President Obama; Secretary Duncan,

My name is Jordan Peterson, and I subscribe to the belief that there are few issues within any society that are more significant than the task of educating those people who live within it. As a future educator, a citizen of the society which you, President Obama, are now the leader of, and a product of the education system which you, Secretary Duncan, are now chiefly responsible for, I feel it is not only my right, but also my duty to voice my concerns regarding the state of our most significant societal issue. And so, I’d like to take this opportunity to do just that.

The current political administration has made several pushes for educational reform; the encouragement of merit pay programs, the support of charter schools and the implementation of the race to the top initiative are all admirable approaches at attending to the current issues that are inherent within the U.S. education system. However, some of these attempts may be of more detriment than benefit.   
 Teaching starts with teachers. It seems then that the reasonable thing to do would be to reward those who play a large part in education, and in a capitalistic nation such as ours, the best reward, it seems, is monetary compensation. Attempts at such monetary compensation have been unsuccessful, however, in improving student achievement; the Merit Pay program, meant to encourage quality teaching in the classroom through financial incentive, is deeply flawed. The philosophy behind salary reforms is that if an educator’s salary is adjusted based on performance the result will be a specific academic outcome for his or her students (Hornick-Lockard). However, studies have not proven that this is the case. Rick Perry’s Texas Educator Excellence Grant legislation gave school districts the funding to distribute bonuses to high performing teachers based on student TAKS scores, but schools districts were uncooperative, giving out bonus checks of significantly less value than the legislation suggested. The $300 million grant produced no evidence that the merit pay program had an effect on student achievement (Stutz). Education scholars do not know if financial incentives and rewards actually improve teaching methods or student success (Guthrie and Schuermann). This, incidentally, brings up another blemished element in the theory of pay-for-performance salary reforms. How exactly does one measure the quality of teaching in the classroom when there are so many inconsistent factors? Proposals for Merit Pay programs in schools tend to “lack objective criteria,” according the President of the American Federation of Teachers (Feldman) and even the exceptions to this tendency fail to truly present criteria that would account for the several discrepancies in the correlation between quality teaching and student achievement. Students are not cookie-cutter replicas of one type of learner. In a single classroom a teacher may be dealing with 25 students and, subsequently, 25 different learning styles. To suggest that he or she should be paid more for being a better teacher for each those 25 students is to suggest that he or she be paid more for having several different personalities. The truth is, some teaching styles are not compatible with some learning styles, and while teachers do need to work around that to ensure that each student is receiving information in a way that he or she can learn it, the stress of impending monetary gains will not aid teachers in working patiently with a student, or 24 students on an individual level. In fact, tying student performance to teacher pay is a seemingly excellent option if the goal is to create a higher-stress environment in the classroom, corruption in school bureaucracy, and non-existent collaboration between co-workers.

Teachers are a valuable part of our society, and are, as many citizens have expressed, grossly underpaid. While educators do deserve a better paycheck, basing their pay on student performance is not only unfair, but also, according to studies, ineffective. Instead of spending millions of tax dollars on the funding of merit pay programs that do not work, it seems that state and federal legislation should be pushing toward a reform in the professionalism of the education field and perhaps spending in favor of an overall raise in teacher pay. Tax money is being poorly spent, students are not benefiting, and teachers are not receiving the respect or rewards that they deserve.   
 In many cases, merit pay programs were tested on inner-city teachers, simply because the potential benefits that politicians and scholars were hoping to see from the program are desperately needed by inner-city schools. The conditions of schools in urban areas, especially those of low-income, have been consistently declining, and as result many families are fleeing from typical public education in hopes of finding an alternative to work as their saving grace. While there are several benefits to the charter system -- more specialized education, programs, and freedom in school structure-- the main attraction for families in our poverty-ridden and underperforming areas stems from “[doubt] that the public schools can do (or at any rate, will do) what is necessary to educate poor minority children” (Raspberry). The government’s focus on the lifting of current caps on charter schools is, in turn, causing them to be negligent when it comes to typical public schooling. I must urge you then, Mr. President, and Mr. Secretary, to consider the fact that at this moment students who attend typical public schools are being severely underserved. In reality, had these schools been given the proper federal and state attention, a lift of charter schools would not need to be a political focus because students would already be receiving an exceptional education . The issue lies in the fact that parents and children alike in urban areas see charter schools as a life-saver in the face of floundering, and dangerous typical public schools. But with limited space and lottery-based admissions, not everyone is given the opportunity to be saved. Additionally, these saviors are not necessarily always better performance wise than the schools from which these students are fleeing. That means that even if a student’s name, to their parents’ relief, is drawn from the mass of other names hoping for a chance at quality education, there is still a chance that the student may be deprived of decent schooling. In fact, that student may also be forced to experience the pangs of disappointment and upheaval if they attend a charter school that ultimately fails and is shut down, in which case the student would be sent back to their original unsafe or underperforming school, thus entering a cycle of poor government provided education options and a widened achievement gap.

