



# Kansas State Board of Education

Kansas State Education Building

120 S.E. 10th Ave.

Topeka, Kansas 66612-1182

(785) 296-3203

FAX (785) 291-3791

www.ksde.org

Janet Waugh  
District 1

Sue Storm  
District 2

John Bacon  
District 3

Carolyn Wims-Campbell  
District 4

Sally Cauble  
District 5

Kathy Martin  
District 6

Kenneth Willard  
District 7

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District 8

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District 9

David Dennis  
District 10

April 23, 2010

The Honorable Arne Duncan  
Secretary, U.S. Department of Education  
400 Maryland Ave., SW  
Washington, DC 20202-0008

Dear Secretary Duncan,

On behalf of the Kansas State Board of Education, thank you for your leadership and determination in ensuring all students are given every available resource needed to achieve. In these challenging times, your courageous vision has set the groundwork for advancing American education in order for our students to better compete in a global society. Your work in education has inspired others to raise the bar and hold our students to a higher standard. With that in mind, I appreciate the opportunity to address some concerns on behalf of the Kansas State Board of Education.

As you may know, the Kansas State Board of Education voted unanimously last week to not apply for funding in Phase II of the Race to the Top grant. After placing 29<sup>th</sup> in Phase I of the competition, staff from the Kansas State Department of Education carefully analyzed the reviewers' comments and concluded there was little chance of earning the necessary points in the second round. Kansas is proud to be a local-control state in terms of education, and The Race to the Top competition simply does not appear to favor such states.

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provides a tremendous opportunity to advance our nation and once again place America as number one in the world in education. The *Blueprint for Reform* gives a glimpse of the vision you and your administration have for education in the years to come. Throughout the *Blueprint*, one element that seems most prevalent is the use of competitive grants among states. This potentially puts small states, such as Kansas, at a distinct disadvantage. Due to the state's current financial situation, staff at the Kansas State Department of Education is at a minimum, currently holding over 20 positions open. These 20 positions account for nearly 10 percent of our entire staff. In short, the already understaffed agency will struggle to find the time, resources and people necessary for preparing numerous grants for which we find ourselves already at a disadvantage due to our history and tradition of local control. Race to the Top is just one example of what Kansas fears is the beginning of a trend. We urge you and President Obama to consider the capacity of small states in all you do, but especially in the reauthorization of ESEA.

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A second concern centers around the common core standards. Kansas has been a leader in standards-based education for many years. Our students have made significant gains, having increased math and reading achievement for nine years in a row. Year after year Kansas continues to score near the top in the nation on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Kansas is among the 48 states working with the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors' Association on the common core standards. This grassroots movement has resulted in a draft set of standards that will certainly benefit all students for many years. Kansas has been supportive of the effort, with staff providing feedback at every opportunity. The State Board was pleased with the progress and on track to adopt the common core standards until they were tied with the reauthorization of ESEA. We urge the administration to allow the common core standards initiative to continue at the grassroots level and not be mandated from the federal level.

Finally, our state is concerned about the four turnaround models required under the School Improvement Grant (SIG) for assisting our lowest performing schools. The transformational model, for example, is unrealistic for small, rural school districts. Replacing the principal and 50 percent of the staff will be difficult, if not impossible, in rural districts which have small populations. Recruitment and retention of administrators and teachers is already difficult in these remote areas of our state. Even in today's economy, unemployment in much of rural Kansas remains below four percent, indicating an actual labor shortage. Rural school districts face a great challenge to replace one retiring teacher; replacing half the staff of a school would be nearly impossible. Kansas is requesting greater flexibility for such schools by allowing local districts, along with SEA guidance, the ability to determine appropriate interventions.

Secretary Duncan, thank you once again for your leadership and vision for education. We sincerely appreciate the transparency and openness you have insisted on at the US Department of Education, and thank you for the opportunity to provide input as discussions about reauthorization of ESEA take place.

Respectfully,



Janet Waugh, Chairman

cc: Governor Mark Parkinson  
Lt. Governor Troy Findley  
Senator Pat Roberts  
Senator Sam Brownback  
Representative Jerry Moran  
Representative Lynn Jenkins  
Representative Dennis Moore  
Representative Todd Tiahrt  
Senator Jean Schodorf, Chair, Senate Education Committee  
Representative Clay Aurand, Chair, House Education Committee