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April 16, 1999

President William J. Clinton
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Clinton:

I am hesitant to intrude on your thoughts as you wrestle with the extraordinary challenges in the Balkans. Yet I must weigh in on the proposed Education Accountability Act that your administration conceived and that is wending its way toward Congress.

The National Urban League strongly supports your efforts to improve the caliber of America's public schools and thereby close the achievement gap that separates low-income and minority youngsters from their more advantaged peers. Most of your administration's plan, as outlined to us recently by Secretary Richard Riley, is right on target. We endorse increased federal assistance to help finance the hiring of new teachers, reduction of class sizes and school construction. We salute your determination to see to it that all classrooms contain certified teachers and to underwrite local efforts to turn around faltering schools.

Since we agree with so much of your agenda, we especially regret that we must take serious issue with one of your key planks. Mr. President, we steadfastly oppose your call to end social promotion.

The National Urban League does not fear holding African-American children to high academic standards. We know from research and practical experience in real schools that our children can achieve on par with other children.

Yet to have a fair shot at succeeding, the education our children receive must be on par as well. That is precisely the problem with the "tough love" approach exemplified by the call to end social promotion. Low-income urban and rural children are caught in an unconscionable trap between lofty standards and lousy schools.

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We insist that our children not be used as cannon fodder in the raging education accountability wars.

Fairness and common sense dictate that the accountability movement should be guided by sound pedagogical practice, not political expediency. The federal and state governments should make certain that all children receive high quality education *before* holding them accountable for tougher standards. In other words, it's time to hold the adults who are responsible for public education accountable for their performance before sanctioning youngsters for their failure to perform.

As the landmark report of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future noted, urban schools are woefully short of teachers who possess the content knowledge, modern pedagogical skills, and belief in the potential of their pupils that is required for children to achieve at high levels.

Moreover, we know from real-world experience with standards-oriented school reform initiatives, like Equity 2000, that it takes nearly a decade and perhaps even longer, to recruit and train a new generation of skilled teachers to man urban classrooms, to transform the quality of teaching and learning in inner-city schools through effective professional development, and thus to hoist youngsters to higher levels of achievement.

What's more, how can black and Latino students possibly meet exacting academic standards when they're systemically excluded from rigorous courses geared to the loftier academic standards that many states are imposing these days? According to the Education Trust, high scoring white and Asian students are twice as likely as high scoring black and Latino youngsters to be assigned to college prep courses.

That is why we believe that school districts that receive federal aid under ESEA, and in particular Title I, must not tolerate any discriminatory educational practices towards African-American and other children of color. By this we mean such practices as:

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- tracking African-American and other children of color into dead-end, non-college preparatory courses;
- placing disproportionate numbers of such youngsters in special education classes;

ESEA should include specific language prohibiting such practices and authorizing that federal education aid be withheld from school districts that countenance such practices and fail to correct them.

The push to end social promotion is wrong because it flies in the face of indisputable evidence that youngsters who already are lagging behind end up worse off. Added pressure and extra doses of instruction in summer school may spur youngsters who just missed passing to clear the hurdle. But that is of little help to pupils who have a steep hill to climb.

As it is, school districts already refuse to promote thousands of students. Professor Robert Hauser, author of *High Stakes: Testing for Tracking, Promotion and Graduation*, reminds us that retention rates were already on the rise before it became popular to lambast schools for indulging in social promotion.

Even more to the point, previous experience with ending social promotion provides no cause for optimism that it actually works. Professor Linda Darling-Hammond cites dozens of studies which show that holding students back:

"...actually contributes to greater academic failure, higher levels of dropping out, and greater behavioral difficulties. Instead of looking carefully at classroom or school practices when students are not achieving, schools typically send students back to repeat the same experience. Little is done to ensure that the experience will be either more appropriate for the individual needs of the child, or of higher quality."

Those who clamor for holding students strictly accountable seem oblivious to the known downsides of ending social promotion. That's why we say that, wittingly or not, they are using low-achievers as cannon fodder in the education accountability wars.

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The National Urban League's bottom line is that local promotion policy is none of Washington's business. Leave that call to educators and parents closest to the ground whose decisions are guided by the children's best interests instead of catchy slogans.

Instead of micro-managing the affairs of local school districts, Washington should mandate that school districts receiving federal aid under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act actually close the achievement gaps that separate poor and minority children from their more advantaged peers. ESEA should be a spur to close achievement gaps, not a sacrosanct source of revenue sharing for urban schools. If the school districts don't make progress, then the U.S. Department of Education should impose stiff financial penalties until they get the point.

Education accountability starts with educators. It ends with children, who will enjoy the benefits of solid academic preparation or else pay the ultimate price of failure. We urge you to keep the federal government focused on those who preside over public education. The National Urban League firmly believes that if adults will only do what we're supposed to do, the children will do what we expect them to do.

Sincerely,



Hugh B. Price
President

cc. The Honorable Richard Riley
Bruce Reed