August 26, 2009

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500-0004

Dear Mr. President,

As President, you have shown great interest in improving the public schools. For that reason, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) wants to bring to your attention what we have recently been told by teachers in Washington State about how to make education better. These teachers had some very good insights that we thought you would find helpful as you develop your administration’s proposals in elementary and secondary education. The views represented in this letter reflect those of the teachers we interviewed, not necessarily those of CEP.

From January to April 2009, CEP conducted a research study in Washington State to understand the impact of federal and state accountability policies on curriculum and instruction in high schools. Administrators, teachers, students, and parents were interviewed for the study. At the end of each teacher group interview, CEP researchers asked the teachers: “If you met President Obama in an elevator and had 30 seconds to talk to him about the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), what would you say?” Some teachers wanted to press the red button in the elevator because they wanted to talk to you for more than 30 seconds!

Teachers mainly spoke about issues related to teacher accountability, funding, standards, elimination of punitive measures, and community involvement with schools. They spoke openly, gave thoughtful responses and always referred their comments back to the welfare of their students. Below is a summary of responses from 68 high school teachers in the state of Washington:

**Teacher Accountability.** Teachers were aware that they are being held accountable for the achievement of their students, and many welcomed this challenge. They want to be trusted, however, to use their skills and knowledge as professionals to do what’s best to address the needs of their students. One teacher asked that they be “allow[ed] to do our jobs” and “set up a system that’s going to allow us to educate kids to their fullest potential.”

**Funding.** Several teachers said they require proper resources and support to help their students achieve at the level necessary to be successful. Teachers in Washington State were concerned with the growing size of classrooms and the lack of sufficient funding to achieve the state’s academic standards. Given the intense needs of students and the pressure to produce adequate test scores, many teachers felt that if they had sufficient and proper resources they would be able to help their students achieve more.

**Standards.** Several teachers reported that they were making considerable and continuous efforts to align their curriculum to the state’s academic standards. These teachers noted, however, that standards were
inconsistent not only across their state and the nation but also within their school districts. They felt that standards should not only be consistent but also equal in rigor. One teacher said he and other teachers need “collaboration time within our scheduled day to produce, to improve our effectiveness with student learning.” Other teachers agreed and mentioned that having more time to collaborate with other teachers in their district or state would improve consistency in teaching and student learning. They also discussed the need for alternative programs for students to meet standards of learning through different paths.

**Punitive Measures.** In many schools, teachers said that NCLB has created a culture of negativity, and they often felt as if the progress they are making is negated when a small portion of students does not meet state benchmarks for progress. These teachers would like to see more emphasis placed on the gains students are making, however small, and the intense efforts schools are putting forth to increase achievement for all students. “[We are] not making products...[we are] making citizens,” said one teacher.

**Community involvement with schools.** Finally, teachers noted the need for greater community involvement in their schools. Teachers mentioned that when parents participate in their children’s education, they notice a difference in student performance. One teacher said that she completely supports your idea of “building strong family values as a way to get children more involved in school.” She and the other teachers interviewed would like to see this change come to pass during your presidency.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to these teachers. We spent over 18 hours talking with these wonderful teachers and hope their perspectives help you with your policies on education reform in the United States.

Sincerely,

Jack Jennings,
President and CEO

cc: Arne Duncan

The research in Washington State was led by Deepa Srikantaiah, CEP Senior Research Associate, and this letter was drafted by her and Laura Sobchik, CEP intern. The Gates Foundation funded the research study in Washington State, but the views expressed are not necessarily those of the foundation or CEP. Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in January 1995 by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy is a national independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. We do not represent any special interests. Instead, we help citizens make sense of conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create the conditions that will lead to better public schools.

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