

TESTIMONY OF
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ELEMENTARY, SECONDARY, AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

It is a pleasure to be here today to discuss with you a topic of mutual concern and of national importance. I am referring to the great challenge of how to encourage state and local efforts at educational innovation and restructuring.

Our schools today are organized along the principles of an industrial factory system and are not responsive to the diverse needs of students or of society at large. In a word, many of the schools are failing, and the public is growing impatient. At the same time, it is not entirely clear how schools should be organized. We know that there should be much greater opportunity for school-site decision making, for collaborative decision making among the administration, teachers and other staff, and for incentives that will spur schools to develop innovative approaches to learning. We know that schools may need to borrow some of the positive aspects of a competitive market system. Yet, there is little real opportunity for innovation, for experimentation, to discover and test new modes of schooling.

state and federal regulations, which constrain attempts at restructuring and drain good people of their enthusiasm.

I would like to comment on H.R. 3347, a bill sponsored by Representative Peter Smith, and others, which proposes to encourage local school efforts at restructuring. Mr. Smith's bill would allow local school systems to pool the funds from a variety of programs and set aside some of the regulations that those funds ordinarily entail. Upon completion of an agreement between the local school system, the state, and Secretary of Education, which would stipulate alternative rules and performance objectives, the school system would be given six years to plan and carry out its experiment. If the school system consistently fails to meet its agreed-to performance objectives, its license to innovate would be revoked.

H.R. 3347 correctly attempts to maintain existing protections for civil rights, safety, and against private misuse of public funds. It also attempts to establish accountability by requiring schools to meet their own performance objectives and by incorporating periodic state evaluations of progress. Most importantly, it would relieve the weight of many rules and regulations which retard innovation. And, there is some incentive for undertaking the burden of change -- in the form of increased freedom and the likelihood of additional state funding. All of this is positive and worthy of support.

H.R. 3347 also raises some concerns. To begin, increased funding is not the solution to our educational problems, but it is a necessary part of

the solution. I have elsewhere criticized President Bush's proposal for Merit Schools as attempting to spread a modest level of financial incentives much too thinly. Given the amount of inertia in our school systems, I believe significant change is going to require large carrots. So, while the lifting of some regulations and rules is necessary to remove impediments to restructuring, real change will very likely require meaningful financial incentives. H.R. 3347 does not envision an infusion of significant financial incentives.

The mingling of funds at the local level is essentially the formation of a local block grant. During the last decade block grants were often offered at the federal level as a means of consolidating federal spending. This is sometimes desirable, as it provides funding in more meaningful amounts and allows greater flexibility in the use of the funds. However, block grants can also be mischievous. They can lead to neglect of the important federal purposes for which programs were first enacted, and they can serve as a wedge for destroying public support for those programs. However, that is not the purpose here. Yet, as I read H.R. 3347, there is no limit on the extent to which existing programs could be consolidated for purposes of restructuring. Although billed as a national demonstration program, the bill could rapidly transform most of the large education programs. As strongly as I embrace the concept of restructuring, I believe we must offer some protection to current federal education programs that were so laboriously enacted.

A related concern brings to mind the events recently unfolding in Chelsea, Massachusetts. In that beleaguered city the school committee turned over the public schools to a private entity, Boston University, and in the process greatly reduced public accountability and the impact of law and regulations. Such a transfer of authority could be very tempting in many locales, as it allows public officials to evade responsibility. This type of mistake must be proscribed in H.R. 3347. With the concurrence of a few national officials, many of whom promote privatization in the form of vouchers, tax credits, and other means, this bill could inadvertently become an engine for setting aside regulations, consolidating funds, abrogating existing contracts, and contracting out essential school services. Appropriate proscriptions against removing services from the school system must be included in the bill.

A final concern which I will mention is one of adequate protection of the special populations and purposes now served by the categorical programs that could be consolidated under H.R. 3374. It seems only right that in some aggregate sense the services rendered should not be diluted, particularly in favor of other groups or purposes. Service to populations with special needs is the central principle of federal education programs and should not be abandoned. However, encouraging innovation and restructuring in schools is also clearly an important national concern and should be a focus of federal policy.

Assuming that adequate protections can be included in

H.R. 3374, that the extent to which the consolidation of programs is allowed can be appropriately defined, and that meaningful guarantees against the privatization of public schools can be included, then I believe it is a bill which warrants support. I am confident that it addresses one of the principal barriers to positive change in the schools, the weight of restrictive regulations and rules, and for that its sponsors are to be congratulated.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify today. I will be happy to answer any questions, and I look forward to working with you in our mutual endeavor to produce the kind of school systems that our great democracy truly deserves.