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June 29, 2011

The Honorable Arne Duncan
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary Duncan:

Thank you for your leadership to ensure that students across this country are exposed to high standards, quality teachers and effective instruction. I also greatly appreciate your efforts to provide flexibility to allow innovation to occur in our nation's classrooms and in our respective states.

South Dakota is in the midst of calculating adequate yearly progress results for the 2010-11 school year. This letter is to respectfully inform you that we intend to hold our annual measurable objectives, or AMO, targets at the 2009-10 levels. In addition, the state is moving to the required four-year cohort graduation rate this year (a year early), and we intend to re-set our graduation rate bar at 80 percent, instead of the current 85 percent.

Without making these changes, we believe our accountability system, as it currently stands, would inappropriately label schools as failing. This situation would eventually trigger a number of NCLB-related sanctions that our department simply does not have the capacity to address.

As I write this letter, South Dakota has not received official word as to the status of our Accountability Workbook, which we submitted Jan. 18, 2011. Furthermore, as you are well aware, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act has not been reauthorized.

In light of these factors, South Dakota has chosen to forge ahead in the company of 40 other states to adhere to the nine key principles for accountability, as developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers. We are moving forward on a new accountability

system with a focus on developing a system unique to South Dakota, as well as one that is legitimate, useful and promotes continuous improvement.

South Dakota remains committed to accountability, and I believe our track record in the area of student achievement demonstrates that commitment. South Dakota students routinely score above the national average on the National Assessment of Educational Progress as well as on the ACT. Proficiency levels on our state test also remain high. Certainly, we have issues and challenges, which we recognize and are seeking to address.

I appreciate and support your efforts at the federal level to push for reauthorization of ESEA. In the absence of reauthorization and up against a deadline for the release of results, we have chosen the route I consider best for our state: To transition to an improved accountability system and, during that transition period, to hold schools accountable at the current levels.

Thank you, again, for your continued leadership on behalf of the nation's school children.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dr. Melody Schopp". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "S" at the end.

Dr. Melody Schopp
Secretary