

Testimony on
Examining the Federal Role in Public School Accountability
before the
Committee on Education and the Workforce, U.S. House of Representatives

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Thank you very much Chairman Kline, Ranking Member Miller, and members of the committee. I am honored to have the opportunity to testify before you this morning regarding the federal role in public school accountability.

My name is Alberto Carvalho and I have the privilege of serving as Superintendent of Miami-Dade County Public Schools, the nation's fourth largest school district. Miami-Dade is arguably one of the most diverse urban districts in our nation, serving over 400,000 students, from every conceivable ethnic and economic background, and at every level of educational preparedness and capacity.

The use of data to analyze student performance, resource allocation, instructional interventions, and human capital deployment, has become the hallmark of our district operation. Our success has drawn national attention because we have been able to move the bar on student achievement across the board, close the gap for minorities and those in poverty, and continue to innovate even in the face of significant economic constraints. That being said, there are schools within my district that have made astounding improvements, have been recognized for the remarkable gains in student achievement and yet, because of the manner in which we implement accountability, faced significant sanctions just months ago. I do not believe this is the kind of dichotomous system that this learned body envisions for our nation's schools.

I believe that the federal government is perfectly positioned to address the inconsistencies which exist in the American system of education accountability and to refine it in such a way that it would be a tool for improvement; one that could be used to identify best practices and to encourage the replication of successful instructional models, rather than simply imposing sanctions.

As a nation, we have embarked on the state-led common core standards movement. Assessments have become the barometer by which we measure progress. We have placed a renewed emphasis on the importance of qualified and effective teachers. And, of course, we have introduced new and stricter levels of accountability into the field of education.

An investment of federal resources should rightly come with requirements for accountability for performance, but such accountability must not be a one-size fits all model. It must carry with it a degree of flexibility, not simply tying progress to lock-step requirements that compare different cohorts of students, as is the case with the current Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP) designation. Instead, progress should be determined by measuring academic and developmental growth of individual students from year to year using growth targets rather than arbitrary proficiency targets. Further, there should be recognition by the federal administration of those states, such as Florida, that have robust, high quality, accountability

systems in place, and not require the overlay of a discordant federal system, which often convolutes the overarching goal of accountability and confuses the public.

In Miami-Dade, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has served as the catalyst for our school system to take a more laser-like approach to school reform efforts and to be more strategic in the allocation of our resources.

The manner in which we chose to address the federal accountability requirements was to develop a highly sophisticated method of using data to drive our reform conversations and ultimately our decision making. We are targeting our efforts to ensure that when students graduate they are career or college ready. We have made decisions that have not always been popular, but we have been able to do so by informing our communities and having heart-to-heart conversations – around data – as to why students in certain communities, predominantly high poverty, high minority neighborhoods, are not achieving at the same rate as their more affluent, less diverse peers.

The need to closely scrutinize student performance data and effectively allocate resources in a timely fashion led to the development of our DATA/Com process. As part of DATA/Com, the principal of a struggling school has the opportunity to meet with me and my entire Cabinet to review the latest student performance data, much like a physician reviews an x-ray or lab results. We discuss the symptoms and prescribe an antidote in real-time. Through the use of data, schools get what they need “on the fly,” whether it is an additional reading interventionist, instructional materials, or money to run an afterschool tutoring program. This is one example of how federal accountability has resulted in the implementation of a practice which has spurred success, but is only effective if the flexibility to allocate resources remains at the local level.

Without question, the advent of educational accountability has not been without challenges, and we have learned a great deal. However, few will argue that there is room for improvement to the current NCLB legislation such as:

- A need to move away from proficiency targets to growth targets that follow the same cohort of students;
- A litany of annually escalating sanctions that force improving schools to change strategies before anything has time to work;
- A failure to differentiate between historically low-performing schools and those that need minor adjustments based on stringent AYP proficiency standards;
- Inclusion of other subjects such as writing and science;
- A lack of comprehensive indicators that can gauge the health of a high school more accurately such as graduation rates, dual enrollment, industry certification, college and career readiness; and
- Large amounts of money diverted into supplemental services that have failed, to date, to yield more than limited effects on student achievement.

Despite these nuances, NCLB and the federal government, through increased accountability measures, has forced us to address the glaring achievement gaps that plague many communities across this land and has forced us to address historic equity issues that were prevalent in our schools. In Miami-Dade we have long

embraced accountability as a tool to improve, and we recognize that NCLB certainly began the conversation around the growth and learning gains made by individual subgroups of students within traditionally high performing schools, as well as shone a spotlight on chronically low performing schools.

