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D. MICHAEL MCCARRON, PH.D.
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Thursday, November 5, 2009

Secretary Arne Duncan; and, i3 Contact Person
US Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave., SW, Room 4W321
Washington, DC 20202

Re: Investing in Innovation – Docket ID ED-2009-OII-0012

Dear Secretary Duncan and USDOE Staff:

I am writing to respectfully request that nonpublic schools – along with nonprofit education organizations serving those schools – be included as eligible applicants for grants within the “Investing in Innovation” or i3 fund. In my role as Associate Director for Education for the Florida Catholic Conference, I have seen compelling evidence that a number of nonpublic schools and nonprofits in our state have a proven record of serving high-need students.

These schools, along with nonprofit education organizations, can and have to some degree already served as models for education reform across the country. For example, the accreditation program for our nonprofit Florida Catholic Conference, which serves 188 elementary and special education schools, is celebrating its 40th anniversary this Fall. Our program has been used as a model in other states such as Texas, Oklahoma and Wisconsin. A variety of nonpublic schools and nonprofits with a proven track record of serving those schools could serve as examples for improving student achievement on a wider scale.

In recent days, I learned that a previously announced discretionary grant program called “Race to the Top” is excluding religious and independent schools from participating. This news was very disappointing news to me and I hope this policy of exclusion will not be mirrored with i3.

By objective measures such as nationally norm-referenced tests, our Catholic elementary and secondary schools have an excellent record of serving students at risk. For example, a 48-page evaluation report from June 2009 shows that a popular, Florida scholarship program is providing a true “lifeline” to the schoolchildren/ families who need it the most. The report disarms certain vociferous critics of the Florida Tax Credit (FTC) Scholarship Program who contend that the program “skims” the best low-income students from public schools. The report analyzed test scores and other relevant data from the 2007-08 school year to determine that – on the contrary – the program is serving the lowest-performing students from the lowest-performing schools. The scores of FTC scholarship students were compared with those of public school students served by the “Free and Reduced Lunch Program.” During the 2008-09 school year, the program served 2,700 students in Catholic schools within our state.

In an effort to promote informed decision-making, the report was posted online by the Florida Department of Education. The report was prepared by noted researcher David Figlio of the University of Florida (and other organizations), in collaboration with the FDOE.

Figlio noted that the comparison data for the report was incomplete. As it turns out, nonpublic schools were adjusting to the process of reporting test scores – for the first time – to the State of Florida. Now that the score-reporting process is better established, a more complete set of data is expected in future years. Nevertheless, this first in a series of evaluations is still useful in showing that scholarship students are making learning gains that are similar in various ways to their counterparts in public schools within Florida and nationwide.

Clearly, nonpublic schools are “key players” in serving low-income students and their families in Florida; this is being done within state scholarship programs and by other means. Without hesitation, I could cite a half-dozen schools which have obtained national recognition for their approach to serving inner city or rural students from low-income families. To mention just two examples, Hope Rural School in Indiantown, FLA has received such recognition for serving generations of immigrants from Guatemala. And, helping to overcome the high-crime rate in Jacksonville, FLA, our “Guardian Catholic Schools” of Holy Rosary School and St. Piux V School are serving many minority, low-income students and making a huge difference in renewing their respective communities. These and other nonpublic schools in our state deserve a chance to apply for i3, like their public-school counterparts.

Moreover, in making the case for inclusion, I would like to cite a well established principle within federal education programs. This principle dates back to the 1965 establishment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. In particular, the principle is as follows: programs that benefit public school students and teachers should provide equitable benefits to private school students and teachers who are comparably situated. As you are aware, this equity is required in many places within federal education law. It is based on being reasonable and fair, as well as the common-sense belief that America’s children are taught in a range of school settings. In short, our nation is best served when we focus on educating students.

In closing, I truly believe that if the Education Department is looking for “success stories” to improve student performance, close the gap in achievement for low-income students and prepare all students for college and the 21st-century workforce, then it should seek the participation of nonpublic as well as public schools. Education is truly a big job for our country; by way of an analogy, including public schools but leaving out nonpublic schools from i3 participation would be like leaving out one of the two lungs from the respiratory system of the human body. Thank you in advance for considering these comments and please let me know any questions or if more information would be helpful.

Sincerely,



James B. Herzog,
FCC Associate Director for Education

JBH

cc: Most Rev. Gerald Barbarito, Bishop of Palm Beach and Episcopal Moderator for Education;
D. Michael McCarron, Ph.D., Executive Director, Florida Catholic Conference; and,
Kristen Hughes, Associate Superintendent, Archdiocese of Miami and Chairperson for the FCC
Schools Executive Committee