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TO: Interested Parties  
FROM: Ellen Fern  
RE: Assistant Secretary Henry Johnson Speaks at NASSP Policy Briefing

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Earlier today at the National Press Club, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) kicked off its 2006 National Policy Briefing Series with Assistant Secretary Henry L. Johnson, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. Johnson's remarks, titled, "The Year Ahead – New Initiatives at the Department of Education," included his personal vision for the future of American education as well as the top three priorities for the Department in the coming year.

While the audience was eager to hear about the Department's priorities, they were also hoping to get a preview of what the President might include later this evening as part of his State of the Union address relating to education. Unfortunately no such details were shared.

According to Johnson, the Department's top three priorities for FY 2007 include:

- 1) Improving math/science education;
- 2) Defining the role of the federal government in capacity building; and
- 3) High school reform.

In terms of math/science education, Johnson spoke about the need to improve how *math* is taught in schools. He said the Department was particularly focused on improving math education in Title I schools and helping teachers teach mathematics more effectively. Johnson noted that a consensus needed to be reached among the factions of the "math wars" on the most important elements of a quality math program. He noted that the various players in the reading profession had reached such a consensus and that a similar process needed to take place in mathematics. Johnson also spoke about the need for more research on this topic and that he had already reached out to colleagues at the National Science Foundation to discuss how to gather such data.

Secondly, Johnson spoke about the need to define what, if any, role the federal government should assume in capacity building. When pressed for more detail on what he meant, Johnson explained that it was his view that it was the federal government's

responsibility to assist states in their efforts to strengthen school districts' capacity to help schools improve. While Johnson saw a role for the federal government in this process, he conceded that he is not sure how the government could do this most effectively.

Lastly, Johnson spoke about the need for high school reform. While he acknowledged that the Congress did not support or fund the President's high school reform initiative last year, he stressed the need to continue to pursue ways to improve high schools. Specifically, Johnson stressed the need to push for a rigorous and relevant curriculum as well as "relationships." This includes increasing the content mastery of middle and high school teachers, which he said has a direct correlation to student achievement. He went on to say that students need to graduate from high school with the ability to make a choice for their future – whether it be pursuing a post-secondary degree or going immediately into the workforce.

During the question and answer period, audience members attempted to get more specifics from Johnson on the President's new math/science initiative. Johnson noted he did not have any more details, nor did he have any information about the President's budget. Requests for further clarification about how the Department was going to go about defining "rigorous" curriculum also went unanswered, but Johnson stated that "conversations have started" internally. Audience questions also touched on the need for more funding for states to utilize technology to implement data-driven decision-making, as well as the feasibility of a standard exam for teachers. Johnson stressed that it was still a state function to define the criteria for meeting "highly qualified teacher" requirements, but that the PRAXIS exam did incorporate a national approach.

More details of the Administration's education policy priorities will become available during the President's State of the Union Address this evening, and when the Administration's federal budget request is unveiled on February 6<sup>th</sup>. Initial briefings and conversations indicate that math and science education will be a part of a cross-agency "competitiveness" agenda. "Strengthening" math and science education, as well as university programs in teacher education have been cited as elements of the initiative. Once the plans are officially released and more details are known, Washington Partners will share these details with you immediately.