

Statement of Chris Bern
President, Iowa State Education Association
Senate Committee on Appropriations
Fiscal Year 2011 Budget Request for the Department of Education
And the Education Jobs Crisis.
April 14, 2010

Thank you, Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Cochran, and the Members of the Committee for allowing me this opportunity to speak before you today. I applaud you, Chairman Harkin, and your Committee for holding this hearing today to discuss the urgent need for continued investment in education jobs. This hearing couldn't be timelier, as immediate action is needed to jumpstart local economies, and keep our schools fully staffed at a time when many students and families are experiencing great stress.

My name is Chris Bern and I have been a public school teacher in Iowa for over 30 years. I began my career teaching middle school math in Woodbine and moved to Knoxville, where I taught math at the high school, alternative high school, and middle school level over the years. Two years ago I was elected to serve as President of the Iowa State Education Association. I am proud to represent 34,000 dedicated educators in more than 350 school districts across Iowa.

We are fortunate in Iowa to have some of the best public schools in the country. We have a long history of attracting the best and the brightest to teach in our schools and we have the graduation rates to prove that we are doing our jobs well.

If educators are given the proper resources and supports, the sky is the limit on learning for our students. Study after study proves that the most important factors

in a student's ability to learn are the skills and knowledge of teachers and education support professionals.

Yet today in Iowa and across our country, scores of talented, experienced teachers and education support professionals are at risk of losing their jobs due to historic state and local budget deficits. In fact, this spring, Iowa's teachers were faced with the threat of massive “pink slips” as the state's proposed budget dipped well below what schools’ needs were. School superintendents throughout the state threatened massive layoffs as ARRA money was used up and state money did not fill in the gaps.

I am very worried about what this means for our economy, as scores of research and common sense tell us that investments in education are inextricably linked to economic strength. More importantly, however, I am worried about what it means for our students.

In our experience there are only two outcomes for a school district facing massive job losses: larger class sizes or the elimination of programs, both of which are detrimental to students. In Iowa and across the country, school boards and superintendents have released proposals to increase class sizes, and reduce program offerings. In Iowa, music, arts, and physical education programs were all on the chopping block. Class sizes ballooned and “excess” positions were proposed for elimination. Not surprisingly, parents and other concerned Iowans have been in an uproar, because they realize that Iowa's children will suffer. Iowans have gotten a glimpse of what these job losses might mean for their kids and they don’t like what they see.

Not one fewer student is coming through our doors because of the economic crisis. They still need us to be there helping them, inspiring them and educating them every single day. The education jobs crisis is not only about adults, it is about our children, who get only one shot at an education and didn't ask to go to school during this time of economic crisis. Little Johnny still deserves the same quality education his sister got when she walked through our doors during better times.

We got a small break this spring as our state revenue picture improved slightly. In the end though, the layoffs and the other cuts are expected to be as drastic as predicted. The picture will be clearer by the end of this month when our state requires layoff notices to be sent. But we know it will not be a pretty picture. We anticipate the number of teachers and education support professionals who will receive pink slips to be as high as 1,500. That's almost four percent of our education professional workforce in Iowa. That number doesn't even take into account the number of positions which will be lost due to retirements and attrition.

The education investment in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act was critically important to us in Iowa. It funded 6,715 education jobs in Iowa – teachers, librarians, nurses, support workers, as the most recent U.S. Department of Education report shows. Close to 5,000 of those jobs came as a direct result of the aid in the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund. We desperately need this aid extended before the next school year.

I want to tell you about one of my colleagues whose job was saved because of ARRA.

Recently, we spoke to a special education teacher in Iowa City who was pink slipped last year. She split her time in two schools working with students needing individual educational assistance. Without her position, these students wouldn't get the one-on-one assistance and would most certainly fail. ARRA saved her job.

She is now employed full time at Penn Elementary and continues her work with special needs students. What would the classroom be like without her and others like her? Who would help these students?

We asked if she had lost her job last spring, would she have left the profession. She didn't know. We cannot afford that collateral damage either.

So, how can the Senate help?

First, the Senate needs to act quickly on an education jobs package. As you know, last December, the House of Representatives passed a jobs bill that included \$23 billion for an Education Jobs Fund – essentially an extension of the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund in the ARRA. We project that bill would provide Iowa with enough emergency aid to help save or fund as many as 4,900 education jobs. Needless to say, this could go a very long way in helping to avert the crisis that is right in front of us.

My colleagues back home asked me to come here to deliver a strong message – please act now to approve additional federal aid targeted to help avert the looming layoffs that will reach into almost every Iowa community, threatening our economic recovery and our students' education.

Leaving states to cut education more deeply – and we already are cut to the bone – without additional federal aid is short-sighted. Lessening the quality of education a student receives today as a result may prove irreversible. Long-term productivity growth and a higher standard of living are dependent on an educated workforce.

Second, I want to ask the Senate to look very closely at the Administration's proposal to use competitive education grants to allocate federal money. Formula grants provide a solid foundation for the resources needed to ensure a quality

education. While that foundation has always been important, it has never been more so than in today's difficult economic climate. Our schools need a level of certainty and stability in funding that they can count on, without having to divert scarce time and resources to grant applications. Many of our rural districts would simply be unable to compete, as they do not have the staff to write grant proposals. We believe a competitive system serves only to create funding winners and losers, rather than providing all districts the resources they need to succeed.

Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Cochran and the Members of the Committee, my bottom line today is that Iowans expect our schools – and our teachers – to receive the support they deserve from the federal and state governments.

A lot of very smart people in Washington often talk about the next best thing to solve our nation's education crisis. But, the answer isn't the next "silver bullet" to raise all test scores. It isn't the next greatest strategy to raise kids' reading skills. And, it isn't some magical test that will suddenly unlock every student's learning potential and every teacher's worth. I want to make one thing crystal clear: Teachers are not the problem here. We are the solution. We have been in the classroom each and every day teaching students. We just need the resources to do our work.

So, please give us those resources to help ensure the fiscal stability of our educational system, and ensure that our schools stay fully staffed and I promise that we will attract and keep the best and brightest educators and we will continue to educate the future of this great nation.

The road to economic stability and prosperity for Iowa and our nation runs through our public schools, and each and every student deserves the best we can offer.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.