

Parents Across America

August 26, 2010

Dear President Obama:

Several weeks ago, we wrote to you about our concern that your proposed “Blueprint for Reform” did not acknowledge the critical role parents must play in any meaningful school improvement process. We also expressed our serious reservations about some of the Blueprint's strategies.

Our goal is simple – to ensure that our children receive the best possible education. As parents, we are the first to see the positive effects of good programs, and the first line of defense when our children's well-being is threatened. Our input is unique and essential.

Recently, Secretary Duncan announced that he would require districts that receive federal school improvement grants (SIG) to involve parents and the community in planning for schools identified for intervention. We appreciate this response as a first step; however, more needs to be done.

First, leadership must come from the top. We would like to see meaningful, broad-based parent participation not just in our local districts, but at the U.S. Department of Education, where critical decisions are being made about our children's education.

Second, we need more than rhetoric to feel confident that only educationally sound strategies will be used in our children's schools. The current emphasis on more charter schools, high-stakes testing, and privatization is simply not supported by research. Disagreement on these matters is not a result of parents clinging to the “status quo,” as you have recently asserted. No one has more at stake in better schools than we do – but we disagree with you and Secretary Duncan about how to get them.

We need effective, proven, common-sense practices that will strengthen our existing schools, rather than undermine them. These include parent input into teacher evaluation systems, fairly-funded schools, smaller class sizes and experienced teachers who are respected as professionals, not seen as interchangeable cogs in a machine. We want our children to be treated as individuals, not data points. And we want a real, substantial role in all decisions that affect our children's schools.

More specifically, and urgently, we insist on being active partners in the formulation of federal school improvement policies. The models proposed by the U.S. Department of Education are rigid and punitive, involving either closure, conversion to charters, or the firing of large portions of the teaching staff. All of these strategies disrupt children's education and destabilize communities; none adequately addresses the challenges these schools face.

We also insist on being active partners in reforms at the school level, with the power to devise our own local solutions, using research-based methods, after a collaborative needs assessment at each individual school.

Our voices must count. If you listen, you will make real changes in your School Improvement Grant proposals as well as your “Blueprint” for education reform.

We look forward to your response and a brighter future for our children and our nation.

Sincerely, Parents Across America (signatories attached)

Natalie Beyer, Durham Allies for Responsive Education (DARE), NC

Caroline Grannan, San Francisco public school parent, volunteer and advocate, CA

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Leonie Haimson, Class Size Matters, New York, NY

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**for identification purposes only*