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March 27, 2018

The Honorable Betsy DeVos
Secretary of Education
400 Maryland Ave. SW
LBJ Education Building
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary DeVos:

Your “tough love” at the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) meeting earlier this month was a welcome and necessary push for New Mexico and for my fellow state leaders around the country. The bipartisan Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA) represents a watershed moment for our students—but only if states embrace the responsibility and opportunity to lead. New Mexico has embraced its leadership role for the better part of a decade—the work on behalf of our students is certainly not for the faint of heart. Collectively, as a nation, we must not be deterred by status quo institutional forces. Often, those that spend very little time working in our communities serving our students, families, and educators seek to keep our school systems stuck in neutral. Together, we must put our children front and center and work tirelessly to break down persistent structural barriers and ensure that all of our students, regardless of race, background, or zip code, have the opportunities needed to succeed in the 21st-century economy.

To that end, we ask that you keep the tough love coming in the months and years ahead—for New Mexico and for the nation. While states should feel compelled to lead in making game-changing improvements for our students, there is no guarantee of this. The United States Department of Education cannot wash its hands of its fundamental responsibility to hold states accountable for what they have pledged to their local stakeholders and communities—and there is no question that New Mexico relies upon our long-standing partnership to advance college and career-readiness for our students.

New Mexico has a State Plan under ESSA that is built to last over the next decade and our teachers, students, and families want long-term continuity and stability. Thus, you must hold state leadership fully accountable for implementation, ensure that any amendments to top-rated plans are in the best interest of our students, keep states from succumbing to inertia and political pressure to lower the bar for our kids, ensure that talk of “equity” is more than just lip-service from elected officials, and continue to provide transparency on which states are holding up their end of the bargain, and which states are not.

One example of this is New Mexico's upcoming decision around four schools statewide that our stakeholders believe require more rigorous interventions immediately. They are the only four schools in New Mexico that have earned five or six failing grades in the past six years. This type of perennial low performance puts a whole generation of students and families at risk, and undermines the economic future of our state. One major pledge made in New Mexico's State Plan is to take immediate action to make dramatic change for our students, especially when they are trapped in failing schools. As a state, we will act to ensure this is not the case. When we act in this manner, both in this situation and in the future, we proceed with the belief that our federally-approved State Plan comes with the full weight of your office, and that you and your team will stand alongside us with courage on behalf of New Mexico's children.

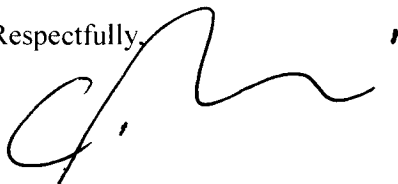
As you know, New Mexico's State Plan under ESSA has been highlighted as one of the best in the country by several independent groups including the Collaborative for Student Success, the Alliance for Excellent Education, and Results For America—in many cases with a full slate of bipartisan and independent reviewers. We are proud of the fact that we are one of the first states in full implementation—there truly is no time to lose, and we are acting with that urgency.

The Alliance for Excellent Education announced that New Mexico's plan is one of the most promising in the United States, and that "New Mexico sets ambitious goals to close achievement gaps between white students and students of color and prioritizes the need for students to graduate from high school in four years, while supporting students who need longer to graduate." Results For America announced that New Mexico is the state with the highest number of "promising practices." We are building upon a strong, state-developed foundation in collaboration with thousands of stakeholders from across New Mexico, and we pledge to fully and completely implement our State Plan as written.

We appreciated the recognition in your speech that New Mexico is working toward creative solutions to best serving students by providing them with learning opportunities that would otherwise not be available through "Direct Student Services." We would also like to highlight several other opportunities we are utilizing: New Mexico applied for and was awarded a \$22-million federal grant to expand high quality charter schools in the state. As a result of traveling the state and hearing from stakeholders we launched our first Student Leader Network. And we will continue to stay the course on higher college and career-ready standards, meaningful educator quality systems that ensure excellent educators for all, and assessment and accountability systems that close honesty gaps for students, parents, and educators.

New Mexico has championed our students over the past decade, and we will continue to push against the antiquated structures and systems that have historically underserved our children. I believe that the team of public servants working at the New Mexico Public Education Department today is amongst the most talented, diverse, courageous group of education leaders in the country. It is an honor to serve beside them. We are committed to ensuring that all of our students have the full support of state leaders—and we call upon the U.S. Department of Education to show the same resolve as we forge ahead.

Respectfully,



Christopher N. Ruskowski
Cabinet Secretary, NM Public Education Department