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## Key Policy Letters from the Education Secretary and Deputy Secretary

June 18, 2013

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Dear Chief State School Officers:

Over the last four years, state and local leaders and educators across America have embraced an enormous set of urgent and long-overdue challenges: raising standards and upgrading curricula to better prepare students to compete in the global economy, developing new assessments, rebuilding accountability systems to meet the unique needs of each state and better serve at-risk students, and adopting new systems of support and evaluation for teachers and principals. Meeting this historic set of challenges all at once asks more of everybody throughout the education sector, and it is a tribute to the quality of educators, leaders, and elected officials across this country that so many have stepped up.

Throughout this process, states and districts have established high goals for themselves: college- and career-ready standards for all; higher graduation rates and college enrollment rates; high expectations for critical thinking, problem-solving, and other 21st century skills; ambitious and achievable performance targets that really move the needle for kids at risk; and useful, rigorous systems of evaluation and support for teachers and principals based on multiple measures, including student growth. The Department has offered flexibility to enable states and districts to meet these goals. In a country as diverse as ours, where schools and students have different educational challenges, one-size-fits-all solutions have not worked. We have also aligned our grant programs to support states willing to lead this important work, and the result is that some states are further along than others, but all states are engaged in significant improvement efforts and students are better off for it.

In recent months, we have heard from many of you and from thousands of teachers, principals, and education advocates. While there is a broad sense that these far-reaching changes carry enormous promise for schools, children, and the future of our country, there is caution that too much change all at once could undermine our collective progress. I fully appreciate both the courage to tackle so many challenges at once and the burdens this imposes on front-line educators – teachers, principals, school boards, and administrators – who are committed to doing this work well.

With that in mind, the Department is open to additional flexibility for states in two critical areas: the first relates to one particular element of teacher and leader evaluation and support system implementation, and the second addresses "double-testing" during the transition to new assessments aligned with college- and career-ready standards.

First, I want to address the implementation of teacher and leader evaluation and support systems. States that have received a Race to the Top grant or flexibility under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) are responsible for working with districts to develop systems to evaluate and support principals and teachers based on multiple measures, including student growth. States have committed to different deadlines to implement these systems: some are implementing now; others will begin over the coming years. Given the move to college- and career-ready standards, the dramatic changes in curricula that teachers and principals are now starting to teach, and the transition to new assessments aligned to those standards, the Department will consider, on a state-by-state basis, allowing states up to one additional year before using their new evaluation systems to inform personnel determinations. To be specific, states that request and are given this flexibility may delay any personnel consequences, tied in part to the use of

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**State-by-State Timeline Implementation Chart**

student growth data, until no later than 2016–2017. We recognize that, for many states, it will not make sense to request this flexibility because they are already well ahead in successfully implementing these changes or have requirements in state law.

States interested in this extension may request this change, before September 30, 2013, through the current ESEA flexibility amendment process. Details about the amendment process are available on the ESEA flexibility Web page (<http://www2.ed.gov/esea-flexibility>). As each state implements college- and career-ready standards, it must have a robust plan for supporting teachers and principals as they transition to the new standards and assessments. States will need to lay out those plans in detail in the ESEA flexibility renewal process, along with indicators of teacher and principal familiarity and comfort with these new materials.

The second issue I want to address is that of "double-testing" during the transition from the current statewide assessments to new assessments aligned with college- and career-ready standards. During the 2013–2014 school year, some schools will be involved in the important work of field testing new assessments. We want to support states that would like to avoid double-testing students, which as you know often happens during the shift to a new test. Therefore, we would consider requests from states for a one-year waiver, to allow schools participating in these field tests to administer only one assessment in 2013–2014 to any individual student — either the current statewide assessment or the field test. We would also consider a request for those schools to retain their Federal accountability designations for an additional year during which the same targeted interventions would have to continue, with no relaxation of accountability requirements. Details about the Title I waiver process are available at <http://www.ed.gov/titlei-waiver>.

Our country continues to face challenges as we work together toward achieving educational excellence for all children, and the timing of these actions has real consequences for students in the real world. The point of raising standards is to prepare students for tomorrow's challenges rather than yesterday's. Their readiness has real consequences for their lives, and the nation's economic health. Yet this effort will only succeed if all parties have the time, resources, and support needed to make the journey from the inadequate standards of the past to the ambitious standards of tomorrow. As the highest-ranking education official in your states, you define the path and the pace for how states and schools will make that journey. Our job in Washington is to support you. In the coming days, the Department will provide more information on the flexibility discussed above; my staff will reach out to you and your teams to provide assistance.

On behalf of the Obama Administration, I deeply appreciate your leadership and courage. I also appreciate your honest feedback and the feedback of your principals and teachers. Above all, I salute your continuing determination to advance reforms that will benefit millions of students in states and across America. This is hard work and the need for change is urgent.

Sincerely,

/s/

Arne Duncan

cc: Council of Chief State School Officers

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