

Testimony of Susan E. Bridges
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Culpeper County Public Schools, Culpeper, Virginia
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Good morning. Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Kline, and members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify this morning. I am Sue Bridges, principal of A.G. Richardson Elementary School based in rural Culpeper, Virginia approximately 70 miles southwest of here. A.G. Richardson enrolls just under 600 students from prekindergarten through the fifth grade and employs 84 teachers and staff. Our school's mission is "Developing the Foundation for Life-long Success" and my teachers, staff and I begin each day with this goal in mind.

I know through personal experience that a principal's leadership in a school must be focused on a cohesive mission statement that is centered on student learning. At A.G. Richardson, we use data to define who we are, mark our progress over time, and secure and manage the tools necessary to continue to achieve our mission. Staying mission-focused is especially important in a school environment where challenges can—and do—pop up at any time.

I firmly believe that I have been successful in leading change in my school because of my hard-working and dedicated staff and because of the support and flexibility in decision-making that I have been given by the school district's administration. To be effective, all principals require the authority and autonomy to make necessary changes in their school buildings. This means principals must be able to arrange building staff and resources to address the needs of students, and to work collaboratively with colleagues both inside and outside of the school to identify the tools needed to sustain change and growth. There is no single plan, or one set of resources, or one style of leadership that will make every school successful. Each school has its own "personality" and successful leaders use this information to make critical decisions every day.

My school recently experienced a significant change. In 2007, A.G. Richardson was redistricted along with 5 other schools in the Culpeper County School District. My staff and I had to lead our school and community through this challenging time while remaining focused on our school's mission. Redistricting resulted in 60 percent of our students leaving A.G. Richardson to enroll in a new elementary school who were replaced with new students entering my building for the first time. Our school district is large and quite remote in parts—while there are a number of neighborhoods now feeding my school, they are scattered throughout the district and are several miles apart. My staff and I quickly realized that we needed to take great measures to assess the individual needs of our new student body in order to target instruction accordingly. We made two strategic changes to remain focused on A.G. Richardson's mission while bringing our new school family together.

First, we focused on the need for more “real-time” data to inform classroom instruction. Grade-level teams began employing targeted assessments to identify their students' specific skills and needs, and then divided their students into small groups for direct instruction. During this process, it was my job to keep data discussions among teachers current and help them make effective instructional decisions, to help secure volunteers to work with small groups of students, and to allow for flexible scheduling of teachers' time to accommodate their small-group instruction. I began holding bi-weekly differentiation meetings with each grade-level team to look at benchmarking data, student work, and standardized test data. We knew it was critically important to monitor our students' progress throughout the school year, so problems could be identified and remediated right away. To further A.G. Richardson's mission, teachers shared their successful instructional strategies with each other and worked collaboratively to identify and refer our neediest students for Response to Intervention services, which provided more intense, skill-specific instruction.

Second, my staff and I identified the need to reestablish an atmosphere of a “neighborhood school” to develop a sense of community. I established what we call the Parent Liaison Program to bring the school families together. Parent representatives from each of A.G. Richardson's neighborhoods serve as a two-way

communication tool for me and for each other. I use them to solicit feedback, to seek volunteer help, to gauge the progress my school is making throughout the school year, and to identify problems that may need to be addressed. In turn, these Parent Liaisons communicate with me concerns and issues bubbling up in their specific neighborhoods. I meet quarterly with the Parent Liaisons to discuss future projects and activities, to solicit feedback, and to have an open dialogue. Families who are new to our school are paired up with a Parent Liaison in their neighborhood to provide them with a “connection” to our school. We recently performed a parent survey at A. G. Richardson Elementary. While I collected and tallied the data, my Parent Liaisons reached out to individual families in their respective neighborhoods to solicit additional feedback. This approach has helped to develop a collaborative spirit between and among A. G. Richardson’s families and the school. But it has also afforded me the opportunity to focus more of my time and attention on the instructional needs of the school and to manage the change process we’ve been going through in recent years.

Instituting change in any organization is difficult and schools are certainly no different. Leading change at A. G. Richardson required establishing and affirming our school’s mission, keeping all staff focused on that mission, and securing and analyzing current data to inform the classroom instruction of our students. As the principal, I lead instruction by showing my teachers and staff what is possible and supporting them with procedures and resources so they can get the work done. I prop up their efforts by working collaboratively with them to analyze student data and monitor progress over time. As a result of our strategic learning focus, we have seen progress in our student achievement, and have maintained scores in the 80 percent range for grades three through five in reading, math, social studies and science.

As the instructional leader, principals have a vital and unique perspective of their school. Because of this, principals understand that local decisions—staffing, resource priorities, infrastructure needs, etcetera—must continue to reside at the local school and district level where community and school needs can be adequately weighed and addressed. Recent proposals from the federal government have

recognized the important role principals play in turning around low-performing schools, but fail to factor in the need for locally-based decision-making. I would argue—and research backs this up—that principals are responsible for leading change in *all* schools, and perhaps more importantly, *sustaining* changes focused on student learning. Principals—especially those in challenging circumstances—must be provided access to professional development and mentoring to help them build their capacity and grow in their jobs. Just as teachers work collaboratively with each other to hone best practices in the classroom, principals learn best from each other through networking and mentoring opportunities. We know that principals are second only to classroom instruction in positively impacting our students’ achievement and must work collaboratively with teachers and parents to be successful. Principals are experts at managing requests and putting into practice what is best for the students who come through the school doors every morning. Ask any principal at any given time what they must be an expert in and be careful of their response. Principals are teachers, nurses, counselors, finance directors, curriculum experts, plumbers, lunch aides, behavior specialists, marriage referees—you name it, and the principal can and has done it. But the most important role the principal plays is in making decisions that are best for his or her students and staff.

Beginning last week and continuing over the next two weeks, A.G. Richardson Elementary will be completing the Virginia state assessment—the SOLs, or Standards of Learning. Each week, I know my students, teachers, staff and parents are all breathing a little bit easier as each assessment is completed. *I* am breathing a little bit easier. But I also know the pressure will mount again soon as we await the results of those assessments and what those results may mean for my school. I will continue to lead my school to remain focused on our mission and I will navigate all challenges thrown in our path. And because I know my teachers, staff and families so well, I know we’ll continue to succeed.

Thank you again for providing me with the opportunity to address you today. I would be happy to take any questions from the Committee.