

October 28, 2014

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

Honorable Arne Duncan
Secretary of Education
400 Maryland Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20202

Honorable Harry Reid
Senate Majority Leader
522 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Minority Leader
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Kevin McCarthy
House Majority Leader
2421 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Honorable John A. Boehner
Speaker of the House
1011 Longworth H.O.B.
Washington, DC 20515

Honorable Nancy Pelosi
House Minority Leader
235 Cannon H.O.B.
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Improving Public Education Accountability Systems and Addressing Educational Equity

President Obama, Secretary Duncan, Congressional and State Educational Leaders:

On behalf of millions of students and families, and civil rights organizations, communities of color, and organizations that reflect the new, diverse majority in public education, we write urging implementation of a set of strong recommendations for advancing opportunity and supporting school integration, equity, and improved accountability within our nation's systems of public education.

Background

We believe that improved accountability systems at the local, state, and federal levels are central to advancing and broadening equal educational opportunity for each and every child in America. The current educational accountability system has become overly focused on narrow measures of success and, in some cases, has discouraged schools from providing a rich curriculum for all students focused on the 21st century skills they need to acquire. This particularly impacts under-resourced schools that disproportionately serve low-income students and students of color. In our highly inequitable system of education, accountability is not currently designed to ensure students will experience diverse and integrated classrooms with the necessary resources for learning and support for excellent teaching in all schools. It is time to end the advancement of policies and ideas that largely omit the critical supports and

services necessary for children and families to access equal educational opportunity in diverse settings and to promote positive educational outcomes.

The demand for our schools to meet new college-and-career-ready standards is happening in the wake of a record number of children living in poverty and an increasingly diverse student population. Students of color represent more than 50 percent of youth and are more than twice as likely to attend segregated schools. Second language learners whose first language is not English now represent 10 percent of all public school students nationwide, and students living in poverty represent virtually half of all US public school students.^{i,ii}

Recognizing the challenging backdrop in which our students, schools, and communities are expected to thrive, we are committed to adhering to the civil rights laws of this country that require that all children be educated equitably and effectively based on their needs. This reality must be matched with the learning opportunities, preparation, knowledge, services, supports, and skills that will enable them to lead healthy and successful lives in the world and workforce. From early education to the postsecondary years, we believe that the federal government continues to play a critical role in helping states, districts, and tribes to achieve educational excellence through equity.

While the need for accountability is almost universally agreed upon, there have been concerns raised about overly punitive accountability systems that do not take into account the resources, geography, student population, and needs of specific schools. In particular, the No Child Left Behind law has not accomplished its intended goals of substantially expanding educational equity or significantly improving educational outcomes. Racial achievement and opportunity gaps remain large, and many struggling school systems have made little progress under rules that emphasize testing without investing.ⁱⁱⁱ We must shift towards accountability strategies that promote equity and strengthen, rather than weaken, schools in our communities, so that they can better serve students and accelerate student success.

Recommendations

We call on local, state, and federal policymakers to use the following set of principles in rethinking sound public education accountability systems. Comprehensive systems of shared responsibility with educational professionals and key stakeholders should evaluate the extent to which productive learning conditions are in effect for all students in each school – with attention to disparities by race, class, gender, language, and disability status – and ensure that appropriate corrective action is taken to improve learning conditions where problems are identified. Development and monitoring of well-designed and comprehensive measures of educational inputs and outcomes must demonstrate the equity that is emblematic of systems that are serious about universally advancing opportunities to learn and succeed. These features are critical to an effective accountability system:

1. Appropriate and equitable resources that ensure opportunities to learn, respond to students' needs, prioritize racial diversity and integration of schools, strengthen school system capacity, and meaningfully support improvement. These include:

- Funding and instructional materials, including access to technology and adequate facilities, allocated based on student needs (poverty, culture/language learning, and other needs)
- Equitable access, within and across schools, to high-quality curricula, tools for learning, and enrichment programs
- Tailored individualized services that build upon the cultural and linguistic assets children bring to schools
- Qualified, certified, competent, racially and culturally diverse and committed teachers, principals, counselors, nurses, librarians, and other school support staff, with appropriate professional development opportunities, including cultural competency training, and support and incentives to work with students of greatest need; and
- Social, emotional, nutritional, and health services

2. Multiple measures: The system should acknowledge that both inputs and relevant outcomes matter, and thus should monitor both appropriate inputs that support academic, social, emotional, physical health, and cultural well-being, along with student and school outcomes (knowledge, skills, and dispositions) that demonstrate college- and career-readiness and civic literacy. These include school resources; school discipline and positive school climate information; children's in- and out-of-school learning opportunities over time; student improvement; and student achievement, progress, and graduation rates.

