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“Partners for Success”

Remarks prepared for U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan

National Association of State Boards of Education

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It’s my pleasure to be here today. Thank you for rescheduling my speech. As you know, when the president calls and asks you to be with him on an important trip, you go.

We had a great visit to New Orleans yesterday. In the four years since Hurricane Katrina, the city has begun to rebuild. Through the leadership of the state and city, and with the support of us on the federal level, New Orleans is starting to build a vibrant network of schools – including traditional public schools and public charter schools. In New Orleans, we’re seeing a city that is accelerating student achievement – and it takes everyone working together in the best interest of children.

It’s a pleasure to be here today because I have so much respect for the work you do. Of all the policymakers in our education system, state and local board members are the best representatives of the American ideal. You are committed to the cause of improving children’s lives. You understand that their future is our country’s future.

You don’t do your job for the money. You don’t do it for prestige. You do it out of a sense of service. You do it because you believe that our children deserve a better future and because by giving our children a better future, America will have a brighter future.

Working together, we have an unprecedented opportunity to change schools for the better. President Obama and Congress have entrusted us – you, me, and educators all across the country – with the largest one-time investment in education reform in history.

My department has more money for education reform than all of my predecessors – combined.

Former Secretary Paige told me that he had \$17 million for reform. My department now has \$5 billion for Race to the Top and Investing in Innovation. We have another \$5 billion for school turnarounds, the Teacher

Incentive Fund, school technology – all these programs can support the reforms in Race to the Top and Investing in Innovation.

This truly is a moon shot. It's an opportunity for the federal government to lead reform and support innovation. It's a chance to make a difference in the lives of children of all ages. It's a chance to educate our way to a better economy and create economic prosperity for our country.

And it's going to take all of us working together: policymakers, educators, nonprofit entrepreneurs, community leaders, religious leaders, union leaders, parents, and students themselves.

I'd like to talk to you today about the federal role in education policy. It's often noted that the Constitution doesn't mention education, and that the provision of education has always been a state and local responsibility.

Yet, it is also true that American leaders have always considered education to be an important priority. They've always believed that a strong and innovative education system is the foundation of our democracy and an investment in our economic future.

This national commitment to education predates even the ratification of the Constitution. In the Northwest Ordinance governing the sale of land in the Northwest Territories, the fledgling government required townships to reserve money for the construction of schools.

In the middle of the Civil War, President Lincoln signed the Morrill Act to create land grant colleges and universities. Today, those institutions are some of the best teaching and research institutions in the world.

In 1944, President Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Program. We know it today as the G.I. Bill. As much as anything, the G.I. Bill has built the longest period of economic growth in our nation's history.

In 1957, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik. They showed the world that they were leading the space race. President Eisenhower and Congress responded by establishing NASA. But they also funded efforts to create new curriculum and programs to advance mathematics and science in our schools. They understood that education would help us win the Space Race – and any other race.

In the 1960s, President Lyndon Johnson saw education playing a central role in his War on Poverty. He created a new role for the federal government – one that provided more money with the purpose of lending a hand to students in poverty.

President Johnson articulated a philosophy for the appropriate federal role in education. He recognized that people like you at the state level and superintendents, principals, and teachers on the local level are in charge of schools. LBJ said that the federal government is a “partner not a boss” in education. The day he signed the Higher Education Act of 1965, he said:

“The federal government has neither the wish nor the power to dictate education. We can point the way. We can offer help. We can contribute to providing the necessary and needed tools. But the final decision, the last responsibility, the ultimate control, must, and will, always rest with the local communities.”

Lyndon Johnson made a huge commitment to helping disadvantaged children. As a teacher and principal in Texas, he had seen the effects of poverty, and he knew that education was the one true path out of poverty.

Because of his leadership, the federal government has played an important role for almost 50 years in aiding low-income students and others who historically have been underserved – students with disabilities, English-language learners, and preschool-aged children.

