



PUBLIC EDUCATION NETWORK

Public involvement. Public education. Public benefit.

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To Linda Darling-Hammond Ph.D, Judith Winston, and the Education Transition Team:

Public Education Network (PEN) is honored to share its beliefs with the Obama Education Transition Team as it formulates federal education policy for the coming administration. PEN specifically brings the experience of our local education funds (LEFs) to this Transition Team because LEFs represent one of the most structured, strategic, and sustaining strategies for increasing student achievement for economically vulnerable children, and engaging the public to take ownership to improve their schools.

PEN celebrates the 25th anniversary of its local education funds (LEFs), local non-profits created through Ford Foundation initiation and support in response to the declining student performance in the nation's public schools, and the lack of public engagement, as documented in the 1983 *Nation at Risk* Report. Our 80 LEF members work in partnership with their school districts to create quality public schools, as well as with their communities to build the knowledge of what good schools can do for the quality of communities and our democratic way of life. Our LEFs have contributed over \$4 billion to school districts in support of education improvement and reform in the most impoverished communities in the nation, but always with the understanding that effective and sustained change, renewal, and improvement can take place only when the public is engaged as a full and equal partner in the process

In crafting a new direction for public education, your team has the unique opportunity to lay the groundwork that can move us from problem identification to real systemic change that will not only provide economic security, but also fortify our democracy. This begins by developing common public principles that build on the mosaic of assuring a quality public education for all children. All policies should then be evaluated on the strength and vibrancy of those common public principles in weaving a federal role that moves beyond *No Child Left Behind*, and what it means to educate our children for the opportunities, needs and challenges of the 21st century. These ideas are only the beginning of what we hope is a continuous and long-term relationship between PEN and the President-elect, the Secretary of Education nominee Arne Duncan, and the new agency appointees.

The most creative, challenging, and inspiring visions of what U.S. public education can be have always been rooted in our democratic value system, not market or privatization strategies. The



most effective national discourse about public education and educational quality has always occurred when those discussions have been rooted in democratic principles. We are at a juncture in education reform.

As President-elect Obama prepares for his Inaugural speech and the State of the Union, we propose that he publically commit his Administration to a democratic public education agenda that results in the highest intellectual achievement of the nation's students. In so doing, President-elect Obama will publically proclaim the value of the intellectual development of our children, as well as define education as a public benefit and democratic resource. This nation can create a citizenry that can further America's development as a civil, democratic nation. Accordingly, we propose the following principles:

- Public school systems across the nation will meet international standards comparable to the highest achieving nations around the world.
- Data about student progress will be uniform across states, disaggregated, transparent, accurate, understandable and actionable for and by the public.
- Academic progress will be evaluated based upon a range of academic and non-academic measures and indicators related to student learning and development comparable to international standards and expectations.
- Teachers and administrators in the nation's lowest performing schools will be highly qualified, experienced and prepared to succeed.
- Financial, legislative, and civic resources will prepare students to join the economic, social, and political life of a 21st century world.
- Rigorous public research will continually inform quality policies, innovative instruction and assessments.
- A system of accountability will not only hold schools accountable, but also hold all stakeholders from the school house to the White House to every household in America accountable for student achievement and strengthening public schools.

PEN has attached its position on NCLB, along with its final report on NCLB hearings conducted nationwide called *Open to the Public: How Communities, Parents and Students Assess the Impact of NCLB*. Based on those documents and the principles above, PEN recommends the following as the Transition Team considers its **initial** policy priorities related to 5 paradigm-changing areas of reform:

- Using the bully pulpit
- Public voice and involvement
- Coordination of programs and services
- Changes at the US Department of Education
- Assessment and improvement

Recommendation 1: Use the bully pulpit to emphasize the critical role that local education funds and intermediary organizations play in bridging the gap among school, parents, and community.

Using his leadership role, President Obama can shift the national mindset about where and how children learn. He can help the public understand the key roles that local education funds and intermediary organizations play in building support for change; mobilizing communities to act on collected data; working with school districts to increase teacher quality; encouraging



community engagement; serving as a broker in bringing together various stakeholders such as business, students, parents, seniors; and holding schools accountable for performance. School leaders that work with community organizations, such as local education funds, create change that is more effective and sustaining, while enabling citizens to take an active and positive role in shaping their own schools. Without building public will, our schools will not be able to meet either the democratic or the economic challenges facing our society.

Recommendation 2: Create an Office of Public Engagement within the White House and a parallel office at the Department of Education in order to ensure public voice and public involvement in matters of educational reform.

Research is replete and irrefutable about the important role of parents, families, and communities in affecting change and raising achievement, but it is often the orphan of education reform. More than 70 percent of the nation's adults do not have children in public schools, yet benefit from the results of an enlightened and educated public. As President-elect, and the nation's chief community organizer, you understand the importance and value of building and mobilizing public will and a constituency.

