

January 27, 2012

Secretary Arne Duncan
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave SW
Washington, DC 20202

Re: Comments on 2011-2014 Strategic Plan

Dear Secretary Duncan:

The National Coalition on School Diversity (NCSd) is a coalition comprised of many of the nation's leading civil rights advocates and organizations.* The coalition members share the goal of increasing diversity and decreasing racial and socio-economic isolation in America's public schools. NCSd writes today to provide comments on the U.S. Department of Education's Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2011-2014.

NCSd reviewed the Strategic Plan with a particular interest in the Department's plans to further support diversity in public schools. This inquiry was spurred by our collective concern regarding the present state of our nation's schools. Despite the mandate for achieving equity and increasing diversity expressed by the Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, public schools today, and the children who attend them, are more racially isolated than at any time in recent history. Disparate educational outcomes for students mirror the divided state of schools; profound achievement gaps persist at every grade level by race and ethnicity. And research indicates that the gaps have grown in recent years as racial isolation has worsened.

Because of these sobering realities, we appreciate the Department's goal to undertake diversity initiatives "to promote cross-racial understanding, break down racial stereotypes, and prepare students for an increasingly diverse workforce and society" (pg. 43). A substantial research base supports the efficacy of this approach. In addition, one reason the U.S. Supreme Court has repeatedly confirmed that diversity in education is a "compelling state interest" is the consensus among major corporations, the military, and leading scholars that diversity in the learning environment yields important educational benefits, benefits that translate into better performance in the workplace. The Department's suggested action of including priorities related to diversity in competitive grant programs is an important tool to reach to this goal. But this tool must be used in order to be effective. Therefore, we encourage the use of diversity as a component of key competitive grant programs such as the Investing in Innovation Fund (i3) that have the potential to reach large numbers of students.

In addition, NCSd urges ED to use all of the tools in its arsenal to achieve the twin goals of quality education and diversity. Despite the laudable emphasis on diversity initiatives, magnet schools, which have for decades proven effective in advancing the related goals of increasing diversity and deepening

*A complete listing of member organizations may be found at <http://school-diversity.org>.

student learning, are absent from the Strategic Plan. This oversight represents a potential missed opportunity for providing additional, proven school options for children and families.

In addition, the recent policy guidance jointly released by the Department of Education and the Department of Justice on promoting diversity in K-12 schools and in higher education provided a legal framework for school districts to pursue voluntary actions that would reduce racial and socio-economic isolation and the disturbing patterns of resegregation in our nation's schools. Unfortunately, this guidance was not mentioned in the Strategic Plan, nor does the Plan mention any specific goals or actions mentioned to reduce segregation among students.

If our nation is to remain competitive in a global economy and if the Strategic Plan embraces that goal, the plan's near silence on diversity in educational opportunity undermines our chance for progress in this area. NCSD strongly encourages the Department to explicitly state its commitment to reducing racial and socio-economic isolation in the final Strategic Plan. We hope that the Department will also state that it plans to provide further guidance, in addition to the joint guidance, and technical assistance it plans to provide to those districts struggling to diversify schools.

NCSD thanks you for the opportunity to provide comments on the Strategic Plan. The Department has set out an ambitious agenda for the next three years and we believe school diversity should be an important priority for the Department.

National Coalition on School Diversity