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August 18, 2015

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

RE: Request Review of Pinellas County Schools' Use of Title I dollars and Elementary and Secondary Education Act compliance

Dear Secretary Duncan:

A recent report by the *Tampa Bay Times* raises very serious questions regarding Pinellas County Schools' use of Title I dollars and I respectfully request that you review the crisis in our local schools and help the students of South St. Petersburg receive the tools they need to be successful.

In America, "separate but equal" in our public schools was deemed unconstitutional over 60 years ago. Our federal and state laws - and our values - require that all children, no matter the neighborhood in which they live, receive an equal opportunity to a high quality education. That is not happening for the students in South St. Petersburg, Florida.

The *Times* story details how some schools win and some schools lose in Pinellas County. Sadly, students in five elementary schools in South St. Petersburg are losing. The *Times* article, entitled "Failure Factories", shares stories of Campbell Park, Fairmount Park, Lakewood, Maximo and Melrose elementary schools. Each school has seen student performance drop significantly in the past decade following resegregation of district schools. These schools are all now ranked in the top 15 worst elementary schools in Florida with Melrose at the bottom. According to the article, students at these five schools have some of the very lowest reading rates in the state. Eight in 10 students at these schools are failing reading and nine in 10 are failing math.

Teacher turnover also is too high. The *Times* reported that 52 percent of teachers at these five schools requested a transfer in 2014 and Fairmount Park lost more than 10 percent of teachers that year. Teachers who have stayed at the schools have worked less time in the field than the district average. Without experienced and stable teachers, I believe that these students and schools are not receiving "comparable resources" which is a fundamental requirement of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act ("ESEA").

One of the most troubling questions raised by the reporting is whether or not the school board is using Title I dollars appropriately. It appears that Pinellas County Schools may be shortchanging the schools in South St. Petersburg through a possible shell game of Title I dollars. Title I dollars are intended to supplement state and local support and not supplant it. These schools serve some of our most vulnerable students and they need every available resource to hire talented teachers and provide supplementary services.

Pinellas County Schools need greater oversight and expertise and I respectfully request your help. I believe School Superintendent Michael Grego is dedicated to the students of Pinellas County and school improvement. Yesterday, he announced an important restructuring of South St. Petersburg elementary schools with the introduction of magnet schools that will need federal support. Nevertheless, the district needs additional attention and help right away to ensure that our students have every opportunity to succeed. The community need not point fingers and must come together to ensure kids have the best educational opportunities no matter their neighborhood. This community deserves so much more.

Thank you for your devotion to America's students. I share your passion for public education and student achievement and therefore urge you to help Pinellas County Schools tackle the inequities and turn the area into a model for education and learning. Please contact me or my education legislative aide, Wendy Hamilton, at 202-225-3376 with any questions or comments. I look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,



Kathy Castor
U.S. Representative
Florida – District 14

CC: Michael Grego, Superintendent of Pinellas County Schools
School Board, Pinellas County Schools
Mayor Rick Kriseman, City of St. Petersburg
Watson Haynes, President & CEO of Pinellas County Urban League
Mike Gandolfo, President of Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association
Leon W. Russell, Vice Chair of NAACP Board of Directors
Adora Obi Nweze, President of Florida State Conference NAACP