



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

Office of the Governor

Robert F. McDonnell
Governor

May 26, 2010

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

RE: Race to the Top Program Application

Dear Secretary Duncan:

I am writing to you today to express my serious concerns with the common core standards and assessment requirements in the Race to the Top (RTTT) application guidelines. Former Governor Tim Kaine and Superintendent of Public Instruction Patricia Wright have expressed similar concerns to you and members of the Virginia congressional delegation. I appreciate the time to speak to you personally on this matter following our review of the United States Department of Education critique of Virginia's application in the first round of RTTT. I do not support the federal mandate of the adoption of common core standards as part of the RTTT program, and neither do many of our leading legislators and educators in Virginia.

Virginia has been a leader in standards-based reform and accountability for over a decade. During that time, we have made much progress in narrowing the achievement gap while increasing high school students' participation in college-level courses and industry certification programs. The Virginia Standards of Learning and the corresponding state accountability and testing program have a proven track record of success, spanning four gubernatorial administrations of both political parties. I cannot support setting aside the proven Virginia Standards of Learning program, nor commit to adopt these common core standards that have not been completed, implemented, or fully evaluated. Virginia's standards actually exceed those of the common core in most areas, and to be competitive for a RTTT grant under the current rules, we would have to lower our standards. This we cannot do.

The requirement to adopt common standards as part of the RTTT program is overly prescriptive and disregards individual state initiatives and progress. The definition appears to place more value on having state standards that are "common" or the same, rather than on the quality of the standards themselves. I believe a set of common, internationally benchmarked

standards should serve as targets for all states to strive to attain. However, implementation of new standards and assessments will need to be customized to fit within a state context.

Virginia's standards are validated, revised and updated routinely. Virginia must stay on schedule with assessment development in order to maintain the validity and continuity of our accountability program for schools and students. We cannot afford to put these investments on hold, waiting for common standards and assessments to be implemented and evaluated.

I implore you to ensure that all future federal policies and funding respect the authority of states to establish and implement their own standards and assessments as long as they meet or exceed the common core, and continue to demonstrate success in increasing student achievement.

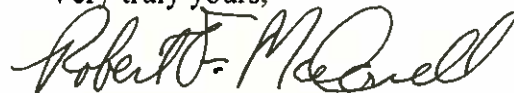
Thus, most reluctantly, I advise you that Virginia will not make application at this time for Round Two of the RTTT program. It is obvious from the critique Virginia received from the Round One grant process that we will be marked down dramatically in the peer review process to the point that we will not be competitive.

As you know, I have been highly supportive publicly of the President's initiatives to improve K-12 success by implementing charter schools, performance pay, and increased accountability. Your leadership nationally on this issue is to be commended. However, I implore you as the leader of the Department of Education to remove strict adoption of common core standards and assessments from federal grant applications to permit high performing states like Virginia to be competitive. We worked very hard during the recent legislative session to secure passage of major new education reforms, to include the expansion of high quality charter schools, creation of college laboratory schools, and implementation of new programs for virtual schools. We are working much more aggressively with underperforming schools to help them turn around. We will continue to pursue other innovative reforms to improve outcomes for our young people in Virginia.

It is most disappointing that these rigid RTTT rules have created such an impediment for Virginia. I continue to support the goals of the RTTT program to improve student achievement, but will not sacrifice Virginia's excellent proven standards to do so.

With warm personal regards, I remain

Very truly yours,



Robert F. McDonnell

The Honorable Arne Duncan

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cc: The Honorable Mark R. Warner
The Honorable James Webb
The Honorable Robert J. Wittman
The Honorable Glenn C. Nye, III
The Honorable Robert C. Scott
The Honorable J. Randy Forbes
The Honorable Tom Perriello
The Honorable Robert W. Goodlatte
The Honorable Eric I. Cantor
The Honorable James P. Moran, Jr.
The Honorable Rick Boucher
The Honorable Frank R. Wolf
The Honorable Gerry E. Connolly