

Dysart Unified School District No. 89

Nathaniel Dysart Education Center

Statement by Superintendent Dr. Gail Pletnick
Hearing, “ESSA Implementation: Exploring State and Local Reform Efforts”
U.S. House of Representatives: Education & the Workforce Committee
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Chairwoman Foxx and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to join you today.

My name is Gail Pletnick and I am the Superintendent of the Dysart Unified School District in Arizona and serve as the President of AASA, The School Superintendents Association. I am here today because I believe it is critical we continue to work together to ensure the underserved populations in our schools truly benefit from the educational promise that the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was designed to deliver. I thank you and the committee for convening this ESSA hearing, a continuation of the hearings held in the last Congress.

The House of Representatives and the Senate are to be applauded for the hard work that was done to craft the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), moving from the “one size fits all” mandates of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to restoring control of education to the states and local communities. Although ESSA may not be perfect, the power of the law is the flexibility it provides to states and schools allowing the focus to be on the individual student. ESSA returned responsibility for education to the state and local levels, allowing better tailored consolidated plans to achieve the promise that every student, including our underserved populations, succeed in obtaining a quality education that ensures they are future ready.

I have had the opportunity to talk with superintendents from across the state of Arizona and from across the nation about the progress made in ESSA implementation. A common thread in those conversations is that ESSA has created an opportunity for stakeholders to become more involved in goal setting and in establishing accountability processes as part of the consolidated plan requirement in ESSA. ESSA requires established procedures and criteria for consultation with the state Governor, State Education Agency, but also, requires efforts to consult with and engage stakeholders when developing a consolidated State plan.

In Arizona, committees and advisory groups were established to provide input at various stages of plan development, feeding input into the process of building a final consolidated plan. I had the privilege of participating in some of these established subgroups and I, also, attended public meetings designed to provide comment on proposed components in the plan, including the indicators to be

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incorporated in the state's revised accountability system. The flexibility of ESSA resulted in a more inclusive process for identifying educational goals at the state level and for building the evaluation systems to measure progress. I believe this more inclusive approach will enhance transparency at the state and federal levels.

I am not going to say Arizona has developed the ideal educational plan for our state; there is definitely room for continued improvement as we implement ESSA, see what works, and continue to roll back state policies that lock in NCLB-era constructs. Stakeholders are engaged in conversation around needs in our educational systems, a discussion that is important to driving the improvements necessary to provide an equitable quality education to all students, including our underserved populations. Later in this statement, I will share some challenges that I believe impacted the ability for Arizona to produce a more robust consolidated plan and those issues may also have impacted efforts in other states.

A second promise of the ESSA statute that many states are realizing is the ability to utilize multiple indicators for evaluation of our schools. ESSA requires evaluation of schools on academic and non-academic factors, but did not mandate a single indicator. In Arizona we still rely heavily on annual summative test scores in English language arts and math, but the flexibility in ESSA started a conversation about other meaningful measures that should be considered.

Although not without faults, the revised accountability system in Arizona attempts to add indicators of significance and that is something we look forward to improving. At the high school level indicators incorporated include Career and Technical Education assessments, advanced academic coursework indicators and earned career credentials. The state's elementary level measures of accountability are far more restrictive, but conversation in the state of Arizona continues around exploring additional important measures. While we don't have it 100% right in Arizona just yet, I can say the flexibility in ESSA around state accountability systems does encourage conversation among stakeholders about exploring multiple measures and more accurate indicators of student and thus school success. ESSA gave the states the flexibility to utilize current research, technology, and the flexibility of the law to build much stronger accountability and reporting systems with meaningful multiple indicators. States were tasked to take responsibility for building a transparent and fair accountability systems and I believe that stakeholders are willing to take on that task in earnest.

There were challenges with the implementation of the ESSA law. Time was definitely one of the biggest challenges. After the passage of the law, there was discussion related to the interpretation of the law and possible or proposed regulations. That debate caused some hesitation in design elements of the consolidated plans at the state and local levels. Arizona started the consolidated planning process in September of 2016 and the plan has had to be adjusted several times before our anticipated submission in September 2017. Consistency in how ESSA is interpreted and regulated is critical. Uncertainty created by shifting interpretations of the ESSA law continues to be a concern. The issue is

that the intent of this law may be lost in translation and will result in inconsistencies that create greater inequalities. We need to allow ESSA to speak directly to the work that must be done in implementing the law and not allow interpretation to move the target set in ESSA of every student succeeding. Respectfully, I ask Congress to guard against over reach.

Another complication, as it related to time is that some states, including Arizona, had laws in place better aligned to NCLB mandates or waivers. With those state laws still in existence there was an impact on what was required in a state plan or accountability system. For example, in Arizona an A-F system is required and thus that framed the discussion and decisions made regarding the consolidated plan and the accountability system. Although that is not a federal concern, it does impact how innovative state plans may be as they are developed.

A final point I want to make is that a great deal of time and effort went into Congress writing this piece of legislation and negotiating on those critical components that make ESSA a good piece of education legislation. The authorizing language is only one half of the story, though. The ultimate success of ESSA lies in our implementation, yes, but also on federal appropriations. It is critical Congress match the bipartisan support demonstrated for the policy of the law with appropriate funding support. I want to take a direct quote from the AZ Consolidated Plan: "As Arizona continues, through both federal and state funds, to fine tune funding streams for our LEAs, the committee felt it important to recognize the need for consistent funding. Through consistent and reliable funding, innovative strategies to support all learners can be developed and sustained. Additionally, consistent and reliable funding assists LEAs in building a strong cadre of teachers and leaders to fully support learners within our Arizona schools and to accelerate the closing of proficiency gaps."

I respectfully submit that as we continue to work together to implement ESSA and ensure it has the intended impact, that we be cognizant of the important complementary role of adequate federal investment. The students in our schools are our future leaders, our future workforce, and we must invest in our future by investing in public education.

In closing, thank you to the Committee for the work you have done and continue to do to ensure the Every Student Succeeds Act drives the change we all want to see in our schools - equity in our classrooms regardless of a student's background, where they live or the circumstances they live in. Your work has ensured our states and local communities have a voice in what happens in our districts and schools. I know, given the opportunity, educational leaders across this country will use that voice to deliver on the promise of ESSA.

Thank you.
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