This, it seems, is not only counter-productive, but also completely preventable. The positive aspects of charter schools can also be found in the magnet school setting. Similar to charters, public magnet schools give students the opportunity to experience a free and specialized education. Instead of focusing on increasing the amount of charter schools in this country, I urge you to consider implementing reforms that would encourage school districts to create and maintain magnet programs while revitalizing those typical, or traditional, public schools that are currently unsuccessful at providing a safe and decent education to its students. I do believe that charter schools have their place in our education system, however, it is my opinion that we must attend to programs and schools already in existence before we attempt to increase the amount of charters in our country. To do otherwise would be to neglect those students who are most in need of our attention.

I do not mean, however, to undermine the attempts that have been made to improve our public schools. The Race to the Top initiative did, at the very least, force states who were interested in receiving the available funding to think about how they could employ reformation in their respective public education system. However, in states like Massachusetts, where education has been a top priority for a great number of years, the criterion and rubric attached to the grant program worked against the state goals and, more importantly, strengths. In this way, while the RTTT initiative did help fund the improvement of some states and encourage others to work toward a similar outcome, it had some of the same negative effects of the long standing No Child Left Behind legislation; it sought out accountability in student education, but stifled the high achieving.   
 The best thing about the NCLB program is that it required teachers and states as a whole to take responsibility for their roles in the lives of their students. However, as with all things, corruption and desperation had the potential to creep in. While accountability is the biggest benefit that came from the NCLB legislation, changes in state curriculum, lowering of state standards and exclusion of non-tested subjects in order to have results worth taking accountability for are obviously the biggest detriments.

The No Child Left Behind act did set clear goals for students (Spelling), however, these goals were left up to state interpretations. Subsequently, states have altered curriculum and changed their standards to accommodate for students who might not have actually met the mark in terms of national expectations. In essence, states have lowered their standards in order to appear successful in the eyes of NCLB supporters. The issue truly comes down to greed. The funding attached to sufficient AYP, and the fear of job loss in the case that a school fails, puts added pressure on teachers and school officials of struggling schools to ensure that students perform well on the tests that determine AYP. Not unlike the pressure that is put on students when teachers are paid based on their performance, the NCLB program creates added stress and facilitates anxiety in the classroom environment. In schools that are typically inclined to perform poorly on standardized testing, programs in the arts and physical education tend to be neglected in favor of added focus on subjects that are tested. Additionally, these struggling schools, typically in low income areas, do not have the funding or resources to truly improve their scores and are therefore punished by the cycle created by negligent government education reforms, and, again the achievement gap widens and students from inner city areas are subjected to the upheaval that is inevitable when their schools are shut down instead of attended to.   
 In schools of the opposite nature, that is, schools that exceed expectations, the NCLB program is just as detrimental, in that AYP obviously measures progress.

Schools that have exceeded expectations rarely have much room to further develop. In these cases, the NCLB program almost punishes schools for doing well, by deeming them in need of improvement for lacking year to year progress. The issue is that these schools can hardly improve when they are already hitting the ceiling so far as student achievement and standardized test results. The NCLB program’s goal of creating a system in which teacher accountability improves student achievement is honorable, but seems a bit unnecessary and has ultimately been poorly executed when one considers the consequences of the programs implementation within our schools. A program that results in a less engaging curriculum, places stigmas on high performance and induces anxiety in children obviously has no place in our education system. Accountability must be present in the teaching profession, however, establishing that accountability should never be at the sacrifice of quality education for our children.   
 I must then urge you, Mr. President and Mr. Secretary, to reconsider the programs that are currently being implemented in our education system. While all actions meant to improve will always have the potential to fail, it is of upmost importance that when we notice a program doing a disservice to our students we make the effort to change it. I do not mean to belittle or disregard the intentions behind the programs that are presently in place; however, I cannot stand idly by without voicing my opinions and observations regarding one of our greatest national treasures: the education of our future.

Thank you for your service, dedication and contributions to our country, and thank you for your time.   
Respectfully yours,

Jordan Peterson