I submit to you that the federal government should adopt a differentiated model of accountability which provides flexibility and loosens sanctions for high performing districts, while increasing oversight in districts and states that fail to make progress. How you proceed in structuring accountability policy is critical. Those nations who are currently outperforming the U.S. on international assessments such as the PISA or TIMSS are not debating educational structures or sanctions; rather they are engaged in conversations about teacher and leader quality. These are the issues we must engage in if we are to live up to the promise of a quality public education for all and ensure our position as a global leader.

In Miami-Dade, we have taken a differentiated approach to school reform and launched the Education Transformation Office (ETO) with School Improvement Grant (SIG) funding. We tier schools by degree of need based on current and historic data and create support and monitoring processes reflective of each school's academic standing. Additionally, SIG requirements have allowed us to replace ineffective administrators and teachers while recruiting those with a proven record of success, to launch an array of wraparound services to target at-risk students, and to upgrade the technological infrastructure to ensure that students are learning in 21st century classrooms. Through our use of the SIG funds and the implementation of our ETO program, we aren't simply focused on turnaround; our goal is to accelerate and sustain improvements into the future. Our ETO processes have been recognized by the USDOE, the FLDOE and districts throughout the country, and we have seen real improvement in these schools and the students who attend them.

Last year, the ETO in Miami-Dade was assigned 19 "persistently lowest-achieving schools." Of the 19, 13 are now either B or C and none are rated F. This year, the ETO oversees 26 schools through SIG II with our district curriculum and instruction team supporting and monitoring another 35 schools that are dangerously close to being identified as persistently low performing. This method of tiering schools in need of improvement has allowed us to be more strategic in resource deployment and insures us from a revolving door approach to school improvement. Schools are provided the attention they need and, much like our teacher coaching model, they are weaned from district oversight as they begin sustaining their own improvements independently. This is the national accountability approach that I proffer to you today.

In concert with the improvement of our struggling schools, our district has distinguished itself among other large urban districts throughout the country. M-DCPS leads urban schools in reading and mathematics at the fourth and eighth grade levels on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). As a Broad Finalist, our innovative systems and student performance in narrowing the achievement gap have been recognized nationally.

Surely, these outcomes should be rewarded by the loosening of sanctions and the practices that have led to them being replicated in other districts nationally. Instead, while school grades have increased (despite ever-increasing state standards of proficiency), our graduation rates improved at a faster rate than the rate of growth for the State itself, and our outcomes on the NAEP Trial Urban District Assessment rank among the highest in the nation, the number of schools that are considered in need of improvement under the NCLB Federal guidelines has continued to increase. Only 11% of all schools in Florida are deemed to have made AYP this past year while 58 percent of them are rated "A." This paradox is inconceivable to educators

and difficult to explain to communities who have witnessed the performance of their neighborhood schools rise to unprecedented levels. At its root is the struggle between competing accountability systems – the one mandated under NCLB and Florida’s own A+ Plan - Differentiated Accountability Model. Both models are rigorous, demand performance accountability, and require the public to be informed regarding the quality of the instruction being delivered. They are, however, discordant in the definition of progress, the sanctioning of schools and the general interpretation of the law.

We have rekindled the beacons of hope in communities that have, for too long, suffered from the stigma of being labeled a failing school, yet threatened them with sanctions and the threat of closure right when they have begun to demonstrate significant progress and posted dramatic numbers in terms of student achievement outcomes. Two examples I can offer you are Miami Edison and Miami Central Senior High Schools. Both schools are located in two of the poorest communities in our district. For years, the two schools had been rightly labeled as “in need of improvement” and rated F by the State. Last year, both schools earned a grade of “C” and posted their highest graduation rates since the advent of accountability. In fact, Miami Edison increased its graduation rate – in one school year – a remarkable twenty percentage points. Yet, despite these undeniable improvements, both schools were threatened with closure by the State in both 2010 and 2011 due to prescriptive and escalating sanctions deemed necessary by the state in its interpretation of NCLB. Certainly this is an unintended consequence of federal and state laws that do not work in concert with one another.

In fact, we now know that a school can be in full compliance with NCLB and not be raising student achievement, while it is possible to raise student achievement substantially and not be in compliance with the law’s current requirements. These nuances will surely need to be ironed out with the reauthorization of ESEA.

Our district has been forced to reduce its budget by over \$1.6 Billion in recent years, yet we have never waived or lost focus on the true measure of our success: our return on investment, which is reflected in individual student achievement, school performance, graduation rates, and the closing of the achievement gap for minority students and those living in poverty. We have but one strategic goal in our district and that is *Student Achievement*. Everything we do, every resource we invest, must be aligned to that goal or we don’t do it.

