



America's Promise Alliance President and CEO Testifies before House Committee on Nation's High School Dropout Crisis

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By Cynthia Hobgood

On May 12, the United States House of Representatives Education and Labor Committee held a hearing to examine how policies for addressing the high school dropout crisis and improving graduation rates can strengthen America's economic competitiveness.

America's Promise Alliance President and CEO Marguerite Kondracke testified at the hearing, titled "America's Competitiveness through High School Reform," which sought commentary from national experts on the subject.

Kondracke joined five other individuals including Alliance partners Bob Wise of the Alliance for Excellent Education, Robert Balfanz, Ph.D. of John's Hopkins University, and Vicki Phillips Ed.D from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in providing expert testimony.

"For a young person, dropping out is a million dollar mistake. For our country, cutting in half the dropout rate would contribute over \$45 billion to our economy. Mr. Chairman, the best stimulus package is a diploma," said Kondracke. "Our children and their education deserve to be our highest priority. They are the only future we have."

- [Video of Marguerite Kondracke's testimony](#)
- [More information about the hearing, including the archived webcast of the full hearing](#)
 - [Lou Dobbs May 12 Coverage](#)

The executive summary of Kondracke's testimony is featured below:

How Improving High School Graduation Rates Can Strengthen U.S. Competitiveness

Testimony Before the House Committee on Education and Labor
Marguerite Kondracke, President and CEO of America's Promise Alliance

May 12, 2009

Executive Summary

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the most pressing issue facing our nation. I am Marguerite Kondracke, President and CEO of America's Promise Alliance. Founded by General Colin Powell, we and our 300 partners are committed to bringing an end to the dropout crisis.

Magnitude of the Problem

General Powell characterizes the dropout crisis as a national catastrophe. A new report commissioned by America's Promise Alliance found that only about half (53 percent) of all young people in the nation's 50 largest cities graduate on time.

If altruistic reasons do not compel you, economic ones should. McKinsey and Company found that the educational challenges we face impose "the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession."

I agree with the President and Secretary Duncan when they say that a long-term, sustainable economic recovery is only possible if we strengthen our education system.

Contributors to the Crisis

There are two influences in a student's life that impact achievement: what happens inside the school building, and what happens outside of it. Both must be addressed if we are to successfully raise graduation rates.

First, we need stronger, internationally benchmarked standards. Students deserve standards and curricula that will help them succeed in college and careers and compete in the global economy. We are making progress in this regard. I commend the Committee for holding a hearing on the topic of common national standards just a few weeks ago, and support the administration's efforts to make rigorous standards a priority.

Integrated supports are also crucial. "There are a set of foundational things we need to do to meet...students' social and emotional needs ... the more we work together...the more we create an environment where the students can maximize their academic potential."

These are not my words; they are the words of our Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan.

The Educational Testing Service (ETS) recently outlined 16 factors that correlate with student achievement—over half of these factors are present in a child's life beyond the classroom. Such factors include forced mobility, environmental hazards, hunger and nutrition, health care, and the summer learning gap, which puts students so far behind by the ninth grade that the prospect of on-time graduation is dim.

If schools just had to deal with one, or maybe two of these issues, they could probably handle it. The problem is that these and many other factors accumulate and are concentrated in our schools with the least capacity to address them.

The Solution: A Comprehensive Approach

The dropout crisis calls for a comprehensive solution. Research demonstrates that young people need five core resources to be successful in life. We refer to them as the "Five Promises" - caring adults, safe places, a healthy start, effective education, and opportunities to serve. These Promises provide a simple but powerful framework for a robust national strategy to end the dropout crisis, and are at the heart of the *Dropout Prevention* Campaign launched by the America's Promise Alliance last year.

The campaign began with high-level summits, one in all 50 states and 55 cities with the largest dropout rates. Within 60 days of each summit, states and communities develop action plans that include a cross section of stakeholders - educators, the business community, nonprofit organizations, and students.

Locally, initiatives are spreading across the country that combines academic and community-based supports to strengthen student achievement. Rather than describe these efforts in detail, I will discuss the potential role of the federal government in bringing them to scale.

- The Graduation Promise Act is "must-pass" legislation. The federal government should not have a heavy hand in high school reform. Introduced by Representative Ruben Hinojosa in the 110th Congress, this legislation is comprehensive, data driven, and strikes the right balance between federal support and local control.
- Complementing this proposal are the Secondary School Innovation Fund Act (H.R. 2239) introduced by Representative Dave Loebsack, and the Every Student Counts Act introduced by Representative Bobby Scott (H.R. 1569). These proposals would support research and accountability so that we can use taxpayer dollars in the most effective ways.
- Additionally, I urge Congress to fund the High School Graduation Initiative proposed by the President as well as his proposed increase for School Improvement Grants in order to turn around the nation's lowest performing high schools.

Broadly speaking, the administration has outlined five pillars for education reform: early childhood; world-class college- and career-ready standards and assessments, teacher effectiveness, innovation/excellence with a focus on low-performing schools, and higher education. To these five items, I suggest adding a sixth: Schools as Centers of Community. We must address both what happens inside the classroom and outside of it in order to strengthen graduation rates and prepare our students for college. As a potential first step, I encourage Congress to fund the President's proposal for "Promise Neighborhoods" to address the effects of poverty and improve educational achievements and life outcomes for our children.

Conclusion

We do not have to live in a country where seven out of 10 students do not graduate on time, and where on-time

graduation for minority students is a 50-50 proposition. We have solutions on the ground, and legislative proposals that will bring them to scale. By passing these proposals, we will solve this problem, fortify our economy, and provide our students with the opportunity to experience the promise of America.