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Mayor's message: The fight for responsible budgeting

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Economic development is intrinsically tied to the education of our youth. A well educated student population is able to provide innovation, creativity and entrepreneurialism to the workplace, and capacity to our workforce. In the northeast, this is a critically important issue.

Late last month, I had the honor of traveling to Washington, DC, to meet with U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. It was the purpose of that meeting to talk about initiatives to help urban youth succeed and to become engaged and productive members of our society. It was also my goal to ask Secretary Duncan to clarify the intention of federal education Recovery dollars slated for Rhode Island, which we believed would bring essential help to our communities and opportunity for our schools and our students.

A recent Washington Post reported that Secretary Duncan had issued the following warning, about those Recovery dollars. "States that are simply investing in the status quo will put themselves at a tremendous competitive disadvantage for getting those additional funds. I can't emphasize strongly enough how important it is for states and districts to think very creatively and to think very differently about how they use this first set of money."

Attending that meeting with Secretary Duncan were three other mayors (mayor Kevin Johnson of Sacramento; mayor Cory Booker of Newark; and mayor Adrian Fenty of the District of Columbia) all similarly concerned about these urgently-needed Recovery funds for our communities. We were there in advance of a 1-day Summit on Education, with the US Conference of Mayors, and discussed with Secretary Duncan a proposal to create a permanent advisory group of mayors for the Department of Education. We also spoke about the "Rise to the Top Fund," which is a fund established in the economic recovery package to support education, that will be dedicated on a competitive basis.

At the Mayors' National Forum on Education, I had the opportunity to present on the award-winning Providence After School Alliance (PASA,) and the city's plans to expand PASA to high schools at the on. I launched PASA shortly after taking office in 2003, in recognition of the urgency of protecting our unsupervised, middle-school youth in the risky out-of-school hours. PASA - which is a collaboration of some 100+ stakeholders - coordinates equipment, services, personnel and programming at campuses of facilities, we call AfterZones. These campuses include recreation and community centers, libraries, museums, school sites and the like, and we are now serving approximately 1,800 middle school students in Providence. We offer them a variety of high-quality, supervised and fun after-school programs including sailing, cooking, theater, tennis and drumming.

It is with some pride that I also mention that just this week alone, we have been named finalists in three separate awards competitions, for our ground-breaking PASA initiative: Harvard University's Ash Institute for Excellence, the US Conference of Mayors City Livability Award, and the National Civic League's All America City Award.

In a very few years, we have made a replicable model of excellent after school care for our city youth, working with 18 other communities nationwide, which are interested in creating similar programs for their youth.

Finally, while I was in Washington, I was able to bring the message of urban cities and to speak to the concerns of our Democratic mayors. As president of the National Conference of Democratic Mayors, I and fellow mayor R.T. Ryback, vice president of NCDM, met with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Melody Barnes, chair of the White House Domestic Policy Council, to talk about the need to recognize the economic engine cities represent, and the impact we face as the front-line of public concerns.

Taking the fight for responsible budgeting to Washington, assures that our nation's highest leaders hear the voices of us all.

David Cicilline is the mayor of Providence.

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