

Bob Wise
Governor of West Virginia, 2001–05



October 4, 2013

The Honorable Jim Shelton
Acting Deputy Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202

Re: U.S. Department of Education's Draft Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2014–18

Dear Acting Deputy Secretary Shelton:

The Alliance for Excellent Education (the Alliance) is pleased to support the U.S. Department of Education's (ED's) Draft Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2014–18. As drafted, this strategic plan includes a number of objectives and goals critical to increasing the number of students who graduate ready for college and a career. In particular, the Alliance is appreciative of the following strategic objectives and goals:

- **Strategic Objective 1.2: Quality; Strategic Objective 1.3: Completion; and Goal 2: Elementary and Secondary Education.** The Alliance supports the inclusion of “deeper learning,” specifically critical thinking, problem solving, the application of knowledge, effective communication, and teamwork in ED's strategic objectives and goals. Educational opportunities for too many students—primarily low-income and students of color—focus almost exclusively on basic skills and knowledge, while their white and relatively affluent peers have had opportunities for content mastery as well the ability to develop higher-order competencies. These deeper learning skills comprise the outcomes of a K–12 education system focused on college and career readiness.
- **Strategic Objective 2.1: Standards and Assessments.** Supporting the implementation of college- and career-ready standards by coupling them with high-quality formative and summative assessments reinforces state-led efforts to raise standards and improve the quality of public education. These assessments should be used to measure the full range of student standards and elicit complex student demonstrations in order to ensure that students develop higher-order thinking skills and the ability to use knowledge to solve problems. As mentioned within the draft, such assessments must also provide actionable information about student learning that can support personalization and student achievement.
- **Strategic Objective 2.2: Effective Teachers and Strong Leaders.** The Alliance applauds ED's focus on ensuring that students in low-achieving and high-need schools, students with disabilities, and English learners are taught by highly qualified and effective teachers. The Alliance recommends that ED explicitly include students of color, native students, and students from low-income families within this focus, particular in light of the subgroup accountability concerns within the civil rights community regarding the state Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) flexibility plans. Further, in paying attention to teacher recruitment, preparation, and induction,

teacher preparation programs should provide high-quality clinical practice throughout a candidate's preparation. Data from well-designed teacher evaluation systems should be used to inform and improve teacher preparation programs. Higher standards require that teachers receive the necessary preparation prior to entering the classroom and ongoing, collaborative support to implement those standards.

- **Strategic Objective 2.4: Turn Around Schools and Close Achievement Gaps.** At the high school level, partially in effort to increase student engagement and motivation, ED will focus on providing challenging and relevant learning experiences that prepare students for college and a career. This objective to bridge classroom experience with postsecondary expectations, while also increasing successful transitions, can be supported through and measured by increased access to Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses, dual enrollment, early college, and applied learning opportunities, which include work-based, project-based, and service learning.

In addition, the Alliance is pleased to see “low graduation rate” referenced throughout the strategic plan. The Alliance encourages ED to define a low graduation rate as one where the high school graduates two-thirds or fewer of its students (i.e., graduation rate at or below 67 percent). The number of high schools with estimated graduation rates below 60 percent, frequently referred to as “dropout factories” has declined over the past decade from 2,007 high schools to 1,424.

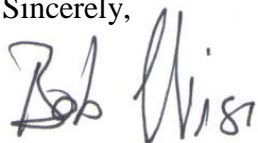
Unfortunately, it appears the progress of these high schools may only be modest, as there are more than 2,000 high schools that graduate two-thirds or fewer of their students (i.e., graduation rate at or below 67 percent). To ensure continuous improvement of the nation's lowest-performing high schools, the Alliance recommends ED expand its focus to include high schools that graduate two-thirds or fewer of their students.

Further, the Alliance appreciates that ED has set a Priority Goal of increasing the national high school graduation rate to 83 percent by School Year 2014–15 as measured by the adjusted cohort graduation rate. The Alliance recommends that ED utilize the *four-year* adjusted cohort graduation rate in assessing progress toward this goal.

- **Goal 4: Equity.** The Alliance fully supports efforts by ED to increase educational opportunities for and reduce discrimination against underserved students. Implementation of states' ESEA flexibility plans and ED's competitive grant programs are both opportunities for identifying and targeting resources to the most underserved students.

The federal government has a limited but critical role to play in ensuring that all students have the opportunity to receive a college- and career-ready education. ED's strategic plan identifies key goals and strategic objectives for providing those opportunities. The Alliance is pleased to support ED's draft strategic plan, and looks forward to working with you to ensure that it is implemented as expeditiously and effectively as possible.

Sincerely,



Bob Wise
President