

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 25th, 2009

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

Dear Mr. President:

There is no issue more intricately connected to the future prosperity of our nation than the quality of our public schools. While the latest data show that elementary school students have made promising gains in reading and math, academic achievement is far too low for too many students and over 1.2 million students drop out of high school every year.

As members of the Moderate Democrats Working Group in the United States Senate, we are writing to offer our cooperation in developing legislation to enact a number of ambitious, innovative proposals in your education reform agenda. We plan to lend our voices to the debate as proponents of education reform as we move through this year's appropriations process and reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

We are committed to addressing the educational achievement gaps that persist among groups of various economic, regional and racial backgrounds and between the United States and other industrialized nations. These achievement gaps have imposed "the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession" on our country, according to a recent report by McKinsey & Company. Had the United States closed the gap in education achievement with better-performing nations like Finland, Iceland, and Poland, our GDP could have been up to \$2.3 trillion higher last year, the report finds.

Solving today's economic challenges means creating new jobs and investing in the growth industries of tomorrow. As legislators, we believe we must embrace promising new approaches to education policy if we are to prepare our children to fill the jobs of the future. By 2016, four out of every 10 new American jobs will require at least some advanced education or training. To retain our global economic leadership, we share your sense of urgency in moving an education reform agenda through Congress.

We support action on a number of education reform proposals put forth in your Fiscal Year 2010 budget proposal. We commend you for the emphasis you have placed on teacher quality. Every teacher touches the lives of countless children, and every adult remembers their favorite teachers and the impact they had. The research confirms what our intuition tells us: nothing has a greater impact on outcomes in the classroom than the quality of our teachers. We must do more to recruit, prepare and reward outstanding teachers, and part of that means overhauling the way we compensate them. Most

professions recognize and reward better performance with better pay, but teacher compensation is based almost exclusively on degree attainment and years of service.

We therefore share your support for dedicating increased resources to the Teacher Incentive Fund, which will spur states to develop new ways to identify and retain excellent teachers and attract new talent to the profession. We believe that resources from this fund should support states and districts that recognize student achievement to be the most important indicator of an educator's performance. We look forward to working collaboratively with teachers to develop these new compensation systems—a critical ingredient to their success.

Second, we support expanding the number of effective public charter schools. Like traditional public schools, charter schools vary greatly in quality. We should encourage the replication of the highest-performing public charters and ensure real accountability measures for those who oversee them. We all have charter schools in our states that have demonstrated—through innovative and student-centered approaches—that every child can learn, regardless of socio-economic background. Conversely, charter schools that consistently fail our children should be shut down.

Third, we support your Administration's desire to extend student learning time. The American school year is based on the old agrarian calendar, which gave children two months off to help work on the family farm. Students lose an average of 2.6 months of grade-level equivalency in math skills over the summer—a phenomenon referred to as the "summer slide." While American boys and girls slide, students in China receive an additional 40 days of classroom instruction. We cannot expect to compete with emerging nations when we devote less time to educating our next generation.

Fourth, we believe our education reform agenda should be driven by accurate information, which will require the development of state-of-the-art data systems. Many schools, educators and policymakers currently lack information critical to informed decision-making. We must invest in new data systems that track individual student performance across grades, schools, towns and teachers. Such systems will allow us to examine the pedagogical background of our most successful teachers and find new ways to support that training. Our goal is to achieve the capacity to view, with the click of a button, the path every child has taken through their academic life, linking their achievements and setbacks to every school and classroom they pass through.

We have no illusions that the road to education reform will be free of obstacles. However, we pledge to work in the Senate to lead the fight for accountability and high standards for all students. Every child can learn, and expectations matter. We should endeavor to fulfill the potential of all of our young people, not merely those born to greater privilege. While there are many practical steps we can and must take to strengthen our nation's education policy, now is the time to explore new paths and reject stale thinking. Our country's economic well-being depends upon the quality of the education our children are receiving in classrooms across America today.

Our nation must confront the growing challenges of an increasingly competitive global economy: an outdated health care system in need of reform, an energy policy requiring an overhaul, and an economy still on the road to recovery. We will not be equal to the extraordinary task before us without a public school system that offers our children the tools needed to reach their potential. We thank you for leading us down the path to education reform and stand ready to contribute our ideas and energy as we work together to enact an agenda for change.

Sincerely,



Senator Evan Bayh



Senator Tom Carper



Senator Blanche Lincoln



Senator Mary Landrieu



Senator Michael Bennet



Senator Joseph Lieberman



Senator Bill Nelson



Senator Claire McCaskill



Senator Mark Warner



Senator Herb Kohl

CC:

Secretary Arne Duncan, Department of Education

Senator Ted Kennedy, Chairman, Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

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