

Education Funding: Save Jobs, Serve High-Need Populations, Drive Innovation & Boost Effectiveness

May 6, 2010

Dear Senator/Congressman:

We write to urge the House Appropriations Committee to fund education policies that save jobs, target high-need populations, and drive ongoing education reforms at the state and local level.

Save Jobs. First, we write in strong support of the “Keep Our Educators Working Act” introduced by Senator Harkin on April 14th that also mirrors legislation introduced by Representative George Miller in the House. We have seen the negative effect that state and local budget cuts and revenue shortfalls have had on educational services, morale, and the ability of states and districts to plan for the 2010-11 school year. Funding like that provided last year via the ARRA “Stabilization” fund is the quickest and most appropriate way to save jobs and assure continuity in local school budgets. The House and Senate should approve the \$23 billion called for under the Harkin/Miller bill as swiftly as possible.

We do, however, strongly oppose the bill’s removal of the four programmatic assurances that Congress and the President wisely included in the original stimulus bill. We also oppose any attempt to weaken fiscal accountability requirements. Without such provisions, there is no guarantee that states will spend the money on education rather than on other state budget shortfalls or that they will do so in a way that best serves the needs of students and taxpayers.

Serve High-Need Populations. Second, we support President Obama’s request for \$14.5 billion for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and \$11.8 billion in grants for special education under the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The funding levels for these programs, especially when one takes into account the \$26 billion in additional funds for these two programs appropriated last year under the stimulus, would be higher than at any level in history. These programs are targeted for the populations of students – poor, minority, and those with disabilities – traditionally shortchanged by state and local education programs. The President’s budget continues to make those students and their families a top federal priority.

Drive Innovation and Boost Effectiveness. Some education interest groups have argued that President Obama’s initiatives to drive innovation in and boost the effectiveness of state and local education programs should be suspended until the economy improves. We strongly reject that argument.

In fact, the investments in education reform that the Administration has proposed are the surest path to our nation’s future economic competitiveness. An analysis released last year by McKinsey & Company indicates that not making these investments is the most costly decision of all:

“Existing [achievement] gaps impose the economic equivalent of a permanent national

recession—one substantially larger than the deep recession the country is currently experiencing. For individuals, avoidable shortfalls in academic achievement impose heavy and often tragic consequences via lower earnings, poor health, and higher rates of incarceration.”

In a time of resource scarcity, it is more important than ever to ensure that education spending at all levels of government is used in the most efficient and effective way possible.

We want to express particularly strong support for three key initiatives in the President’s budget that will spur innovation and raise the quality of education standards and practices across the country:

1. Race to the Top. The \$1.35 billion in the President’s 2011 budget for Race to the Top is critical to give states the financial support they need to continue efforts to revise, strengthen, and implement their education reform plans. In the past year we have witnessed unprecedented efforts by parents, teachers, school administrators, and policymakers to raise standards, revamp assessments, improve the effectiveness of teachers and principals, and turn-around the lowest-performing schools. Forty-one states submitted plans for Race to the Top Round 1. Sixteen states actually changed their laws and regulations before Round 1 awards were even announced and more states are planning to do so in preparation for Round 2.

Now is not the time to pull the rug out from under states that are investing great amounts of time and effort in developing and implementing statewide reform plans. In order to ensure that Round 2 states get the maximum awards possible, and that states that do not compete successfully this year have time to make the necessary changes to their laws, regulations, and plans, Congress must appropriate additional Race to the Top funds for 2011. Furthermore, we urge Congress to include the President’s proposal to make local educational agencies eligible for Race to the Top grants next year so that those LEAs that want to go above and beyond statewide efforts have the resources and support necessary to do so or, in instances where state’s choose not to apply, LEAs can undertake their own initiatives.

2. Teacher and Leader Reforms. We support both the President’s proposal for \$950 million in new funds to support state and district approaches to recruiting, developing, retaining, and rewarding effective teachers, particularly in high-need schools; and, \$405 million to back successful and innovative pathways into teaching and school leadership.

This is the single most important area for change in our nation’s education system. We know, beyond a doubt, that teacher effectiveness is the most critical component of a student’s education. Right now, teacher evaluations are perfunctory and unable to consistently differentiate levels of instructional performance. Professional development of teachers is dull, expensive, and disdained by the professionals it is meant to help. More of the same is simply unacceptable for our nation’s students and teachers.

In states like Tennessee and Delaware and school districts such as New Haven and Washington, D.C. we have seen that bold reforms to improve teachers’ and school leaders’ effectiveness can gain the support of all interested parties, including state and local union affiliates. Every child deserves a qualified and effective teacher. No one – including teachers unions – wants ineffective teachers in the classroom. All teachers and school leaders deserve strong, research-based preparation before they enter the profession to succeed and thrive, and honest feedback

throughout their careers about how effective they are in providing high-quality instruction to students.

3. Investing in Innovation (i3). The Obama Administration’s proposal for \$500 million in i3 grants is a cutting-edge initiative that has the potential for a large return on a relatively small investment of federal funds. Nearly 2,500 districts, schools, and nonprofits have expressed their “intent to apply” for these funds giving us strong evidence of the rich set of ideas that exists within the sector.

According to the House Committee on Science and Technology, about half the growth in our GDP since World War II is related to development and adoption of new technologies, but we spend less than 3 percent of our GDP on research and development. Investments in innovative approaches in education lag even farther behind those in other sectors.

The i3 fund focuses on approaches that are specifically tailored to meet local education needs, but that at the same time help schools keep pace with rapid changes in technology and provide students with critical skills in math, science, and engineering that they need to compete in a global economy. Moreover, i3 is designed to leverage additional resources from non-governmental and community-based organizations that would greatly expand local capacity and the available pool of human capital.

We appreciate your consideration of these requests.

Respectfully,

Center for American Progress Action Fund
ConnCan
Democrats for Education Reform
Education Equality Project
Education Reform Now
Hope Street Group
Mississippi First
National Alliance of Public Charter Schools
National Council of La Raza
NewSchools Venture Fund
The New Teacher Project
Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, Kentucky
Rodel Foundation of Delaware