



Southern Education Foundation, Inc.

Lynn Walker Huntley, Esq.
President

March 17, 2009

The Honorable Haley Barbour
Governor
State of Mississippi
Office of the Governor
PO Box 139
Jackson, MS 39205

RE: Use of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Funds for Education

Dear Governor Barbour:

The Southern Education Foundation (SEF) is an organization which for 142 years has worked with leaders in business, religion, civic life, education and policy across the South to promote social and economic revitalization through advancement of equity and excellence in education at all levels. In my capacity as SEF President, I am writing to offer our views concerning the use of education funding to be provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA).

We estimate that ARRA will provide almost \$35 billion in additional, new education funding to 15 states in the South and approximately \$1.1 billion for Mississippi students, when combined with existing allocations. This commitment is by far the largest single-year allocation of federal funds for Mississippi and other Southern states in the nation's history.

The inclusion of education funding in ARRA underscores the vital link between economic growth and high quality education. In the modern economy, quality education is the primary engine of economic development, the only means by which to create a world-class workforce and good paying jobs, the best way to attract capital and spur business growth, and necessary to spur innovation and meet national security requirements. ARRA provides Mississippi with an unprecedented opportunity to broaden its productive base, reduce troubling access, quality and achievement gaps in education, and raise the state's profile in national rankings of education quality.

The core federal principles that establish both economic and educational objectives for the expenditure of ARRA funds include:

- Spending the funds quickly to save and create jobs;
- Improving student achievement;

- Implementing reforms to:
 1. develop and implement rigorous college- and career-ready standards and high-quality assessments;
 2. establish pre-kindergarten to college and career data systems that track progress and foster continuous improvement;
 3. *make improvements in teacher effectiveness and in the equitable distribution of qualified teachers for all students, particularly students who are most in need; and*
 4. *provide intensive support and effective interventions for the lowest-performing schools.* (emphasis added)
- Ensuring transparency, reporting and accountability;
- Making one-time investments for long-term gains.

In other words, ARRA requires that the monies be used for *transformational* purposes, not simply for the *perpetuation* of existing education programs, strategies and resource allocation patterns that have hobbled efforts to reduce poverty and inequality. In addition, please note that ARRA monies must be used in ways that comply with non discrimination provisions of federal laws, such as Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, state constitutional provisions related to education adequacy, and other such laws and requirements.

The need to focus ARRA funds in these ways is evident. Mississippi has a majority of low income students in its public schools (eligible for free and reduced lunch) and more than 27 percent of its school age children are in families living in poverty. These Mississippi students, who are disproportionately members of minority groups, are more likely than others not to be school-ready in kindergarten, have the lowest achievement scores and the lowest high school graduation rates, fail to enter college even if they graduate from high school, and to fail to complete college, more often than not due to lack of money. Effective use of ARRA funds to improve education of such students will provide the greatest return on investment by broadening the state's productive tax and consumer bases, reducing social safety net needs and criminal justice funding requirements, and increasing workforce readiness and preparedness in order to attract, retain or grow new industries and jobs.

Southern Governors and others involved in ARRA implementation must, therefore, demonstrate that all ARRA monies are used fairly to significantly enhance the quality of education provided to millions of low income students, who are disproportionately members of minority groups, and concentrated in low performing, under-funded and under-resourced public schools. ARRA monies are also meant to be used to help low income students with the will and capacity secure the resources needed to go to college.

SEF urges all Southern Governors, State Legislators and public officials who report to them to incorporate into state plans three simple functional guidelines to interpret the intent of ARRA and guide the use of funds:

- Make support for improvements in the education of low income students at all levels the first and overriding priority;
- Focus on low performing schools and school systems;
- Improve – don't simply maintain – low-achieving schools;

I am enclosing herewith SEF Issue and Policy Briefs that outline in greater detail specific recommendations and bedrock principles that should be followed in order to demonstrate wise use of ARRA funds.

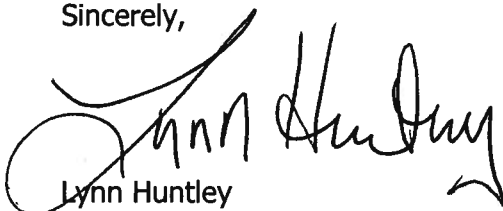
The eyes of the nation and the fondest hopes of its people, including its millions of low income people, are on our leaders in whose hands rest the economic future of the nation. As President Barack Obama recently said:

There's been partisanship and petty bickering, but too little recognition that we need to move beyond the worn fights of the 20th century if we're going to succeed in the 21st century...[I]t's time to prepare every child, everywhere in America to out-compete any worker, anywhere in the world....We've accepted failure for far too long. Enough is enough.

SEF hopes this letter and the enclosed Issue and Policy Briefs will prompt a deep substantive focus on the highest and best uses of ARRA funds. It would be a tragedy of great dimension if we let this special moment pass without making the education changes called for by the times.

SEF and a host of other organizations in your state will be monitoring independently how the State uses ARRA monies. We are all in this together, and together we will move forward. If we may be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to call upon us. We wish you the very best.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lynn Huntley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "L" and "H".

Lynn Huntley
President

cc: Dr. Hank Bounds, State Superintendent of Education, Department of Education
Sen. Videt Carmichael, Education Committee Chair
Sen. Doug Davis, Universities & Colleges Committee Chair
Rep. Cecil Brown, Education Committee Chair
Rep. Charles Young, Universities & Colleges Committee Chair
Dr. Aubrey Lucas, Commissioner, Mississippi Institution of Higher Learning