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August 20, 2014

The Honorable Tom Harkin  
Chairman  
Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Harkin:

We are writing on behalf of the sixteen school districts comprising the Large Countywide and Suburban District Consortium to provide initial feedback regarding the Higher Education Affordability Act's (HEAA) proposed teacher preparation provisions. As district leaders, we share your interest in strengthening the nation's teacher preparation institutions and your desire to create new opportunities to better transition new educators into the classroom, including through the provision of increased clinical opportunities.

Establishing and supporting a strong teaching force is a priority for our districts. Essential first steps include the institution of high standards for admission of candidates into teacher preparation programs and the recruitment of more underrepresented minorities and non-traditional teachers. Our goals also call for the provision of rich, high-quality professional development to our novice and more experienced teachers, as well as better equipping new educators to be successful during the first year of their career. Unfortunately, many current teacher preparation programs are not sufficiently preparing new educators for classroom success and do not have the strategic plans needed for improving their outcomes. As a result, we believe Congress must raise the bar for teacher preparation institutions, so that every new teacher is prepared to transition successfully into the classroom. With that important national goal in mind, we strongly urge you to ensure that the next Higher Education Act (HEA) includes a core focus on encouraging and supporting powerful improvements in the nation's teacher preparation programs.

As you evaluate the public's recommendations for strengthening the HEAA prior to the bill's formal introduction, we encourage you to consider incorporating the following ideas in the bill's teacher preparation provisions:

- **Require increased program transparency and accountability.** Federal law should require teacher preparation programs to report more meaningful outcome data and effectiveness measures aligned to states' college- and career-ready expectations, much in the way that states and districts are currently working to make accountability systems for elementary and secondary schools and the educators working within them stronger and more meaningful to the stakeholders and the public. Such systems should include, but not over emphasize, test scores and must be balanced with other measures (e.g., observation data, principal and district surveys, placement rates of program graduates, and licensure pass rates). Additionally, new teacher preparation accountability policies should be aligned with updated accreditation standards.

**DISCUSSION DRAFT – NOT FOR PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION**

- **Promote and support high quality induction and mentoring programs.** We strongly urge you to focus on the expansion of effective induction and mentoring programs for teachers during their first four years of teaching. Federal funding should incentivize high-quality teacher residency programs, drawing from best practices in other professions, including medicine, by targeting federal resources to support hands-on experiences for incoming and novice teachers. This strategy may require greater initial investment early in a teacher's career, but will save money over time by decreasing teacher attrition and turnover. This strategy should include supporting partnerships between postsecondary institutions and high-need schools designed to provide new teachers with comprehensive induction in their first years of teaching and to support improved, more flexible, pathways for those entering the profession from other fields. This approach delivers real-world interactions and enables incoming educators to learn from veteran practitioners.
- **Encourage greater alignment between teacher candidates' capabilities and training and school districts' specific human capital needs.** Too often, preparation programs fail to account for the specific needs of the districts and schools into which their graduates are hired, such as educators equipped to teach in high-need subjects, like science, technology, engineering, and math, as well as high need fields like teaching English Learners and students with disabilities. Incentives must be implemented to encourage preparation programs to be more responsive and capable of meeting districts' greatest needs. With this goal in mind, federal grants should encourage strategic partnerships between school districts and institutions of higher education designed to support ongoing dialogue about districts' evolving staffing needs.
- **Provide support for the innovation and scale of successful preparation programs.** Equipping all students with the deep content knowledge and skills needed for postsecondary success will require new approaches to teaching and learning. Implementing these new models of education, including equipping educators with much greater capacity to use technology and high capacity broadband, must begin with teacher preparation that equips new educators with the capacity to innovate, to think creatively, to effectively collaborate with their peers to better meet student need. Preparation programs with proven records of success should be scaled and enhanced to increase their scope.

To help illuminate the potential impact of the policy changes we are proposing, we have prepared and are attaching highlights of some of the innovative and effective practices and partnerships that Consortium districts have put in place.

Thank you for carefully considering these high level recommendations. We would appreciate a chance to meet with you and your staff to provide additional details about these ideas and to discuss other strategies for leveraging the Higher Education Act to support students' readiness for success after graduation.

Sincerely,

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The Large Countywide and Suburban District Consortium is a unique network of some of the nation's most highly-regarded districts and district leaders, all of whom are committed to world-class learning for all students. Together, the 16 Consortium districts serve more than 1.46 million students. The make-up of Consortium districts is reflective of the make-up of communities across America. Most have no majority student group; racial minorities compose more than 60% of students; and, nearly 40% of students qualify as free and reduced lunch eligible. Individually and collectively, Consortium districts have had significant success. The keys to their success are many, including strong leadership, highly-functioning organizations, and deep investments in the continuous development of knowledge and expertise. These capacities have served them well to date and are providing the foundation for changes in teaching and learning that are essential to college- and career-readiness and civic engagement.