

Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee (HELP)
July 23, 2010
ESEA Reauthorization: Rural High School Reform

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Good afternoon Senator Enzi and members of the committee. I am Rollin Abernethy, a professor of plant biology and currently Associate Provost for Academic Affairs at the University of Wyoming. I also serve as President of the Wyoming P-16 Education Council (www.wp-16.org), a non-profit educational organization in its third year. The overarching mission of the P-16 Council is to enhance the transition of students from each level of education to the next and thereby increase postsecondary participation and workforce preparation. The Council members represent all four educational systems in Wyoming, primary through postsecondary and include business sector and legislative representatives. It is an honor to come before you today and share some of the efforts in which the University of Wyoming and the P-16 Council are engaged to improve student preparation for both postsecondary learning and work in our rural state. With one four-year university, seven community colleges and 48 school districts in Wyoming, we believe we have near unequalled opportunity to improve postsecondary participation and completion.

Today I will emphasize six initiatives that we believe will advance a more rigorous, effective and seamless educational system and support high school reform. These initiatives include:

- 1. A defined and rigorous high school curriculum, the Hathaway Scholarship Success Curriculum;**
- 2. Articulations by disciplinary faculty members across grades 9 through 16;**
- 3. The Wyoming P-16 Education Council's high school and college course comparison charts;**
- 4. Common Core State Standards initiative and comprehensive standards assessment consortia;**
- 5. Teacher preparation at the University of Wyoming; and**
- 6. Engaging the community to support more effective schools.**

Rigorous High School Curriculum

The evidence is extensive: completion of a rigorous course of study in high school enhances postsecondary participation, completion and career readiness. The traditional gulf between college-readiness curricula and career-readiness curricula is disappearing. With development and implementation of Wyoming's Hathaway Scholarship program, and scholarship eligibility linked to completion of the Hathaway Scholarship Success Curriculum, policymakers in Wyoming established a powerful incentive for students and families to pursue more challenging high school coursework (www.k12.wy.us/eqa/Hathaway/hathway_rubric.pdf). Likewise, our schools are challenged to

provide this opportunity for their students. Development and implementation of the Hathaway Success Curriculum was an early stimulus for formation of the P-16 Council. The Council was initiated by the university in close collaboration with the Wyoming Department of Education and Wyoming Workforce Council. Both the university and the P-16 Council have contributed and strongly supported the Success Curriculum that will be fully implemented during the upcoming academic year. With support of the state legislature, the Council fostered initiation of a long-term longitudinal study including the assessment of outcomes. The necessity of sound data for informing decisions and formulating policy is one of the P-16 Council's key tenets.

Faculty Articulation Across Grades 9 through 16

The Wyoming School-University Partnership under the leadership of director Dr. Audrey Kleinsasser, along with several university faculty, community college and school faculty, formulated a program several years ago that continues to expand and mature. The program concept initially brought together faculty teaching biology in high school, community college and university classrooms for a discussion of student learning goals at each grade level using student work from the participating faculty classrooms as the focal point. The faculty participants engaged in this endeavor with a strong desire to identify shared goals for student achievement as they progress through successive grade levels. As a result, participants better understand and respect the challenges each face in their classrooms. Further, the faculty participants have collectively developed strategies and instructional exercises that help overcome some of the identified challenges.

Conversation among peers at their respective institutions has led to similar efforts with faculty in writing and reading, and in mathematics over the last two years. Growing out of this articulation initiative, a small work group representing French, German, and Spanish faculty are developing recommendations for a placement exam and broadly accepted student learning expectations for the first year of postsecondary language study. We acknowledge the need to expand the participants to include more secondary schools and more postsecondary faculty.

Understanding Expectations for College and Career Readiness

The growth of knowledge and the complexity of our global society make the importance of postsecondary experience more critical than ever before. High school completion alone is widely recognized as a partial, but generally insufficient step toward a rewarding career, and as an informed and effective participant in our democracy. Awareness of the differences between high school and college expectations is a well documented component creating successful postsecondary experiences, particularly for those students who have limited access to college experience mentoring. This is particularly critical in Wyoming, where approximately one-fourth of residents age 25 and older have bachelor's degrees. Acknowledging the need for this understanding, the P-16 Council initiated development of charts comparing and contrasting the differences in instructional features for high school and college-level courses. Charts for mathematics, science, social studies, world languages and writing courses have been produced jointly by secondary and postsecondary faculty, with support from the Wyoming State Scholars Initiative and Wyoming School-University Partnership.

Differences in class sessions, out of class preparation, textbooks and grading are among those outlined for each subject. These charts have been provided schools across the state and are now accessible on the P-16 Council website (www.wp-16.org/Projects.asp#PastProjects).

NGA Common Core Standards and Balanced Assessment Consortium

The Wyoming State Board of Education (SBE) approved adoption of the Common Core State Standards (Common Core) for English language-arts and mathematics in June 2010. The common core standards are the product of a state-led initiative coordinated by the National Governors Association (NGA) and Council of Chief State School Officers following extensive input from content experts, teachers, school administrators, and parents from 48 states, two territories and the District of Columbia. These common education standards for K-12 build on the individual states standards by providing a consistent set of goals and expectations across the states. The adopted mathematics and language-arts Common Core standards are founded on rigorous content and application of knowledge requiring higher order skills. The Common Core does not tell teachers how to meet the standards as that is best left to local districts. The Wyoming Department of Education coordinated the state's input during development and the subsequent review of the Common Core prior to adoption in June.

