

Education Reform Coalition Urges State and Local Accountability for Closing Achievement and Graduation Gaps as Key Elements of ESEA/NCLB Reauthorization

March 29th, 2011

The Honorable Arne Duncan
Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary Duncan:

We, like President Obama and many Congressional leaders, want a speedy and bipartisan reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), preferably before the beginning of the 2011-12 school year. But we also want to ensure that the law keeps its commitment to the children and schools it was designed to serve.

Quality education is a civil right, and the lack of it for all children is the civil rights issue of our time. The past decade has seen an unprecedented focus on closing the insidious achievement gaps plaguing America's schools. While there has been some progress towards closing those gaps, they remain a pernicious reality that must be confronted and addressed with even greater vigor. In order to ensure that we as a nation can continue to make progress toward educational equality, we need to ensure that the academic achievement of historically disadvantaged students is an intrinsic part of any accountability system.

Prior to the reauthorization of ESEA in 2002 under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), that is until the federal government required it, few states had such systems. While we, like you, think the 9 year-old ESEA/NCLB law needs to be updated and made more flexible, we believe strongly that the new ESEA must continue to require, in exchange for federal funding, state and local accountability for the academic achievement of *all* children, including and *especially* for racial and ethnic minorities, English language learners, children with disabilities, and children from low-income families.

There are other issues that all of our organizations care deeply about, including teacher effectiveness, school turnarounds, the creation of new educational options for children and their parents through charter schools or other innovative models, and equity. Those issues will be addressed in other correspondence. The fact that they are not addressed here does not mean they are of lower priority. For our purposes here, we want to focus solely on accountability and iterate the following principles that we believe are essential elements of any ESEA reauthorization:

§ State accountability systems should hold all students in the state to the same college and career ready standards and use the same statewide summative assessments and benchmarks, aligned to those standards, for all students enrolled in the state’s public schools;

§ Accountability systems should also include graduation rates as measured according to the common metric set out in section 200.19(b) (1) of Title 34, Code of Federal Regulations;

§ English language learners and students with disabilities should be included more effectively in state accountability systems and assessments and be provided with the adaptations and accommodations available to validly and reliably assess their academic progress;

§ All student achievement data must be disaggregated (i.e., measured and reported) by race and ethnicity, gender, disability status, migrant status, English proficiency, and economic status;

§ Students should be counted and “cross-tabbed” across these multiple sub-group categories to fully assess whether combined characteristics (e.g., race and disability) interact in ways that indicate serious educational disadvantages above and beyond those for individual subgroups, and to inform interventions to remedy the underlying policies and practices that put such students at higher risk for educational failure;

§ States should set annual, measurable, and ambitious goals for the academic growth and performance of all students and for closing achievement and graduation gaps between the following 4 sub-groups: 1) economically disadvantaged students; 2) students from major racial and ethnic groups; 3) students with disabilities; and, 4) students with limited English proficiency, as compared to their non-disadvantaged peers;

§ Districts must be held accountable for supporting their schools and increasing achievement and closing gaps district-wide;

§ Schools or districts that are stuck at the bottom – low-status and low-growth, especially for subgroups – should be targeted for the most intensive interventions, including measures aimed at ensuring that all students, especially those in our lowest-performing schools, get access to effective teachers. Schools and districts that do exceedingly well should be recognized for their success;

§ States, districts, and schools should make transparency paramount. Parents have a right to know their children’s level of achievement as measured against the state standard for proficiency in key subjects including math and reading. Parents and the

public have a right to information about the performance of every school as compared to schools at the local, state, and national level and about the qualifications and performance of school personnel.

Thank you for your consideration of these issues. We look forward to continued work with you to revise and amend ESEA to further our shared goal that every child has access to a high quality education.

Sincerely,
Achievement First
Advance Illinois
Alliance for Excellent Education
Business Roundtable
Center for American Progress Action Fund
Children's Defense Fund
Civic Builders
ConnCAN
Democracy Prep
Democrats for Education Reform
Education Equality Project
Education Reform Now
The Education Trust
EdVoice
GetSmart Schools
Hope Street Group
KIPP: Knowledge is Power Program
League of Education Voters
League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)
The Mind Trust
MinnCAN
National Alliance for Public Charter Schools
National Council of La Raza
National Women's Law Center
New Schools Venture Fund
The New Teacher Project
Oklahoma Business and Education Coalition
RI-CAN
Rodel Foundation of Delaware
Stand for Children
Stand for Children – CO
State of Black Connecticut Alliance
Step Up for Students
StudentsFirst
U.S. Chamber of Commerce

50CAN

cc:

Senate HELP Committee Chairman Tom Harkin

Senate HELP Committee Ranking Member Michael Enzi

House Education and Workforce Committee Chairman John Kline

House Education and Workforce Committee Ranking Member George Miller

Senator Jeff Bingaman

Senator Lamar Alexander

Congressman Duncan Hunter

Congressman Dale Kildee

Members of the Senate Help Committee

Members of the House Education and Workforce Committee