

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 22, 2007

The Honorable Margaret Spellings
Secretary
United States Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary Spellings:

We read with interest your op-ed "A National Test We Don't Need" in the June 10th Washington Post. You wrote that a move towards a national test would be "unprecedented and unwise" and correctly pointed out that states and localities have historically had the "primary leadership role in public education." As you noted, states and local districts develop curriculum for schools and pay most of the costs associated with public education. We agree that a national test is unwise because states and localities are best positioned to evaluate and ensure student achievement. We encourage the Department of Education to extend that perspective to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) reauthorization.

We hope that your recent op-ed signals the Administration's willingness to overhaul the unworkable aspects of NCLB, particularly the rigid, yearly testing requirements and the punitive sanctions structure. NCLB has hamstrung state and local decision-making by establishing a federal system that measures and punishes our students and our schools based on, among other things, annual high-stakes standardized testing. This is a costly and misdirected approach, and significant progress could be made if additional resources were instead directed at areas aimed at improvement, instruction, and reform.

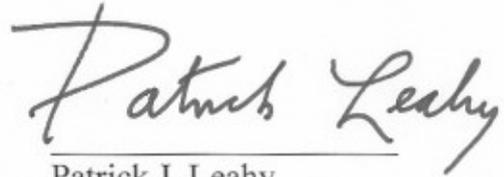
Unfortunately, the Administration's proposal for NCLB reauthorization released earlier this year did not embrace enough of the themes you recently expressed in your op-ed. Under the Department's recommendations, states and districts would still be required to annually assess students and implement sanctions that may not be workable in local schools and districts, including transfer options and supplemental educational services. While the Department does support some flexibility, such as allowing states to implement growth models, the Administration's reauthorization proposal does not go far enough in promoting state and local flexibility.

As Congress prepares to consider reauthorization of NCLB, we should pay particular attention to your words, "Neighborhood schools deserve neighborhood leadership, not dictates from bureaucrats thousands of miles away." We encourage the Administration to work with Congress to ensure that a reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act returns the decision-making power regarding testing systems and school interventions to teachers, principals, school administrators, and state education officials, as they are the professionals closest to our schools and best equipped to make these decisions.

Sincerely,



Russell D. Feingold
United States Senator



Patrick J. Leahy
United States Senator



E. Benjamin Nelson
United States Senator



Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator



Claire McCaskill
United States Senator



Maria Cantwell
United States Senator