

September 25, 2008

Senator Tom Harkin
731 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Harkin:

We, the undersigned education, civil rights, and advocacy organizations thank you for introducing the Every Student Counts Act to ensure meaningful accountability for the graduation rates of our nation's students. As you know, educators and policymakers at all levels of government agree that change is necessary on this issue.

Only 70 percent of our nation's students graduate with a regular diploma. Worse, just over half of black and Hispanic students graduate on time. Special education students also have graduation rates of just over 50 percent. Such poor graduation rates are untenable in a global economy that demands an educated workforce. According to the Department of Labor, 90 percent of the fastest-growing and best-paying jobs in the United States require at least some postsecondary education. It is imperative that the nation's schools prepare their students to succeed in the twenty-first-century workforce.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has focused the nation's attention on the unacceptable achievement gap and the need to improve outcomes for all students, particularly those of minority students, English language learners, and students with disabilities. However, NCLB does not place enough importance on *graduating* the nation's high school students. Furthermore, current federal policy on graduation rates permits the use of inconsistent and misleading graduation rate calculations that overestimate graduation rates, does not require meaningful increases in graduation rates over time, and does not require the graduation rates of student subgroups to increase as part of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) determinations.

As a response, the Secretary of Education has created proposed regulations to address these concerns. Although the proposed regulations are a laudable step in the right direction, we believe that the Every Student Counts Act is a better approach to ensuring that all students are treated equally in calculating graduation rates and for accountability purposes.

The Every Student Counts Act would do the following:

- require a consistent and accurate calculation of graduation rates across all fifty states to ensure comparability and transparency;
- require that graduation rate calculations be disaggregated for both accountability and reporting purposes to ensure that school improvement activities focus on all students and close achievement gaps;
- ensure that graduation rates and test scores are treated equally in AYP determinations;
- require aggressive, attainable, and uniform annual growth requirements as part of AYP to ensure consistent increases in graduation rates for all students;
- recognize that some small numbers of students take longer than four years to graduate and give credit to schools, school districts and states for graduating those students while maintaining the primacy of graduating the great preponderance of *all* students in four years; and
- provide incentives for schools, districts and states to create programs to serve students who have already dropped out and are over-age and undercredited.

Again, we thank you for introducing the Every Student Counts Act and for your leadership on this critical issue.

Sincerely,

Alliance for Excellent Education
American Foundation for the Blind
Association of University Center on Disabilities
Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law
Big Brothers Big Sisters
Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)
Council for Learning Disabilities
Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund
Easter Seals
First Focus
GLSEN - the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network
Helen Keller National Center
Higher Education Consortium for Special Education
Learning Disabilities Association of America
League of United Latin American Citizens
Knowledge Alliance
National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth
National Center for Learning Disabilities, Inc.
National Coalition on Deaf-Blindness
National Collaboration for Youth
National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform
Project GRAD
Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children
Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. (TESOL)
The Advocacy Institute
The Arc of the U.S
United Cerebral Palsy
United Way of America
YouthBuild USA

Joel Klein
Chancellor
New York City Public Schools

Joan L. Benso
President & CEO
Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children