United States Congress

May 7, 2015

The Honorable Arne Duncan
Secretary of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary Duncan:

Few jobs are more difficult than teaching in a high-needs school, yet our public education system does a notably poor job of supporting the teachers doing this critical work. As a result, we lose almost 50 percent of our teachers within their first five years of teaching. The Department has estimated a need to hire 430,000 new teachers by 2020. To accomplish this long-term goal, we need a robust pipeline that encourages teachers to teach where they are most needed and does a better job of supporting them once they enter the classroom. Some of the best levers at our disposal to attract and retain talent in the teaching profession are through federally sponsored grant and loan assistance programs. However, recent data indicates that these programs are poorly administered and in need of change.

Today's teacher loan assistance options have not provided sufficient financial relief to teachers willing to work in high-need fields or low-income schools. The current system of federal assistance programs available to teachers is a complex patchwork of loans and grants that can be difficult to navigate. For example, from 2008-2013, only 113,065 teachers—roughly 3 percent of the teaching force in the United States—received teacher loan forgiveness, and the Department of Education distributes only 15,000 TEACH grants to prospective teacher candidates each year. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimates that only 19 percent of the potentially eligible population for the TEACH Grant Program are benefitting from this program. These anemic participation rates indicate that the Department could do more to simplify the loan forgiveness process, disseminate program information to eligible teachers, and inform candidates of the terms of their eligibility.

A report recently released by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), entitled "Better Management of Federal Grant and Loan Forgiveness Programs for Teachers Needed to Improve Participant Outcomes," highlighted a number of concerns about the efficacy of these programs—particularly, the TEACH Grant Program. According to the report, of the more than 112,000 TEACH Grants awarded since 2008, 36,000 of those grants have already converted into unsubsidized loans, due in large part to recipients failing to meet and understand the stringent requirements of the TEACH Grant Program. Meanwhile, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimates that only 19 percent of the potentially eligible population for the TEACH Grant Program are benefitting from the program. These conversions leave recipients with unanticipated debt and suggest that the grant as currently structured is not an effective incentive to keep teachers in high-need classrooms.

For various reasons, many of our highest need schools and districts have a more difficult time attracting talent. Moreover, these schools and districts often lack the proper tools to recruit and maintain their most valuable assets. Providing better assistance for teachers to finance their higher education can be a valuable recruitment and retention tool. To improve our schools, we should prioritize the needs of the teaching candidates and established practitioners who are the drivers of student achievement at the helm of our nation's classrooms. We look forward to working with you to improve these programs and embolden new teachers to enter into the schools where their talent can have the most transformative effects.

Sincerely,

U.S. Senator Orrin Hatch

U.S. Senator Mark Warner

U.S. Representative David Joyce

U.S. Representative Derek Kilmer

cc: Ted Mitchell
Department of Education Under Secretary
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202