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September 5, 2011

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

I deeply appreciate your steadfast support for public education and America's students. We share the belief that knowledge is the single most valuable commodity in today's global economy. Public education is not only the vehicle for individuals' success, it is the engine of American innovation. Educators across this country hold the cradle of America's ingenuity and resilient, hopeful spirit in their hands. In our public schools every day, students are taught that good ideas combined with hard work can create the next new invention, market, or treasure. On this Labor Day, I write not only to honor the educators who have gone back to school this year to instill that American spirit and work ethic, but I also write to honor all those who have been laid off and are no longer able to fulfill their calling to help our nation's students.

I have heard the voices of educators across this country who, in the face of budget cuts and pink slips, worry first about their students. As I know you are aware, one out of every five children lives in poverty and millions more are living with the uncertainty and instability of parents who are unemployed. Educators see the impact of the economy on the worried faces their students. They see it in the growing numbers of children who need support from counselors and other educators, yet cuts in school budgets are shrinking our students' access to the very professionals who can provide a sense of stability and normalcy as our country weathers this economic storm. Educators see the impact of cuts through the elimination of classes designed to create well-rounded students who can thrive in a 21<sup>st</sup> century globally interdependent world. They see the impact of cuts to afterschool programs, the increase in the number of hungry children, and in ballooning class sizes. They even see the impact in the growing list of supplies that educators and parents together must provide to students and schools with their own money.

I, along with the 3.2 million members of the National Education Association, look forward to hearing your address to Congress this week. We understand that these are challenging times and that no lawmaker or American can possibly expect one proposal or one piece of legislation to remedy all that ails the American economy. I hope, however, that what guides your leadership continues to be a firm belief that investment in our nation's human capital—the American middle class—is the surest path to economic recovery. Educators are smart enough to learn

lessons from history, and history has shown time and again that federal investments in infrastructure and other middle class job-creating initiatives is the fastest way to not only put Americans back to work, but to improve the country overall. We urge you not to countenance the false rhetoric of ideologues who proclaim Wall Street, mega corporations, and billionaires as “job creators” who need continued special treatment under the tax code. The notion that a government that invests in its people is somehow irresponsible at a time when the wealthiest continue to make record profits, enjoy tax breaks for luxury items, and ship American jobs overseas is beyond offensive to average Americans. The bottom line for this nation—as with any nation in the world—is that when the middle class thrives, so does the nation’s economy. Our communities become stronger. Students’ dreams become more attainable.

When you address Congress and the nation later this week, I specifically hope that you will emphasize:

- **Putting Americans to work modernizing schools.** On average, the buildings that house our public schools are more than 40 years old and require an estimated \$500 billion in repairs and upgrades. An initial \$50 billion school renovation program would employ 500,000 workers — a third of the 1.5 million construction workers now unemployed — and could easily be scaled up. Construction and building repair generally create 9,000-10,000 jobs per billion dollars spent. Eliminating just half the backlog in repairs and improvements would, over a period of years, create more than 2 million jobs.
- **Providing direct aid to local governments.** Federal support for public education is an investment in our nation’s future — in equipping America’s workforce to succeed in the global economy of the 21st century. When educators lose their jobs, students lose too. When students returned to school this fall, fewer dedicated professionals were there to greet and care for them — fewer teachers, teachers’ aides, librarians, bus drivers, food service workers, counselors, and nurses. These dollars will also help ensure that communities are not placed at risk by cuts to other critical services, such as public safety and healthcare. Many Americans do not realize that forty percent of all education funding is derived from local property taxes. Given the avarice associated with the mortgage industry over the last 10 to 15 years—in the form of predatory lending practices and unchecked Wall Street speculation in this sector—local communities and their school systems have borne the brunt of a housing crisis they didn’t create. As a result, we need to ensure that federal dollars make their way to the people in greatest need, that those dollars are not diverted to other purposes or used to meet general budget shortfalls.
- **Urging the Super Committee to develop a balanced approach to deficit reduction by including revenue-raising proposals and protecting programs for the most vulnerable.** The need to preserve and strengthen programs like Social Security and Medicare is evident, but the moral imperative to ensure that Medicaid, low income programs, Pell grants, and essential education formula funding like Title I and IDEA remain unharmed is a notion that I truly hope is unchallenged. The country’s long term prosperity cannot sustain a continued growth in the gap between the wealthy and middle- and lower-income American families. Those who are struggling on Main Street should

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not become a bargaining chip in the country's fiscal debate – they should be our highest priority.

Our nation's educators stand ready to work with you to restore confidence in government and revive the American dream — to strengthen our children's belief that the United States is a nation where children can dream of greatness, prepare themselves in our public schools, and see their dreams come true. On this Labor Day, I join with educators across America in wishing you well and pledging our support to work with you to place the American dream within greater reach for every American.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dennis Van Roekel".

Dennis Van Roekel  
President  
National Education Association