

COALITION FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

April 16, 2009

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

Dear Mr. Secretary:

The Coalition for Student Achievement, representing organizations committed to dramatically improving student achievement, believes that the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) is an unprecedented opportunity to strengthen our economy by improving our schools. If implemented well, these reforms will pay dividends for decades to come in the form of stronger schools, more effective teachers, and a better-educated citizenry and workforce.

The need for reform is clear and urgent. Nearly a third of all American students—approximately 1.2 million each year—do not graduate from high school on time. Another third are not prepared for college and only half of those who do graduate earn some kind of postsecondary degree or credential. Among minority students the problem is even more severe, with nearly 50% of African-American and Hispanic students failing to complete high school on time. The consequences of leaving high school or graduating unprepared for college have never been greater. Today, the unemployment rate for those without a high school diploma is three times the rate for those with a bachelor's degree and those who do not graduate are also three times more likely to live in poverty. Simply put, long-term economic recovery depends on greater educational attainment.

While the problem is daunting, solutions are at hand. Evidence from across the country shows that with high expectations, clear standards, robust data systems, and

effective teachers and principals who appropriately use data, all students can succeed. That is why we believe the most promising ARRA provisions to promote education reform are the “assurances” to which Governors must commit in exchange for their portion of the \$48.6 billion State Fiscal Stabilization Fund (SFSF). These assurances are focused on research-based reform and apply to every single state, district (including public charter schools), and public school. As you know, the assurances include:

- Creating a robust P-16 data system that tracks individual student performance and fosters continuous improvement;
- Developing college and career-ready standards;
- Designing and implementing high-quality assessments of student learning;
- Improving teacher effectiveness and placing our best teachers in our most challenging schools;
- Intervening effectively in chronically low-performing schools.

Ensuring that states and districts make significant progress on these reforms is a top priority for our Coalition. With this in mind, we have reviewed the guidance for the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund which you released April 1.

We applaud your bold vision of reform and understand the economic imperative of getting the first phase (two-thirds) of funding out to the states quickly. With the remaining third of funding, plus the competitive “Race to the Top” dollars, we encourage you and the Department to embrace your authority to persuade, incentivize, and assist states and districts to use these funds to fundamentally change the system so all young people receive an excellent education. We urge you to develop mechanisms that provide transparency about how the assurances at both state and local levels are pursued. Simply put, while we appreciate the speed and efficiency by which the Department is delivering these much-needed funds, we want to be on record expressing our view that speed and efficiency must not trump reform and improvement.

Secretary Duncan
April 16, 2009
Page Three

With respect to the “Race to the Top” initiative, we believe it is essential to encourage collaboration between the states and the districts to leverage the new funds to scale best practices more broadly. We are pleased that the Department has stated that it will support coalitions of states who pledge to work together. To this end, for example, the Department could encourage states to share the costs of adopting common college and career-ready standards and developing aligned assessments.

Further, while the initial guidance provided states with broad suggestions on ways to achieve reform, we urge that future directives regarding these funds give much stronger, clearer direction to states and local education leaders about how to meet the assurances and demonstrate measurable outcomes. States need workable models and technical assistance to implement these changes effectively within the stimulus funding guidelines. Ultimately, it is critical that states and districts have the ability to measure outcomes and demonstrate student achievement.

The Coalition for Student Achievement, made up of reform-oriented stakeholders—parents, teachers, administrators, civil rights organizations, business professionals, and opinion leaders across the country—will be carefully tracking the progress of the ARRA as it relates to education reform. We will strongly support the efforts of those policymakers at all levels of government who work with educators to seize this historic opportunity to reform our education system. If we fail, we undercut the momentum for bold changes and jeopardize future increases in education funding.

To this end, the Coalition for Student Achievement looks forward to working with you and your Department in the weeks and months ahead.

Sincerely,

Signatories on the following page

cc: Governors
Chief State School Officers
Members of Congress

America's Promise Alliance
American Youth Policy Forum
Business Roundtable
The Center for Reinventing Public Education
The Commission on No Child Left Behind
ConnCAN
Hope Street Group
The James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy
Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education
National Alliance for Public Charter Schools
National Council of La Raza
Partnership for Learning
The Policy Innovation Education Network
The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence
The Rodel Foundation of Delaware
Texas Institute for Education Reform
United States Chamber of Commerce