

Excerpts on Innovation and Transformation
From NEA President Dennis Van Roekel's March 9, 2010 Testimony
Before the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee

Revitalizing the Public Education System

It is important to recall that 1965 was one of the notable years in the history of education in America. That year, as part of his War on Poverty, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to reduce inequity by directing resources to poor and minority children and signed the Higher Education Act (HEA) to provide more opportunities and access to postsecondary opportunities for lower and middle-income families. "Poverty has many roots," Johnson said, "but the taproot is ignorance."

Poverty is still an issue in this country, and unfortunately we still have schools that lack resources, committed and effective leadership, and enough great teachers and education support professionals to reach every student. Schools in struggling communities too often have high dropout rates, and the cycle of poverty continues.

The federal government must be engaged in these issues, offering the only remaining leverage point to hold states accountable for remedying these untenable inequities. Later in this testimony, I will address our recommendation that the federal government require states to put together adequacy and equity plans that outline how they will address these inequities.

NEA also stands ready to help do something about it—we must break this cycle of poverty. And we are ready to work with our partners, community by community, to revitalize the public school system and redesign schools for the 21st century.

Redesigning Schools for 21st Century Learning

To be clear, however, educating every student so they can succeed in **this** country is not enough today. We live in a global society and our students will have to compete with people from across the world.

We need a world class education system that will prepare students to become critical thinkers, problem solvers, and globally competent. To prosper, graduates must learn languages, understand the world, and be able to compete globally, and we must benchmark our educational goals against other nations with strong education systems. If we collectively work toward that outcome, it is expected that the United States gross domestic product will be more than one-third higher in the next 70 years.

To meet the challenges of the 21st century, we must transform the system by demanding sweeping changes that changes the dynamic—significantly higher student achievement and significantly higher graduation rates for all groups of students.

Our vision of what great public schools need and should provide acknowledges that the world is changing and public education is changing too. NEA's Great Public Schools (GPS) criteria require not only the continued commitment of all educators, but the concerted efforts of policymakers at all levels of government. These criteria will prepare all students for the future

with 21st century skills; create enthusiasm for learning and engaging all students in the classroom; close achievement gaps and increase achievement for all students; and ensure that all educators have the resources and tools they need to get the job done.

The criteria are:

- **Quality programs and services that meet the full range of all children's needs so that they come to school every day ready and able to learn.**
- **High expectations and standards with a rigorous and comprehensive curriculum for all students.** Curriculum and assessments must focus on higher order thinking and performance skills, if students are to meet the high standards to which we aspire. Students will be better prepared for the rigors of life and citizenship after school if they have had access to a broad, rigorous, relevant curriculum that prepares them for a variety of postsecondary educational and career options. Students' access to core academic content areas that incorporate 21st century skills as well as fine arts, civics, and career and technical education helps inspire their creativity, helps connect their school work to their outside interests, and can help keep them engaged in school.

We must support innovative public school models of education that inform and accelerate school transformation efforts and prepare students for citizenship, lifelong learning, and challenging postsecondary education and careers. The federal government can play a critical role in increasing educational research and development and providing a clearinghouse for innovative promising practices.

- **Quality conditions for teaching and lifelong learning.** In an effort to obliterate the “corridors of shame” that exist and repair or rebuild crumbling schools, we also must focus resources on infrastructure. President Obama’s administration and Congress already have taken a giant leap forward in this respect when they passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). ARRA included billions of dollars in aid that can be used to help update schools. We are pleased that both the House and Senate have passed legislation to extend and strengthen this program.

We also know that if we are to revitalize our public schools, we must address the design of public schools. Schools today must work for students in rural, urban, suburban, and exurban areas. In rural areas, for example, broadband access is key to ensure students have access to virtual, supplemental material and support that is not available in their physical location. By creating this technology gateway, educators can also obtain high-quality professional development to which they might otherwise not have access.

Schools and classrooms designed for 21st century learning also must be designed for universal access to ensure the inclusion of the widest spectrum of students. Every effort should be made to reduce the barriers to learning so that every student reaches his or her potential and dreams.

- **A qualified, caring, diverse, and stable workforce.** Investments in teachers' and leaders' knowledge and skills are essential to all other reforms, and pay off in higher achievement. Strong preparation, mentoring, and professional development, as well as collaborative learning and planning time in schools, are the building blocks of any successful reform. We must ensure students have access to accomplished educators by requiring high standards for entry into the profession and by offering incentives to teach in hard-to-staff schools. We recommend creating a prestigious national education institute and provide incentives to states to create world-class teacher preparation programs that attract the top tier of college graduates nationally.

