

August 21, 2009

The Honorable Arne Duncan
Secretary
U. S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Docket ID: ED-2009-OESE-0006

Attention: Race to the Top Comments from the National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group

Dear Secretary Duncan,

The Harvard Family Research Project appreciates the opportunity to submit comments on the U.S. Department of Education's Federal Register Notice regarding the Race to the Top Fund's proposed priorities, requirements, definitions, and selection criteria. As a member of the National Working Group on Family, School and Community Engagement we endorse its comments that were submitted on August 17, 2009.

Since 1983 the Harvard Family Research Project, housed at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, has helped stakeholders develop and evaluate strategies to promote the well being of children, youth, families, and their communities. We work primarily within three areas that support children's learning and development—early childhood education, out-of-school time programming, and family and community support in education. Underpinning all of our work is a commitment to evaluation for strategic decision making, learning, and accountability.

Successful schools engage families in their children's education. A priority criteria for awarding Race to the Top funds should focus on the quality and depth of family engagement, especially to turn around struggling schools. We suggest that applicants demonstrate a commitment to *systemic family engagement*. The core components for systemic family engagement are:

- **Fostering district-wide strategies.** Family engagement must be part and parcel of student learning. This includes superintendents and senior leadership linking family engagement to their district's instructional goals, the creation of an infrastructure that communicates and elevates the importance of family engagement, and mechanisms to assess progress and performance along the way.
- **Building school capacity.** District-level resources should enable schools to acquire the capacity to carry out family engagement in strategic ways that align with instructional goals. This happens through ongoing professional development and technical assistance to schools and the inclusion of family engagement in school leader and teacher evaluations.

- **Reaching out to and engaging families.** School districts reach out to families directly and through schools and community partnerships to encourage them to have high expectations for their children's learning. Efforts to engage families in their children's learning should be continuous, from a child's earliest years through young adulthood, and with well-supported transitions from pre-school to kindergarten, elementary to middle and middle to high school.

We appreciate the opportunity provided by the Secretary and the Department to provide feedback on its key reforms. Please feel free to contact me at (617) 495-9108 or weisshe@gse.harvard.edu if further clarification on the comment is needed.

Sincerely,

Heather B. Weiss