

April 29, 2013

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

Dear Secretary Duncan:

As representatives of the civil rights and disability community, we strongly oppose the U.S. Department of Education granting waivers from key accountability provisions of federal law directly to school districts, including those in the California Office to Reform Education (CORE).

Statewide accountability systems do two essential things that district level accountability systems can't do: they set expectations for the performance of all groups of students in a state, and they communicate whether schools are making sufficient progress toward meeting these expectations.

By setting common expectations and communicating progress, strong state accountability systems give parents a common yardstick for evaluating schools in their community and making informed choices on behalf of their families. They give educators a clear sense of what kind of improvement is expected and policymakers the ability to assess the impact of their investments in education. They also serve as a backstop to forces pressuring districts to sweep low performance under the rug —especially when it applies to low-income students, students of color, Native students, English language learners, and students with disabilities—and declare that local schools are doing just fine.

That is why we've worked to hold the line on strong state accountability systems throughout years of debate over the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). And that's why we're urging you to hold the line now.

Moving away from a system of statewide accountability and state-led commitment to improving student outcomes will result in different expectations for students from one district to the next. Considerable experience tells us that for low-income students, students of color, Native students, English language learners, and students with disabilities, different expectations far too often means lowered expectations.

We are also worried about the message that this level of flexibility sends to districts within states that have already received waivers under ESEA. Although the Secretary of Education has signaled that districts in States with state-wide waivers will not be eligible for separate waivers, we are concerned this lays the groundwork for a possible future loophole allowing any district to come forward to seek an independent waiver.

Additionally, States are moving to new, more rigorous college and career ready standards. These standards have the potential to help schools raise expectations for children, engaging all of them—

rather than just a privileged few—in the rich content that will ensure improved achievement and better outcomes. But the power of these standards will go unrealized if districts are allowed to create and define their own accountability system within a state.

We understand and appreciate the CORE districts’ desire to move on their own. To date, the state of California has been unwilling to put together a waiver application that reflects a strong, coherent set of policies around Common Core implementation, accountability, and teacher and leader effectiveness. That’s a big missed opportunity. But district waivers are the wrong path forward.

Instead, we urge California’s district and state leaders to work together on a strong statewide application. And we urge the U.S. Department of Education to stand firm, both in its commitment to equity and its commitment to statewide accountability systems. All of our students deserve a united approach so that policy and practice are aligned to assure their success in school and beyond.

Sincerely,



Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates, Inc.



National Center for Learning Disabilities



Democrats for Education Reform



National Indian Education Association



Easter Seals



National Women's Law Center



League of United Latin American Citizens



The Education Trust