March 13, 2008

The Honorable Mark Pryor
U.S. Senate
257 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Edward Kennedy
U.S. Senate
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Pryor and Kennedy:

On behalf of the following national education and civil rights organizations we are writing in support of your amendment which you plan to offer to the FY 2009 budget resolution (S.Con.Res 70). We applaud the fact that the amendment focuses on middle school completion, high school graduation and ensuring that students are prepared for higher education and the workforce. As you well know, this amendment is critical because additional resources are needed to improve our nation’s middle and high schools and to turn around those schools identified as graduating the lowest number of students.

In a world in which a meaningful high school diploma has become the minimum qualification necessary to support a good job and family well-being, far too many American students are being allowed to fall off the path to prosperity. These problems have escalated to crisis proportions in thousands of the nation’s middle and high schools and are hampering the opportunities of millions of students, and particularly poor and minority students.

Less than one-third of the students in 8th grade, and only five percent of English language learners, can read with proficiency, according to the 2007 National Assessment on Educational Progress (NAEP). In mathematics, again less than one-third of students in 8th grade show skills at the NAEP proficient level, and nearly 30 percent score below the basic level. International comparisons indicate that students in the U.S. do not start out behind students of other nations in math and science, but that they fall behind by the end of the middle grades.

Middle school students are hopeful about their future, with 93 percent believing that they will complete high school and 92 percent anticipating that they will attend college. Yet about one-third of students who enter high school do not graduate with their peers, and another third graduate but do not have the knowledge and skills to succeed in college. In fact, for minority and low-income students, the situation is even worse. Only about 55% of African American students and 52% of Hispanic students graduate on time from high school with a regular diploma, compared to 78% of white students. High school students living in low-income families drop out of school at six times the rate of their peers from high-income families.

The cost of educational failure is borne by individual students, the rest of society, and the American economy. There is a well-documented earnings gap between high school graduates and dropouts, and a growing challenge for individuals with only a high school diploma to find stable, well-paying jobs. Individuals with less education are less healthy, die earlier, are more likely to become parents when very young, become embroiled in the criminal justice system, or receive social welfare assistance from government and other agencies. And just as it has become clear that we must be able to compete even more aggressively abroad, there is mounting evidence that the nation’s graduates and workforce are less and less prepared for the challenges and competition they face in the global economy.
Therefore, the undersigned organizations approve of your efforts and enthusiastically support your amendment as an important step to meet these great challenges.

Sincerely,

Academy for Educational Development
ACT, Inc.
Alliance for Excellent Education
American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
American School Counselor Association
First Focus
International Reading Association
Jobs for the Future
Knowledge Alliance
League of United Latin American Citizens
Learning Disabilities Association of America
Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF)
National Association of Professors of Middle Level Education
National Association of School Psychologists
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Council of Teachers of English
National Education Association
National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform
National Middle School Association
National Puerto Rican Coalition, Inc.
Project GRAD USA
School Social Work Association
Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)
The College Board
The International Center for Leadership in Education