But Lyndon Johnson respected that state and local officials had the ultimate control over what happens in schools and in classrooms.

When I was the superintendent in Chicago, I knew that the federal government's role was to support our work—not to direct it or micro-manage it. The federal government should encourage, reward, and support the innovation and progress that is being made at the state and local levels.

Now that I am in Washington, it's even clearer to me that education reform starts locally—in classrooms, schools, districts, and states—and my job is to help you succeed. I want to be a partner in your success, not the boss of it.

But I'm not willing to be a silent partner who puts a stamp of approval on the status quo. I plan to be an active partner. As a nation, we need a federal voice encouraging our shared goal of success for every student and stimulating innovations to reach those goals.

But I'm also mindful of this. For nearly 200 years, our federal government was a silent partner. It mostly sat on the sideline while a shameful achievement gap persisted.

We've made some progress in closing that gap. But it remains.

Just this week, the Institute of Education Sciences released the latest results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress's math tests. The scores are flat in the 4th grade and show a very slight improvement in 8th grade. The achievement gap isn't closing in either grade. That is unacceptable.

Too many of our students are failing to reach their potential. Twenty-seven percent of them drop out before earning a diploma. Only 40 percent of our adults earn a two-year or four-year degree. That was good enough to lead the world a generation ago. Now the U.S. is 10th in the world.

The President has set a goal that we lead the world again by 2020. We must achieve this goal – not just to increase our international competitiveness, but to deliver on the American promise that education is the path out of poverty.

President Obama has laid out a cradle-to-career education plan. It begins at birth and goes through the end of college. We'll have early learning challenge states to reform their early childhood education programs, and invest as partners in raising the bar and improving the learning experiences for all young children – especially low-income students. They'll benefit most from high-quality programs and settings because they're the students who start school behind and have to work hard just to catch up.

We've proposed the largest investment in student aid and loans since the G.I. Bill. We going to help students pay for college, and we're going to help control the cost of college.

But I want to talk about our K-12 agenda today. That's the area that concerns most of your day-to-day work as state board members. It's also the area where the federal government has a unique role to play – where I am your partner, but not your boss.

By now, I'm sure everyone in this room is aware of the four areas of reform that are at the heart of our agenda. They are the statutory requirements of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act – and they're driving just about everything my team and I are doing right now.

First, we want to create college- and career-ready standards. Right now, academic standards are too low. We're lying to our students that they are being prepared to succeed in college or to compete in the globally competitive workplace. I applaud the work of governors and chief state school officers to create a common core of standards. That work is happening where it should – at the state level.

Second, we want highly effective teachers in every classroom and effective leaders in every school. To do that, we're going to need to change the way we recruit, prepare, retain, and reward teachers.

Third, we want data systems that track students from grade to grade so they know whether they're on track to graduate and succeed in college or the workplace.

Finally, we need to turn around our lowest performing schools. We have 2,000 dropout factories. Half of our nation's dropouts leave these schools without a diploma. Three-quarters of our minority dropouts are coming from these schools.

Some have suggested that the federal government's primary responsibility is to provide money for the education of low-income students and children with disabilities.

But the federal government needs to do more than that. We need to ensure that those students are receiving the education they need to prepare them for success in college and the workplace.

I know you share that goal – that together we will be partners for the success of all our nation's children.

Our role in Washington is to support reform by bolstering efforts to set high standards, by encouraging bold approaches to helping struggling schools, and by reducing the dropout rate, closing achievement gaps, and boosting college access. All of this must lead to more students completing college.

Just how we are going to accomplish all of these ambitious goals is an important federal, state, and local conversation that lies ahead.

As we work to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, I have said that we need to be tight on the goals – with clear standards set by states that truly prepare young people for college and careers – but we should be loose on the means for meeting those goals.

As we work with Congress to reauthorize the ESEA, we're going to wrestle with many important questions.

