

EMBARGOED until Wed. May 5, 2010 at 10 AM.



class size matters

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To President Obama and the U.S. Congress:

As public school parents and parent advocates, we have grave reservations about the “Blueprint” for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) put forward by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

So far, the parent voice has been missing from the debate and is entirely absent from the top-down and often draconian proposals being put forward by your administration. This approach ignores the central role that parents should play in their children’s education and lives.

We strongly believe that the Blueprint’s proposals would undermine rather than strengthen our public school system, particularly in the urban districts whose parents we represent. Many of the schools in our communities are already experiencing substandard conditions and need enhanced support, especially during the current economic crisis, yet will suffer great harm if these proposals are enacted into law.

Our schools are facing huge budget cuts, resulting in sharp increases in class size, the shortening of the school year, massive teacher layoffs, and the loss of many valuable programs and services. Yet the new proposed funding system will rely primarily on competitive grants, and questionable policies, as exemplified in the “Race to the Top” program. This means that millions of at-risk children will become “losers” in the race for federal funds.

Moreover, though the Department of Education calls their proposals “innovation”, we instead see them as representing large-scale experiments on our children, without backing in the research and without informed parental consent, something that would never be allowed in the field of medicine.

Blueprint plans fail to acknowledge proven reform strategies including increased parent involvement and lower class size

A central flaw in this administration’s approach is the complete failure to encourage parent involvement in decision-making. Studies show that the more involved parents are at the school level, the better their children’s outcomes. Yet the proposed education budget would eliminate the sole funding dedicated to family engagement, and the ESEA Blueprint removes essential mechanisms for engaging parents at the school or district level.

The only instance in which parent involvement in decision-making is mentioned in the entire Blueprint is to require that parents of Indian (or Native American) children should be included in the design of programs at the school level, with no recognition that all public school parents, whatever their background, should be involved.

Involving parents in decision-making is essential to any successful school turnaround strategy, as is the need for smaller classes, which is the priority of parents and teachers according to national surveys.

Class size reduction is also one of only a handful of education reforms that have proven to increase learning, according to the Institute of Education Sciences, and one of the few methods that have been shown to narrow the achievement gap. Yet the schools that poor and minority children attend tend to be burdened by excessive class sizes.

Blueprint plans are disruptive and force districts to use questionable interventions

ESEA was originally designed as extra support for poor children, and federal funding was distributed by a formula to assure that they received the most benefit. Yet instead of offering more resources to the schools that these children attend, with the option to strengthen these schools by offering proven reforms, the proposed legislation threatens to further undermine them, by requiring that five percent of these schools be closed or turned into charter schools, or that half of their teaching staff be fired.

In some respects, neighborhood schools are the anchors of their communities, and in many cities, thousands of parents, teachers and students have erupted in protest against the closing of their neighborhood schools and the prospect that more exclusive screened schools or charter schools will be forcibly put in their place.

These interventions are overly disruptive, and are unlikely to help our schools improve. We speak from experience. In Chicago, the mass closure of schools has been associated with increased violence, including students murdering other students. Moreover, research shows that the students sent elsewhere after the closure of their schools did no better academically than before.

In New York, the closing of schools has led to more overcrowding and destabilization of nearby schools, and sharp spikes in the discharge rate – with thousands more students leaving the system or being pushed out without graduating, and yet never counted as dropouts.

We particularly object to the focus on forcing states to privatize education, by radically expanding their charter school sector. Though some charter schools may offer a quality education, the largest national study shows they are on average no better and often are worse than neighboring public schools. They also draw resources and in many cases precious space from our district public schools, while enrolling fewer immigrant, special needs, and poor children than the communities in which they reside.

Education is a public trust and the very foundation of our democracy. We urge you to be wary of the influence of venture philanthropy on our public education system. We are well aware that powerful foundations -- such as those of Bill Gates, Eli Broad, the Walton family, and others – are shaping many of our federal and local education policies with dollars rather than evidence-based solutions. We urge you to insist that the next version of the ESEA formally incorporates

the views of public school parents as well. As highly knowledgeable primary stakeholders, we must be permitted to have a seat at the decision-making table.

Blueprint plans undermine and discourage quality teaching and learning

The punitive approaches proposed by the administration are also **likely to deter rather than attract qualified teachers to work in our highest-need schools**. Blaming teachers and threatening them with the loss of their jobs in under-resourced, overcrowded schools with the most at-risk students is like blaming doctors for our inequitable health care system, and will lead to even greater inequities in the distribution of experienced teachers. As one teacher recently expressed “we have 100% of the accountability and 0% of the authority”.

Tying teacher pay and tenure to gains or losses in student standardized test scores will not only make the prospect of teaching in our inner cities less attractive, but is also highly unreliable, as the National Academy of Sciences has pointed out.

Too many of our schools have already become joyless test prep factories, rather than centers of real learning. All children, especially those in inner cities whose parents cannot afford to supplement their schooling, need and deserve a full complement of social studies, science, arts and physical education – yet these subjects have been driven out as a result of the high-stakes testing regime imposed in recent years. The Blueprint pays lip service for the need for a well-rounded education, but its proposals to link teacher evaluation and pay to the results of high-stakes exams are likely to make a bad situation even worse.

Blueprint plans avoid the greatest cause of school failure – inequality of resources

Finally, this Blueprint pays almost no attention to the need to address enormous disparities in funding across and within states, saying only that “states be asked to measure and report on resource disparities and develop a plan to tackle them.”

Yet in a plan filled with heavy-handed threats and promises of financial windfalls for states that adhere to the administration’s preferred approaches of closing schools, firing teachers, tying their pay to test scores, and opening more charters, this statement seems to be a mere afterthought with no consequences attached.

Please listen to parents; reject the Blueprint plans and enact positive, proven policies

You hold a great responsibility in your hands this year in reauthorizing the ESEA. We hope you will listen to parents, the most important stakeholders of our public school system, before you make the radical and destructive changes that the administration has put forward.

Instead, we urge you to replace these risky experiments with proposals that offer real solutions to the problems facing our schools, including ending unfair funding disparities, reducing class sizes, providing a balanced curriculum with multiple assessments, and requiring that schools involve parents in the decision-making process.

These are the changes that parents want, that will work, and that, if incorporated into ESEA, will provide our neediest public school children with their best chance to learn and succeed.

We would all welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues with you further. We look forward to hearing from you.

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Sandra Halladey, co-founder, Parents for Public Schools, San Francisco

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