

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 25, 2014

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

Dear Secretary Duncan,

I write today to express my support for the Department of Education's intention to expand its Experimental Sites Initiative to explore innovative programs that improve student success, shorten time to degree, and reduce student loan indebtedness.

Ensuring the affordability of higher education is one of the most critical issues confronting our country. Each year, the federal government invests over \$150 billion in student aid programs. Both students and the taxpayers have a vested interest in ensuring these dollars are well spent. Given climbing tuition costs and substantial outstanding student debt, policymakers need to be able to explore new ways to keep costs manageable and to examine alternative methods for delivering educational services.

Unfortunately, higher education has often lacked the innovative, research-based experimentation that might lead to those ends. While the Department has been exercising its authority under the Experimental Sites Initiative since the 1990s, most experiments have focused on financial aid administration rather than exploring alternative ways to improve student outcomes. The Department's new proposal is a welcome shift in the use of the program and could lead to both significant cost savings and improved student success.

As the Department considers suggestions for new experiments, I would like to draw your attention to a program in Maine that is on the frontier of this kind of experimentation. Initiated in 2012, the Bridge Year program is a partnership between Hermon High School, a regional Career & Technical Education secondary school, and the University of Maine. Funded by the state legislature, the pilot program permits high school students to earn up to 30 credits at the University of Maine over the course of their junior and senior years. This enables the students to have the opportunity to complete an associate's degree, through the state Community College system, in one year's time following graduation or to enroll in a four-year program as a sophomore. Because of the CTE's central role in the program, Bridge Year also equips graduates with the unique kind of mentoring and skills that technical education provides.

The program has been an unequivocal success and represents the best of what can be accomplished when educators, policymakers, and community members come together to support students. I had the pleasure of meeting recently with the group of Maine educators and administrators who have worked tirelessly to implement the program. They are the real deal – and they are motivated to find ways to further expand the program in the state and across the country.

Despite the partisanship that has plagued both national and state governments, Maine has not only maintained its commitment to the Bridge Year program but has begun to expand its reach. Just recently, the Maine Department of Education announced funding to extend the program to five additional CTE-high school partnerships which will begin in the fall of this year. The department also announced it would provide a round of planning grants to seven CTEs and high schools to begin laying the groundwork for further expansion in 2015.

Looking to the future, one of the largest impediments to expanding Bridge Year is cost; given this, I urge the Secretary to give particular attention to allowing students in programs like Bridge Year to gain access on a limited basis to Title IV dollars; this would enable the program to expand its reach, collect more data, and test varying models to meet the needs of different communities. In addition, one lesson learned from the Bridge Year program in Maine is that dual enrollment programs work best when there is a true partnership between all stakeholders. Because of this, I urge you to ask that these experimental early college initiatives put all participants – high schools, CTEs, and the higher education community – on equal footing throughout the planning and implementation process.

Supporting innovation is one of the most essential functions of the federal government. Thank you for your leadership in fulfilling this role and for considering the Bridge Year program as a model for what could be accomplished across the country. I look forward to closely following your efforts in the coming year.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Angus King" with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator