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Agency of Education

June 8, 2017

The Honorable Thad Cochran
Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
Room S-128, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Vice Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
Room S-128, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Roy Blunt
Chairman
Labor, Health and Human Services
Education Appropriations Subcommittee
260 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Labor, Health and Human Services
Education Appropriations Subcommittee
154 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairmen Cochran and Blunt and Ranking Members Leahy and Murray:

I am writing today, on behalf of the vulnerable students in Vermont, to share our concerns with the President's proposed K-12 education appropriations priorities for the Fiscal Year 2018 appropriations cycle.

Vermont's Governor Phil Scott is committed to investments that grow the economy and make Vermont more affordable, but knows that progress doesn't—and can't—come at the expense of our most vulnerable, and in particular, our most vulnerable children. The current wellbeing of our children is essential to the future economic strength of Vermont and the nation. Vermont is a small state with an aging and declining population. We struggle to find workers to power our economic growth. When we allow inequity in outcomes, we leave the full academic and personal potential of many of our most vulnerable children on the table. In doing so, we undermine our own future economic prosperity. For us, strong schools that support child-wellbeing are an imperative. Federal dollars provide supplementary supports that some children need, due to accidents of life circumstances, in order to thrive alongside their peers.

The proposal put forward by the President will greatly limit our ability to give our most vulnerable students the essential support they need to take advantage of the great educational opportunities we offer. We see every day the differences these resources can make in preparing students who face adversity.



In addition, when the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was passed with strong bipartisan support two years ago, Congress also affirmed its commitment to funding the provisions of this long overdue and much improved version of ESEA. On the basis of that commitment, we spent the last year engaging stakeholders across the state and developing a state ESSA plan (recently submitted) that was true to the language of the statute. The proposed cuts now threaten our ability to effectively implement the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) as written by diverting resources to new, ill-defined purposes with a weak research base at the expense of our most vulnerable children.

We are a small state that does big things with comparatively little. We do not receive large amounts of federal dollars compared to other states. However, federal support is a critical and integrated component in promoting educational equity. Our historically disadvantaged children are our greatest investment opportunity. A little extra support and attention to their well-being is what enables them to realize the value of the great educational opportunities our state offers.

Our federal dollars support additional professional development, direct services to students, stronger assessments and support for continuous improvement. Our systems work hard to braid resources from multiple state and federal funding streams to create coherent interventions and supports for the children for whom we can make the greatest difference. It is the braiding of these local state dollars with federal programs that has created an education system that consistently performs well on all measures of national and international comparison.

We adamantly oppose any action that would reduce allocations of Title I, Part A in favor of federal choice policies. We have developed our own, locally appropriate solutions to address the same goals. For example, we currently have, in statute, a statewide public school choice program. And locally, districts have the option of deciding, by a vote of the electorate, to tuition students to either private or public schools instead of operating a school. Most choose not to do this because of the cost and the desire for a community school. And in our small rural schools, where losing even a few students threatens to make the school unavailable to all students, educators expand choice and opportunity through dual enrollment, career and technical education, early college, and internships.

While the details of the President's plan for choice have not yet been revealed, we remember that a bipartisan vote of Congress rejected a choice plan when approving ESSA. In many small rural states like Vermont, choice programs in some regions don't work the same way they do in urban centers. In some regions, there are no private schools, let alone enough students for more than one school. Geography and distance in many regions do not facilitate parents choosing among myriad options, and if one too many parents determine to leave a school under choice, the local public school closes for all. The tension between individual choice and community needs is thus more pronounced in small rural areas, where the school may be the only shared community institution. In Vermont, districts that want to educate their children through choice already can and do so. And, we already have statewide public high school choice. We note, therefore, that none of Vermont's current choice options would be eligible under what we understand to be the direction of the new federal choice initiatives, so effectively these new initiatives would make a substantial portion of Title I dollars unavailable to Vermonters.

At the Vermont Agency of Education, we are stingy fiscal stewards. We have a rigorous process by which we review federal investments to ensure that they support our most vulnerable youth in achieving ambitious outcomes. We are particularly concerned with the proposed reductions in Title I,

Part A resources, the proposed elimination of ESSA's Supporting Effective Instruction program (Title II, Part A), the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program (Title IV, Part B), and the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant (Title IV Part A), and the proposed reduction of Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act funding. The funding put forward by these programs supplements our state efforts. Without these federal funds, essential services for young people and educators will likely be foregone; we will not be able to make up the difference.

