

Congress of the United States

June 14, 2006

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

Dear Secretary Spellings:

We are concerned with the recent developments in Iowa's attempt to develop a statewide assessment for all incoming elementary teachers as required in the No Child Left Behind Amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

For more than 15 months, the Iowa Department of Education (IDE) has worked closely with your staff to develop a system to determine whether elementary school teachers new to the profession have the requisite subject-matter content expertise, as determined by a rigorous state test of content knowledge, in compliance with the highly qualified teacher provision of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). During the process of developing its highly qualified teacher assessment, IDE Director Judy Jeffrey has worked closely with your staff to build upon Iowa's existing state rules that clearly specify "information on the candidate's performance shall be drawn from multiple assessments including... content knowledge." These state rules recognize that content knowledge, while important, should not serve as the sole factor in teacher qualification. Rather, other factors, including the ability to enhance academic performance, classroom management, parent communication, planning for instruction, teaching strategies to meet diverse learning needs, and assessment of learning are important considerations in determining ability to teach.

All of these characteristics are measured by performance assessments during the student's preparation but, since these assessments were not common across all preparation programs, the USDE recommended to the state that there must be one common assessment. This led to the development of the Iowa Department of Education Student Teacher Evaluation (IDESTE). A common rubric in the IDESTE measures all of the above factors. Building on recommendations from USDE in the spring of 2005, IDE has piloted the IDESTE this past school year.

On March 31, USDE notified Director Jeffrey that it would not accept IDESTE, meaning that Iowa was out of compliance with the highly qualified teacher provision within

NCLB. This notification came in stark contrast to the past 15 months of correspondence between your staff and Director Jeffrey and her staff. In particular, we are unable to reconcile the message communicated in the March 31 conference call with the conference call that took place on March 3 with IDE staff and Dr. Robert Stonehill, Director of State and Local Services Division at USDE. As Director Jeffrey has indicated to us, in the March 3rd conversation, Dr. Stonehill was very positive and encouraging about the principles behind Iowa's non-standardized approach and expressed hope that Iowa's plan could be seen a model for other states. We believe Dr. Stonehill's comments reflect both the Iowa Department of Education's standing as an innovator in the world of education and your own stated support for flexibility in enforcing NCLB. However, regardless of the message Iowa received in that correspondence, USDE had ample time and opportunity to express its concerns with IDESTE and failed to do so until one month before the May 1 deadline.

In response to the March 31 conference call, IDE began discussions with all of the pertinent parties within the state to establish an interim test. Subsequent discussion with the USDE led to Iowa requesting and receiving a time extension until May 20. As a result of that extension, Iowa was able to complete an interim testing plan to administer a content-based exam for its incoming elementary teachers beginning with the 2006-2007 school year. However, one day after IDE submitted its revised plan, USDE publicly declared Iowa out of compliance with No Child Left Behind.

Given the effort Iowa has put into developing its system of teacher accountability and the volume of correspondence between Iowa and USDE working toward compliance, we find it shocking that Iowa would be publicly listed as one of nine states and territories refusing to comply and threatened with a loss of funding. In the interim, Iowa has worked with Educational Testing Service to submit all incoming elementary teachers to the PRAXIS II exam and Director Jeffrey has indicated to our staff that she will continue development of IDESTE.

It is clear that Iowa has acted in good faith in its efforts to comply with the No Child Left Behind Amendments in developing an evaluation that accurately measures whether teachers are ready to receive their licenses. Over a year ago, you announced a "new path for No Child Left Behind" whereby states that show results and follow the principle of NCLB will be granted flexibility to meet the goals of the law in innovative ways. This appears to be a prime candidate for such a cooperative approach. It is our hope that as Iowa moves forward both with its interim plan of testing its teachers and with its long-term development of IDESTE, that the Department provides the support and assistance to ensure this process is a success for Iowa teachers and students.

We look forward to your response.

Tom Harkin
Senator Tom Harkin

Chuck Grassley
Senator Charles Grassley

Jim Nussle
Congressman Jim Nussle

Jim Leach
Congressman James A. Leach

Leonard L. Boswell
Congressman Leonard L. Boswell

Tom Latham
Congressman Tom Latham

Steve King
Congressman Steve King