The National Urban Alliance for Effective Education
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**"Open Letter to the Secretary of Education Designate:
A Focus on Equity & Opportunity"**

This is an open letter with several specific recommendations to the Biden/Harris Education Transition Team and the incoming Secretary of Education-designate. We are a coalition of American Indian, Asian American, African American / Black, Latinx and White Americans, who represent the eastern, midwestern and western regions of the United States. Our ages span from 18 to 80's, with more than 400 years of experience with students and public schools among us.

We urge that the Biden/Harris administration develop a federal education policy that recognizes and builds on five fundamental facts:

1. President Elect Joe Biden and Vice- President Elect Kamala Harris have promised to bring us together as a nation and build on our combined strengths.
2. Young people represent an enormous underutilized resource for helping solve local, state and national problems. Their insight, energy and creativity can be more effectively mobilized to simultaneously help increase learning and motivation in schools, and help reduce problems.
3. One of the most powerful roles the US Department of Education (ED) has is to encourage, support and help assess educational changes developed in states and local communities.
4. There are a vast array of traditional district and public charter schools within the U.S. that are doing great work with students, and their families. The US ED has recognized these schools for more than 20 years via its "Blue Ribbon Schools" program.
5. In addition to a number of community and local leaders many of the nation's most powerful, wealthy people and funders are interested in improving the quality of our public schools.

There is both considerable agreement and substantial controversy about how to best support student success in preschool, K-12 and through college/university. However, by grounding your work in the above fundamental facts, and the six recommendations below, the Biden/ Harris team will help maximize and expand some of the most effective programs that have been developed – by educators, communities, foundations and researchers. We recognize that there are many other important issues you'll work on, such as: supporting programs for students who qualify for disability services, students who are English language learners, and for youngsters under age five. But we as a coalition have chosen to focus on the following:

1. **CREATING A NATIONAL TASK FORCE THAT FOCUSES ON SHARING BEST PRACTICES FROM THE MOST EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS:** Create a national task force that reports to the Biden/ Harris team in six months or less, to recommend ways that we can more effectively learn from the nation's most effective schools - district, charter, private and parochial. There are great public district schools and not-so-good district schools; great charter schools and not-so-good charters. The U.S Department of

Education has identified and briefly described hundreds of "Blue Ribbon Schools." But it has done very little to promote actual learning from, or replication of those schools. Some of them want to replicate and expand. We urge that you appoint a task force that includes educators, families, and students from these schools, along with researchers who can develop recommendations about what federal and state governments can do to increase learning from, and replication of such schools.

The challenge is to learn from schools that are succeeding —especially for students we call "school-dependent," or those who, because of family and financial circumstances, rely on schools to improve their academic and life trajectories.The latest available data from 2018 show that in the country there were at least 5,152,000 jobless and out of school 16 to 24 year olds. These school age youth are students who deserve equitable resources to return to school to build their skills, earn a high school diploma and go on to succeed in college, training and/or employment to reach their dreams to succeed as adults. Evidence based, best school practice small schools developed in Chicago beginning in 1997 re-enroll over 3,900 out of school students in 20 small community based schools. It's not easy but they come back, build their skills, earn a diploma and follow their dreams. We can never forget that the primary purpose of schooling is learning and teaching that leads to engaged adults who support and improve on America's dynamic democracy.

In the best schools, educators, in the words of educator/journalist John Merrow, focus LESS on showing young people how smart they are (via standardized tests; and focus MORE on helping youngsters learn HOW they are smart. These schools help students develop their skills, talents, gifts via classes, independent study, internships, etc.

Public schools serve the public purpose above and beyond helping individuals advance their careers. Our schools are where young people learn (or don't) the habits of mind and experiences that democracy needs for it to work.

We hope the task force will, among other things, ask people working in successful schools which if any federal demands make it more difficult for them to help students succeed and set aside dollars to do just that.

2. **BUILDING ON THE SKILLS, STRENGTHS, CREATIVITY AND ENERGY OF AMERICA'S YOUTH:** Young people are our future and their voices, experiences and passions should help shape their education. When it comes to changing state standards, or school policies, or other youth-issues, it is rare that youth themselves are asked for input into how a problem that they are facing may best be solved. So we recommend that this administration:

a. Promote the inclusion of youth on boards and other decision-making bodies, along with educators, parents and family members. This will help policy-makers better create and refine programs. Powerful research that shows when we build on students' strengths, they learn far more and develop pro-democracy attitudes and more respect for others different from themselves.

b. Expand programs that give teens opportunities to combine classroom and contribution to community, through service-learning. There is an ever growing research base for service-learning programs that supports service-learning as a proven strategy to engage students in their own education.

c. Expand support for programs that fund teens and those in their early 20's to help reconstruct America – learning for example, construction and other trade skills as they work with others to build new affordable housing, and repair homes that have deteriorated, among other things.

> In "Inspired to Serve" issued May 2020, the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service—a bi-partisan commission completing two and a half years of extensive research—concluded with a compelling call to revitalize civic education and expand service-learning over the next 10 years. They recognize these as key factors to ensure young people are fully prepared to participate in civic life and understand the importance of service. The final Recommendation calls for an appropriation of $450 million per year for a Civic Education Fund and a Service-learning appropriation of $250 million per year to "develop and implement service-learning programs" (pp 185-192 of the Commission's Final Report.)