As you prepare for the difficult task of balancing a budget, and the difficult choices that must be made, Vermont implores you to consider the children and educators who will be negatively impacted by these cuts. We support CCSSO's request that Congress approach appropriations with these priorities in mind:

1. Adequately Fund ESEA Title I, Part A

Vermont has embraced the state flexibility allowed under ESSA to address and reduce the achievement gaps present across the nation; we were among the first in the nation to submit our ESSA plan for consideration and we planned based on current appropriations. If funding in Title I, Part A is reduced, the plan we just submitted may no longer be viable. When this law was passed, we had a commitment from Congress that funding would be protected for this important work. We trust Congress to protect this commitment and reject proposals that redirect these resources to an ill-defined "choice program." Please exercise the same degree of rigor and discipline in reviewing this proposal that you expect us to exercise in reviewing federal grant proposals from our districts.

2. Provide Authorized Funding for ESEA Title II, Part A

In Vermont, we use Title II, Part A funding for many purposes. About 50% of our funding supports educators in providing coaching, mentoring and curriculum support to other educators so as to improve the educational experiences of our most vulnerable children. Particularly in our small, isolated rural schools, where overhead is higher, this professional collaboration is an essential improvement tool. In addition, the very small and rural nature of many of our schools makes the impact of the loss of these funds acute. This funding is typically braided with other sources- state and federal- to create full time work. Without Title II, Part A funds, small systems will likely lose multiple full time positions which were partially funded by Title IIA, and which provided supplementary support services to our most vulnerable students. In our ESSA plan, we also have committed to using the discretionary 3% set aside of Title II, Part A funds to support a state-wide school leader academy similar to the approach taken by New Mexico. If the funds are eliminated, or even reduced, we will need to forego this valuable strategy for improving educational outcomes. Again, because of our small size, a substantial cut effectively means the loss of programs in many contexts. We ask Congress to stand behind its recent commitment to improving educational outcomes by supporting educators in developing the skills they need to meet our students' needs. This commitment was foundational in how we shaped our recently-submitted ESSA plan.

3. Adequately Fund ESEA Title IV, Part B, 21st Century Community Learning Centers

In Vermont, our 21st Century Community Learning Centers are critical partners in supporting our most vulnerable students to achieve extraordinary results. There are currently programs in 108 schools,

supporting 13,246 students across the state. Over 35% of Vermont's public schools are 21C funded and 59% of regular attendees are low-income students. These programs create opportunities for children through integrated extended school programming, connecting after-school programming with school-based needs, and community-based learning. These programs also create wraparound support for families who know that their children receive full care while they engage in work or educational efforts of their own. The closing of these programs will have a negative impact on children and on their families, many of whom are financially vulnerable and likely will not be able to cover costs associated with supervised care after school hours. For some of these families, losing access to these programs means parents may be unable to work, as they will have to care for their children instead. In a state that struggles with the challenges of affordability and finding enough workers to drive economic growth, in which over 70% of families with children have all available parents in the workforce, losing access to this care will adversely affect the economic goals of the state. We trust that Congress is as committed to maintaining a full commitment to this important program.

4. Adequately Fund ESEA Title IV, Part A, the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant

Vermont has made plans for how to support Title IV, Part A, the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant program, investments that support a well-rounded education, safe and healthy students, and education technology. These funds are critical for supporting communities where poverty impedes access to the kinds of "extras" that give learning meaning- whether it is the arts, civic engagement, work-based learning or other educational opportunities that some families are fortunate enough to take for granted. Eliminating these funds perpetuates inequalities that ESSA seeks to end. We implore Congress to fully fund this important initiative.

5. Adequately Fund the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act

In Vermont, more than 5,500 students participate in our 17 Career and Technical Education centers. CTE is a cornerstone of our flexible pathways to graduation work and a critical component of how we prepare Vermonters for careers after high school. This funding is essential for building coherent educational experiences for students, particularly our male students most at risk of failing to achieve their educational or occupational potential. In Vermont, our CTEs are a vital tool for moving students to postsecondary credentials, and play a central role in ensuring our graduates have the skills they need to contribute to the Vermont economy. We trust Congress to recognize these funds as an effective investment in our youth and maintain the funding appropriated.

Sincerely,



Rebecca Holcombe, Ed.D., Secretary
Vermont Agency of Education

cc: Chairman Lamar Alexander, Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions