

TESTIMONY OF BILL JACKSON
FOUNDER AND CEO OF GREATSCHOOLS

HEARING ON “EDUCATION REFORMS: ENSURING THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IS ACCOUNTABLE TO PARENTS AND COMMUNITIES” BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD, ELEMENTARY, AND SECONDARY EDUCATION, U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SEPTEMBER 21, 2011

Good morning Chairman Hunter, Ranking Member Kildee, and members of the Committee. Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today about school performance data and how it facilitates parent-driven school accountability.

My name is Bill Jackson. I am the founder and CEO of GreatSchools, a national nonprofit based in San Francisco, CA. Our mission is to improve education by inspiring and guiding parents to support their children’s education. I’m also the father of two girls, one in fourth grade, the other in sixth.

GreatSchools began publishing a national online guide to K-12 schools around the same time ESEA was last reauthorized in 2002. Our guide at www.greatschools.org provides a wide range of information about America’s 129,000 K-12 schools, with everything from official state test data to parent reviews. Today, we are the leading source of information about school quality for parents nationwide, reaching millions of parents with the information they need to make good school choice decisions and to advocate for improvements at their children’s schools. We also run programs in Milwaukee, WI and Washington, DC to help low-income parents make informed choices about where to send their children to school.

We know that parents want this information because last year 19 million parents – representing approximately 43 percent of American households with children – came to GreatSchools.org to get information about school performance. In addition, almost 1 million Americans have signed up for weekly emails from GreatSchools.org that provide insight into

their children's school and information about how they can be involved in their children's education.

The parents we serve represent a diverse cross-section of American families, and they tell us that school performance information is invaluable to them. On an individual level, this information helps parents find and choose better schools for their children. But it also empowers parents to make their children's schools more accountable. They use this data to start conversations with teachers, principals and school board, giving parents facts that allow them to speak with "the experts" about challenging issues.

From our perspective, the 2002 reauthorization of ESEA provided an invaluable new asset to parents seeking a great education for their children: better data about the academic performance of students and schools. With this in mind, we'd like to offer three recommendations as you consider next steps.

First: Don't back down on performance data transparency.

School performance data is like sunshine for parents. Parents need data to make good decisions about their children's education. The data should continue to be disaggregated so that families can see how different groups of students are performing in schools and districts.

Along with "absolute" test score data, "growth" data that sheds light on how much schools are improving student academic skills is also valuable to parents. To the maximum extent possible, parents should be provided with data that shows whether or not their own children are making progress.

Further, it is critical that school performance data continue to be made available to third parties, like GreatSchools, so that we can present it to parents in accessible ways. Today, the evidence suggests that more parents are getting school information from third-party sources than from official government databases. As third parties get access to better data – such as information about student academic growth – we will be able to continue to innovate and provide even more value to parents.

Second: Ensure that "proficiency" means what it says it means.

When a state tells parents that their children are "proficient," parents believe their children are on track academically. When they believe this, they are less likely to ask tough questions, move their children to another school, or band together with other parents to advocate for improvements.

Unfortunately, today many states are setting the bar too low. As the governor of Tennessee and the US secretary of education acknowledged in a CNN interview earlier this year, many

states are essentially “lying” to parents about whether their children are mastering the academic skills they will need to get good jobs and to take their place in the world.

We believe that American parents deserve an honest assessment of how their children are doing.

This does not mean that all states must have the same standards and assessments – but that parents have reasonable confidence that these standards and assessments mean what they say they do. Indeed, there are different ways of accomplishing this. Some states are involved with the Common Core Standards and related assessments. This effort is a promising approach to providing parents with an honest assessment of their children’s progress toward college- and career-ready graduation.

Texas has a different and also promising approach: the K-12 and higher education systems have agreed on standards and assessments for K-12 students. The state higher education system is certifying that when high school students pass the requisite exams, they are indeed ready for college.

Ultimately, all that matters is that parents have confidence that the “proficient” label really means that their children are on track to compete in a world where education is the key to opportunity.

Third: Catalyze innovation to make accountability more personal for American families.

When it comes to the performance of the K-12 education system, nobody has more at stake than America’s children. Imagine the impact if large numbers of American parents were to demand that local school boards improve school performance and put many more children on track for college and career success. American schools would improve far more quickly.

This kind of commitment to children’s futures must arise from the hearts and minds of American parents. But federal, state, and local policymakers can create conditions to make this kind of activism more likely.

Parents are first and foremost motivated to ensure that *their own children* get a great education. The best way to stimulate an army of advocates for better schools is to help parents see that their *own children’s futures* depend on better schooling than they are getting today.

Policymakers might accelerate this process by catalyzing innovation that helps parents understand how their children are performing and that gives parents more tools to put their children on the path to success. To the extent that policymakers are investing in R&D, here are three specific ideas for consideration:

- New high-quality computer-based assessments that quickly and frequently provide parents with easy-to-understand feedback on their child's progress could help draw parents into deeper understanding of their children's trajectory toward college- and career-readiness. With deeper insight into their children's performance, parents might be more likely to intervene early when they see that their children are not on track.
- New "electronic education records," similar to electronic health records, could put more power in parents' hands by allowing them to share information about their children's achievement and progress with schools, after-school programs, summer programs, and online providers of educational services. Of course, parents would need control over who has access to this information.
- More transparency around assessments could help parents, students, and third-party education providers better align their efforts to help students succeed. Eric Hanushek, GreatSchools board member and Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, recently proposed an idea in this vein: "open tests" that allow parents and students, as well as teachers, to better understand what "proficiency" really means.

Ideas like these can be accelerated through grant programs run or funded by the federal government, such as Digital Promise.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss these issues with you today. I am happy to answer any questions.