

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 12, 2010

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

In order to ensure our long-term economic viability, we must fundamentally change our public schools in this country. Settling for the status quo is not an adequate response to the challenges we face, or the needs of our kids. This year, over 1.2 million students will drop out of school. The 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that 69 percent of the nation's eighth-graders scored below proficiency level in math, and 70 percent scored below proficiency level in reading. We are falling behind other countries in the percentage of Americans with college degrees. Improving the quality of our public schools must be an urgent priority for this Congress.

As members of the Moderate Democrats Working Group in the United States Senate, we are writing to express our commitment to work with you and our colleagues on both sides of the aisle in Congress to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act this year. We are committed to advocating for reform that will close the achievement gap and help ensure our nation's competitiveness in a global economy. Our kids cannot afford to wait.

Over the last year, we have taken unprecedented action in changing the future of American public education. Race to the Top has spurred reforms at the local level. And your FY2011 budget proposal provides a strong framework to pursue a path of bold reform.

Your new budget proposal outlines a vision for ESEA that embodies many principles we share. We also believe that the federal government should encourage innovative state and local solutions that produce results. We support establishing clear goals, and giving the people closest to kids the ability to determine the best ways to meet those goals. In addition, we must recognize and reward success. Under the current system, too many schools and teachers achieve remarkable gains with their students, yet go unrecognized.

Your increased focus on competition for federal resources will create additional opportunities to reward and recognize success. As we have seen with Race to the Top, the federal government can serve as a significant catalyst for reform when it provides incentives for innovation and rewards for excellence. We applaud your effort to transform the Department of Education into an engine for innovation, and we believe competitive grant programs such as Race to the Top and the Investing in Innovation Fund are effective tools to spur reform and drive improvements in student achievement.

Under the myriad of federal education programs that exist today, school leaders must spend their limited time and resources applying for too many narrowly-focused grant programs. This limits their ability to implement comprehensive solutions to challenges that we know are complex and interrelated. By consolidating the numerous existing programs into larger, more flexible funding

streams, your budget proposal would provide local leaders with the resources and flexibility they need. We support creating more flexibility to ensure that people on the ground can focus on meeting the needs of students, rather than meeting the needs of programs. Rural areas have a unique set of challenges. We are committed to working with you to ensure that rural states and districts fully benefit from your proposals.

As we push for more flexible, innovative, and state and locally-driven solutions for schools, we must also remain committed to the principles of accountability that were the foundation of the last reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. We must push for higher standards and demand results and transparency from all schools – and for all students.

There are some schools that have been failing their students for too long. Just 2,000 schools across the country produce half of the nation's drop-outs. We support significant reform such as your School Turnaround program in the lowest-performing schools.

However, none of these efforts will be effective if we do not transform our system for attracting, training, supporting and retaining teachers and leaders. We need a 21st Century model for attracting and keeping talent, especially in the schools where we need them most. We are not doing enough to support the quality teachers we have -- nearly half leave the profession in the first five years. We do not provide teachers or school leaders with adequate training or mentoring. And we fail to differentiate the teachers who are making outstanding gains with their students. It is not enough to pay lip service to teachers. We applaud the emphasis in your budget on teachers and leaders and will work to ensure we support our most valuable resource moving forward.

Finally, we appreciate that your budget proposal reflects several of the priorities many of us outlined in a June 25, 2009 letter to you. We must invest in charter and other autonomous public schools, while ensuring that they are effective and accountable. We must extend the school day and school year so that our kids are prepared to compete with their peers around the world. And we know that none of these reforms can succeed unless they are based on accurate information about outcomes and effectiveness. Thus, we applaud your proposed investment in better, more useful assessments and data systems that measure growth, which will be instrumental in providing the information needed to inform decision-making and drive improvement in our schools.

As Congress continues to invest in our country's economic recovery, education reform should be a top priority. Our ability to compete in an increasingly competitive global marketplace depends on our ability and willingness to work together now to improve our public schools and invest in our children's future. We look forward to working with you and all of our colleagues in Congress to reauthorize and improve the Elementary and Secondary Education Act this year. Our country's future depends on it, and our children can't wait any longer.

Sincerely,



Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator



Evan Bayh
United States Senator


Kay Hagan
United States Senator


Mark Begich
United States Senator


Thomas R. Carper
United States Senator


Bill Nelson
United States Senator


Herb Kohl
United States Senator


Mary Landrieu
United States Senator


Mark Warner
United States Senator

CC: Secretary Arne Duncan
Department of Education

Senator Tom Harkin
Chairman, Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

Senator Mike Enzi
Ranking Member, Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions