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2017-2018

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November 29, 2017

Hon. Governor Rick Scott
The State Capitol
400 S. Monroe St.
Tallahassee, FL 32399-001

Hon. Commissioner of Education
Pam Stewart
Florida Department of Education
325 West Gaines Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0400

Dear Governor Scott and Commissioner Stewart:

On behalf of the membership of the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE), Joint National Committee for Languages and the National Council for Languages and International Studies (JNCL-NCLIS), Ana G. Mendez University Systems (AGMUS) of Puerto Rico and USA Branch Campuses, Hispanic Education Coalition of DC (HEC), American Federation of Teachers (AFT) jointly with the Asociación de Maestros de Puerto Rico, and TESOL International Association, we write to support the requests of the South and Central Florida School Districts most impacted with students from Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands who were forced to leave their homeland due to the ravages and destruction caused by Hurricane Maria.

It is requested that the Governor create a state emergency declaration from the Florida Board of Education to waive statutory language that would allow the incoming 11th and 12th grade students from Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands to receive a temporary waiver status from the state mandated high school standard assessments and graduation requirements (FSA) so that they will be able to graduate and receive their HS Florida Diplomas on time. We believe that this is a fair, reasonable and humane accommodation to support these displaced students given the fact that these students are also having to move into a new environment under extreme emotional, physical and psychological stress, not to mention personal losses and yet they will have to deal with language and cultural adjustments to which they must quickly acclimatize in the U.S. mainland.

We further commend Governor Scott and his cabinet for strong leadership, courage, compassion and sensitivity in waiving state rules to facilitate the enrollment of students whose families were fleeing the storm. It is also recognized that Commissioner Stewart has committed to the Puerto Rican Secretary of Education, Julia B. Keleher, that those high school students are eligible to earn Florida diplomas and that the state would also support students in completing the requirements for Puerto Rico high school diplomas which, if successful, may allow students the ability to graduate on time with a Puerto Rico diploma rather than risk potential delays inherent in an attempt to complete the different curriculum necessary to obtain a Florida diploma.

The vast majority of these students from Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands show great promise and are seriously committed to completing their high school education. In addition, many of the high school juniors and seniors have already prepared for and/or met their graduation requirements back in their home countries in their first language (Spanish). We believe that these students should not have to come to the U.S. mainland-not by choice-and be required to take assessments they have not been prepared for. In addition, the Florida Standard State Assessments (FSA) is only administered in English while the vast majority of these eligible 11th and 12th grade students from Puerto Rico are English Learners. We have also learned that some districts have submitted petitions to the Florida State Department of Education to allow its students to take state mandated tests in their native language. At the High School level, that would mean using a Spanish-language version of the SAT. To do anything else would constitute an unreasonable and unfair burden upon these involuntarily “displaced” students who have not been properly prepared for Florida exams.

NABE and its partners are convinced that both Governor Scott and Commissioner Stewart are decent, well intended and honorable public servants who, by their willingness to listen to reason, and their rapid and positive responses, will continue to work through the state’s policy and political processes to do everything in their powers to help and to support what is best for these students **by enacting immediate and appropriate emergency declaration to waive the statutory language that would allow the incoming 11th and 12th grade students from Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands to receive a temporary waiver status from the state mandated assessments and graduation requirements so that they will be able to graduate and receive their Florida HS Diploma on time or by offering an alternative to the FSA in their native language.**

NABE and its partners are extremely proud of the visionary, resilient and compassionate leadership on the part of the Superintendents whose districts are most impacted by this sudden and dramatic influx of new students from Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. For example, the Miami Dade County Schools welcomed close to 700 students and 90 11th and 12th graders from Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Island by establishing bilingual welcome centers and providing counseling support. Osceola County Schools has about 1,500 Puerto Rican students displaced by the hurricane, more than almost any other district in Florida. It is estimated that about 88 percent of those students qualify as English-learners. Orange County Public Schools took in over 2,000 students from the Caribbean due to Hurricane Maria. Every one of the Superintendents are very concerned and have been exploring the issues of how to manage the exit exam for its newly arrived high school students. Its also been reported in the press that many of the Superintendents are also concerned about the state's position, as reflected in a letter from Commissioner Pam Stewart to Julia Keleher, the Secretary of Education in Puerto Rico. Recent figures from Florida department of education indicate that so far nearly 7,212 students from Puerto Rico and 710 from other islands had enrolled in Florida public schools. Furthermore, the counties receiving the largest numbers were Orange (1,793 students), Osceola (1,218), Miami-Dade (764) and Polk (569). Further, the Orlando press reported that the Governor's Office indicated that the state can expect to receive anywhere from 100,000 to 500,000 new residents from Puerto Rico over the next few months. And that many of them will be relocating to the Orlando area to join family members currently residing in the area.

The National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) and its partners stand ready, willing and able to work with Governor Scott and Commissioner Stewart as an equal partner in serving the education, social and emotional needs, and creating opportunities, access and accommodations for **ALL** students and especially our most vulnerable of the 4.6 million Dual Language Learners (DLLs) and English Language Learners (ELLs) including our newly arrived U.S. citizens from Puerto Rico and the other islands.

Since 1974, the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) is the only national professional organization devoted to representing bilingual/multilingual English Learners and bilingual professionals. **NABE's mission is to advocate for educational equity and excellence for bilingual/multilingual English Learners in a global society.** NABE places high value on native language, and respects cultural and linguistic diversity. NABE works as a tireless advocate to influence and to help create policies, programs, research, pedagogy and professional development for positive outcomes in our children's education, our nation's future leaders, and our world's well being.

Together, we can help our students achieve greatness, while using their linguistic and cultural skills as global assets to achieve social and economic competitiveness as we strive for equity and excellence in the education of our students. We have a collective duty to insure that our students have opportunities to succeed and that language and diversity continue to enrich the life of our nation as a whole.

“¡Sí se puede!”

Dr. Margarita Pinkos, Ed.D.
NABE President

Dr. Santiago Wood, Ed.D.
Executive Director

Cc:

Julia B. Keleher, Secretary of Education of Puerto Rico
Superintendent Alberto Carvalho, Miami Dade
Superintendent Debra Pace, Osceola County Schools
Superintendent Barbara M. Jenkins, Orange County Public Schools
Superintendent Jacqueline C. Byrd, Polk County School District
Superintendent Robert Runcie, Broward County Schools
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