Teachers and education support professionals must be respected as professionals by ensuring they are part of critical decisions affecting students, schools and themselves. We also need to encourage school leadership to be effective in both operational and instructional leadership.

- **Shared responsibility for appropriate school accountability by stakeholders at all levels.** We must obtain the full commitment from all policymakers—at the federal, state, and local levels. We also must involve our communities and partners, including governors, state legislators, mayors, county officials, business partners, the faith-based community, the civil rights community, and parents and families, to name a few. It will take the concerted effort of all of these stakeholders working with superintendents, school boards, and educators to ensure that all of our schools become the modern, safe, vibrant centers of the community that they can become.
- **Parental, family, and community involvement and engagement.** Through more than 125 initiatives in 21 states, NEA's Public Engagement Project is demonstrating the essential role of school-family-community partnerships in student achievement. Our findings echo those of a six-year-long study of multiple data sources conducted by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University: such partnerships contribute to increased student attendance, improved performance on standardized tests, higher high school graduation rates, and college-going aspirations.
- **Adequate, equitable, and sustainable funding.** Resources must be adequate and equalized across schools. We cannot expect schools that lack strong and prepared leaders, well-qualified teachers, and high-quality instructional materials to improve by testing alone. We must ensure adequate and equitable funding for schools and fully fund critical programs such as Title I and IDEA and we must help states and districts to identify disparities in educational resources, supports, programs, opportunities, class sizes and personnel (including the distribution of accomplished educators) through required Equity and Adequacy plans.

NEA is part of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills -- a unique public-private organization formed in 2002 to create a successful model of learning for this millennium that incorporates 21st century skills into our system of education. The members of this Partnership believe that policymakers today have an opportunity—and an obligation—to move forward with a new

direction for teaching and learning in the 21st century (*The Road to 21st Century Learning: A Policymakers Guide to 21st Century Skills*, Partnership for 21st Century Skills).

As laid out in the Partnership's guidebook, *The Road to 21st Century Learning: A Policymakers Guide to 21st Century Skill* (http://www.p21.org/downloads/P21_Policy_Paper.pdf) we see

“a growing sense of urgency that the nation must act now to ensure that future generations of Americans can participate fully in the democratic process and the competitive global economy. Education is the foundation of democratic institutions, national security, economic growth and prosperity—and Americans cannot be complacent about improving the quality of education while competitors around the world are focusing on preparing students for the demands of this century. Only recently, the National Science Board, a federal advisory panel established by Congress, warned that the United States faces a major shortage of scientists because too few Americans are entering technical fields and because of the burgeoning ranks of highly competent scientists in other nations.

America risks losing its long-standing preeminence in science, engineering, technology, medicine, defense, business and even democracy. Without many more highly educated, highly skilled young people to carry the torch of inquiry, innovation and enterprise into the future, American dominance in these and other endeavors may fade.

There is broad consensus among educators, policymakers, business leaders and the public that schools today must do a better job of preparing young people for the challenges and expectations of communities, workplaces and higher education. Moreover, there is broad consensus about the knowledge and skills that are essential in the world today—and about the educational model that would make schools more relevant to the world again as well. This model emphasizes that students today need 21st century skills to guarantee America's success tomorrow.”

Incremental changes yield incremental results. We must be bolder. A legislative tweak here or a regulatory toggle there will not lead to the fundamental and transformative changes in education we all seek. When we address change, we have to focus on significant *and* sustainable improvement in the rates of achievement for all students, but especially poor and minority students.

According to the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, integrating 21st century skills into K–12 education will empower students to learn and achieve in the core academic subjects at much higher levels. These skills, in fact, are the learning results that demonstrate that students are ready for the world. It is no longer enough to teach students the 3Rs; we must also teach the 4Cs of creativity, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking.

The Partnership calls on policymakers to imagine:

- A place where all children master rigorous core academic subjects
- A place where teaching and learning are relevant to life outside of school

- A place where all children understand and use the learning skills— information and communication skills, thinking and problem-solving skills, and interpersonal and self-directional skills—that lead to high performance in school and in life
- A place where vital new academic content is part of the common core curriculum
- A place where professional development and teaching strategies enable educators to help students gain the knowledge and skills they need
- A place where every student, teacher and administrator has on-demand access to 21st century tools and technologies and uses them to work productively
- A place where 21st century tools and context are embedded in core subjects and assessments
- A place where all students—including those with learning or physical disabilities and those who are learning English—can show what they know and can do with all of the knowledge and skills that are valued in the world

The Partnership members know that schools like these would be intellectually stimulating environments for students, teachers and administrators alike. Communities, employers, colleges and universities would be proud to welcome graduates of 21st century schools as the best prepared generation of citizens in American history. Reaching this vision is both important and possible—and it rests in the hands of policymakers today. It is this vision that Congress should have at the forefront as you reauthorize ESEA.

