

Statement of Molly Spearman  
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“The Every Student Succeeds Act: States Leading the Way”  
United States Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions  
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Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting me to present the opportunities the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has allowed the State of South Carolina as compared to No Child Left Behind (NCLB). As a former public school music teacher and principal, I have had the experience of teaching in some of our most affluent school districts with every resource imaginable from keyboard labs, guitar labs, and a well-equipped theatre to traveling eighteen miles away to my home district of Saluda where I found myself standing in an old, non-air-conditioned portable classroom with an upright piano and had to bring my own record player. Previously serving four terms in South Carolina’s House of Representatives and now as a statewide elected constitutional officer, I know firsthand the challenges of ensuring every student receives the opportunities they need and deserve through the public education system. In my current role, I have observed and been part of the education policy pendulum swinging back and forth over many years. This gives me the unique opportunity to present to you the positive changes that ESSA has afforded our state.

South Carolina previously operated under two accountability systems – a state system and the federal NCLB. The dual system was very confusing in our state and was clearly not a best practice as our work was not aligned with a single goal. With the flexibility offered under ESSA, and the requirement of an outcomes-based system, South Carolinians are now united in our efforts and our commitment to accountability is clear. We measure how well all of our schools are doing in preparing every graduate for college- and career-readiness and citizenship, and we shine a light on areas where we need to improve to ensure achievement gaps are not masked or ignored. All of our work is centered on the *Profile of the South Carolina Graduate*, a document, which outlines the knowledge, skills, life, and career characteristics that every graduate should possess. This work began with a group of district superintendents and quickly grew to involve the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce and adoption by education stakeholder groups and local school boards prior to being put into statute by South Carolina’s General Assembly and signed by then Governor Nikki Haley. Another important change for South Carolina made possible by ESSA is the use of multiple measures – not just the “bubble-in” assessments required under NCLB. This holistic approach creates a common-sense accountability system that considers all important factors and gives schools credit for performance outside of just one high-stakes test, all while ensuring meaningful goals and targeted supports for all schools.

This change has ushered in the addition of a student academic progress, or growth model, as an indicator in our accountability system. Currently, we are using the Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS) for grades 3–8 in English language arts and mathematics. We believe that using an academic progress measure is fair and a motivation for teachers who often find students at very different levels of readiness in their classrooms.

After robust discussion that included statewide town hall meetings, webinars, and public hearings, South Carolina chose to include a positive and effective learning environment as a measure of school performance at the high school level. Stakeholder feedback involving students, parents, and education advocates, such as members of the Columbia Urban League and South Carolina Council for Exceptional Children, who strongly suggested a focus on improving the climate of schools through safe, healthy, and positive environments. Currently, surveys are being used to fulfill the reporting requirements. Our stakeholders feel strongly that initiatives addressing character building, leadership development, creativity, and the arts must be a part of a successful school. We recognize our ESSA plan currently only requires this to be measured at the high school level. We are committed to working with parents and educators to find a path forward to reflect this priority in other grade levels in the future.

Hearing from small businesses, local and state chambers of commerce, and military liaisons, South Carolina recognized the importance of students being prepared for both college and the workforce in our ESSA plan. Our approach to ESSA incentivizes career readiness, as schools are rewarded for supporting and preparing students in work-ready skills. South Carolina high schools are awarded points for career readiness based on student completion of an apprenticeship, work-based learning opportunity, career program pathway, industry credential, or a silver rating or above on a career readiness assessment. We are proud that our system also recognizes military service readiness through success on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, or ASVAB.

Officials at the United States Department of Labor have continuously recognized South Carolina as a national leader in apprenticeship programs, with over 226 programs that are youth-specific. Recently, two young men completed a mechanics apprenticeship at their local school bus shop – the first of its kind in the nation. Upon high school graduation, they both have a high-skilled, well-paying manufacturing career awaiting them: one working full-time at BMW and another working part-time at a diesel engine plant while the company pays for him to obtain his technical college degree. Stories like these are proliferating across our state because our ESSA accountability system supports the needs and possibilities of the South Carolina workforce.

