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March 16, 2020

The Honorable Betsy DeVos
Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary DeVos:

I write to express my concerns about the U.S. Department of Education's ("Department") recently announced proposal to use the Education Innovation and Research program to fund professional development vouchers. The Education Innovation and Research program (EIR), is an evidence-based innovation fund that my Republican colleague, former Senator Hatch, and I created in 2015 as part of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). EIR is designed to "create, develop, implement, replicate, or take to scale entrepreneurial, evidence-based, field-initiated innovations to improve student achievement and attainment for high-need students" and "rigorously evaluate such innovations" 20 U.S.C. 7261(a)(1). Your FY2020 budget disregards the authorized use and design of the program and instead creates an ill-conceived proposal to use this funding to create professional development vouchers.

This proposal violates both the spirit and intent of EIR, which is to fund evidence-based interventions and to evaluate them so that they can be improved, replicated and scaled to further the evidence base in our K12 education system. EIR was not created to support a personalized voucher program that deliberately circumvents systematic school and district efforts to improve teaching and learning. I find this approach to be wrong-headed and counter-productive to the efforts to improve schools serving our most disadvantaged students.

Moreover, this voucher proposal runs counter to the comprehensive definition of professional development included in ESSA, a bipartisan law that took many years to carefully negotiate. The definition clearly states that professional development funded by ESSA must be "sustained (not stand-alone, 1-day, or short term workshops), intensive, collaborative, job-embedded, data-driven." Your professional development voucher proposal, again, does not accord with the law.

Further, this voucher program contradicts the evidence we know exists about what constitutes quality professional development. That evidence, like ESSA, makes clear that the most useful professional development is sustained, linked to the practices and curriculum being used, and data-driven. There is no evidence to suggest that giving teachers vouchers for one-off workshops will improve their practice or the outcomes of the students they teach. Congress recognized the folly of this voucher

proposal and included language in the FY 2020 House appropriations report that states: "The Committee rejects the Administration's proposal to fund professional development vouchers for teachers and directs that no funds are to be used for that purpose." However, the Department disregarded Congressional intent and plowed ahead, stating in its FY2021 congressional budget justification: "Although this restriction was included in the House appropriations bill, it was not included in the Senate bill nor the final bill that was enacted into law. Therefore, the Department intends to use a portion of the funds available for the EIR program for projects that provide professional development vouchers."

I find the Department's response contrary to clear congressional intent. The proposed voucher program violates the authorized purpose of the EIR program and contravenes the definition of professional development included in ESSA.

I strongly urge you to reconsider including this voucher program in the upcoming EIR competition.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Michael F. Bennet". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Michael" and last name "Bennet" clearly legible.

U.S. Senator Michael F. Bennet