

NEWSLEADER

“The House Is On Fire” Chairman Exclaims, Referring to Drop-Out Crisis

Although senior officials at the U.S. Department of Education don't expect the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to occur until 2010 at the earliest, a House Education and Labor Committee hearing highlighted what is sure to be a major topic of consideration for the law's renewal—high school reform.

Citing the average graduation rate at 70% and the fact that 12% of the lowest-performing high schools produce more than half of the nation's dropouts, Chairman George Miller (D-CA) said in his opening remarks, “Some may think twice about using the word ‘crisis’ to define what's happening in our high schools. But the truth is, we aren't just facing a crisis—the house is on fire.”

Chairman Miller noted that the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the current iteration of ESEA, hasn't done enough to turn around the nation's middle level and high schools and expressed his support for key legislation championed by NASSP:

- Every Student Counts Act (H.R. 1569)
- Fast Track to College Act (H.R. 1578)
- Secondary School Innovation Fund Act (H.R. 2239)
- Success in the Middle Act (H.R. 3006)
- Graduation Promise Act (soon to be reintroduced in the 111th Congress).

Appearing as a witness before the committee, Rep. Mike Castle (R-DE) expressed his support for a national high school graduation rate, which he called “a critical first step toward solving the graduation crisis and making certain our students are given the tools they need to succeed,” echoing a recommendation in NASSP's 2004 white paper, “What Counts: Defining and Improving High School Graduation Rates.” Rep. Castle also urged Congress to support states and districts to improve their state academic standards so that all students leave high school “with the knowledge and skills necessary to reach their goals.” His final suggestion was that Congress work to improve programs authorized under NCLB, such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers, to support students at the high school level.

Robert Balfanz, a researcher at Johns Hopkins University, said that a lot of work has been done in the past decade to develop evidence-based tools and models to transform the lowest-performing high schools, which he has dubbed “drop-out factories.” Progress has already been made in large districts, such as New York and Chicago, and at the state level in North Carolina, Arkansas, Alabama, and Kentucky, which should serve as a guide for Congress moving forward on high school reform.

Balfanz also cited his own research on the development of early warning and on-track indicator systems: “It is often possible to identify as early as sixth grade up to half of the students who, absent effective interventions, will not graduate. This speaks to the need to reform both our nation's high schools with low graduation rates and the middle schools where their students come from.”

Marguerite Kondracke, president and CEO of America's Promise Alliance, called for a comprehensive approach to the dropout crisis that addresses strong internationally benchmarked standards and integrated supports for students. She also encouraged Congress to fund the High School Graduation Initiative proposed by President Obama in his FY 2010 budget request, and to support his proposal for Promise Neighborhoods that would “address the effects of poverty and improve educational achievement and life outcomes for our children.”

The NASSP Board of Directors approved a position statement earlier this year to express our support for challenging graduation requirements and to provide recommendations for federal, state, and local policymakers to help schools ensure that all students meet those high standards. We encourage states and districts to develop graduation requirements that allow students to choose from multiple pathways to graduate, and we encourage them to ensure that students have access to academic supports that will help them stay on track toward graduation. The full statement, “Preparing All Students for Postsecondary Success,” can be viewed by visiting www.principals.org/positions.

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