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Letter, John C. Stennis to Richard M. Nixon, March 12, 1969

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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20510

T. EDWARD BRASWELL, JR., CHIEF OF STAFF
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The President
The White House

Dear Mr. President:

I urgently request that you personally intervene and take steps to protect our public schools and colleges from the harsh and unreasonable demands of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. I firmly believe that unless prompt and effective action is taken, our schools are in great danger of being destroyed or damaged beyond repair.

Of course, I refer to the action being taken and threatened daily by officials in the Compliance Division of the Office of Education, as well as other officials having to do with so-called Civil Rights compliance requirements imposed upon our local schools and colleges pursuant to the "guidelines" promulgated under Title 6 of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. I have been impressed with the statements made thus far by Secretary Finch and especially the statements made by him during the interview published in the March 10, 1969 edition of U. S. News and World Report. I have discussed this generally with Secretary Finch by telephone and I look forward to an opportunity to go into the matter with him further. I understand that the "guidelines" are under review and perhaps will be revised.

However, the trouble is that while the present guidelines are being reviewed and studies are being made, agents and officials of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare appointed under the previous Administration and acting under "guidelines" promulgated by the previous Administration, which are still in effect, are calling on our school districts to meet unreasonable and impossible demands, threatening to cut off federal funds, imposing harsh deadlines and making recommendations to the Justice Department regarding Court actions. Unfortunately, these officials seem to have little or no interest in the education of our children, or the preservation of our schools. Their apparent sole consideration is total and immediate integration, even if the schools are totally destroyed in the process.

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Mr. President, I think that the people all over the country are concerned about the future of public education and the over-involvement of Civil Rights enforcement officials in the day-to-day operation of our schools. I was encouraged by your own clear-cut statement which you made last Fall in North Carolina and, in my opinion, citizens throughout the Nation expressed themselves in November in no uncertain terms, that on this one subject, as well as others, they wanted a change. I am hopeful that a change in the guidelines and the general policy in such matters will be forthcoming, and prompt action is necessary if our schools are to be preserved.

Of course, there can be no public schools without local support, financial and otherwise, and unless the people in the local communities back school officials and school board members every step of the way. These local school officials have gone to great lengths, at considerable personal sacrifice, to meet the various requirements imposed upon them by the Courts and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In large measure, I think they have satisfied these requirements. Certainly considerable progress has been made because of the willingness of local school boards and school officials to assume responsibility and to take the steps necessary to work matters out at the local level, in a manner where local support for the schools would be maintained. However, constant arbitrary and capricious harassment, insistence upon impossible percentages, and demands that certain schools be closed, serves to undermine the very local officials who have been willing to take the lead.

Mr. President, I urgently request that you take immediate action to rescind the guidelines and impose a moratorium of further action in this field by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare until your administration can review the matter fully and until new and reasonable guidelines are issued more in keeping with the provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The current guidelines go far beyond any such requirements and should be rescinded immediately.

Respectfully,

John Stennis
United States Senator

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