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cc: Bruce/Mike C.

Record Type: Record

To: Elena Kagan, June G. Turner, Maria Echaveste, Sylvia M. Mathews  
cc:  
Subject: IMPORTANT: Education Policy Rollout

Race  
Initiative

Sylvia:

I've heard rumblings about impending rollout of the "no social promotions" education policy within the next few days.

I have had no success contacting Elena to learn details or give feedback on this policy. I have tried email, voice mail, hallway greeting, and conversation with her secretary. I don't feel that I have standing to call yet again and be a pest.

HOWEVER: Like the Voluntary National Test of 4th and 8th grade students, there are serious substantive and political pitfalls. The VNT was flawed from the start, which I told everyone who would listen, and which is one reason the liberals and minority caucuses decided to get in bed with the GOP to attack the policy. It's not about standards, its about safeguards to prevent abuses of powerless poor and minority kids. (And, let me add, when in June and July I raised these issues with Secretary Riley and the President, they expressed a great deal of concern, both substantive and political. If indeed they had been presented with the information and perspective I offered prior to adopting the VNT, they either didn't recall it, had not been given a fair sense of the weight of those concerns, or gave me Academy Award performances.)

The basic substantive question is whether the safeguards are merely hortatory (my suspicion) or are central and mandatory. I am fearful, because on a wide range of social welfare issues, the Administration has been very reluctant to impose regulatory strings.

It is also important to anticipate and answer the objections many moderate and liberal researchers will raise. For example, students who fall 2 years behind their age cohort in grade have something like a 98 percent HS drop out rate; does that matter, and if so, how is your concern reflected in the design of this policy?

Sylvia, I made a mistake in not making earlier, vigorous objections to all the visibility the White House bestowed on Abigail Thernstrom, when other more responsible conservative voices are available. Then, in a box, I felt the need to go on the record with reporters expressing my dismay. That was an awkward thing for me to do, and I'm sure many at the White House resented it. But it I felt compelled to do it, since I'm not on the staff and the terms of our arrangement were that I would keep my own voice, but be judicious. My work with the National Research Council and civil rights

groups on the VNT began before consultancy with you on the race initiative.

This rollout of a social promotion policy I know virtually nothing about holds the potential to create a third and far more serious problem for me, because the issue goes to the core of opportunity issues about which I care so deeply. I hope we can find a process that will get me comfortable with whatever you are planning to do, and thereby avoid the problem of deciding (together) whether I need to resign.

VNT / *Therese*

cc: Elena, Maria, Minyon