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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

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July 10, 2013

The Honorable Arne Duncan
Secretary
Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary Duncan:

Yesterday, the U.S. Department of Education announced that it will move forward with a three day Federal Student Aid conference at the Mandalay Bay Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada in December, in spite of dire warnings about the impact that sequestration will have on the agency.¹ At a time when the Administration is making the dubious claim that 1,172,000 students “will lose access to support [sic] programs and special education,” the Department should not be diverting resources to lavish conferences.²

The Department should cancel this conference and review all conferences for the remainder of the year to determine whether they should continue while core programs are being reduced.

In May, the Department announced that it would not be furloughing any full-time employees under sequestration because “multiple furlough days in the final months of the fiscal year could delay or prevent grants or loans; increase the risk of fraud, waste, and abuse; and make it difficult to carry out the Department’s mission.”³ However, the \$2.5 billion sequestration cuts at the Department will still impact Title I, special education, and career and technical education funding.

Effective management of sequestration is critical, and the Department should not be choosing Washington bureaucrats over funding for schools that serve low-income children. For example, several furlough days for the 50 employees with six-figure salaries in the “Office of Communications and Outreach” would free up thousands in grant dollars for schools.⁴ This is just one example, but throughout the Department, there are numerous positions that are important but not as critical to the mission of the agency as serving the schoolchildren of the

¹ See <http://www.ifap.ed.gov/eannouncements/070913FSATrainingConferenceFAP2013.html>

² Aggregated data from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/sequester/interactive-map>.

³ “No Furloughs at Education Department Under Sequester,” Education Week, (May 10, 2013). Available at: http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2013/05/no_furloughs_at_department_of_.html.

⁴ “DataUniverse” Asbury Park Press. Available at: http://php.app.com/fed_employees12/search.php.

nation. The Office of Legislative and Congressional Affairs, for example, has just 17 employees, but spent more than \$1.7 million in salaries in 2012.⁵

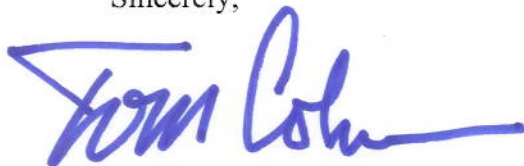
Finally, the Department has already begun planning the 2013 Secretary of Education's Bus Tour across New Mexico, Texas, Arizona and California.⁶ It is unclear how this messaging event will directly benefit the taxpayers, states, schools, and students that the Department serves. The Department should consider the cost to taxpayers when planning messaging events like the 2013 bus tour. Education dollars belong in the classroom and should not be wasted on campaign-style bus tours and junkets.

In order to better understand the Department's management of sequestration, please provide the following information no later than July 24, 2013.

- 1) Provide a list, including costs, of all conferences sponsored by the Department that are planned for the remainder of the year.
- 2) Provide the total cost of the Secretary's back to school bus tour for the last three fiscal years.
- 3) Provide the estimated cost for the 2013 bus tour.
- 4) Provide the total number of staff involved with planning the 2013 bus tour.
- 5) Provide the total number of staff that will attend the 2013 bus tour, including advance staff and those who participate for only part of the trip.

Thank you for your prompt attention to these important issues. If you have any questions regarding this letter, have your staff contact Patrick Bailey of my staff at 202-224-4751.

Sincerely,



Tom A. Coburn, M.D.
Ranking Member

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ More information available at

https://www.fbo.gov/index?s=opportunity&mode=form&id=203cae3b160d9c57e3ce4621e7e69613&tab=core&_cview=0.