Continuing the focus of NCLB upon student subgroups, our ESSA plan requires that we must keep our focus on and serve all students. We are keenly aware of the importance of understanding and addressing both the barriers and successes of our most vulnerable students and subgroups in South Carolina. We have increased transparency in subgroup reporting by lowering the masking threshold (or n count) to 20. This will increase the visibility of subgroups in schools where none had been previously identified under NCLB. This, in conjunction with the increased accountability reporting, will shine a light on the performance of the subgroups across all metrics in the accountability system. South Carolina will continue to account for the performance of student subgroups in its identification of schools in need of targeted support and improvement.

In South Carolina, schools identified as Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI) Schools will consist of any school with a “consistently underperforming” student subgroup that has performed at or below all students at the bottom 10 percent of schools statewide, across all indicators, for three consecutive years. This strategy captures more students than ESSA requires.

Schools with the lowest performing subgroups will be identified for Additional Targeted Support and Intervention (ATSI) if the scores of any subgroup(s) are lower than the "all students" performance of the

highest ranking Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) School. In other words, when a subgroup performance mirrors that of the lowest 5 percent of schools in our state, we will work closely with every district to intervene and provide technical assistance. From these schools that are identified as ATSI, schools identified as having a “chronically low-performing” student subgroup(s) across all accountability indicators for two consecutive identification cycles, or 6 years, will then be moved from targeted support to our CSI category. Our expectation is not only for districts and schools to address the performance of these subgroups, but to sustain their improvement over time, giving these students an equal opportunity to meet the vision for every student in our state found in the *Profile of the South Carolina Graduate*. Measuring the performance of subgroups across all accountability metrics will emphasize South Carolina's commitment to excellence for all students.

One important strategy we have implemented to support our lowest-performing schools is the development of a team of transformation coaches to build capacity and provide targeted assistance in the schools that need it most. Transformation coaches support South Carolina’s educators and school leaders by being “boots on the ground” daily in our lowest performing schools to strategically guide their efforts. These coaches, who are fully funded by and employees of the state, range from a former national principal of the year to strong classroom and district award-winning leaders. They are selected based on their content experience and leadership qualities to be agents of support and change. They truly have answered the call to serve in our most underprivileged areas, often times located in rural communities nearly 40 miles from the nearest Walmart.

In South Carolina, we strongly believe schools will only be able to achieve excellence when the performance of all students, including those in historically underserved subgroups, meet expectations. This also gives us a unique opportunity to blend our efforts, particularly for students with disabilities, in a braided approach with our work under both ESSA and IDEA.

As an example of our commitment to high standards and accountability, the state recently took over management of three school districts in South Carolina. One of those, Florence School District Four, is a very small, rural, high poverty district where students were performing at the lowest levels in our state and had little opportunity for career skill development. The district was financially unstable and the future was bleak at best for these students. Now under state management, a new model of shared services is underway. We have contracted with two neighboring school districts to provide district level functions at a cost-savings of over \$600,000, representing a 50 percent administrative cost reduction for the district. These savings are being pushed down to the classroom to provide more opportunities for these rural students. I visited the district’s high school in May right before the state-takeover and asked a group of students what they needed in their school. The first hand was from a 16-year-old male student who said, “I want to be a welder, but we have no welding program.” Another student, young lady said, “I want to be a nurse, but we have no health science equipment.” One of my proudest achievements is that these young people are enrolled this year in welding and health science, in addition to the challenging academic content that all students receive.

On behalf of my staff at the South Carolina Department of Education, I commend your Congressional Staff and the staff at the United States Department of Education as both have been extremely responsive to our questions and needs. Participating in the U.S. Department of Education State Support Network, as well as supports provided by the Council of Chief State School Officers, have been very helpful as we designed and are now implementing our ESSA plan.

Finally, I want to thank each of you for your service to the students, parents, and educators in South Carolina and across our country. As a former legislator, I also appreciate the role this Committee plays in monitoring the progress of this new law and how it is being implemented across states. ESSA has moved the education pendulum in the right direction of accountability, support, creativity, and flexibility which benefits everyone. Thank you.