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Prepared Testimony for Congressman Chaka Fattah
Member, US House of Representatives
Before the Committee on Education and Labor

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Improved Competitiveness Through Better High Schools

Chairman Miller, Congressman McKeon and members of the committee, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak before you on improving our nation's high schools and ensuring every child, regardless of life circumstances, is receiving the education necessary to succeed in college, career and life. I am also honored to join my colleagues Mr. Grijalva and Mr. Castle in offering remarks and to welcome Scott Gordon, CEO of Mastery Charter Schools in Philadelphia, to Washington.

I am excited by the opportunity we now have to improve educational outcomes and ensure a fair playing field for all students. With the leadership of this committee, President Obama and Chairman Kennedy, I am confident that we will begin to close the devastating gaps and inequities in opportunity that have contributed to under achievement among our nation's low income students and students of color.

I would like to focus my remarks on those ingredients of better high schools which have been effective in improving student achievement and sending students to higher education; effective teachers and a rigorous, college preparatory curriculum. These critical resources are available in abundance to our wealthiest families, in both public and private schools, but available only to a chosen few poor neighborhoods and communities of color.

Nationally, high-poverty districts start the year with $938 less state and local revenue per pupil. In a class of 25 students, that $23,000 difference means teachers with less experience and less expertise, fewer appropriate instructional materials and less access to current educational technology. 34 percent of classes in high-poverty schools are taught by teachers lacking a major or minor in their field of instruction, almost twice the rate for their higher-income peers. In high school, this often means teachers whose last academic experience with math or science was their own high school-level science or math class.

In addition to less content expertise, teachers in poor schools are more likely to be pedagogical novices with three years or less experience. The difference in teacher experience is even greater in high-minority schools when compared with low-minority schools.

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Naturally, these differences in teacher experience and content mastery lead to wide variations in available curricula. In core classes, the content of which is a predictor of college success, students in high-poverty schools are 24 percent more likely than students in low poverty schools to face an out-of-field teacher. Low income students are less likely to be in a full college preparatory track and are more likely to begin post-secondary education unprepared.

These significant academic inequities are creating formidable barriers for students hoping to attend college. Graduation is delayed – if not derailed, when students must spend their first year in remedial, non credit-bearing courses. This problem only serves to enhance the financial barriers that are keeping otherwise qualified students out of our higher-education system.

There are solutions to these challenges. Early college opportunities are helping an increasing number of students prepare for post-secondary learning and graduate college early or on time. Significant progress is being made by this committee, President Obama and Secretary Duncan in ensuring every child has access to an effective teacher and rigorous instruction.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) will guarantee that states are working to ensure the equitable distribution of their teacher talent by enforcing previously unenforced reporting and remediating requirements from the No Child Left Behind Act that dictates low-income students and students of color not be disproportionately taught by less-qualified teachers. ARRA also shifts the way Title I funds are distributed, using the Targeted and Education Finance Incentive Grant formulas instead of the Basic and Concentration grant formulas that will direct more resources where they were originally meant to go, providing assistance to the schools in the most need.

I am also encouraged by the work of the Education and Labor Committee in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorization discussion draft, which closed the comparability loophole and required states to report on the ways in which critical educational resources were distributed. Building on the foundation for equity in ESEA, I will be reintroducing the Student Bill of Rights Act this spring which addresses disparities in educational resources and students' opportunity to learn.

This work on improving academic instruction will go a long way to make certain that students are ready to begin college work when they step on campus. The barriers to higher education are not solely academic. We have years of research that shows similarly qualified African American students are less likely than their White peers to advance to post-secondary education.

The work led by Mr. Hinojosa last year to make college more affordable addresses a critical piece in college-going. Also, the recent changes to the Pell Grant program, moving it from the discretion of the Appropriations Committee to the mandatory side of

the budget and increasing the maximum grant will give more low-income students the opportunity to earn a degree.

Simply improving instruction and offering financial resources will not address other pernicious obstacles that students, many of whom would be the first in their family to attend college, face. Providing students with the certainty that their own hard work and commitment will be met by the work and commitment of their community establishes a college-going culture and builds expectations within the system that every student should have the opportunity to attend college. I have introduced the Communities Committed to College Tax Credit Act, H.R. 1579 to support local efforts that provide college scholarships to local students.

GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) has successfully put 6 million students in high-poverty schools on track for college. Students receive assistance in overcoming academic, financial and cultural barriers to college. GEAR UP increases access to college preparatory academic programs (including AP), offers scholarships to students accepted into college and provides the critical background knowledge about the financial aid and admissions processes that is particularly lacking in low-income communities.

GEAR UP is a stunning success. Over 80 percent of GEAR UP students graduate from high school, while only about half of all low-income students graduate. This shows that when students and communities set their sights beyond twelfth grade, and when they are prepared for college, a high school diploma becomes more assumed and inevitable than for the population as a whole.

Low-income students who have effective teachers, college preparatory curricula, financial aid and information about the college process are currently meeting or exceeding standards set by their higher income peers. This is our opportunity to invest in equitably and adequately distributed resources and a college-going culture. Our students are eager to do their part; the question is whether we, as policy makers and adults, are ready to rise to meet this challenge.