3. Shared Responsibility: Each level of the system – from federal, state, and local governments to districts and schools should be held accountable for the investments it must make and for the oversight, accountability, data collection, monitoring, and actions it must undertake to produce high-quality learning opportunities for each and every child and to ultimately achieve equity in student outcomes. This includes ensuring civil rights protections, equitable resources, meaningful student and parental engagement and inclusion in decision-making, active coordination between systems serving students, and productive learning opportunities.

4. Professional competence: Systems of preparation and ongoing development should ensure that educators have the time, investments, and supports necessary to acquire the knowledge about curriculum, teaching, assessment, linguistic and cultural competence, implicit bias, and student support needed to teach students effectively. This should include additional supports for education professionals who serve children and families in historically under-resourced and disadvantaged classrooms and schools. School systems should recognize educators' abilities, particularly in working with diverse learners and students of color. They should not only create incentives for education professionals to develop or acquire additional skills, but also require professional learning to ensure their effectiveness in the classroom.

5. Informative assessments for meaningful 21st Century learning: A system of assessments should document both student and school system progress using tools that evaluate deeper learning skills (e.g. critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, communication, and creativity) that are necessary and valuable for today's and tomorrow's world and that represent authentic applications of knowledge. Assessments should be valid for the students and purposes for which they are used, comparable in quality, and able to be reliably scored. These measures would be used to help identify the most appropriate interventions, supports and instructional strategies to accelerate learning. They should also be used as diagnostic tools for determining student acquisition and application of knowledge, should identify students' strengths as well as their learning and cultural needs, and should be used to support individual students and educators. Measures should also be used to assess whether individual and collective education *systems* are moving toward meeting objectives related to greater equity in educational opportunities and achievement.

6. Transparency: The system should provide useful, publicly accessible, and actionable school system information and data for parents and community members, as well as students and educators. It should also support new ways for changing practices, exploring additional investments, or expanding opportunities. School system progress should be evaluated in part in terms of equitable inputs and outcomes, as well as access to learning resources, services, and opportunities for different student groups (e.g., English learners, students by race and ethnicity, Native students, low-income students, and students with disabilities).

7. Meaningful and culturally and linguistically responsive parental and family engagement: The expertise and meaningful engagement of all parents and families should be included in both the teaching and learning process and in decisions associated in the planning and implementation of P-12 system investments. Adequate steps must be taken to ensure participation of low-income parents and parents facing linguistic or other obstacles. Such planning should also incorporate the resources of community partners (e.g., tribes and Native communities, afterschool providers, businesses, faith-based institutions, medical providers, higher education institutions, and community and civil rights advocacy organizations) that can contribute to a shared vision of accountability in an education system in which all students can excel.

8. Capacity building: Accountability, including the consequences that accompany evidence of poor performance, should be a mechanism for strengthening schools, education professionals, and their communities. Consequences that accompany evidence of poor performance should be timely, narrowly tailored, targeted to the populations and parts of the school systems most in need, and likely to maximize student learning for all students. This system accountability would serve to elevate all children to achieve to their highest potential by enforcing and expanding students' equitable opportunities to learn; guiding strategic investments so that schools are healthy, productive places for learning; and ensuring meaningful progress toward equity in student achievement.

We appreciate your attention to our concerns and urge you to use the principles articulated in this letter in deciding how to best serve and nurture our nation's greatest resource, our young people, and the backbone of our democracy, the public school system. We believe the right to a quality education is a civil right and that the civil rights of all our children must be vigorously protected. We look forward to hearing from your respective offices to discuss the issues raised in this letter further. We can be reached as a coalition through Dr. Joseph Bishop of the National Opportunity to Learn Campaign at (626) 319-0496, or via email at jb@schottfoundation.org.

Respectfully,

Signatories:



Advancement Project
Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law
League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)
Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF)
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
National Opportunity to Learn (OTL) Campaign

National Urban League (NUL)
NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (LDF)
National Council on Educating Black Children (NCEBC)
National Indian Education Association (NIEA)
Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC)

cc:

Council of Chief State School Officers

National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials

National Association of State Boards for Education

National Black Caucus of State Legislators

National Conference of State Legislatures

National Black Caucus of State Legislators

National Governor's Association

National Hispanic Caucus of State Legislators

ⁱ Southern Education Foundation (2013). Low Income Students in the South and in the Nation. Retrieved at <http://www.southerneducation.org/getattachment/0bc70ce1-d375-4ff6-8340-f9b3452ee088/A-New-Majority-Low-Income-Students-in-the-South-an.aspx>

ⁱⁱ UCLA Civil Rights Project (2012). E Pluribus...Separation: Deepening Double Segregation for More Students. Retrieved at <http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/mlk-national/e-pluribus...separation-deepening-double-segregation-for-more-students>

ⁱⁱⁱ See: Darling-Hammond, Linda (2010). *The Flat World and Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Nation's Future*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.