

Testimony to the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Children  
and Families

By

Michael Casserly, Executive Director  
Council of the Great City Schools

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Good morning and thank you for inviting me. I join with my colleagues others in thanking you, Mr. Chairman, for your outstanding contributions to the lives of so many children and families. Thank you.

I am Michael Casserly, Executive Director of the Council of the Great City Schools, the nation's primary coalition of large urban school systems, which was co-founded by Sergeant Shriver in 1956 when he was president of the Chicago school board.

Our urban school districts enroll the lion's share of the country's students of color, English learners, and poor students.

Mr. Chairman, we have seen substantial progress in the education of our nation's children over the decades you have served on this panel, despite the work in front of us.

In addition to the landmark Family and Medical Leave Act and expansions to the Headstart program, you have played a critical role in the passage of the Education of All Handicapped Act and its successor IDEA; untold reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act; and student loan expansions.

You have also been a strong proponent of early childhood education, state school finance equity, and afterschool programming. And you were the first legislator to stand with us in calling for national math and science standards, which eventually morphed into the common core state standards that so many states are adopting.

All of this legislation has been important in expanding opportunities for historically underserved populations and in boosting student achievement. Nowhere is this more evident than in our urban public schools.

The number of large-city students reading at the proficient level or better on NAEP, for instance, has increased by 35 percent among fourth graders since 2002. And, the number scoring below basic levels dropped by 18 percent.

In addition, the reading gap between the large cities and the nation narrowed by one-third between 2002 and 2009. We are now just ten scale score points away from national averages.

The gains are more substantial in math. In fact, the number of large central city students scoring at the proficient level or better has increased by 45 percent among fourth graders and 50 percent

among eighth graders. And we have decreased the number of students scoring below basic levels by 24 percent.

Between 2003 and 2009, our large central city schools have narrowed the gap in math with the nation by 20 percent in both fourth and eighth grades. Still, we know we are far behind and that our racially-identifiable gaps are too wide

Congress and this committee, in particular, should feel proud of its work over many years, because it set the stage for these academic gains.

In fact, Congress has been especially effective in articulating issues and defining priorities, and then building a legislative infrastructure around those priorities, including an emphasis on the instruction of poor children, students with disabilities, and English learners.

Congress has also been particularly effective in targeting its scarce resources on school districts with the largest concentrations of need. This targeting of funds has been critical to the ability of struggling schools to overcome the effects of poverty and other barriers.

The nation's urban schools have benefitted from this targeting and have used these dollars to help spur the gains I just described. The federal government's continued support for the concentration of limited dollars on high-need communities is one of the wisest investments it can make.

The federal government's work to ensure civil rights and conduct research on what works in education has also been important.

Finally, Congress's efforts to build more accountability into public education have also been critical.

But, there is still considerably more work to do.

Research, in particular, needs to be expanded to better support school systems that are facing special challenges they can't solve by themselves, including new research on adolescent literacy, English acquisition, reading comprehension, and teacher quality—to name but a few.

There are also new national educational priorities that Congress should consider as it moves forward. Despite our rhetorical attention to science, for example, the nation's efforts in this area lack coherence and direction. Congress could change that.

At one point, Congress also made dropout prevention a legislative priority, but abandoned its program. The nation, however, continues to lose too many young people before they attain a high school diploma.

During the reauthorization of E.S.E.A., Congress should consider focusing on dropout prevention—along with secondary school reform.

Research is also quite clear on the benefits of early childhood education, but we can't seem to muster the public will to create a system that ensures that all children are served.

Finally, I want to call your attention to a report that my organization released last week--"A Call for Change: The Social and Educational Factors Contributing to the Outcomes of Black Males in Urban Schools." I ask that the report be included in the record.

It looks at the academic well-being and college and career readiness of America's African American male youth. And the results are not anything we should be proud of as a nation. On almost every indicator of well-being we looked at our Black male young people were coming up on the short end, despite the fact that many city school systems were showing progress.

We found that Black children were over twice as likely as white children to live in a household where no parent has year-round, full-time employment.

Black children were three times more likely to be raised in a family living in poverty than white children.

Black male fourth graders nationwide were over three times less likely to read and do math at proficient levels than white males.

Black males are about twice as likely to drop out of school; are less likely to take advanced placement exams; and score on average over 100 points lower than white males on SAT exams.

If these students make it into college, they are far less likely to graduate than white males.

At the end of this progression are unemployment rates among African American males that are twice as high as white males, and imprisonment rates that are 6.5 times higher.

Congress may not be able to solve all the complicated issues surrounding this situation, but it is hard to believe that additional focus on this issue would not pay enormous dividends.

That America squanders so much of its human talent does not bode well for our ability to maintain our global pre-eminence economically, financially, politically, or morally.

The great civil rights battles that so many on this panel fought were not fought so our kids could have access to mediocrity; they were fought over access to excellence and the resources to pay for it.

Congress should be proud of its work over the decades to improve access to and the quality of public education in this nation. But we still have so much more to do.

Thank you and I'd be happy to take your questions.