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Fixing No Child Left Behind: Community Schools to Support Students, Families and Teachers

Ranking member Scott and members of this committee, thank you for inviting me here today to discuss how the Elementary and Secondary Education Act can better meet the needs of students and families through innovation. My name is Katrina Kickbush, and I am a special education teacher at the Wolfe Street Academy in Baltimore. Over the course of 20-plus years, I have taught prekindergarten through eighth grade in a wide variety of educational institutions, including private schools, special education settings, and currently the Baltimore City public schools, where I serve as our school's current building representative for the Baltimore Teachers Union.

Every day, teachers work tirelessly—before school, during school, after school, and even after they return home to their own families—not only to develop their instruction so their students can have rich lessons and classroom experiences that will help them excel academically, but also to ensure students have the supports they need to access those lessons and experiences. With the majority of kids in American public schools living in poverty, this has become the normal job for thousands of teachers across the country.

Every family, no matter what their socio-economic level, knows that bad eyesight, poor mental and physical health, hunger, housing problems and joblessness are barriers to effective education and learning, and thus are barriers to successful student growth, to strong families, to thriving cities and to a nation with a bright future. It would be very surprising if anyone in this room would not seek to remedy these issues if they arose in their own family. And most of the people in this room have the resources, either through personal wealth, employment benefits or the assistance of others, to successfully mitigate these problems immediately when they arise.

Yet many of the families living in poverty around the nation do not have the resources to overcome these problems. Most of the time, our families are not able to pinpoint or vocalize what barriers they are facing, they just feel the frustrations of encountering roadblocks to solving problems. In the end, children are left to try to learn while their teeth rot, while they cannot see the board, while they live underneath a bridge or a homeless shelter. We see how the effects of poverty can hinder a student's

success in the classroom. But we also know that community schools, as an innovative reform model, can help support students, families and schools.

Wolfe Street Academy is an elementary school located in Southeast Baltimore serving 222 students in the Upper Fells Point area. The school has the highest percentage of Hispanic students in the city, at 78 percent; 11 percent of our students are African-American, and 11 percent are white. The Free And Reduced Meals rate is 96 percent, and 55 percent of students receive English for Speakers of Other Languages services each day. Since 2006, Wolfe Street Academy has operated as a community school and is currently partnering with the University of Maryland School of Social Work. Over the past nine years, Wolfe Street has gone from the 77th most successful elementary school to the 2nd most successful elementary school in Baltimore, as measured by the Maryland School Assessment. During the 2013-2014 school year, it was designated one of the top 14 highest-performing Title I schools in Maryland. This success has been achieved while maintaining similar racial, ethnic and economic demographics as before. The community school strategy, an innovative model, helps provide wraparound services and supports for all students and families so that academics can take center stage, students can achieve, families can thrive, cities can grow and our nation can flourish.

Most recently, the adoption of the Common Core State Standards has set the bar high, as it should be. Along with high academic standards comes the need for accountability. As a teacher, my annual evaluation is connected to student performance. But I would ask, as I do with my students, that I be held accountable for expectations that I have been given the resources to meet. I have worked in a variety of educational settings. I have provided instruction and supported children under various assessment and accountability models. I know that a community school provides me with the resources I need to guide my students toward success. The community school strategy allows students to arrive in my classroom ready and able to access the instruction I provide. Just as my students and I need great programs and curriculum to succeed, we also need students who are not suffering from preventable hardships, students who are fertile ground for the learning schools and teachers, like me, provide.

Prior to being part of the community school strategy at Wolfe Street Academy, I had to decide whether to use my noninstructional time to plan for upcoming academic lessons or to find a resource or support for a student and their family. I had to decide if I was going to stop instruction so that I could help a student process a trauma or problem-solve a barrier to his or her learning. The teacher does not have the time or resources to provide high-quality academic instruction and thorough nonacademic supports

to students, their families and the larger neighborhood. The strength of the community School strategy is that it provides a designated person, a community school site coordinator, who develops systems that teachers, administration, students and their families can access in order to effectively overcome barriers to success. This allows teachers the opportunity to teach and students the opportunity to learn; it allows parents to trust the school institution, partners to invest in their community, and public and private service agencies access to the people their missions seek to serve.