The White House office will symbolize the importance of involvement, and incorporate public engagement as an integral policy for change. The new office will be responsible for developing policies, strategies and models of effective engagement with oversight designed to hear voices of the public who are not represented by lobbyists, or otherwise usually not asked about their ideas or opinions. An example, among many, is legislation sponsored by Rep. Mike Honda (D-CA) called the National Citizens Commission on Equity in Education. The measure would enable public hearings across the country to collect the voices of the public about next steps in assuring fiscal equity among school districts and states. At the state and local levels, the public must be involved in determining community needs, holding schools and policy makers accountable, using data, and recommending ideas for improvement. With a myriad of technology such as webinars, teleconferencing, polling, focus groups, hearings, and formats such as America Speaks, it is easier than ever before to build civic voice and capacity. A White House office would be the advocate for public voice.

Recommendation 3: Coordinate and integrate over 188 federal programs so that they more effectively and efficiently serve the learning needs of students and families, especially in our most impoverished school districts. This function should be an additive function, and not a way to curtail services.

At this momentous time -- the advent of the Obama era -- we envision a seamless approach to fulfilling the federal responsibility for supporting children and families. An approach is needed where the very important goals of existing federal programs are fulfilled in a way that is less cumbersome and more efficacious for the intended beneficiaries. In an era in which belt-tightening and cost-effectiveness are priorities, such an approach is a necessity.

We must streamline the various education, child-related, health, and other service programs known as 'categoricals', and develop cross-agency partnerships that coordinate supports for families and schools.

Over the recent decades, a proliferation of categorical programs -- many very effective -- has emerged in all agencies dealing with domestic priorities: education, health, nutrition, training, safety, juvenile justice, housing and urban development, and child welfare programs. Many of



these programs are intended to benefit children and families in challenged circumstances. And yet the categorical nature of these programs forces a bureaucratic response from a community – starting with application for funds, through implementation of programs using those funds, and concluding with accountability for and evaluation of programs supported by those funds. Splitting the needs of children and families 188 ways may have made sense in the past, but now there is a need to coordinate and integrate services, based on providing communities the flexibility to determine their own unique needs related to educational achievement and developmentally-appropriate services. The Full Service Community Partnership Act should be expanded, and is an example of how the federal government can play a role in encouraging community partnerships and collaboration. Agencies should:

- Audit existing programs, their performance, and effectiveness.
- Coordinate duplicative programs, and remove programmatic and regulatory barriers that prevent collaboration.
- Allow localities to apply for funds across programs and even across federal agencies, using a single application, single set of benchmarks and activities, and single evaluation, to meet multiple program and agency goals in the way that the locality believe most efficacious. This could be initiated on a pilot basis.
- Require that funding applications and proposals demonstrate that the Education Department and other agencies collaborate in integrating services based upon community involvement and need.
- Develop non-academic indicators of success, and report that information to the public.

Recommendation 4: The US Department of Education needs to expand its leadership, infrastructure and funding capacities to work in relationship with state and local entities to raise student achievement for the most vulnerable of our students.

Strategies to develop a 21st Century learning framework for our students should include:

- A seamless system of birth through higher education coordination of programs within agencies, across agencies and between federal, state, and local public entities.
- A commitment during the next four years, to attracting the most experienced and qualified teachers to teach in the most difficult schools, and resisting policies that place idealistic, but unprepared teachers to work with students in the lowest performing schools.
- Assurance that all students are college-ready, and have access to higher education, no matter what their financial status.
- Support for middle and high school reform efforts that focus on preparing students for college, or for a high skilled, high paying career.
- Parent involvement that is an integral part of the education program and system. A paradigm shift is required by schools in how they invite, welcome, honor, and include parents and families as equal partners in the academic process. This means whole new and different ways that schools organize and restructure in response to the needs of families.
- Innovations that are not quick fix gimmicks, but that are scalable and accompanied by equity. Scale and equity are on the same continuum as school change and improvement, and are mutually inclusive.
- Provisions for the non-academic supports that focus on the whole child and that are linked to student performance.



Recommendation 5: When the Administration turns to reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, move beyond a single test of evaluating students, to developing a core set of multiple measures that include both academic and non-academic learning factors.

We must:

- Broaden accountability measures used to determine school performance, to include other indicators such as parent and community involvement, school funding, class size, services offered by the school, and, if the school is low-performing, the measures that the school has taken to make improvement;
- Use incentives, rather than punitive consequences, to improve low-performing schools; and
- Explain to the public the meaning of the assessment results. Simply publishing a report of scores in a newspaper or website without explanation or context leads to frustration and skepticism. Public data is important, but only in concert with purposeful plans to act on that data, and the capacity of a school district to make the instructional changes necessary to effectively utilize the data.

In conclusion, we call upon the new Obama Administration to think broadly and anew about the responsibility the federal government has for the well-being of children and families, and about how that responsibility is best fulfilled. PEN appreciates the opportunity to present its viewpoints to the Obama Transition Team, and looks forward to scheduling a meeting with the Team to discuss these issues with you.

Sincerely,

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President
Public Education Network

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