

**Oral Testimony to the
Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
“ESEA Reauthorization: Graduating America: Adolescent Literacy”**

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Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi and Members of the Committee:

- My purpose is to speak about the millions of adolescents whose literacy skills are so low that they cannot make sense of their classroom texts, often fail to graduate, and are unsuccessful in careers or postsecondary education. Let me get to the bottom line right away. The magnitude of the adolescent literacy problem is this: 70% of ALL adolescents read below proficiency on the NAEP!

- In my limited time I’m going talk about two incorrect assumptions or myths that have adversely affected how struggling adolescent learners are often treated and taught in public schools and how education public policy has been crafted.

- **The 1st incorrect assumption (myth): It’s too late to do anything for older students once they get to middle or high school w/o sufficient literacy skills.** In some of our schools, this attitude has led to placing these students in low track classes, assigning them the least experienced teachers, and crossing our fingers hoping that they don’t become a disruptive force in our schools but hang on long enough to “graduate” so they don’t count against our drop out statistic.

From a public policy standpoint, a similar “there’s not much we can do” posture has been adopted. Evidence of this is the paltry investment that the federal government has historically made in students in grades 7-12 compared to investments made in children birth through grade 6 and in postsecondary programs such as Pell grants. Bottom line: our investment in adolescents is only 20%. Since so little is invested in students in grades 7-12 – these students who fall in the middle of the continuum from birth through post secondary are appropriately referred to as the “missing middle.”

The reality is these students CAN learn. There is compelling evidence showing that when we use powerful, evidence-based instructional practices, students overcome their literacy deficiencies, they can thrive and the infamous achievement gap can be closed.

I cite two concrete example of where this has happened and there are thousands of other cases just like these two. I’m not talking minor movement of the literacy needle, I’m talking dramatic improvements in performance. It is not to late to turn the tide for these students – they can be taught and they can overcome their literacy problems.

To buy into the myth that the gap can’t be closed is analogous to a doctor pulling the plug on a patient who is in the hospital because of a bad virus. He might be very ill

and not functioning well – but he is not dead. There still is hope and we need to act accordingly.

• **The 2nd incorrect assumption (myth):** It is wiser to invest in younger children OR “let’s get them young and we’ll prevent problems from occurring in the future” mentality. Don’t get me wrong, I’m a strong proponent of making investments in our younger children. There is compelling data justifying why it is sound public policy to do so. HOWEVER, there are two fallacies in the position that it is sufficient to put all of our eggs in the “early childhood basket.”

First, unlike getting inoculated for chicken pox, early literacy education does NOT ensure that problems won’t emerge as children grow older. In other words, the inoculation doesn’t last. As students move into middle and high school, the demands of the curriculum change dramatically and hence, new and more sophisticated literacy skills are required.

Second, even though we have developed highly effective intervention strategies for younger children, we have NOT developed effective ways to bring these interventions to scale – that is, they are not being well diffused throughout our schools. Consequently, there are millions of young students who are not being taught with research proven practices that have emerged from federal investments.

BOTTOM LINE: millions of our younger students pass through their early educational experience not being exposed to the best practices and eventually move into adolescents poorly prepared for middle and high school. In other words, it is faulty to assume that by solely investing in improving the literacy skills of younger children, we will do away with large numbers of struggling readers and writers at the secondary level.

So.....with that as a backdrop, highlight 3 of the six recommendations in written testimony:

Recommendations:

1. Increase funding for middle and high schools so that these students are no longer referred to as the “missing middle”
2. Support current legislative initiatives before Congress related to adolescent achievement – each is very significant and well crafted.
 - a. LEARN (Literacy Education All, Results for the Nation Act)
 - b. Success in Middle School Act
 - c. Graduation Promises Act
3. Support the development and adoption of state-led common standards that embed literacy standards throughout the content areas.
4. Encourage states to develop a comprehensive literacy policy.
5. Invest in professional development in literacy instruction for current and prospective teachers and administrators and encourage states to revise certification and licensure standards.
6. Invest in research and evaluation –
 - a. While we know enough to act == many unanswered questions

- b. With very few exceptions, adolescents, secondary schools and adolescent literacy have not been a high priority for any federal agencies.
- c. RESEARCH IS THE ENGINE THAT DRIVES INNOVATION AND IMPROVEMENT IN PRACTICES ON THE FRONT LINE.