Good morning. I appreciate the opportunity to be here.

I spent more than 25 years of my career as a school psychologist in Montgomery County Public Schools Maryland. Even then, it was clear to me that children can't learn to their fullest unless the right conditions exist, namely: physical and mental health, family and economic security, being safe and supported, having a sense of belonging and purpose, and access to quality instruction that takes into the account the needs of the individual child.

In recent years, I have served through the American Institutes of Research (AIR) as a consultant to high-poverty urban school districts attempting to create such conditions for learning through comprehensive district-wide reform. Over the past decade, I have worked with districts in New Jersey, New York City, Cleveland, and Los Angeles. Presently, I am working primarily with Cleveland.

**Islands of Hope**

At their best, schools in high-poverty communities are islands of hope for our children, offering a place of caring, safety, and opportunity for a better future. At their worst, they mirror the poverty around them. The hope and caring are gone. Students feel disconnected, unsafe, bullied, unchallenged and socially-emotionally unskilled. The results have been tragic. A few years ago, Balfanz (Johns Hopkins University) identified 2000 high schools he called "drop-out factories" where more than 50% of the poor, and frequently minority, students did not graduate on time, or at all. On a macro level, this costs the United States billions of dollars in lost tax revenues and increased costs for judicial and social services. On a micro level, these students are unnecessarily at significant risk for a life of incarceration, poor health, substance abuse, unemployment, or homelessness.

**Many Systems Are Committed to Positive Changes**

Many urban school districts, like the ones I am working with now, are trying desperately to prevent or reverse this reality. They firmly believe they can be the islands of hope these children need. They are working to connect with proven practices that will help their students learn academically, socially, and behaviorally so that they can cope, solve problems, and become respectful and responsible citizens. These dedicated educators need our help, our stimulus, and our knowledge to move those proven practices into their classrooms and school buildings to enable all children to learn.

I would like to talk a little bit about these proven practices and how these districts are implementing them. From a policy perspective, these practices are vital for struggling, high poverty schools—whether urban or rural—but they also form the universal foundations of effective schooling everywhere.

**Overarching Paradigms**

There are three essential paradigms for implementing and sustaining practices that have proven successful at lowering barriers to learning for all students.
1. **Conditions for Learning.** We must openly address the components that make up the *conditions for learning* being discussed here today.

2. **Multi-Tiered Prevention and Intervention Model.** We must implement a systemic multitiered services model that starts with universal prevention and provides increasingly intensive services for students with greater needs. Importantly, interventions at all tiers of support are cohesive, building on each other.

3. **Imbedded Prevention and Social Skill Development.** We must align, coordinate, and imbed prevention and skills-building strategies throughout the curriculum and school day. This represents a critical cultural shift for most schools away from categorical silos for symptom-based problems. Imbedding basic positive behavior and social skills instruction within every aspect of schooling can reduce problems and help children feel more connected to school and to their peers and teachers.

Critical to all of the above is having student support personnel available to help school leaders identify and implement proven school-wide practices; to help teachers create resilient, caring classrooms; and to recognize and intervene early with the students who need more targeted help.

**Conditions for Learning**

You have heard a lot this morning about *conditions for learning* that focus on creating safe and supportive schools. In 2004, my colleagues at AIR and I defined four foundational conditions that are critical to success:

1. Offering challenging **academic instruction** that supports high standards for all.
2. Ensuring a **climate of connectedness and caring**.
3. **Basing discipline on positive behavioral policies and supports.**
4. **Teaching, reinforcing, and modeling social skills.**

These conditions are interactive, synergistic, and interdependent. They are like the ingredients of a recipe; you have to blend them in the right amounts to get the desired results. The critical point is to make all of them extrinsic and not assumed. We have to be intentional about ensuring they are present, understood by all, and consistently implemented and maintained.

**Examples of Culture Change**

So what does this look like in practice on a district-wide level? I would like to share a few examples of the strategies being used in the urban districts with which I am working.

**We implemented comprehensive social skills instruction.** Many people think social skills are not the province of education or should be taught at home. On the contrary, they are an essential part of education necessary for school and life functioning. Few of our children in high risk communities know how to consistently listen, solve problems, or respond effectively to frustration or bullying. We can teach them these skills just as we can teach them to read. In fact, the two support each other. In Cleveland, teaching the PATHS social skills curriculum in every classroom, grades pre-K through 5, is now mandatory. Far from distracting from academics, this instruction has, in 1 year, increased student attention and their social skills, which improves behavior and learning.

