



Community Unit School District # 205

..... Helping Students Achieve Their Dreams



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President Elect Barack Obama
 5046 S. Greenwood Ave.
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Dear President Elect Obama:

First of all, let me say that I am thrilled with your election as the next President of the United States of America. I have supported you every step of the way and, like millions of people around the world, wept as you delivered your acceptance speech in Chicago. I truly believe that your election is the dawn of a new America.

A few years ago, I wrote to you as my Senator from the State of Illinois. I am a school administrator in Galesburg. I know that you are aware of what's happened here in Galesburg. You have visited and spoken about our community. In many respects, Galesburg is a microcosm of the difficulties in America. Still, our school district remains strong despite those many challenges. When I wrote you in 2005, I told you about our district's frustrations with the No Child Left Behind act and how it was crippling true learning in many of our schools. Graciously, you wrote back and told me that you shared our frustrations and that the goals were pure but the delivery was clouded. That letter is framed on my office wall.

Please don't misunderstand, I believe in the ideals of NCLB. I have spent my career fighting for the rights of all children to receive a great education. Still, NCLB is laced with problems (lack of funding, failure to address funding inequity, bureaucratic basis, punitive nature, etc.) that cause it to be ineffective and in many cases is injurious to our children. Of all of its problems, however, to me the law's biggest problem is that it doesn't truly focus on the greatest learning obstacle we have in American schools. Children aren't learning to read. If a child is not reading by the time he or she has finished third grade, the likelihood of school success is practically nil. Reading is the foundation of every other subject area we teach. With our graded system of schooling and the fact that retention does not work, inevitably children's reading problems are passed along until we have countless failing children and frustrated teachers, parents, community members, and employers.

This is why I'm asking you to consider a program. You may have heard of it; it's called Reading Recovery. The goal of Reading Recovery is to dramatically reduce the number of first graders who have extreme difficulty learning to read and write and to reduce the cost of these learners to schools and communities. Reading Recovery provides one-to-one tutoring for the lowest achieving first graders. The intervention is most effective when it is available to all students who need it and is used as a supplement to good classroom teaching. Over the past 30 years, over one million challenged students have been taught to read with the Reading Recovery intervention. I am not writing to you as someone who's deeply embedded in the Reading Recovery organization. I'm not! I'm writing to you as an educator who has seen the magic that this program works. In Galesburg, we identify the lowest 20% of first graders for Reading Recovery services. Of that number of underachievers, 75% are reading at grade level by the end of first grade. Most of these students come from impoverished homes. I believe we are saving lives!

So, why am I writing you? I am writing to you because I believe that Reading Recovery should be available to every school and struggling first grader in America. When students transfer into Galesburg schools in subsequent grade levels from other school districts, they are often behind. They have not had the benefit of Reading Recovery. I truly believe that if every child had the Reading Recovery opportunity we would avoid many of the problems that NCLB tries to address. Not the least of these problems is the special education over identification of students with learning disabilities. I believe that we could make Reading Recovery available to all by shifting not expanding our federal resources.

I know you have enormous issues and problems on your agenda right now. However, I would love to speak with someone in your administration about our experience in Galesburg. Of unit school districts in Illinois with greater than 50% low income, no district has higher achievement than Galesburg. Reading Recovery is a large part of the reason for that.

Again, my most sincere congratulations! You have brought all of us "change we can believe in". "YES WE CAN!"

Sincerely,

Joel Estes
 Assistant Superintendent, Galesburg CUSD #205