



December 2, 2009

The Honorable Arne Duncan
Secretary of Education
Attn: Race to the Top Assessment Program - Public Input
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW, room 3E108
Washington, DC 20202.

Dear Secretary Duncan:

We were pleased to see “Innovations for Improving Early Learning Outcomes” in the recently published notice of final priorities for Race to the Top. While we maintain that a state’s commitment to research-based pre-kindergarten education should be a competitive priority, we thank you for taking seriously the comments of the early education community and look forward to working with you on this important issue.

We are writing to comment on another aspect of the Race to the Top competition – the Race to the Top Assessment Program. As pre-k is a fundamental component of our nation’s education system, appropriate standards and assessments should begin at pre-k and be aligned with kindergarten readiness. It is short-sighted for the Department to exclude developmentally appropriate assessments of school-readiness in a competition intended to help states develop “a next generation of assessments.”

We commend you for helping schools “get out of the catch up business” by securing a high-quality early education for all children. Yet, the discussion of measuring school readiness, a key indicator of children’s chance for school achievement, is missing from the public meetings regarding Race to the Top Assessment Program. High-quality pre-k is the most rigorously researched option for school reform, and we believe the Race to the Top Fund can better achieve its goals by incorporating a greater emphasis on this proven education strategy.

We recommend that the Race to the Top Assessment Program include early education as a clear priority by incorporating developmentally appropriate assessments for pre-k. An excerpt from the public comment submitted in August by The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Buffet Early Childhood Fund, W.K. Kellogg Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts provides specific language to fill the gap that currently exists in the competition.

“Standards and Assessments: Voluntary, national standards should begin at pre-k, be grounded in child development principles, and be aligned with national assessments of kindergarten readiness and third grade performance.

“Over 45 states have come together to focus on voluntary, national standards that are benchmarked to high international standards. These standards, thus far, have been defined as K-12. Many states, however, have already developed early learning standards for pre-k that articulate up through third grade. To begin voluntary national standards as late as kindergarten risks abrogating key principles of early childhood development and learning, which span the critical years between the ages of 3 and 8. If the standards only begin at age 5, children’s developmental trajectory and the requisite skills and experiences that all children need before kindergarten to become proficient readers and learners by third grade will be ignored. We urge that the call for voluntary standards begin at pre-k and that the standards are grounded in child development principles. Not doing so risks, at a later time, a standards gap, varying across the nation’s 50 states, between what’s expected in pre-k and what’s expected in kindergarten.

“Like standards, assessments are critical to improved educational outcomes for children and improved state and national results. Given how differently individual children develop in the early years, the field is, quite rightly, concerned about driving individual assessment down into the younger years. Nonetheless, valid, reliable, and developmentally appropriate progress monitoring and assessments of children in the early years should be a critical piece of reform. In particular, the Race to the Top should call for the development of assessments aligned to national, voluntary standards for kindergarten readiness and for third grade reading and math. These measures are key predictors of long-term success. With such assessments and the data that can be used for improvement strategies and achieving quality, the Race to the Top will maximize its chances for long-term success.”

If states are to develop high-quality assessments linked to common K-12 standards, it is imperative that valid, reliable, and developmentally appropriate assessments aligned to standards for kindergarten readiness are a part of the assessment program. We urge you to incorporate the call for assessments aligned to voluntary standards beginning at pre-k in the notice of application for Race to the Top Assessment Program. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions. We are happy to work with your staff and to connect them with experts on the technical aspects of early childhood assessment.

Sincerely,



Marci Young, Director
Pre-K Now



Kathy Patterson, Senior Officer
Pew Center on the States

Cc: Thelma Meléndez de Santa Ana, Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education

The Pew Center on the States identifies and advances state policy solutions. Pre-K Now, a campaign of the Pew Center on the States, collaborates with advocates and policy makers to lead a movement toward high-quality, voluntary pre-kindergarten for all three and four year olds.