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Linda McCulloch
Secretary of State

May 26, 2009

Arne Duncan
Secretary of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary Duncan,

As Montana's Secretary of State, and the former Superintendent of Public Instruction for Montana (2001-2009), I understand the critical role that our schools play in strengthening local Montana businesses and building stronger communities. Today, the Montana Secretary of State's office provides services for over 100,000 businesses operating in Montana, all of whom depend on a well educated and trained workforce that is prepared to face the challenges of our changing economy. It is a rare business owner who does not understand and advocate for that.

In this time of economic uncertainty, it is clear that our economic future depends on a strong education foundation for our children. That's why I want to thank you for taking the initiative to ask the public about education reforms you will be considering as the nation's new Secretary of Education. Too often in the past, education guidelines have been written solely in Washington, DC, without the input of the state and local communities tasked with implementing the policy. As you visit Montana, I encourage you to speak not only to education leaders across the state, but also to the leaders in the business community whose success depends on the workforce that our schools are teaching and training.

All eyes will be on your department as you take the lead on reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as an essential element of education reform. I urge you to keep some of the goals of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) version of the ESEA, including high standards for math and reading, focusing on groups of minority children and children with various learning disabilities, and providing help for schools that are not doing well. But by all means, stop the NCLB methods that have been counterproductive and will surely damage our education system if continued.

Perhaps there have been some successes in big cities, but the Montana experience has been overwhelmingly bad with this ill-conceived program. Since Montana's educational system has been better than the national average as measured by almost any student achievement standard, those involved were unhappy because the NCLB requirements made it more difficult to provide an excellent education, rather than helping.

Because of the substantial agreement about what was wrong with the federal program, I helped create a Montana position paper on reauthorizing ESEA to fix the fatal flaws of NCLB. I worked with the leaders of the Montana School Boards Association, MEA-MFT (representing Teachers, Head Start, Higher Education Faculty and Staff, and Public State and County Employees), Montana Board of Public Education, Montana Parent Teacher Association, School Administrators of Montana, Montana Rural Education Association, Montana Small Schools Alliance, Montana Association of School Business Officials and Indian Impact Schools of Montana. In other words, a wide spectrum of the organizations representing the education community were in agreement about how to move forward with reform that will actually work in Montana.

I have attached the document, which outlines eight steps for reforming the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to move us toward educational excellence. These are:

- (1) Remove the 100% proficiency target. Make any goals realistic.
- (2) Use multiple measures of success.
- (3) Return responsibility for determining "highly qualified teachers" to the states.
- (4) Return the federal role to being a partner with states for general support and supplementation for special populations, instead of the present control from the top.
- (5) Fully fund federal programs like IDEA and others to help special student populations.
- (6) Remove the Adequate Yearly Progress structure of labeling schools as failures and use a better system of assessment.
- (7) Target some schools for improvement, but use methods that actually help schools here. Big city "solutions" are often counterproductive in rural settings.
- (8) Use other federal resources to focus on reducing poverty, which is the primary barrier to student achievement.

Educational excellence cannot be achieved through a federally mandated "one size fits all" approach. Excellence requires your department to recognize what is working and to encourage that, recognizing that what works will vary according to circumstances such as size of the school, cultural differences, degrees of poverty/affluence, numbers of students with special needs and more. I encourage you to examine the Montana document carefully, since it may well represent the views of many rural areas throughout the nation.

Montana's businesses depend on a strong education system. Our economy requires people who can learn and work in different businesses and environments, and who can create their own companies and jobs. I encourage you to keep Montana in mind as you move forward.

Sincerely yours,


Linda McCulloch
Montana Secretary of State

Enc: MT statement of reauthorization of ESEA

cc: U.S. Senator Jon Tester;
U.S. Senator Max Baucus;
U.S. Representative Dennis Rehberg;
Denise Juneau, Montana Superintendent of Public Instruction