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June 16, 2020

The Honorable Marie Royce
Assistant Secretary
Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
U.S. Department of State
Washington, D.C. 20520

RE: Expedited J-1 Visa Interview Process for SSSP Exchange Visitors

Dear Assistant Secretary Royce:

In spite of the COVID-19 crisis, the Secondary School Student Program (SSSP) continues to enjoy keen interest from teens—and parents—around the globe. We are all aware that a high school exchange experience affects participants' future lives in many positive ways. The experience forever changes how they think of themselves and our respective countries. The determination of these prospective Exchange Visitors (EV) to learn and engage directly with Americans speaks to the value of the SSSP experience and underlines the importance of effectively responding to the challenge before us.

Exchange Visitors also impact their communities mightily, bringing an awareness of the value of international engagement and public diplomacy to local communities all around the United States. Thousands of host families and schools are eagerly awaiting these EVs knowing the valuable contribution they make to their communities. Further, these EVs contribute millions of dollars to local economies and support many millions of dollars of employment that further contributes to the U.S. economy more broadly. The value of these contributions should not be minimized as the U.S. seeks to recover from this crisis.

Many U.S. consulates abroad are now preparing plans for their re-opening. As we near those dates and consider the significant build-up of demand for visa interview appointments, it is clear that serious bottlenecks are ahead. Already numerous consulates are projecting that they will—upon re-opening—be immediately backlogged well into September.

We ask that it be communicated to consular officers that ECA wishes to ensure that these high school EVs be prioritized and that their visa application reviews be done on an expedited basis to ensure that they are able to arrive on time to start their programs throughout August and early September. The Secondary School Student Program is a cornerstone of U.S. soft diplomacy and many students have only one opportunity to participate due to age or grade level restrictions.

So as not to stretch consular capacity even further and so as to ensure high school applicants do not miss this important opportunity, another solution would be for consulates to exercise their statutory purview and routinely waive in-person interviews for SSSP J-1 visa applicants while implementing a random sampling in-person interview regimen for purposes of control and compliance. Naturally, we understand that political and security situations vary by country and that such a

protocol would need to be implemented in a manner consistent with local conditions.

We understand that there are always a number of competing priorities but ask that high school exchange visitors who by definition are minors (15-18 year of age) and pose a very low risk—both in terms of security and possible violation of the terms of their visa (e.g. overstaying) be viewed as a key priority.

Naturally, the vast majority of SSSP applicants come from countries well known to and friendly with the United States. We hope this approach will expedite the process for SSSP applicants while allowing consular officers to focus their attention where they are most needed at this critical time. We greatly appreciate your consideration in this matter and would gladly offer any support or clarification necessary.

Respectfully,

Academic Foundation for International Cultural Exchange	La Jolla, CA
AFS-USA	New York, NY
AIFS Foundation/ Academic Year in America	Stamford, CT
American Cultural Exchange Service	Bellevue, WA
Aspect Foundation	San Francisco, CA
ASSE International Student Exchange Programs	Laguna Beach, CA
ASSIST	Suffield, CT
Ayusa International	San Francisco, CA
Borderless Friends Forever Foundation	Cary, NC
Children of All Nations	Austin, TX
CIEE - Council on International Educational Exchange	Portland, ME
Council of Educational Travel USA	Grand Rapids, MI
CSIET	Alexandria, VA
Cultural Academic Student Exchange	Montclair, NJ
Cultural Homestay International	San Rafael, CA
Education Travel & Culture	Portland, OR
Educational Merit Foundation For Student Exchange	Sachse, TX
Educational Resource Development Trust/ SHARE!	Santa Monica, CA
EF High School Exchange	Cambridge, MA
Face the World	Petaluma, CA
Foreign Links Around the Globe (FLAG Inc.)	Portage, MI
Forte International Exchange Association	Falls Church, VA
GAPP, Inc.	New York, NY
Global Insights	Marietta, GA
Greenheart International	Chicago, IL
International Cultural Exchange Services- ICES	Henderson, NV
International Experience	Northfield, MN
International Fellowship, Inc.	Westfield, NY

International Student Exchange	Bay Shore, NY
Nacel Open Door	St Paul, MN
NorthWest Student Exchange	Seattle, WA
NW Services, Inc. PEACE Program	Caldwell, ID
Organization for Cultural Exchange Among Nations (OCEAN)	Tempe, AZ
Pan Atlantic Foundation	Portland, ME
Program of Academic Exchange (PAX) and Laurasian Institution	Port Chester, NY
States' 4-H International Exchange	Seattle, WA
STS Foundation	Concord, MA
Student American International	Hollywood, FL
Terra Lingua USA	Terryville, CT
The Foundation for Academic Cultural Exchange	Reno, NV
The Foundation for Worldwide Inteernational Student Exchange	Dyersburg, TN
UCEUS	Upland, CA
United Studies	Hot Springs, AR
Youth For Understanding USA, Inc.	Washington, DC