

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 23, 2012

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

Dear Secretary Duncan,

We write in regards to the recently-announced fiscal year 2012 Race to the Top competition for districts. Specifically, as you develop the competition's parameters, we urge you to ensure that rural districts across our country have the capacity to write competitive applications and are not disadvantaged in the scoring or selection process to receive grant awards.

Rural districts in our states are constantly innovating and doing more with less. This experience makes these districts good candidates for programs that allow them to further stretch their ability to provide an outstanding education to their students. However, rural districts have unique challenges that include constrained fiscal and community resources, struggling local economies, and increasing rates of poverty and students with disabilities. Because of these challenges, we are concerned that rural districts lack capacity to successfully tackle a complex federal grant process and compete against large districts that may have dedicated grant-writing teams. To address this concern, we urge the Department of Education to provide ample technical assistance as may be needed to boost the ability of rural districts to compete for Race to the Top district-level grants.

Additionally, we strongly encourage you to allow two or more districts to apply together in consortia, as well as to allow educational service agencies (ESAs) to apply as fiscal agents in conjunction with interested local districts. At a time when federal funding is scarce, it makes sense to ensure grants provide the highest return on investment possible. Rural districts are adept and experienced at working together to make the most of limited resources, and ESAs even further support this capacity.

Finally, we urge you to release the Notice of Funding Availability for the Race to the Top district-level grant as soon as possible. Doing so will allow rural districts with less grant-writing capacity as much time as possible to develop thoughtful, high-quality applications.

One in three schools in the U.S. is rural, one in five children in the U.S. attend rural schools, and four in ten rural students live in poverty. We urge you not to leave these children behind as you develop the Race to the Top district-level competition, and we look forward to continuing to work with you on issues related to rural schools.

Sincerely,

Patty Murray

Carl Levin

Jeff Bingaman
Kent Conrad

Jay Rockefeller

Herb Kohl

Pat Roberts

Jim Johnson

Susan Collins

Lamar Alexander

Tom Coburn

Sheldon Brown

Chris McCasill

Tom Udall

Mark Begich

Mark F. B. #

Al Franken