

March 11, 2009

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 (S. 618) 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 African American 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 minority students, English language learners, and students with disabilities. However, NCLB does not place enough importance on *graduating* the nation's high school students; this fact—combined with weak state action in this area—has given states, districts, and schools little incentive to improve their graduation rates. As a response, the Secretary of Education released regulations that created a uniform high school graduation rate calculation and ensured that improving high school graduation rates for all schools is part of the federal accountability system. Although the regulations are a laudable step in the right direction, we believe that the Every Student Counts Act is a better approach to graduation rate accountability because it provides clear and high expectations for graduation rate goals and growth.

The Every Student Counts Act would:

- require a consistent and accurate calculation of graduation rates across all fifty states and the District of Columbia 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 Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) determinations;
- require aggressive, attainable, and uniform annual growth targets as part of AYP to ensure consistent increases in graduation rates for all schools;
- while maintaining the expectation that most students will graduate in four years, recognize that a small number of students take longer than four years to graduate and give credit to schools, school districts, and states for graduating those students; and
- provide incentives for schools, districts, and states to create programs to serve students who have already dropped out and are over-age or 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 Association of University Women  
American Federation of the Blind  
American School Counselor Association  
America's Promise Alliance  
Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law  
Council of Administrators of Special Education  
First Focus  
Journey Programs  
Knowledge Alliance  
Learning Disabilities Association of America  
Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund  
National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth  
National Association of Federally Impacted Schools  
National Association of School Psychologists  
National Association of Secondary School Principals  
National Association of State Boards of Education  
National Center for Learning Disabilities  
National Collaboration for Youth  
National Council of La Raza  
National Education Association  
National Parent Teacher Association  
Project Grad USA  
Public Education Network  
School Social Work Association of America  
Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages  
United Way of America  
Youth Service America

Joel Klein  
Chancellor  
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