3. CREATING A NATIONAL TASK FORCE REGARDING IMPROVING AND INCREASING DIVERSITY WITHIN THE TEACHING PROFESSION: Concerns regarding the lack of diversity of the U.S. teacher workforce—and the mismatch between the demographics of the teacher workforce and the nation's students—are not new. However, because of glaring opportunity gaps disparities in the teaching force must be addressed. Increasing the diversity of the educator workforce is an important goal that will benefit students and adults. As we know racial diversity benefits every workforce, and teaching is no exception, especially since on a national level Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) children now make up more than half of the U.S. student population in public elementary and secondary schools. Furthermore, research shows that teachers of color help close achievement gaps for students of color and are highly rated by students of all races—a fact that is more relevant in light of data released from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). NAEP results show that, "Teachers of color boost the academic performance of students of color, including improved reading and math test scores, improved graduation rates, and increases in aspirations to attend college."

> Additionally, there is research highlighting that students of color are more likely to succeed when they have had teachers of color who serve as role models and support their attachment to school and learning. We recognize that students and teachers do not always come from the same racial or cultural backgrounds. Thus, we believe it's vital to change perceptions/ expectations of some teachers regarding "underachieving" students. We believe that particular attention must be given to the cultural dimension of these differences and work to build on the cultural and racial strengths students bring to classrooms rather than their weaknesses. It's vital to both give and help teachers develop specific, practical strategies to promote learning and teaching in the manner that eliminates stereotype threats and implicit bias that may impede improved academic trajectories for all students. This task force should report to the Biden/ Harris administration within its first six months, and should be composed of: national and state teachers of the year, outstanding teachers from traditional district, public charter, private and parochial schools, families, and students. Moreover, the task force should recommend ways to promote the most successful strategies via professional learning opportunities steeped in neuroscience and culturally responsive pedagogy, changes in administrative and organizational arrangements, teacher development, and educator/leadership.

4. **CREATING A NATIONAL TASK FORCE REGARDING IMPROVING ACCESSIBILITY TO AND COMPLETION OF SOME FORM OF POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION:** Currently the graduation rates of many colleges and universities are below 50%. With the increased cost of college tuition and ballooning student loan debt the greatest barrier to college persistence/ completion remains financial. We recommend the Biden/ Harris administration create a national task force focused on helping colleges and universities become more financially accessible and efficient, and build on the excellent work that some post-secondary institutions are already carrying out. This task force should report to the Biden/ Harris administration within its first six months, and should be composed of: State and Private Colleges/ Universities, Historically Black College and Universities, and Tribally Controlled Colleges as well as first generation college graduates and post-secondary faculty and administrators who have produced outstanding results. Additionally, The Education Trust (a Minnesota based advocacy organization) has identified a number of colleges and universities that have done an exceptional job with supporting students from low-income families.

5. **WORKING WITH STATE LEADERS & FOUNDATIONS**: Meet with state governors, state legislators and with national, statewide and local foundations. Describe your plans, and invite them to join with the US Department of Education to help carry out initiatives that you and they agree on. Please encourage and explore incentives so states review, revise and revamp their funding systems to provide more equitable opportunities. Offer governors, foundations and state legislators the opportunity to partner on one or more of our initiatives. Invite them to submit ideas, based on their experience, on which the federal government might partner with them. This effort recognizes something that we believe the Biden/ Harris administration would agree on: there is great creativity throughout the country, not just in Washington DC. To be great, we must learn from and use terrific ideas, wherever developed.

6. **MAKING THE BEST USE OF PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE:** Recognize the power, potential and challenge of expanding public school choice. We agree on the value of public school choice by which we include district, charter, magnet, teacher-led, post-secondary option/dual credit and similar programs. We believe that there is no single best public school for all students. We also recognize that innovation has been one of the central strategies for improvement in all facets of American life. Chartering and other forms of public school choice can be powerful, positive forces. We also acknowledge that sometimes there has been misuse of public funds, both in district and chartered public schools. Offering options about public schools helps allow educators and families to innovate while retaining our commitment to non-sectarian, open to all, transparent public schools.

a. Provide funds to help increase family information in various languages, in various media about public school choice programs in several states and local communities. Provide them the options to choose public charters or public district schools. Enable them to seek and understand the importance of diverse learning opportunities for their children.

b. Appoint a commission made up of researchers from various viewpoints, along with parents, students and educators participating in school choice programs representing different viewpoints. Support research about what steps to use for choice to help many more students succeed.

c. Continue to provide startup funds for non-profit public school options that are open to all kinds of students, in both the district and charter sectors of public education. Some of this should go to replicate and expand outstanding schools, such as those identified as Blue Ribbon Schools. Some of it should go to help create new options which focus on equity and opportunity for students.

d. Provide funds to promote collaboration among different kinds of schools, district, charter, private and parochial, focused on important issues such as reading, math, building a strong climate for learning, reducing youth homelessness, etc. We've had experience with this type of collaboration. We've seen significant benefits for students from focused cooperation.

The Biden/ Harris administration ran on a message of uniting Americans. All Americans seek a united nation - one that ultimately embraces change which enables all of our students to succeed -- one which engages all in the democracy we recognize as a global beacon; woven together by the cultural, demographic mosaic that defines us. We, the signers represent this diversity. And we, the people, are eager to work with you.

Signed,

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