The site coordinator works closely with administrators and teachers, builds relationships with parents to find out what students and their families need, and then recruits the right set of community partners to meet those needs. Our coordinator is constantly present in the school, building trust with parents and students. They know that they have someone at the school that they can count on to support them through a delicate and sometimes difficult situation. The coordinator is the bridge between a family's needs and a student's academic success, so that families experience less of the stress of poverty and can engage in their student's academic learning and success.

We have 24 partnerships with community organizations that provide both supports and enriching learning opportunities for students. For example, our partnership with the linguistic program at Johns Hopkins University allowed us to identify a group of students' native language and ethnic background, which was instrumental in teachers being able to learn about those students' background. Teachers were then able to use that knowledge in reading and math instruction, which helped students make greater gains than before. The site coordinator also supported a family through the process of obtaining a hearing aid and FM radio set-up for a student whose outside therapist said that she was "selectively mute." So instead of having to go through the IEP process and special education, her individual needs were met through the school's wraparound services.

Our experience at Wolfe Street Academy shows us that innovation in the form of community schools is one way that ESEA and No Child Left Behind will be more effective and serve more people. In some ways, it really isn't even innovation. It is just doing what every educator and every parent wants to do for their children in a systemic, responsible manner, taking on as a nation a large-scale project that will make us better as a country. But then again, it stands out as innovation because, even though educators do it every day in small, one-off ways, it has rarely been implemented on a grand scale.

The community school strategy brings to bear the focus of a dedicated individual to the nonacademic needs of families, but it is still a strategy that demands all members of the community—educators, students, parents, neighbors, businesses, public and private agencies, and even politicians—remain constantly engaged with each other in all aspects of the struggle for success. Schools engaged in the community school strategy report:

- Student gains in academic achievement and nonacademic development are widely evident.
- Parent/family participation is seen as instrumental to children’s success.
- Schools have stronger staff and parent relationships, improved school climate and greater community support.
- The community is stronger; there is improved safety and connections among people.

We simply cannot ignore the stunning impact of income inequality and high child poverty. To argue that factors such as poverty, neighborhood conditions, family circumstances and other nonschool factors, including healthcare, social services and parental involvement, do not influence student achievement is wrong, and it blatantly ignores those realities in children’s lives that affect their education. The federal government has an important role to play to support innovative approaches like community schools, and to ensure that each student is getting an equal opportunity for an excellent education. As a teacher in a community school, I know that site coordinators, and the trust that they build with students and families, along with the partnerships with community organizations, are essential to provide students the full range of opportunities and supports they need and deserve. Schools cannot do it alone: They need strong community partnerships, public-private partnerships, to give students the level of education they need for the 21st-century workforce, and to give our nation the strength of a well-prepared and highly successful generation.

That’s why I support dedicated and significant funding for full-service community schools in a reauthorization of ESEA, to help more schools and communities connect more strongly for student success, and to grow the practice of having a full-time coordinator to manage and sustain these school-community partnerships and community trust. As important, I support allowing community schools to be an option for schools identified as needing assistance, as well as the other recommendations of the Coalition for Community Schools outlined in a recent letter to the Senate HELP Committee, signed by 45 national organizations. Far too often, the federal government has focused on closing schools instead of bottom-up interventions like community schools. This is a crucial issue that is particularly relevant to me

at the school level; it is important to support reform strategies that show promise in supporting students, families and communities.

More broadly, I support the inclusion of before-school, after-school and summer learning as an integral part of a student's success and well-being, not an add-on. Many of our students lack a safe space for physical activity at home. The school is often the place where families feel secure and where children are not at risk. Finally, even if other school-based staff or partners are addressing a child's social-emotional learning and well-being, teachers could benefit from training on how deficits in the areas of health, mental health or family stability can and do affect a child's behavior and learning. School staff need nontraditional training and professional development so they can work more effectively with families and community partners during and outside the school day.

As a teacher at a community school, I am aware of the time and commitment it takes a site coordinator to build partnerships between schools and community resources. And while I understand that educational funding is dwindling at an alarming rate, by including specific community schools language and significant authorization levels in a reauthorized ESEA, we could help bring to scale the community school strategy and sustain existing community school models in communities across the country. Community schools are an educational, developmental and community-change strategy designed to empower children, youth and families to realize their American dream.

Thank you so much for this opportunity to tell you about my school, my students and my work. Please think of them as you work to improve and reauthorize ESEA.