United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 26, 2010

The Honorable Arne Duncan
Secretary
Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary Duncan:

We write with respect to the FY2011 Department of Education proposed budget, released on February 1, 2010. While we applaud the Administration and Department of Education for its commitment to America's children and to improving elementary, secondary, and higher education in the country, we strongly urge the Department to ensure rural states and districts are given adequate opportunities to participate in these initiatives.

The Department estimates that over nine million students are enrolled in rural districts, which comprise about twenty percent of the nation's total public school enrollment. While all schools share continued challenges in addressing student achievement, it is clear rural and frontier districts face unique circumstances compared to their more urban-centered peers. In 2004, the U.S. Government Accountability Office released a report recommending the Department of Education conduct additional research and assistance in determining effective strategies for small rural districts to meet education standards. The report identified several distinctive challenges that arise for small, geographically isolated school districts. For example, most rural schools report greater difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers, due to inability to offer competitive salaries, geographic isolation, and for some, severe weather. Rural districts often have fewer personnel, creating additional challenges in providing professional development opportunities. Small rural districts are often located long distances from other districts, towns, and universities, drastically reducing opportunities to partner or collaborate. For-profit and non-profit education servicers are simply unavailable to rural districts. Additionally, the long distances students must travel between school and home make it more difficult to participate in traditional remedial services, mentoring, and after school programs. Furthering the challenges facing rural districts, the 2004 GAO study found the average per pupil cost of education for small rural districts is twenty percent greater than the cost in nonrural districts.

While we are pleased to see the Department's commitment to fund efforts related to closing the achievement gap, increasing graduation rates, strengthening teacher recruitment and retention, improving access to higher education, and greater collaboration with other federal agencies, we are concerned the Department's proposals fail to provide realistic opportunities for rural and frontier states and districts to compete for such funding. Innovation in education can take many forms and should not be linked solely to the creation of programs that may not always address the challenges rural and frontier areas face. Requirements that emphasize the creation of charter schools may not best serve the needs of isolated and low population density communities which are already struggling to support one school. We request the Department to consider ways to

address unique issues facing rural states and districts. Strategies such as distance learning provide a greater opportunity for rural and frontier districts to address education standards, including student achievement and professional development.

Furthermore, we ask the Department to commit to ensuring rural and frontier states and districts are fairly represented in Department priorities. Merely providing one separate funding stream for rural states and districts may not be sufficient. Rather, we call on the Department to review each and every education reform initiative from the standpoint of urban, rural and frontier districts and provide adequate technical assistance for states and districts to compete for funding. Finally, we ask the Department to consider proposals to establish an Office of Rural Education, to focus on strategies tailored to meet the needs of rural and frontier school districts.

As you know, education is an essential driver for economic development. This rings true especially in rural and frontier America, where these schools are the linchpin of their communities. Education is the key to a good quality of life for our children, and we look forward to working with you to ensure all students can benefit from the Department's initiative.

Sincerely,

Senator Max Baucus

Senator Patrick Leahy

Senator Jeff Bingaman

Senator Bernie Sanders

Senator Maria Cantwell

Senator Tom Udall

Senator Blanche Lincoln

Senator Tim Johnson

Senator Jon Tester

Senator Russ Feingold

Senator Herb Kohl

Senator Patty Murray

Senator Ben Nelson

Senator Jay Rockefeller

Senator Michael Bennet

Senator Amy Klobuchar

Senator Al Franken

Senator Mark Udall

Senator Sherrod Brown

Senator Byron Dorgan

Senator Mary Landrieu

Senator Kent Conrad