July 8, 2016

The Honorable Sylvia Mathews Burwell
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Burwell,

We write to urge the Administration to reform the Head Start Designation Renewal System (DRS) by immediately suspending the use of the lowest 10 percent of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS®) trigger. We are concerned that the use of this isolated trigger does not accurately identify poor performance in Head Start programs and as a result does not meet the intent or letter of the Head Start Act. Maintaining its use will continue to cause undue and unnecessary burden on grantees, result in wasteful use of Head Start grantee resources, and fail to meet Congressional intent that DRS serve as a tool for improving the quality of Head Start services in a transparent, reliable, valid, and timely way.

The DRS was authorized by Section 641(c)(8) of the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 and implemented as a Final Rule in 2011. The CLASS® tool is used to assess teacher-child interactions in classrooms on a seven point scale on the domains of: Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support. Using CLASS® scores, the DRS is intended to improve the quality of Head Start programs by requiring grantees determined to not be delivering high quality and comprehensive services to recompete for their funding at the end of their 5-year grant.

Head Start grantees that fail to meet the required quality thresholds under the CLASS® tool may, under DRS, be recompeted. In addition, however, grantees that score within the lowest 10 percent for one or more of the three domains of the CLASS® tool during each monitoring cycle are required to recompete.

This system of quality evaluation and recompetition has been in use since 2012. Head Start grantees’ experiences with and the impact of this system are now clear. We have three main concerns with the use of the lowest 10 percent as a trigger for recompetition. First, because the 10 percent line is redrawn each year, programs are forced to aim for an unknown and moving target which is very disruptive to planning and innovation. This also means that programs monitored in different years are not subject to the same 10 percent cutoff line. As a result, use of the 10 percent trigger does not appear to meet the requirements of Sec. 641(c)(8) of the Head Start Act (42 U.S.C. 9836) that the Designation Renewal System be transparent, reliable, and valid. Second, following
their CLASS® monitoring event, a program must wait until the following school year to learn whether their scores will require them to compete. The operational stress this creates is felt at every level and has contributed to staff turnover in many communities. This delay also does not appear to meet the law’s requirements that the DRS renews designations in a timely manner. Third, 83 percent of the 140 programs who are in DRS solely for being in the bottom 10 percent of CLASS® have won their grants back entirely. Many of these programs received clean monitoring reports and some were only in competition by a fraction of a point in one domain. In short, this trigger is not a transparent or clear measure, it is highly stressful and wasteful for programs—taking away from their ability to focus on their services—and is not accomplishing Congress’ goal of identifying and improving low performing programs.

While we agree with the nation’s Head Start grantees that it is imperative that quality improvement be our first consideration, the 10 percent CLASS® trigger has compromised the goal of high standards and continuous quality improvement. While additional, more comprehensive changes will be needed to truly reform DRS, the incremental fix of suspending the use of the lowest 10 percent of CLASS® trigger is critical, and should be implemented immediately.

We look forward to hearing from you timely about our concerns and your plans to address them.

Sincerely,

Lisa Murkowski  
United States Senator

Joe Manchin, III  
United States Senator

Jerry Moran  
United States Senator

Tammy Baldwin  
United States Senator

Jeffrey A. Markley  
United States Senator

Mark Kirk  
United States Senator

Shelley Moore Capito  
United States Senator

Ron Wyden  
United States Senator
Dear Colleagues,

I write to ask for your support in reauthorizing the Neighborhood Assistance Act (NAA), a critical program that assists low- and moderate-income families in acquiring their first home. The Neighborhood Assistance Act (NAA) was first enacted in 1977 as a result of recommendations from the National Commission on Housing. Since then, the NAA has been reauthorized twice, in 1987 and 1992.

The NAA helps families purchase homes through the use of competitive tax credits. These credits are then transferred to a creditworthy third party, such as a nonprofit housing agency. This allows the credit to be leveraged in the market, providing the funds necessary for families to purchase homes. This leveraged funding enables a greater number of families, particularly those in underserved and underserved communities, to purchase homes.

I believe that we have the opportunity to strengthen this important program. By extending the NAA, we can expand the opportunity for more families to afford to purchase homes. Given the current housing market and the challenges facing families, now is the time to do this.

I urge my colleagues to join me in supporting the reauthorization of the Neighborhood Assistance Act. Together, we can help more families achieve their dream of homeownership.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

[Signatures of Senators]

[Names and titles of senators]

[Signatures of Senators]