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Prominent Civil Rights Leaders Unite to Push for a Federal Education Agenda That Gives All Students an “Opportunity To Learn”

WASHINGTON – July 26, 2010 –Prominent civil-rights leaders today joined force to call for the adoption of federal education policies that create the framework and conditions necessary to achieve equitable opportunities for all.

The leaders called on the Obama Administration and Congress to revamp the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) by leveraging federal resources available to all states. As a part of extending an opportunity to learn as a right, the leaders asked the President to demand and support universal access to early education for students in all states. They also seek to ensure that all students have access to highly effective teachers. Their plan calls for providing incentives to recruit and retain highly effective educators and improve the teaching and learning conditions in high-need, low-income, and rural areas. Their plan also urges the federal government to institutionalize a national resource accountability system so that all students and parents will live within communities with the type of educational systems where students can achieve high outcomes.

Addressing Resource Inequities

To help address longstanding resource inequities that exists nationwide, the civil rights framework calls for a pairing of the common standards movement with efforts to define common resource standards that support important priorities, such as access to early education, highly effective teachers, college-bound curricula and equitable instructional resources. The civil rights leaders also urge federal officials to promote and support state-level systemic innovations that can help encourage alternatives to state and local property-based education funding which inherently leads to resource inequities.

Inherent Inequities in “Race to the Top” Funding Strategy

The civil rights leaders noted that competitive funding approaches advanced by the federal government’s Race to the Top grant program have resulted in inequities for high needs students

and districts and are particularly problematic during these economic times. Leaders urged lawmakers to resist the urge to flat-line formula-based funding for states and high-poverty schools in the middle of a financial crisis and where schools have traditionally been underfunded. “Because only a few states will receive competitive grants, most children in most states, particularly the rural south, will experience a real decrease in federal support when inflation and state and local budget cuts are taken into consideration,” the framework points out.

Under Race to the Top, at least 42% or 12.5 million of the nation’s children will be left behind in what is widely regarded as a test run for programs that may be enshrined in the ESEA reauthorization.

The framework urges the President and Congress to promote “universal” policies that support all states and students nationwide over competitive policies which excludes states with students who have critical education needs. “By emphasizing competitive incentives in this economic climate, the majority of low-income and minority students – and the United States – will be left behind; we need conditional incentives for all states, not competitive funding for a limited number of students in a limited number of states. If any state is a loser, the children and communities in that state become losers and our nation becomes a loser in a larger global competition” the document says.

Ensuring Accountability for Charter Schools

The framework encourages the federal government to make charter schools “controlled laboratories of innovation” rather than a prescribed strategy for improving entire local school systems. The document notes that there is no evidence that charter operators are systematically more effective in creating higher student outcomes nationwide. In fact, the largest national study on charter schools (from Stanford’s Hoover Institution) shows that they are more likely to underperform than to outperform regular public schools serving similar students. The framework also notes that there is even less evidence that charters admit, can consistently serve, and accommodate the needs of a full range of students.

Alternative Approaches to Turning around Low-Performing Schools

The civil rights leaders also called on the federal government to change course on ineffective federal school-closures policies that will lead to a disproportionately high number of school closings in low-income, high-minority communities. “If school improvement were as simple as ‘fire and rehire’ or ‘close and restart,’” the leaders note, “the problem would have been solved many years ago, as both teacher and school leader departures and school closures already occur at a much higher rate in these communities.”

The civil rights groups called on federal leaders to take four direct actions, including adopting the recommendations in their statement, convening a White House Summit on Opportunity to Learn that would establish a plan for fulfilling the fundamental civil right of all students to a fair and substantive opportunity to learn. They also called on the President to convene a panel of leaders from the Department of Justice, the Department of Education, the National Governors Association, civil-rights advocates, and other key stakeholders to recommend steps towards creating a federal right to education.