The University of Wyoming and Wyoming P-16 Education Council strongly support the Common Core, and provided a recommendation in support of adoption to the Wyoming SBE. Integration of this research-based Common Core with its focus on college and career readiness and the existing Wyoming K-12 standards offers additional potential for increased postsecondary participation and completion.

If the full potential of the Common Core is to be realized, a new generation assessment system is needed to support ongoing improvements in instruction and consider a broad range of student learning outcomes. The Comprehensive Assessment Systems Grant Program, a component of the Race to the Top Fund Assessment Program, recognizes this need and offers states an opportunity to participate in consortia to formulate such an assessment. The University and the P-16 Council are on record in support of the Wyoming Department of Education's application to join the current 31 state SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). The University of Wyoming and Council were initially attracted to the key elements and principals for a comprehensive assessment system proposed in the MOU for the states joining the SBAC. These key elements and principles are outlined in the Executive Summary on the SBAC website (www.k12.wa.us/SMARTER/pubdocs/Exec_Smarter.pdf). The SBAC assessment system calls for strategic use of a variety of item types and performance events to measure the full range of the Common Core and to ensure accurate assessment of all students. The importance of valid assessment of student performance in meeting content standards is obvious. However, the complexity of designing a valid assessment that provides incentives for students, parents, teachers and schools to improve and excel is not. We are eager for an opportunity to participate in the development of a new generation comprehensive assessment as proposed by the SBAC.

Teacher Preparation

Teacher preparation and evaluation are topics too often receiving negative attention today. While the importance of well qualified and effective teachers committed to students and learning is inarguable, proposals addressing teacher accountability more often emphasize punitive actions rather than supportive and developmental actions. Unfortunately punitive measures are occasionally necessary, but are a last resort. The teacher preparation initiatives I outline are not intended to discount the responsibility of instructional faculty at every level, from pre-school through graduate school. It is imperative that they effectively impart new knowledge to their students, but it is not solely the responsibility of the school and the faculty. The role of community is addressed in a subsequent section.

Without delving too deeply into teacher education, I want to highlight three facets of our NCATE accredited College of Education program at the University of Wyoming. Since 2005, every major in secondary education must also complete a concurrent major in a specific discipline. For example, secondary mathematics education majors must complete 47 credit hours in mathematics coursework. The student must receive a grade of C or better in the content coursework. Majors in Art, Agricultural Education, English, Mathematics, Modern Languages, Science (Biology, Chemistry, Earth Science and Physics) and Social Studies Education must fulfill this expectation. These concurrent majors provide substantial depth in content for students seeking certification in that area.

A second key element for quality teacher education is an increasing opportunity to work with students in actual public school classrooms to develop the skills necessary to be a highly effective member of the profession. In conjunction with required college coursework, teacher education program students at UW spend significant time with mentor teachers in their classrooms. In addition, most of our education college faculty have P-12 teaching experience on their resume providing increased credibility in our work with mentor teachers across the state. The increasing exposure to the public school classroom begins during the second year and culminates with a two semester sequence in the senior year. Each graduate completes 16 weeks of full-time field experience in a partner school during the second semester senior year.

Lastly, alternative teacher certification pathways are a topic of interest nationally. We have some concern about alternative certification programs that do not provide substantial instructional interaction with students in school classrooms. With that being said, the University recognizes this need offering a program for students who have already completed a bachelors degree that leads to teacher certification through Wyoming's Professional Teaching Standards Board. The Teacher Certification Program for Post-Baccalaureate Students is not a degree program, but a path to teacher certification. The actual certification courses can be completed over one summer and the following academic year, including the student teaching experience we value. An associated, but separate option with some additional coursework, can lead to the master's degree.

Engaging the Community in Support of Effective Schools

If high school reform is to be realized, it is essential that we as a country move beyond the blame game. The community -- parents, business owners and employees, government workers, civic leaders, and seniors -- can and should all play a role in elevating the importance of an academically strong, effective school system. David Kirp, in the June 14, 2010 issue of *The Nation* outlines a “community school” philosophy using as a model a school in upper Manhattan Island of New York. In his example, parents are involved as learners and teachers, with schools offering medical care and social services in addition to academics. Community groups and businesses are partners with the school and not only provide new funding, but also connect students to the world beyond their school and neighborhood. The traditional school day and year is substantially expanded with programs after school, on weekends and during the summer. While all the elements of this particular model may not be readily transferable, the concept overall is worthy of more widespread consideration.

One advantage of rural schools may be greater feasibility in engaging the community in activities that enhance student achievement in preparation for college and the workforce. While the smaller scale should offer an advantage in terms of involving the community, it also presents a disadvantage in that rural community residents may have less diversity of experience and perspective. On that premise, that P-16 Education Council has debated various approaches to engage individual communities in consensus building dialogue on specific elements of the academic and social skills needed for effective functioning in a global economy. Understanding and implementing best practices in providing college coursework credits for appropriately prepared high school students throughout the state is one example of a project the Council is undertaking with support from the Wyoming Community College Commission. The challenges in reaching broad consensus on a topic such as this are substantial. Most importantly, the process creates opportunity for participants to listen and learn about different perspectives, values and practices. This is a powerful first step in creating a shared vision for a stronger, more effective educational system.

I thank you for this opportunity to share some thoughts and will be pleased to answer any questions.