

April 4, 2016

The Honorable Roy Blunt
Chairman
Subcommittee on Labor, Health,
and Human Services, Education,
and Related Agencies
Senate Appropriations Committee
135 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Labor, Health,
and Human Services, Education,
and Related Agencies
Senate Appropriations Committee
156 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Blunt and Ranking Member Murray,

As members of the National Coalition on School Diversity (www.school-diversity.org), we urge you to support funding for the Stronger Together Program as proposed in the Administration's FY 2017 budget. Additionally, we urge you to support the President's proposed funding increase for the Magnet School Assistance Program ("MSAP").

The National Coalition on School Diversity is a network of civil rights organizations, university-based research centers, and state and local coalitions working to expand support for government policies that promote school diversity and reduce racial isolation. We also support the work of state and local school diversity practitioners.

As our increasingly diverse nation continues to grapple with disparities in educational opportunity and outcomes along racial and class lines, we must strive to promote achievement, diversity, innovation, engagement, choice, and equity in our public schools.

Under the Administration's proposal, the Stronger Together program would be funded at \$120 million, and the MSAP program would be funded at \$115 million, which is an \$18.4 million increase from FY 2016.

The Stronger Together grant program would promote socioeconomic and racial diversity within our schools. The program is completely voluntary. Diversity plans would be locally developed. Applicants for funds would have to demonstrate strong family and community involvement in plan development. \$2.5 million would be available for National Activities, which would include technical assistance and evaluation.

MSAP is a long-standing program that was recently reauthorized by the *Every Student Succeeds Act*. MSAP promotes the elimination, reduction, or prevention of minority group isolation and supports innovative methods to promote diversity and school choice. The increased funding would be used for a new competition giving priority to applicants proposing to make socioeconomic diversity a central factor in their efforts to increase racial integration. The activities under MSAP complement the proposed Stronger Together grant program.

The research on the benefits of diversity are clear. Students attending socioeconomically and racially diverse schools have better test scores and higher college attendance rates than peers in more economically and racially segregated schools.¹ The benefits from attending diverse schools also continue into adulthood. These include subsequent reduced segregation in neighborhoods, colleges and workplaces, higher levels of social cohesion, and a reduced likelihood of racial prejudice.²

Despite these benefits, 25% of public school students attend schools in which more than 75% of students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch; and in urban areas, nearly half of all students attend high-poverty schools.³

Recommendations for Improving the Stronger Together Program

The Stronger Together program is a significant step forward in addressing the socioeconomic segregation of our schools. It is important, however, to permit local school districts to also promote racial diversity if they so choose, as simply pursuing socioeconomic diversity will not achieve the maximum benefits for society.⁴ Such plans can be developed by communities in accordance with the law as outlined by the Supreme Court. As stated by Justice Anthony Kennedy in his concurring opinion in *Parents Involved In Community Schools v. Seattle School Dist. No. 1*: “This Nation has a moral and ethical obligation to fulfill its historic commitment to creating an integrated society that ensures equal opportunity for all of its children. A compelling interest exists in avoiding racial isolation, an interest that a school district, in its discretion and expertise, may choose to pursue. Likewise, a district may consider it a compelling interest to achieve a diverse student population.”⁵ Another risk of limiting the Stronger Together program to socioeconomic integration alone is that excellent local programs that are designed to reduce racial isolation, consistent with the Supreme Court’s standards, could be unfairly excluded from consideration.

We also recognize that, in many parts of the country, segregation and accompanying resource disparities across district lines are the most compelling school integration challenges. It is therefore important to include state education agencies (SEAs) in any discussion of interdistrict solutions. For this reason, we recommend including SEAs in the final bill language.

To maximize the likelihood of success for this program, we suggest the following changes to the proposed authorizing language with our additions underlined:

“Provided further, That \$120,000,000, to remain until expended, shall be for competitive grants to local and state educational agencies to develop and implement comprehensive strategies to improve socioeconomic and racial integration in early childhood education

¹ National Coalition on School Diversity Research Brief 2, “How the Racial and Socioeconomic Composition of Schools and Classrooms Contributes to Literacy, Behavioral Climate, Instructional Organization and High School Graduation Rates,” *National Coalition on School Diversity* (October 2010), <http://school-diversity.org/pdf/DiversityResearchBriefNo2.pdf>

² National Coalition on School Diversity Research Brief 3, “The Impact of Racially Diverse Schools in a Democratic Society,” *National Coalition on School Diversity* (October 2010), <http://school-diversity.org/pdf/DiversityResearchBriefNo3.pdf>

³ FY 2017 Department of Education Justifications of Appropriation Estimates to the Congress, F-86, <http://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget17/justifications/f-ii.pdf>.

⁴ See, e.g., Johnathan D. Glater and Alan Finder, “School Diversity Based on Income Segregates Some,” *New York Times* (July 15, 2007), http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/15/education/15integrate.html?_r=0

⁵ *Parents Involved In Community Schools v. Seattle School Dist. No. 1*, 551 U.S. 701, 797-98 (2007) (Kennedy concurring), <http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/boundvolumes/551bv.pdf>

programs and elementary and secondary schools, of which up to \$2,500,000 may be used for national activities including technical assistance, evaluation, and dissemination.”

This modest investment will enable hundreds of schools across the country to take meaningful steps to pursue diversity. It is good for the schools, good for the students, and good for the nation.

Thank you for your support of these programs that promote diversity in our public schools.

Sincerely,

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