Through innovation, careful planning and, yes, a measured degree of sacrifice, we have been able to protect our classrooms, maintain a high quality workforce without laying off a single full time teacher for economic reasons, and establish a healthy reserve, ensuring the District’s financial position remains stable and sustainable going forward. We would not have been able to do so without the injection of dollars made available to us by the federal government. Monies from Race to the Top, School Improvement Grant (SIG) and Title I have allowed us to continue to provide a high quality education for all of our students while investing in human capital and attracting the best and the brightest in their field to teach in our persistently low performing schools. This month, we will distribute the first round of bonuses, based on student achievement outcomes, to thousands of teachers in our district. While our state has made less and less of an investment in education, our nation has recognized that without a learned populace our position in the global marketplace as a world leader in innovation and invention is in peril. Our federal government has recognized that if these challenges are not adequately addressed, inequities in wealth and opportunity will limit our nation’s economic potential and threaten our democratic ideals.

My testimony today would be incomplete without a nod to my heritage and my own personal experience. You see, today, I stand before members of Congress in the greatest nation in the world, representing a \$3.6B enterprise. An enterprise that creates great Americans, that develops the mind of future scientists, teachers, and entrepreneurs, but I too am a product of the promise that is America. For I came to this country when I was just 17 years old; unable to speak the language, one of 6 siblings living in a two-room apartment in my native Portugal. Were it not for our core belief that all children can learn and that all students deserve a quality public education, I would not have broken out of my own cycle of poverty.

In closing, Congress should, and is, as evidenced by holding this very hearing today, reevaluate its role in public school accountability. Clearly, in order for us as a people to maintain our economic and democratic prosperity, we must reflect on the lessons learned from NCLB and achieve a balance between accountability and flexibility to state and local school districts. The federal government should support the state-led common core standards movement and continue to incentivize states to join the movement as well as develop and participate in assessments that evaluate mastery of said standards. It should reorient legislation away from annually escalating sanctions to a more differentiated, longer intervention period of improvement in order to allow strategies to gain traction at historically low performing schools. It should continue to invest, through programs such as Race to the Top and the SIG which assist states and districts in the development of data systems that can effectively link student achievement and teachers. Finally, as our demographic landscape continues to become more and more diverse, it should extend the window for English language acquisition from one to three years; allowing these learners a more adequate period of time before they are expected to be at-par with their native peers.

Our educational systems have evolved dramatically in the past nine years, no doubt due to the influence of legislation at both the federal and state level. It is now time for us to evolve into the next stage of standards-based, data-driven reform; shifting from the current focus on prescriptive compliance requirements that have proven to be less than effective to a more meaningful and impactful accountability model that focuses on what surely is the most important schooling outcome of all: college and career readiness, as prerequisites of graduation. We must embrace an accountability model which incentivizes innovation; one that focuses on building state and local capacity to improve learning opportunities for all students, one that invests in research, evaluation, and technical assistance, and intervenes in consistently low-performing districts and schools, but allows enough time for reforms to take hold before insisting that further sanctions be applied. We must focus on collaboration and the dissemination of best practices which can inform state and local efforts to improve student achievement and close achievement gaps; in effect, to move the discourse from crisis rhetoric to one about solutions partnerships. To achieve this, it is going to take federal, state, and local cooperation.

ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION ACT (NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND)

Reauthorize and modify the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left Behind Act 2001) to:

- Recognize student progress in lieu of the current all-or-nothing approach and recognize degrees of progress for schools;
- Eliminate sanctions associated with not meeting adequate year progress;
- Support uniform national assessments aligned with national standards to allow for valuable comparison of student achievement among states;
- Ensure fair accountability by providing flexibility for special education and English Language Learners (ELL's) and other formula adjustments, and by requiring identical tests for Title I and Title III students in non-public schools;
- Include other indicators for accountability such as dual enrollment industry certification, AP, graduation rates, dropout attendance suspensions in determining AYP and align accountability standards with those in the School Improvement grant;
- Reward and retain quality teachers by supporting measures that raise pay for teachers in fields with shortages and in high-needs communities; that create career ladder paths; and that assist with rising housing costs;
- Establish new qualification requirements for teachers and paraprofessionals to ensure that teachers are highly skilled in content areas, as well as pedagogy;
- Allow districts to use Supplemental Education Services (SES) funds to provide tutoring to eligible students as well as pay for monitoring and other implementation costs of the out of the required 20% set-aside and ensure that public schools are not unfairly prevented from providing remedial services to students;
- Require that funding to SES private providers be contingent on outcomes on norm-reference assessments developed and administered by the states and/or the district; and
- Allocate immigrant funds under Title III based on the number of recently arrived foreign-born students.