Chairmen Hunter and Kline, Ranking Member Miller, and Members of the Committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to address the Committee

My name is Benny Gooden and I am Superintendent of the Fort Smith Public Schools in Fort Smith Arkansas. I currently serve as President-elect of the American Association of School Administrators. Fort Smith is an urban community located on Arkansas’ western border with Oklahoma. The Fort Smith Public Schools serve more than 14,000 students. The demographic characteristics include a district poverty rate approaching 70%, almost 5,000 students with non-English home languages and an ethnic mix which results in no single group majority in the District or in more than one-half of our 26 schools.

Students entering our schools bring widely differing skills to the starting line. During the past decade we have experienced every aspect of the NCLB protocol. As a diverse district with large subgroups in several areas, there is no refuge in small sample sizes to shield schools from accountability. In fact, many of our schools will present challenging students who will be counted in several different subgroups to the detriment of each. We have seen schools defy the odds and meet the targeted goals, while others face the disappointment when one subgroup or another will result in the dreaded label “failing school.”

Recently we saw two of our persistently low performing elementary schools meet standards. Both schools are more than 90% free and reduced lunch qualifiers with non-English background students in the majority. There was no simple formula they applied to make the required progress. Their success was a persistent concentration on the performance data, the use of formative assessments to guide instruction and a rich menu of in-time professional development to build capacity in a dedicated teaching staff. As for the teachers and principals, this was the hard work of education.
We are not at the finish line, and under the current standards it is unlikely that we will ever be at the desired level of performance in every school or subgroup.

As Congress pursues the process of ESEA reauthorization, it is worthwhile to note successes These include:

- articulating the imperative to serve all children
- Requiring that performance data be disaggregated and using the power of data to focus upon relative achievement needs.
- Emphasizing transparency regarding results

These successes should be continued and enhanced to emphasize accountability and to expand it to include all schools—public, private or charter.

There are a number of issues which must be addressed in the interest of college and career readiness. These include:

- Many state assessment systems fail to instill confidence that they measure performance uniformly. While few would endorse a “national test,” moving toward a commonly accepted set of standards and assessments is needed.
- Using a single test to gauge student and school success fails to support targeted teaching and leads to the mischaracterization of schools. Using multiple measures to reflect student achievement will help ensure appropriateness in testing. Adding formative assessments will make the process of assessing for accountability valid and reliable.
- Using a “pass/fail” system in which unsuccessful performance by one or a small group of students brands an entire school or district as “failing” is inconsistent with what educators and the public know about groups of students or schools.
- The sanctions which were included in NCLB are inconsistent with what we know about school improvement or the motivation of professionals. Closing the school or replacing the existing principals and teachers is not appropriate or reasonable in many rural and urban settings.
An important part of the accountability system must continue to address high school completion. But the comparative methodology must be refined and standardized to reflect the realities of our adolescent society.

The overriding effects of poverty in many communities cannot be ignored.

Locally, we have quickly realized that there is no “silver bullet” of school improvement. However, there is an array of research-based practices which will yield measured progress.

Are we accountable? Of course! With a system which is transparent and coherent, and with a system which acknowledges the well-known fact that one size does not fit all, Congress can build on what we know to take our schools where we must be.

Educators want to work with you toward these goals.