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Testimony of Yvonne Caamal Canul, Director, Office of School Improvement
Michigan Department of Education
To the Commission on No Child Left Behind
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Co-Chairman Barnes and Thompson, esteemed members of the Commission: Thank you for providing the Michigan Department of Education this special opportunity to testify here today on our state's implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Michigan is very proud of its pioneering role in this endeavor, and is pleased to provide other states with research, strategies and approaches in supporting schools not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). We view the role of our Department of Education as a vanguard in the national discussions about instructional excellence and continuous school improvement.

With the historic passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, Michigan chose to embrace it -- viewing it as an opportunity to create a statewide systemic focus on school improvement and student achievement. Even though Michigan had already implemented a system very similar to AYP accountability standards prescribed in the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 and progressed farther down the consequences path than most other states, we began blazing a new and unique trail. One from which we hope that other states may benefit.

Clearly the No Child Left Behind Act has served as a catalyst for reform by elevating the discourse on the importance of instructional excellence and student achievement. Providing an unmistakable focus on a common goal with clear accountability expectations and consequences, it has brought the conversation about teaching for learning more into a public dialogue, from behind the closed classroom doors and squarely into every state's reform agenda -- and into the media like no other education issue in recent memory.

NCLB also has helped create a climate of change for historic reforms in Michigan.

Very recently, as part of an extraordinary partnership between the executive and legislative branches, the bipartisan statewide-elected State Board of Education and the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Michigan Governor Jennifer M. Granholm signed into law the most comprehensive high school graduation requirements in the country, called the Michigan Merit Curriculum.

Two years ago, we launched our nationally-recognized K – 8 Grade Level Content Expectations for English Language Arts and Mathematics, providing teachers with specificity about what students should know and be able to do by the end of each grade. And in August, to support our new Michigan Merit Curriculum, every high school will have a set of curricular expectations for the credits required for graduation.

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In order to create a common dialogue, and guide continuous school improvement, last December, our State Board of Education adopted a research-based statewide School Improvement Framework that outlines the essential elements for continuous school reform.

In 2001, we piloted the Partner Educator Program providing intensive technical assistance to a group of schools with a history of under-achievement. We knew that the greatest impact on student achievement happens in the classroom through effective instructional practices. However, we also learned that the greatest impact on instructional practice is creating school environments that foster and sustain instructional excellence. It was from this program's action research that we developed strategies for assisting high priority schools with an approach that resembles a triage process.

NCLB Phase 1 and 2 schools are provided with training and their own nationally-recognized MI-MAP Kit. Developed by educators for educators, MI-MAP provides over 300 practical strategies and activities to shape, support, and sustain systemic reform and academic achievement.

For schools in Phases 3 – 5, in collaboration with the College of Education at Michigan State University, we developed a Coaches' Institute and trained 93 turn-around specialists to work with principals and school improvement teams as an alternative governance option.

Michigan now has schools in NCLB Phases 6 and 7 that are placed on a "critical list". We administer a comprehensive school audit, turn-around specialists are assigned. This year, we're collaborating with the North Central Association to identify audit teams from their cadre of ambassadors.

Creating this kind of statewide capacity requires solid partnerships with our intermediate school districts (education service agencies), the professional education organizations, and universities.

But while the goal of increasing student achievement has invigorated the educational community in Michigan, a few of NCLB's details also have created challenges.

NCLB accountability is not uniform across the country. Each state has its own target progression; they started their "phase clock" at different points along the sanctions path and have varied group sizes and confidence intervals. While a level playing field would have made this transition smoother and any state-by-state comparison far more fair and equitable, individually state-driven systems vary incredibly. And, while each state can apply for modifications to their Accountability Workbooks, approval and/or denial of requests don't always appear to have clear and uniform rationale. This is the transparency issue that is the current buzz in Washington.

Without question, the single most difficult sanction option to implement has been the provision of Supplemental Education Services (SES). It's an expensive, time consuming, and administrative-heavy option. In Michigan's successful experience, clear learning expectations, improved classroom instruction and effective school leadership has had a much greater impact in turning around achievement than SES or choice and/or transportation.

We would like to see the Regional Assistance Centers playing a more significant and increasing role in helping states with monitoring and evaluating SES providers.

We appreciate the President's proposed budget recommendation recognizing the critical importance of state capacity with a proposal for an additional \$200 million for that purpose. As a state education agency, we constantly are engaged in a balancing act, and the annual inconsistencies in federal funding for a number of program offices have posed tremendous challenges for us. It is our hope that the Congress will reinforce its commitment to the promises and challenges of NCLB in this year's budget debate. Without ear-marked funding, many states will find it difficult to build the kinds of systems capable of sustaining progress.

Every reform initiative has its challenges. NCLB is no exception. However, in Michigan we are encouraged by our results and believe that this endeavor will have a positive impact on our state for generations to come. Thank you for affording us this opportunity to share our good news story.