Right now, the No Child Left Behind law prescribes what schools need to do year after year. It says struggling schools need to offer choice to their students before they offer tutoring. As a superintendent, that didn't make sense to me. I know it didn't make sense to my colleagues around the country either.

Educators don't need a prescription for success. They need a common definition of success.

We need to find a way to give state and local officials the freedom to intervene in schools that aren't achieving their goals. The federal government should not be the boss in these situations. It should offer ways to support schools, and so long as progress is being made, people on the ground should decide on the reforms they want to choose.

But I want to be clear that when we see dropout factories, when we know that in some schools that students are falling behind every year – I don't want the federal government to be a silent partner.

In cases where children are being underserved or neglected, we have a moral obligation to intervene, and we won't allow fear of over-reaching to stop us. Kids have only one chance for an education. They can't wait years or decades for reforms to take hold.

We can't sit by idly while these schools continually fail to give children the education they deserve. We need to set clear definitions of what's expected and provide the resources to help schools turn around.

And that begins what the research says: talent matters tremendously. You can't have a good school without a good leader. And you won't see student achievement improve if you don't have good teachers.

How we hold schools accountable is an important conversation to have. We're going to seek to create strong incentives to turn around schools, with an effective formula of reform but without a heavy prescriptive hand from Washington and with leadership from the states. And we'll need to do so with the best interest of children at the center of our conversation and our actions.

We also need to focus on innovation.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act gives us an unprecedented opportunity to do so.

In the Race to the Top Fund, we will be rewarding states that are leading the way on reform.

To states that want to compete for the money, we are saying we want you to be aggressive in your reforms and push for reforms that reflect the statutory goals set by Congress in the Recovery Act.

We want everyone to be part of education reform: the broader the coalition behind reform, the better. This represents our national belief that working together, we can achieve our dreams as a nation.

We're also asking states to show us their commitment to funding their schools. Schools can't make the transformational changes without a financial foundation to do so. If we're truly going to turn around schools, we need to make investments in our principals and teachers, in the new instructional programs, in the ideas that will make a difference in the lives of children.

Now some may say that we're being too forceful in pushing reform. But I say we need to be aggressive. We shouldn't be satisfied with our progress.

Right now, we don't have a high-quality teacher in every classroom. But that's exactly what we need. The policies of the past haven't delivered the teachers we need today, and they won't deliver the teachers we need in the future. The federal government should be rewarding states that are taking steps to find those teachers and reward them.

In the Investing in Innovation program, we're going to let districts and their entrepreneurial partners put their best ideas forward. We've proposed that they specifically address one of the four areas of reform.

But in our proposal, we're saying we won't fund any idea just because it sounds promising or looks innovative. We're asking applicants to provide the research that demonstrates the potential effectiveness of their proposal. Under our proposal, the better the evidence, the larger the grant will be.

We're collecting comments on this proposal right now. We look forward to your response.

I recognize that we have a lot of work to do at both the federal and state level. It won't be easy. We won't always agree on the path to take.

But we will move forward, working together in our country's unique federalist experiment.

Together, we have seen success in this special partnership. The call for higher standards is a perfect example.

It started with governors like Jim Hunt and Roy Romer as well as Richard Riley and Lamar Alexander, both of whom have been very helpful to me over the past several months.

At one point, years ago, the federal government tried to take the lead. But everyone ultimately agreed that wasn't a good idea.

Now, state officials are the leaders. Governors and chief state school officers set up a process that they believe will deliver standards that prepare students for college and careers. I know that you have an important role to play in this process. In many of your states, you'll be responsible for adopting these standards. You'll set the policies to implement standards and adopt the tests that measure whether students are meeting these standards.

I thank you for your leadership and courage on this issue. This truly is a role that belongs to governors, chiefs, and state board members. This is an example of how states working collectively are solving a national problem and why we will continue to make progress together.

We have a unique, historic, and powerful opportunity to transform public education. And I look forward to being your partner in success.