October 30, 2003

The Honorable Edward M. Kennedy
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
644 Dirksen Senate Office Building
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Kennedy:

I am writing on behalf of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)—the preeminent school leadership organization representing the nation’s middle level and high school principals, assistant principals, and aspiring principals. Although NASSP will not take a formal position on all aspects of the Higher Education Act (HEA), there are several initiatives contained within Titles II and III of your recently introduced legislation, S.1793, which we are very pleased to support.

NASSP believes that S.1793 strengthens the current HEA Title II provisions by providing additional programs and funding that will help address the teacher and principal shortage problem. The bill is also aligned with new provisions within No Child Left Behind that underscore the importance of educator quality. NASSP strongly supports the creation of a new School Leadership Development program to provide training for in-service principals, assistant principals and superintendents. We applaud such a provision included in your bill, and for calling attention to the current low level of HEA Title II grants available for the purposes of training educators.

The importance of quality leadership in a school is a factor that should not and cannot be diminished. Strong schools have strong leaders. Because principals shape the environment in which teachers and students ultimately succeed or fail, improving the quality of school leaders is one of the most effective approaches to make systemic improvement in our nation’s education system. Today’s ever-changing school environment demands that principals and other school leaders be equipped with better knowledge and skills than ever before—a reality addressed within S.1793. The new climate within which principals lead requires enhanced proficiency related to issues such as research, data collection and analysis, curriculum and assessments.

NASSP also commends you for including a new Patsy T. Mink Fellowship program designed to encourage minorities and women to pursue post-graduate degrees. Although this program is not specifically designed for aspiring principals, NASSP hopes that it will inspire additional qualified minority candidates to train to become school leaders. As schools have become more diverse, it is important that the field of the principalship be
diverse as well. In addition to teacher shortages, the nation continues to face a shortage in the number of qualified candidates applying for the principalship.

As your bill indicates, 40 percent of all white students ages 18-24 are pursuing postsecondary education, compared with only 30 percent of African-Americans and 16 percent of Hispanics of the same age. That is why NASSP supports several programs in Title III of your bill, including funding increases to the GEAR UP program, and the addition of a new initiative offering low-income students free tutoring for college entrance exams such as ACT and SAT.

NASSP is very concerned with the current dropout rate in secondary schools. The Alliance for Excellent Education (AEE) reports that less than 75 percent of all eighth graders graduate from high school in five years, and in urban schools these rates dip below 50 percent. GEAR UP provides secondary school students the academic preparation and the understanding of necessary costs to attend college. The program is an important link between secondary and postsecondary education that may inspire students—especially low income and minority students—to remain in school. In addition, S.1793 recognizes that funding for low-income students to take college preparatory courses will enable more students to go on to postsecondary education.

NASSP greatly appreciates your dedication to improving the nation’s education system, including the recognition that additional resources are required in order to meet this goal. We look forward to working with you and the entire Committee as S.1793 and other legislation moves forward.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Gerald N. Tirozzi, Ph.D.
Executive Director