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Statement by Superintendent Dr. Gail Pletnick
Hearing, “ESSA Implementation: Perspectives from Education Stakeholders on
Proposed Regulations”
U.S. Senate, Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
July 14, 2016

Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray 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-Elect for the AASA, The School Superintendents Association. I am here today because I believe the underserved populations in our schools deserve the educational promise that Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was designed to deliver. The power of ESSA is the flexibility it provides to states and schools - allowing them to focus on each student. The ESSA environment promises to be in stark contrast to the prescriptive and restrictive ‘one size fits all’ landscape of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). I understand the value of carefully crafted regulations in supporting ESSA implementation, but it is critical those regulations reflect the carefully constructed language that speaks to intent in this law: state and local flexibility and leadership.

For example, ESSA statute requires evaluation of local education agencies (LEAs) on academic and non-academic factors, but stops short of requiring the rating to be a single indicator. The proposed regulation’s summative score approach may hinder a state’s effort to design a fair and transparent accountability system. We have the ability to utilize current research, technology and, hopefully, now the flexibility of ESSA to build much stronger accountability and reporting systems with meaningful multiple indicators. Let the states do what they were tasked to do: take responsibility for building transparent and fair accountability systems. We should not handicap that work by dictating a single score accountability system.

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Compounding my first concern is the proposed timeline for labeling schools under the new ESSA law. In 2017-2018, states would be required to identify failing schools. The proposed timeline will rush the implementation of accountability system decisions and may result in some schools, in the first year of ESSA label implementation, being identified as failing based on 2016-17 data, which may be more aligned to NCLB mandates. How does that support driving meaningful change in the highest need schools?

There were questions posed with the release of the regulations related to areas such as 95% participation rate, n-size and others. I caution the Department of Education from going any further regulating these areas.

ESSA maintains the requirement that 95 percent of students be tested. The concerns that create the problem with meeting that mandate are related to local conditions or issues and must be solved at the state and community levels. Consequently, it follows that the states determine actions to be taken and the consequences. ESSA is meant to change the role of the federal government from dictating to supporting solutions for states and schools.

I have concerns with the proposed regulation related to the transportation of foster children. Under this proposal, when there is no agreement regarding transporting, the LEA is fiscally liable for transportation costs. This regulation undermines the negotiated language in the statute and diminishes the responsibility of the child welfare agency to meaningfully engage in discussions with the district.

I want to offer input related to assurances that may be included as part of the ESSA requirements. It is critical that states have rigorous standards that ensure students have the academic foundation they need to be successful. In Arizona, we wasted a great deal of time and energy in a divisive Common Core debate. To ensure challenging and relevant standards, states need to work collaboratively with stakeholders to evaluate and revise the standards to drive improvements, not spend vast amounts of time debating whether to reject them.

In Section 299.16 of the proposed regulations, language is included requiring states to provide evidence of adopting challenging standards. Does that equate to the ability to reject the state developed standards based on someone's opinion they are not challenging? If the Department of Education is viewed as dictating standards work, I fear, once again, Arizona resources and energy will be focused on debating federally mandated standards rather than improving the standards.

I am concerned that an unintended consequence of adding a large number of regulations and/or additional reporting requirements will be an increase in the resources needed to address those mandates resulting in a decrease in the resources that can be allocated to support students. Data collection and reporting is important for transparency and accountability; however, we need to move away from burdensome reporting, and to meaningful collection and reporting of information that is important to the stakeholders.

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 or circumstances. 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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Superintendent
AASA President-Elect