

Testimony

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before the

**House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education and Related Agencies**

March 27, 2012

Good morning, Chairman Rehberg, Ranking Member DeLauro, and Members of the Committee. My name is Gwile Freeman, and I proudly serve as the Superintendent of Schools in the Catahoula Parish School District in Louisiana. Our small rural school district is located in east central Louisiana. We are nestled in the foothills of the Ouachita Mountains midst agricultural land, forests, lakes, and bayous. Catahoula Parish School District is the largest employer in our parish. We are a school district of 1563 students whose ethnicity encompasses 57.3% Caucasian, 41.5% African American, 1% Hispanic, and .3% Asian. Seventy-six percent (76%) of our student population receives free or reduced lunch. I speak to you today from 24.5 years as an educator, which include 15 years as a public school administrator. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Let me begin by sharing the voice of a student in my district which exemplifies what she and many of her peers face each day.

This is the story of me. I've been raised in a place where my grandma barely puts food on our table, and most of my clothes used to belong to somebody else. I walk to school every day, and I pass folks sitting on the porch and standing on the corner waiting for something. I don't want to be like them—just waiting for life to show up. My grandma tells me to find a way out, but my teachers tell me to find a way up. The problem is that I don't know how. I don't want pity or charity. I just want to know where to begin so that I can have a happy ending to my story.

Persistent poverty is an ongoing challenge faced by many of our students in Catahoula Parish. Although born in the land of plenty, they live in small towns, in a rural area, in a state, in the Delta region, and in the south where disadvantages can overtake dreams and obstacles can hinder success, unless, we intervene to help these students to “find a way up”.

Our school district lacks a viable, thriving tax base and does not generate excessive funding through the Louisiana Minimum Foundation Program, the mechanism by which school systems are funded at the state level. Therefore, we are very dependent upon federal formula-based funds. Federal funding expenditures are 17% of our total expenditures. Federally funded employees make up 8% of our total workforce. Throughout the course of my career, I have seen first-hand the wonderful benefits of the millions of dollars in federal education grants such as Title I, Title II, REAP, and IDEA. These funds have supported and assisted many students, teachers and families and allow my school district to provide the instruction and services that will ensure success.

When I mention Title I funds you might first think of the millions of dollars Congress provides each year. However, when I mention Title I funds, I think of opportunities to offer supplemental services to disadvantaged students who would otherwise be underserved. For example, I use these resources for remediation services. Specifically, we utilize Title I funds to provide summer remediation for students seeking to pass high stakes statewide assessments. Additionally, we provide tutoring, grade recovery, and credit recovery programs. During the summer of 2011, approximately 85 students received remediation from 10 teachers in coursework and high stakes tested subject areas. From the students served, approximately 77% were successful in their remediation endeavors. This success helps to ensure that these students graduate on time. Without these Title I funds, we would be unable to offer such opportunities to our students. Another example of the positive impact of Title I funding is recognized by the fact that all of our Title I high schools have attained a graduation rate above the 80% goal of the State of Louisiana. This data further validates that the services received through federal funding assists in students graduating from high school on time.

Unfortunately, we were informed recently by the Louisiana Department of Education to plan next year's budget with a 10% reduction in Title I funds. Currently, our district receives approximately \$915,000 in Title I funds. Due to reduced revenue and increased employer benefits, we have already consolidated two schools and are currently engaging in a Reduction in Force of faculty and staff within those schools. The expected reduction in resources will likely result in the elimination of a school from our Title I funding continuum next year.

Having flexibility with the use of federal funds is very important to those of us running small, rural districts. As superintendent, I am keenly aware of the importance of braiding or "cobbling together" available funds to ensure maximum impact. For example, Louisiana school districts participate in a comprehensive consolidated planning process whereby all stakeholders come together to formulate goals, strategies, and activities based on a comprehensive needs assessment. The Consolidated Planning Process encourages decision-making and the providing of non-duplicative services. Since I am in the process of cutting approximately \$500,000 from our \$14,554,000 local budget, I am more

committed to this process and the need for maximum flexibility of federal funds. Because Title I funding is so flexible, I am able to use these resources to fill the gaps in my budget as long as I do not supplant funding.

Funds provided through the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) are also critical and flexible. These funds have allowed us to support the infusion of instructional technology into our school districts' classrooms, culminating with high-quality professional development for our teachers in the use of this technology which ultimately translates into better instruction for our students. The use of interactive, high-interest technological advances has increased student engagement in learning. One example is the use of distance education to deliver advanced courses that our schools are unable to offer.

Perhaps the example of flexible federal dollars my colleagues around the state and I are most excited about is the new federal competitive grant program focused on literacy that Louisiana's State Education Agency competed for and won. Louisiana is not accustomed to winning competitive grants of this nature as our State Education Department does not have the same level of resources and expertise to write high quality grant proposals as some of the larger and better resourced states. However, the state could not be happier to have received one of the six state discretionary Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy grants awarded by the U.S. Department of Education which affords states, and ultimately school districts, a unique opportunity to improve literacy for all students based on a plan developed by and for the State. I had the honor of serving on Louisiana's State Literacy Team along with members of the Louisiana Department of Education, university advisors, teachers, college professors, directors of educational programs, and instructional leaders. The team included individuals with expertise from pre K- 12th grade, post secondary education, child development, and research. We worked together to develop the Louisiana Comprehensive Literacy Plan which aims to ensure Louisiana students meet the literacy expectations outlined in the state's critical goals and the Common Core State Standards.

Now the difficult work is upon us to start implementing our comprehensive plan. The state must sub-grant 95% of the grant funds to local school districts through a rigorous competitive process, and the Catahoula School District recently applied for one such sub-grant. If awarded one of these grants, students identified as being the most in need of additional assistance and interventions will receive quality literacy instruction. Federal initiatives such as the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy Program encourage paradigm shifts for "all teachers to be teachers of literacy", responding to the unique needs of struggling readers and writers in their local school districts. We are given the flexibility to serve low-performing students across the grade spans while also expanding effective literacy instruction.

In conclusion, while these funds are desperately needed in Catahoula Parish School District they also must be flexible. I recognize that there is no single solution to transform public education, and money cannot solve all problems. At the same time, I also recognize that we must be held accountable with the federal dollars entrusted to our care. These resources must be spent on effective programs based on student outcomes and teacher performance using data that we collect from the classroom to make decisions.

As the Congress continues its work to support school districts such as Catahoula, I encourage you to continue to provide funding that is flexible, such as funds provided by Title I and the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy Program. I also encourage you to target resources to rural areas and small school districts. Formula funding provides rural and small schools the opportunity to utilize resources in a way that competitive grants often do not, simply because we often lack the capacity to write competitive grant applications. That said, in order for formula funding to have an impact, enough funding must be provided for formula grant programs in order for school districts to receive a formula grant of sufficient size to impact students.

The Catahoula Parish School District, although small in population, is large in the commitment to close the achievement gap of our students and to ensure that all of them leave our schools as college and career ready citizens.

I am humbled at the opportunity to provide testimony to the distinguished members of this committee. I will consider it a privilege to respond to your questions or comments.