthorization of ESEA should enable innovation and be focused on the general principles of fairness, opportunity, investment, support, flexibility, and local autonomy.

I conclude by thanking the Chairman, the Ranking Member and the Committee for the opportunity to be a part of this critically important discussion about the future success of the United States of America. I am very proud of the innovative and successful educational work that we have been doing in the Knox County Schools, and believe that there is an opportunity in this reauthorization to structure the landmark Elementary and Secondary Education Act to allow for clear expectations and greater flexibility in order to facilitate innovation and excellence in public education across this great nation.