Comments to United States Department of Education
Notice of Policy Priorities for Investing in Innovation Fund
Docket ID ED–2009–OII–0012

Submitted by:
Center for Law & Social Policy and Campaign for Youth

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on the Department of Education's Notice of Policy Priorities for Investing in Innovation Fund. We greatly appreciate the Administration's recognition that investments in education are vital to the future of our economic viability. The Investing in Innovation (I3) Fund offers local education agencies (LEAs) and nonprofit organizations an opportunity to rethink how they educate children and youth and to use school reform efforts as a foundational vehicle to work across sectors and explore new and innovative ways to support student learning from birth through postsecondary education.

These resources are critical to ensuring communities have the tools necessary to implement the most appropriate strategies that work for them and their entire eligible student population. We applaud the Department for taking this very important step forward in providing flexible funds for LEAs and nonprofit organizations to assess what works and implement best practices and promising strategies. We especially support the following:

- Proposed Absolute Priority 4 – use of funds to create multiple pathways. In particular, we are pleased that funds can be used to award credit based on competency, as well as the recognition that integration of supports for non-academic barriers to achievement is critical to impacting the achievement of students.

- Proposed Absolute Priority 3 – inclusion of dual enrollment programs. These programs have been quite successful; not only for high performing students, but also for out-of-school students returning to the classroom who would benefit from an accelerated learning option that prepares them for a career.

- Definition of High Need Students - this definition includes students who are over-age and under-credited, as well as those who have left school without completing a diploma. The Department's commitment to supporting these vulnerable populations of students is helpful, as they are often ignored by traditional education systems.

- Inclusion of non-academic success indicators- School climate is critical to student academic achievement, as it is often a key reason why students leave school, either due to overly harsh

disciplinary sanctions or lack of safety in the building. Addressing these types of issues creates an atmosphere where students feel nurtured, valued, and safe – all of which are necessary for academic success.

We are pleased to see the inclusion of the above elements in the I3 Fund, however, we believe there are particular components that could be strengthened to more effectively support the education and learning of struggling middle and high school youth, and the recovery of high school dropouts and other high-need youth populations.   Our comments and recommendations relate specifically to ensuring the needs of these struggling students and disconnected youth are adequately addressed. If you have any questions or need further information, please contact Rhonda Tsoi-A-Fatt at CLASP (202-906-8014 or rtsoiafatt@clasp.org) or Kisha Bird at the Campaign for Youth (202-906-8020 or campaignforyouth@clasp.org).

Recommendations

1. **Create an additional competitive preference priority area: Innovations that Reconnect High School Dropouts and Target Highly Vulnerable High School Students.**

   Research shows that every nine seconds in America, a student becomes a dropout.[i] More than 50 percent of minority youth and youth in high poverty urban and rural communities who start high school will not graduate four years later.[ii] While we are supportive of the inclusion of a robust definition for "high need student," we believe that this emphasis alone does not provide LEAs with sufficient incentive to taken an intentional look at creating real and practical solutions to address the educational challenges of this population.

   An elevated priority on these students will raise the profile and importance of these students in the minds of district and community leaders, and make high school completion and career or college readiness for all students a goal that has real weight. It will propel LEAs and nonprofit organizations working towards increasing graduation rates to develop strategies that work for this diverse student population, based on knowledge of their youth population and research about what works. In cities such as New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, Portland (Oregon), and Chicago, district leaders working in partnership with community-based nonprofit partners and other youth serving systems (such as workforce, child welfare, and juvenile justice) are already creating promising strategies to re-engage students who are slipping off-track to graduation and to recover those that have already left school.[iii] These communities have found that targeting resources to "map student needs against actionable solutions"[iv] will increase the likelihood that students at risk of not graduating on time and those already out-of-school can attain secondary school diploma through recuperation and recovery efforts.

   Thus, we recommend adding a **Competitive Preference Priority area** for youth who are over-aged and under credited, who have left school before receiving a regular high school diploma, who are at risk of not graduating with a regular high school diploma on time, who are homelessness, who are in foster care, or who have been incarcerated.

2. **Support innovations that improve the use of data to inform planning and programming for dropout prevention and recovery.**

   We are quite pleased with the Department's emphasis on high school completion, and ending the nation's dropout crisis. Data is critical to understanding and intervening to stop the dropout crisis. Research has shown that analysis of school attendance, behavior, and course failure statistics can help districts to readily identify 40 percent of its potential dropouts by the 6th grade, and 75 percent by the 9th grade.[v] Armed with this knowledge, LEAs and schools can maximize their resources by creating a system of early supports that are targeted to its most vulnerable students. In addition, data can be used to better understand a community's dropout population by an analysis of district-level student performance data for youth who have dropped out. This information is critical to planning efforts in creating recovery options for returning students.

