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Education, Equity and Opportunity in the Obama Administration's FY 2015 Budget

The Obama Administration's articulated goals for the FY 2015 budget request include a focus on equity and opportunity for students and families. The request includes a total of \$68.6 billion for the Department of Education, an increase of approximately \$1.3 billion over the funding provided in FY 2014.¹

To support the goals of equity and opportunity, the President's FY 2015 Budget request includes several proposed programs that include explicit school diversity incentives, including a new "Race to the Top: Equity and Opportunity" competition and the newly proposed "Expanding Educational Options" program.

The new **Race to the Top: Equity and Opportunity** competition is focused primarily on improving the academic achievement of students in high poverty schools.² This \$300 million competition seeks to develop, attract, and retain more effective teachers and leaders in high-need schools, using strategies such as targeted and individualized professional development, career ladder opportunities, financial incentives, strengthening school culture and climate, and educator training and preparation programs. The competition also includes extensive data reporting requirements. This new competition recognized the harmful impacts of economic segregation in schools, and encourages grantees to identify and carry out strategies that help "break up and mitigate" the effects of concentrated poverty. Although the phrase "break up" is a poor choice of words, the emphasis on reducing concentrated poverty in schools is a positive new focus for Race to the Top, and one we hope will be reinforced should the program receive funding from Congress.

Also included in the FY 2015 budget is the **Expanding Educational Options** program, which is part of the Administration's proposal for reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).³ This program would replace the Charter Schools Program and the former Voluntary Public School Choice program. Expanding Educational Options would consist of two parts, "Supporting Effective Charter Schools" grants and "Promoting Public School Choice" grants.

The Supporting Effective Charter Schools grants would operate along the same lines as the current Charter Schools Program grants, including the option for the program to

¹ FY 2015 Education Budget Summary and Background Information, at 1, available at www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget15/summary/15summary.pdf

² FY 2015 Department of Education Justifications of Appropriation Estimates to the Congress, *Innovation and Instructional Teams*, at 28, available at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget15/justifications/index.html>

³ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, *ESEA Blueprint for Reform*, Washington, D.C., 2010, available at www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/blueprint.pdf

prioritize schools that work to increase diverse enrollment.⁴ The Promoting Public School Choice grants could be used to create or expand interdistrict and intradistrict school choice programs and implement theme-based school programs. Under the Promoting Public School Choice program, the Department would give priority to applicants that propose to implement or expand interdistrict and intradistrict programs that increase diversity.⁵ This strong emphasis on diversity marks an important step in the Department's funding priorities. Unfortunately, the Budget proposes that the total \$248.17 million requested for Expanding Educational Opportunities in FY 2015 would all go to the Supporting Effective Charter Schools program, leaving the Promoting Public School Choice program – with much stronger diversity incentives – unfunded, at least in the 2015 budget.

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⁴ *Supra* note 2. at 107. (There is currently a weak diversity incentive in the current Charter Schools Program grant program. The program awards up to 2 points above the base maximum of 100 for schools seeking start-up or dissemination funds that meet the diversity requirement, and up to 4 points above the base maximum of 100 for non-profit charter management organizations with proven success who want to replicate or expand their existing model, *see* 11 Fed. Reg. 22298; 77 Fed. Reg. 13304.)

⁵ *Id.* at 108