Revamping Accountability Systems for 21st Century Learning

In order to support public school improvement, states should have well-designed, transparent accountability systems that authentically assess both student learning and the conditions for its success, focus on closing achievement gaps, help to monitor progress, and identify successes and problems. We should not continue the unhealthy focus on standardized tests as the primary evidence of student success.

Achievement is much more than a test score, but if test scores are still the primary means of assessing student learning, they will continue to get undue weight. This is especially problematic because the tests widely in use in the United States, since NCLB narrowed the kinds of tests in use, typically focus on lower level skills of recall and recognition measured with multiple-choice items that do not adequately represent higher order thinking skills and performance. These are unlike the assessments that are used in high-achieving nations that feature essays, problem solutions, and open-ended items and more extensive tasks completed in classrooms as part of the assessment system. Achievement must take into account accomplishments that matter in the world outside of school, such as: Are you prepared for college or trade school? Can you form an opinion about something you read and justify your opinion? Are you creative? Are you inventive? Can you come up with a variety of solutions when you're faced with a problem?

The federal government should use the ESEA implementation process, along with those associated with other federal programs, as mechanisms to incentivize states to devise comprehensive accountability systems that use multiple sources of evidence (including rich, meaningful, and authentic assessments, such as developing and/or using native language assessments as appropriate for students until they gain proficiency in English as determined by a valid and reliable measure). Instead of the current NCLB system that has resulted in a significant narrowing of the curriculum, state accountability systems should be designed to support efforts to guarantee every child has access to a rich, comprehensive curriculum. Such systems also should:

- Align with developmentally appropriate student learning standards;
- Require the use of multiple, valid, reliable measures of student learning and school performance over time and assess higher-order thinking skills and performance skills;
- Replace AYP with a system that recognizes schools that make progress toward achieving learning goals and correctly identifies struggling schools in order to provide needed support instead of punishment;
- Recognize the unique instructional and assessment needs of special populations, including students with disabilities and English language learners by designing standards and assessments that are accessible for all students; and
- Foster high-quality data systems that are both longitudinal and complete and that protect student and educator privacy and improve instruction

These state systems should evaluate school quality, as well as demonstrate improvements in student learning and closing of achievement, skills, and opportunity gaps among various groups of students. NEA has developed a comprehensive diagnostic tool called KEYS to assess school climate and success using a variety of indicators. There are also important and highly informative surveys such as the Teacher Working Conditions survey (pioneered by the Center for Teaching Quality) and the Gallup student survey that should inform states' educational approach and accountability system as it relates to school system quality.

As states design these evaluation systems, the design team must include practicing educators to ensure that the system can yield clear and useful results. The results of these evaluations should not be used to punish and sanction schools. Results instead should be used to inform state, local, and classroom efforts to identify struggling students and problematic school programs so that states, districts, and educators can provide appropriate interventions and supports for improvement.

When considering individual schools that need significant reform or turn-around efforts, I strongly urge you not to be too prescriptive—as we believe the US Department of Education's regulations in Race to the Top have been—in outlining specific methods of transforming schools. For example, we believe that turnaround assistance teams, such as those so successfully employed in North Carolina and Kentucky, serve as a highly effective, proven model of turning around low performing schools. We also believe that teacher-led schools have shown remarkable results in improving student learning. These two models were not included in the RTTT rules as allowable turn-around approaches. Such narrow prescriptions for school overhaul are predictive of one thing: diminished opportunity and tools to reach and turn around MORE schools.

Ensuring Sustainability of Public Education

Transforming America's public schools is a daunting task. It will take the concerted efforts of all stakeholders and the commitment to continue the effort until every student has access to a great public school.

At the core of this effort is ensuring the fiscal stability of the educational system so that the energy of stakeholders can be spent on how best to serve students.

As we have said in the past, the federal government should require states, as part of their application for federal education funds under ESEA, to develop "Adequacy and Equity Plans." Through these plans, states will demonstrate where there are disparities in educational tools and services, as well as opportunities and resources. The plans will outline steps underway or planned to remedy the disparities. The process of developing the plans should bring together stakeholders within the state to devise a plan to meet adequacy and equity goals, and for the first time significant federal resources could serve as a powerful incentive that spurs action on this issue. This effort will help elevate the commitment to all students and build a shared understanding of what it will take to support them.

The design of federal approval and monitoring should be one that sensibly supports adjustments and flexibility as states pursue their goals and work toward eliminating disparities, without ever losing sight of the fact that the richest country in the world can provide every student with a quality education.