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Wildwood Public Schools

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RE: ESSA Testimony Before the Joint Committee on Public Schools

To Whom It May Concern:

Good afternoon, my name is Kenyon Kummings, Superintendent of Wildwood Public Schools in Cape May County. Our district has a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students and is racially and ethnically diverse. I am here today to testify on two separate but related concerns.

Free and Reduced Lunch Status as a Data Point in Structuring Peer School Groups

NJASA Vision 20/20 Key Factors:

- Services that focus on high expectations and emphasize individualized outcomes in order to maximize the achievement of special needs youngsters
- Governance policies and practices that enhance trust and foster collaboration, communication and coordination

The first of which is on the use of free and reduced lunch status as a metric within any school accountability system, and primarily when identifying peer schools for use in the school performance reports. The performance report is the New Jersey Department of Education's (NJDOE) main vehicle for communicating with the public regarding the status and performance of our schools. We know from peer-reviewed studies, and over two decades of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) that students on reduced lunch do not score statistically significantly differently than students not eligible for reduced lunch. However, students eligible for free lunch do score significantly lower. To aggregate the two is to create an inaccurate portrayal of the social conditions that a school is charged with navigating. For example, the composition of our elementary school is 90% free and reduced, with 85% free and 5% reduced. Under the current system, our school could be grouped with a school with the inverse of that distribution that is 5% free and 85% reduced. Those numbers represent two very different schools within two very different communities.

My request is that the department look to abandon the use of the percentage of students receiving reduced cost lunch and rely on either the free lunch rates exclusively, or the state of New Jersey's direct certification numbers that indicate if students are involved with the School Nutrition Assistance Program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Food Distribution Programs and/or are foster children. This would be a standardized metric that would result in a more accurate portrayal and grouping of schools on reports such as the school performance report, or its next iteration.

Standardized Testing, Frequency and Accountability Structures

NJASA Vision 20/20 Key Factors:

- The recognition of many different and rigorous paths to academic achievement, all of which lead to lifelong learning and careers
- Ongoing and continuous professional development support to maintain the effectiveness of all educators

The second concern is in regard to standardized testing frequency and accountability structures. With the onset of NCLB in 2001, we began administering standardized tests in grades 3-8 and 11. That has now grown to potentially 6 compulsory assessments across ELA and Math during high school, one of the highest amounts of high school testing in the country. Any opportunity to decrease the frequency and volume of mandated testing will result in more opportunities for learning as well as a reduction in costs at the school, district and state levels. In addition, many states have abandoned the use of a standardized assessment as a graduation requirement (see attached CMCAA Resolution). Any opportunity to reduce the amount of state standardized assessment via pilots within ESSA should be strongly considered.

The results of standardized assessments are currently used to identify the lowest performing schools for monitoring in an effort to improve student performance. This was originally through the Collaborative Assessment for Planning and Achievement (CAPA), and most recently via the Regional Achievement Centers (RAC) an idea borrowed from other states. The implementation of ESSA offers an opportunity evolve from the current vantage point of monitoring into a new system with a focus on capacity building and support in a more thorough and efficient manner, taking into account protocols that have a proven record of effectiveness. There already exist national school accreditation associations for feedback and growth that have demonstrated track records: (i.e. Middle States Elementary and Secondary School Accreditation, and New England Association of Secondary Schools; Western Association of Schools and Colleges).

Furthermore, given the focus on global competitiveness, it is more appropriate to look at international accreditation agencies that can collaboratively and effectively provide feedback on how well our schools are growing toward offering international educational experiences. Agencies like the Council for International Schools or AdvancedED, among a host of others, offer international perspectives for growth. For all their good intentions, the RACs do not have the personnel, nor the resources to provide that type and level of support. We need a 21st century model built on growth to replace the current 19th century model built on monitoring. For example, the NJDOE could facilitate partnerships between schools in NJ that share similar demographics and challenges to share best practices that have been successful in areas identified for school improvement such as the dropout rate or specific achievement gaps. They could also facilitate partnerships with international schools to help create professional learning networks. The NJDOE would then be in a position to help facilitate customized and collaborative professional development between two or more districts, as opposed to applying the same set of standardized principles to all schools.

By reducing the amount of standardized assessments, and by restructuring the accountability systems, the NJDOE has an opportunity to decrease the cost of school improvement initiatives and increase the efficiency and effectiveness of public education in New Jersey.

Sincerely,



J. Kenyon Kummings, Superintendent