**We shifted from punitive discipline to positive discipline.** I cannot overemphasize how important it is to stop simply punishing students, and instead develop an approach to discipline from a skills-building perspective. Children want to be competent, successful people. I will never forget waiting to meet with a principal and her leadership team at one of our schools. Sitting in front of her office were three boys. One first grader fidgeted and the secretary announced in a loud stern voice that he threw his backpack on the floor rather than store it in his cubby. A few minutes later as he stared at me in my suit, he said in a whisper, "I can read." He wanted me to know him as a reader, not as a discipline problem.
He spent most of the morning sitting there not learning to improve his reading and not learning to change his behavior. As a school psychologist, I know that his teacher was frustrated by his behavior. I also know she would like a practical, implementable solution to his problem. The good news is that there are practical solutions that can reinforce this teacher’s natural caring and help keep this student in the classroom, improving his competence in reading and behavior.

Making the shift to effective discipline policies requires focusing on the goal of keeping kids in class and in school. One school system with which I am working suspended students for being late or absent. This was completely nonsensical and the policy has been replaced. Now attendance patterns are monitored, and school counselors develop individualized solutions for the students struggling with attendance. Establishing incentives for attendance and improving transportation is part of the preventive universal culture change we have established.

In another district, removal from the classroom as a way to change a student’s misbehavior was a common practice. We changed the policy so that students now go to a planning center where instructional assistants help them to learn effective behavioral and coping strategies. As long as they are out of the class, they also receive academic instruction. School psychologists and social workers are back-up coaches for the instructional assistants. School psychologists also train teachers and staff in de-escalation techniques to reduce classroom disruptions and removal in the first place.

This leads me to the next strategy: using student support teams (SSTs) to solve problems and address early warning signs. In many urban school districts, referral to special education was seen as the only intervention for struggling students. This counterproductive practice simply leads to disproportionate special ed placements and higher rates of school failure. Schools in the South Bronx in New York City now have problem-solving teams that are staffed by the principal, school social worker, and teachers. In-school counseling services, tutoring, and targeted instruction can be quickly provided before problems escalate. For students with the most significant problems, school-based services are augmented with wraparound services supported by partnerships with community agencies.

Similarly, in Cleveland every school has an SST comprised of three core members who connect to the school’s leadership team. The SST always includes a principal; a teacher; and a school psychologist, school counselor, or school social worker. They meet weekly to ensure early interventions, to follow those students referred and to prevent waiting lists. In addition to working with individual students, the team looks for patterns of problems that can result in school-wide, classroom, or grade level changes.

In Cleveland, as in New York, all these changes in policies and instruction are selected from an array of best-practices and proven programs by the school system’s representative committee that includes management, principals, teacher union members, community partners and parents.

It is important to note that the coordination between school and community services is critical. Even the most well staffed student support teams cannot address every issue, particularly in these high needs districts. School support personnel are well equipped to oversee services and ensure quality and alignment with school practice. For example, in Cleveland, school personnel and community partners were trained together to use the common language of the social skills curriculum, aligning school-wide prevention with intensive interventions in a consistent manner.

We established training, coaching and monitoring. Ongoing training is necessary. In urban districts, we find there are high mobility rates not only for children but also for staff. Schools close and consolidate, and staffing shrinks with tight budgets. Critical training to sustain interventions cannot be left to chance. Changes in practices and policies need to be implemented universally so that students have consistent instruction across the district. The capacity for sustainable training and mentoring ultimately needs to be developed in-house, because consultants like me come and go. To accomplish this we have begun to institute several training of trainers using school psychologists, counselors, and social workers to train and support teachers, other school staff, and parents in positive behavioral supports, de-escalation skills, PATHS, bullying prevention, crisis intervention, and other skills.
We made effective use of data. When we look at our complete interactive prevention intervention program, we require data to assess the process and the outcomes. We use electronic data on multiple interventions and prevention activities to look at fidelity and the relationship to academic and behavioral outcomes. We have seen that when PATHS is imbedded properly in the classroom, student attention improves and behavior problems are minimized. Data have system and school accountability implications as well. In Cleveland, all schools are reviewed not only on their academic progress but also on their school climate and implementation of the social–emotional and behavioral initiatives. Every intervention has measures that can be self-monitored and monitored by support staff. This provides a guiding picture of school functioning. And instead of punishing them, schools that need the help actually get it.

What Can Congress do?

I always say if you can read, you have a better chance of getting a job, and if you can behave, you have a better chance of keeping that job. Social–emotional skills are necessary and should be considered as a core component in ensuring academic success. Good academic instruction is necessary but not sufficient. The value added by supporting initiatives that address and imbed the critical conditions for learning in school policies and practices should be reflected in education (and interagency) legislation. Systems must ensure sustainability of effective practices and multi-year support is required to ensure implementation.

Remember for every 10% improvement in graduation rates we save tens of billions of dollars in related costs and more importantly we save many more from painful poverty for generations to come. These are our children. They are the future of the United States.