   Thus, we recommend adding "**to inform planning and programming for dropout prevention and recovery**" as one of the specific uses of funds under *Proposed Absolute Priority 2 – Innovations That Improve the Use of Data.*

3. **Ensure that public alternative programs and schools operated by LEAs also build toward college and career readiness.**

   A large number of LEAs (39 percent as of 2000-2001) operate their own alternative schools or programs.[vi] The majority of students served in these environments are students of color and low-income students. These schools have the potential to be high performing environments which function as a part of strong multiple pathway system, preparing youth for college or careers. Instead, these schools or programs are often used as a "holding place" for students with disciplinary issues, and help the districts to keep their reported suspension and expulsion rates down. Without careful attention and reform, many public alternative schools will continue to contribute to the nation's dropout problem instead of being a viable solution for struggling students. While districts report that these schools provide curricula for attainment of a regular high school diploma, they are often not held to any particular standards or expectation for graduation.

   Thus, we recommend adding "**alternative programs or schools**" as one of the particular types of schools or programs to be supported under *Proposed Absolute Priority 3 – Innovations that Complement the Implementation of High Standards and High-Quality Assessments.*

4. **Expand nonprofit partnerships to include other institutions of education beyond LEAs.**

   The requirement that nonprofit organizations must work in partnership with LEAs or a consortium of schools is quite limiting when serving off-track and disconnected youth. LEAs and schools have already failed to educate off-track and disconnected youth, and have not historically been the likely partners in innovative approaches to educating this population of students. In many cases, nonprofit organizations have forged partnerships with other youth-serving systems such as the workforce system or child welfare system, or institutions of higher education to create educational options. Exclusion of these groups will likely reduce the benefit

of these innovations resources for off-track and disconnected youth, as many nonprofits will fail to meet the requirements as proposed.

Thus we recommend including **institutions of higher education, the workforce system, juvenile justice system, and child welfare system** as potential partners for nonprofit organizations in the *Note about Eligibility for an Entity that Includes a Nonprofit Organization.*

5. **Explicitly recognize the GED as viable education pathway to support high-need and off-track students.**

All students should have access to education options that meet varying needs, including strategies and approaches such as credit-recovery, accelerated learning, and GED preparation.[vii] In particular, off-track and reenrolling students, including those that are over-age and under-credited and youth with reading and math proficiency at/or the below 8th grade level, need flexible options. LEAs have begun to assess their portfolio of secondary school credential options and are designing strategies to expand those options that have demonstrated positive educational outcomes. Those options include GED preparation and testing programs.

While some argue that allowance of the GED as an acceptable education outcome gives LEAs an option to push unwanted students out, other education and training systems – including the U.S. Department of Labor, the United States Army, and the adult education system – recognize that the GED, coupled with intentional education and workforce pathways, training and supports is a feasible option for older, off-track students and high school dropouts to obtain a secondary credential necessary for gainful entry to into an industry credentialing program and/or post-secondary institution.

Thus, we recommend:

Including "**GED to College programming and strategies**" as a approved practice to successfully prepare high school students to successfully prepare for, enter, and graduate from a two- or four-year college under *Proposed Competitive Preference Priority 6—Innovations That Support College Access and Success*.

Additionally, in an effort to support a range of secondary school credential options, we support the expansion of language around multiple pathways to include "a regular high school diploma **or state recognized secondary school credential**" under *Proposed Absolute Priority 4— Innovations That Turn Around Persistently Low-Performing Schools.*

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[i]Camilla A. Lehr et al., *Essential tools: Increasing rates of school completion,* National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2004, http://www.ncset.org/publications/essentialtools/dropout/dropout.pdf.

[ii] Gary Orfield, Daniel Losen, Joanna Wald, and Christopher Swanson, *Losing Our Future: How Minority Youths are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis*, The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, 2004, 2.

[iii] MetisNet. *Closing the Graduation Gap: A Superintendent's Guide for Planning Multiple Pathways to Graduation*, Youth Transition Funders Group, 2009, 5-6

[iv] *Closing the Graduation Gap*

[v] Robert Balfanz, "Improving the Transition from Middle Grades to High Schools: The Role of Early Warning Indicators," American Youth Policy Forum, presentation, January 25, 2008.

[vi] US Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, *Public Alternative School Programs for Students At Risk of Education Failure: 2000-2001*, http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/frss/publications/2002004/

[vii] National Youth Employment Coalition, *Expanding Options: State Financing of Education Pathways for Struggling Students and Out-of-School Youth*, 2008, http://www.nyec.org/content/documents/NYECexpandopt_intro.pdf