May 13, 2013

The Honorable Tom Harkin
United States Senate
731 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Jerry Moran
United States Senate
361A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Harkin and Ranking Member Moran:

I am writing on behalf of the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) and leading state board members to urge you and your colleagues to make investing in the nation’s students a top federal budgetary priority and to urge timely investment in several core state-led reform areas. Preparing all students for college, career and civic life will require a continued array of critically needed federal and state reforms. Under the bipartisan leadership of state boards of education, efforts to secure key educational improvements – involving changes to both policy and practice – are well underway in many states, but they must be complemented by well planned, long-term investments designed to improve teaching and learning and promote equitable access to high quality educational opportunities.

States boards – leading through strong partnerships and close collaboration with an array of key stakeholders - are taking significant steps to help districts and schools achieve dramatically better student outcomes. Many states have adopted and are now implementing college and career ready standards, with the goal of improving not only what students know, but also what they are able to do with their knowledge. To help students reach this much higher performance bar by high school graduation, state boards are guiding the implementation of next generation assessment & accountability systems, establishing comprehensive school turnaround strategies, improving longitudinal and instructional data systems, and identifying strategies for providing more robust supports to teachers and school leaders. Together, these and other reforms are promoting equity (addressing key issues identified by the Excellence and Equity Commission) and strengthening educational systems across the country.

The long term success of these reforms will depend in part, however, on strong continued investments in the nation's most disadvantaged students and lowest performing schools, including promoting accountability and the provision of continued funding focused on state and local leadership and capacity building. With this context in mind, we are writing to
First, NASBE respectfully urges you to increase funding for the formula component of the State Assessments (ESEA § 6111) program to at least $800 million. These critically important federal resources help states cover a portion of the costs associated with developing and administering the assessments required by the No Child Left Behind Act. The funds also help states transition to college and career ready standards and next generation assessments (including improved performance assessments) that will capture a fuller picture - for students, educators, parents and communities - of what students know and are able to do. State board members believe this need is particularly acute in FY'14, because many states lack the technology infrastructure and teacher training resources needed to implement and deliver next generation college and career ready assessments, including the two consortia assessments, which will be implemented during the 2014/15 school year. This timeline leaves only one school year for district leaders to close technology gaps and make other final preparations. Increasing the formula component of the State Assessments program will provide states flexibility to address their unique next generation assessment needs, including acquiring assessment technology (if needed in a given school district), but also meeting other timely state assessment needs such as developing and implementing valid and reliable measures of college and career readiness, creating high quality science assessments, and taking other steps to more accurately measure student achievement, student growth, and school progress.

Second, we urge you to prioritize federal investments in teachers and school leaders, including by restoring the Teacher Quality State Grants program to at least pre-sequestration levels, and increasing funding for the Teacher Incentive Fund to $350 million and the School Leadership program to $50 million. The nation is calling on educators to do more than ever to help prepare students for college and career; therefore, we must also do more to support their work, including building their capacity to deliver on the higher expectations set for their students. State boards are leading in this area by guiding the development of new (better targeted) professional development systems linked to well-designed educator evaluation systems. State boards are also seeking new strategies for identifying and placing highly effective teachers and leaders in high need schools and developing new policies for strengthening teacher preparation program accreditation and teacher induction and mentorship. This important state led work must be complemented by a strong federal commitment and resources to enhance the capabilities of veteran educators and school leaders, while also identifying strategies for focusing greater attention on preparing and transitioning pre-service educators.

Third, we encourage you to increase funding for the State Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) program to $85 million. States have made incredible progress during the past decade in developing robust longitudinal data systems that guide decision making, while vigilantly protecting student privacy. This success depended heavily on the vitally important SLDS program, which provided resources to build comprehensive data systems and support for expert data leadership in states across the country. Effective decision making depends on access to information and this increased funding will help expand states’ analytic capacity. State board members rely on this data to inform policy adoption and implementation, and guide continuous improvement efforts. Continued resources will also help states
continue important reforms including promoting kindergarten readiness, improving secondary and postsecondary transitions, developing strong systems of teacher evaluation, and linking workforce outcomes to education.

Fourth, we urge you to increase funding for the School Improvement Grants (SIG) program (ESEA § 1003(g)) to $700 million. This important resource helps every state focus intense efforts on turning around the nation's very lowest performing schools. States use SIG set-aside funding to build their capacity to provide effective technical assistance to low performing districts and in some cases to provide direct support to very low performing schools. Greater SIG funding is needed to expand state and district capacity to continue and sustain improvements in turnaround schools. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) waiver process provided some States with much greater autonomy over the use of SIG funds. We urge you to extend this much needed flexibility to non-ESEA waiver states, so that they can better tailor interventions (outside the confines of the SIG program's four models) to meet low performing districts and schools’ unique needs. This need is particularly pronounced in geographically isolated rural communities where it is often not possible to implement key elements of the four SIG models (e.g., closing schools, and replacing all staff and leadership).

Finally, in addition to addressing these timely specific needs, we encourage you to maintain a very strong commitment to ESEA, Title I and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act State Grants program. At a minimum, these accounts should be restored to pre-sequestration levels in FY14, but even greater resources (consistent with the initial authorization contemplated by the NCLB Act) are needed to serve these populations. We cannot overstate the importance of maintaining and strengthening the federal government's long standing commitment to high poverty students and students with disabilities. These critically important formula programs ensure that all states receive funding aimed at improving outcomes for these often marginalized students. The automatic cuts required by the sequester were devastating for students served by these programs. Therefore, we strongly urge you and your colleagues to eliminate the sequester and take action to provide greater funding for ESEA Title I and the IDEA State Grants programs (aiming for full federal funding of IDEA over time). Competitive grant programs alone, while beneficial, will not suffice to meet the far reaching cognitive and non-cognitive needs of at risk students.

Thank you for your service. We are grateful for your leadership on behalf of the nation's students and hope you will carefully consider our recommendations. Please let us know if you or your staff have any questions or might benefit from additional information about the work state boards of education are leading nationally.

Sincerely,

Bradley J. Hull, Ph.D
Interim Executive Director
National Association of State Boards of Education