December 7, 2009

Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education

U.S. Department of Education

400 Maryland Avenue, SW

Washington, D.C. 20202

Subject: Race to the Top

Dear Mr. Duncan:

I would like to begin by introducing myself. I am a mother, a teacher, a union member, and a taxpayer. I have worked in education since 1997 – for eight years as a seventh- and eighth grade-English teacher and for five years as a Library Media Specialist for the same small, rural school district in Northeaster Wisconsin. I have a vested interest in the quality of education in our schools not only as a teacher-librarian, but also as a taxpayer and as a parent of two children who are receiving an education in the district I work in.

In your speeches and writings, you claim failing schools will improve by tying student performance to teachers’ wages. In your speech “Partners in Reform” given on July 2, 2009, to the National Education Association, you point out that in charter schools across the nation, you have seen this work. Achievement gaps have closed and student achievement and graduation rates have increased – even for students from low, socio-economic backgrounds. But let me point out the problem with your theory, as well as offer a better solution to solving the problems in our educational system – because I do not disagree with you that something needs to change to help our students’ and our nation’s future.

Your proposal of tying teachers’ salaries to student achievement puts all of the responsibility of increased test scores on our teachers. Where is the responsibility of the students and their families? Teachers can be as innovative and talented as they come, but without support from homes that encourage hard work and value education, some students – as hard as this is to want to believe – simply will not put forth the effort to get educated. An Old English proverb says, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink.” In the same sense, you can offer all children a quality education with quality teachers and administrators, but an equal effort needs to come from the students and their families. People, like horses, will only do what they have a mind to do. All children *can* learn, but that doesn’t mean they are all *willing* to learn or have the *support at home* that is needed to learn.

And what about the increased student performance in the nation’s charter schools? In most charter schools across the country, parents need to “opt in” to the program. Parents who take the time to research and learn about charter schools – even parents who simply take the time to make the choice to have their children attend these charter schools – these are parents who are involved in and care about their children’s educations. Hard as it is for many people to believe, some parents simply don’t care or are too busy working to help support the educational process at home. This explains why so many schools today now need to offer breakfast programs -- because parents are too busy to feed their children in the morning, after school programs -- because parents are too busy working or can’t afford reliable child-care after school, summer school, guidance programs, drug awareness programs, even sex education programs – because educators have found these a vital part of a young person’s growth and development, but they were not being taught in most homes.

Mr. Duncan, I argue that not only will linking teacher salaries to student performance actually leave poor, rural schools still depressed, but it will drive the good teachers that are working there away – those teachers will go to schools where there is more parent support for education. Your plan also does not focus enough on the changes that need to happen in the way our schools are run – only in the way our teachers and administrators are paid.

In your speech “Partners in Reform” you state, “We’re losing too many children today and incremental change won’t save them. We need dramatic change.” On this, we agree; however, we disagree on what that dramatic change should be. Our classrooms and student expectations are still set up like they were during the industrial revolution; however, according to Daniel H. Pink in his book *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*, “the people – artists, inventors, designers, storytellers, caregivers, consolers, big picture thinkers – will . . . reap society’s richest rewards and share its greatest joys.” (1) Pink adds “we are moving from an economy and society built on the logical, linear, computer-like capabilities of the Information Age to an economy and society built on the inventive, empathic, big-picture capabilities of what’s rising in its place, the Conceptual Age.” (1-2) So I ask you, why are our schools still trying to create students who are good workers, but not necessarily independent thinkers, creators, or inventors?

In *The Essential Difference: The Truth about the Male and Female Brain* by Simon Baron-Cohen, “one out of ten jobs in the U.S. computer software, and information technology industry will move overseas in the next two years. One in four IT jobs will be offshored by 2010.” As educators, we need to focus on our country’s need to change not only the *way* we educate our students, but also *what* we are expecting of them. No longer, should we be lecturing students and having them memorize facts. Instead, schools should be fostering their creativity. Instead of a curriculum – or worse yet, a test – guiding the *same* curriculum for *all* students, each child’s curriculum needs to be *individualized* for them – drawing upon their strengths and interests. This will motivate more students to learn and do their best – bringing all they have to the table. Students need to have the freedom to express their own interests and learn about what interests them – curriculum needs to be individualized for each student. Only by changing the way curriculum is developed and administered, will we develop innovative, creative, and self-motivated students into these same kinds of successful adults.

Pink also focuses on the ease with which knowledge workers can be outsourced to other countries – so we need to create innovators and creators. We need to foster adaptability and the willingness and ability to learn something new in an ever-changing world and marketplace.

You may be asking yourself, “Why can’t we change the way our students’ curriculum is developed and administered *and* tie student achievement to teachers’ salary?” Because Mr. Duncan, your measurement for student achievement is in standardized tests and data. How do you measure creativity? How do you measure ingenuity? How do you measure inventiveness? How to do you measure ideas? Until these things are measureable for individual students, you cannot easily and rightly tie teachers’ salaries to student achievements. Our standardized tests are archaic and faulty. They focus on educating 20th-centurty workers – not 21st-centurty workers, creators, innovators, leaders, and doers.

Our real challenge as parents, educators, taxpayers, and yes, even union members, is to change the way we create curriculum for our students, the way we create educational experiences for our students, not in testing them more and teaching them the same, old, 20th-century way.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Jennifer M. McMahon