



May 7, 2024

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Room S-221, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Majority Leader Schumer:

On behalf of The Better World Campaign and the undersigned individuals and organizations, we write today to ask that you expedite Senate confirmation of Courtney D. O'Donnell's nomination to be U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This is a critical position for U.S. global leadership that must not remain vacant, and we firmly believe that Ms. O'Donnell is highly qualified and well-positioned to advocate for U.S. interests there.

UNESCO does vital work on a wide array of issues important to U.S. national interests and values. This includes everything from supporting literacy efforts and access to quality primary education in the developing world, to supporting the preservation of World Heritage sites around the world, including in the United States. UNESCO also works to promote international Holocaust education by encouraging countries to incorporate teaching about the Holocaust into their national curricula, running training seminars and providing educational materials to educators, and working to combat Holocaust denial.

UNESCO has also increasingly become an important forum for discussing the ethical development and use of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and neurotechnology. In 2021, for example, UNESCO member states promulgated a comprehensive framework for how to deploy AI in ways that do not exacerbate societal inequalities, threaten fundamental human rights and freedoms, or fuel division and violence. These guidelines were an important element of the "historic" UN resolution recently passed setting out principles for using AI in a safe way. After the vote, U.S.-UN Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield said she believes the world's nations came together in part because "the technology is moving so fast that people don't have a sense of what is happening and how it will impact them..." She also stated that "It's just the first step." Moving forward, UNESCO will continue to serve as a key venue where national governments, developers, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders can discuss the implications of these types of technologies, and it is essential that our ambassador be in place for the journey ahead.

As you know, the U.S. rejoined UNESCO last year after a five-year absence, and an even longer period of not honoring our annual financial commitments to the organization. During that time, the People's Republic of China became UNESCO's largest funder—contributing 15% of its total core budget—and leveraged the vacuum left by the U.S.'s absence to pursue its own agenda. As a result, the U.S. is now playing catch-up at UNESCO as its work dovetails with a number of core priorities for U.S. policymakers, including, as noted above, issues around AI, press freedom, and Holocaust education. Given the stakes, it is critical that a Senate-confirmed Ambassadorial nominee be able to quickly assume the U.S.'s seat in Paris in order to influence these discussions.

Ms. O'Donnell's skill set is uniquely well-tailored for this task and we believe that she will be able to hit the ground running as soon as she is confirmed. Ms. O'Donnell served as a senior Advisor in the Office of the Vice President and as Chief of Staff for Second Gentleman Douglas Emhoff. In these roles, she was involved in advancing a number of issues that are also central to UNESCO's mandate, including gender equality and efforts to fight anti-Semitism. Prior to her White House service, Ms. O'Donnell served as Director of Global Partnerships at Airbnb, where she worked to promote sustainable tourism and female entrepreneurship both in the U.S. and abroad. Here too, Ms. O'Donnell's record of experience establishing programs and alliances to advance these issues will be an asset to her as U.S. Ambassador to UNESCO.

Coming out of the recent UNESCO Executive Board meetings, it is vital that the American delegation demonstrates leadership within the body and leverages the expertise of American experts from government, academia, the private sector and civil society across UNESCO forums and debates on issues in education, technology and science. There are a number of key milestones in the U.S.-UNESCO relationship, including global convenings on AI in May and the one-year anniversary of the U.S. rejoining the organization this June. It is important that an Ambassador be installed as soon as possible so that the U.S. is able to put its best foot forward at the organization and move the needle in a way that advances our national interests and values.

While we recognize there are a number of other nominations and legislative matters demanding your attention, given the importance of this position to U.S. diplomacy, we request that you bring up Ms. O'Donnell for a vote on the Senate floor as quickly as possible. After five years of silence at UNESCO, it is time for America to lead.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

- Gen. U.S. Army (Ret.) Nolen Bivens, President & CEO, Americans for the Arts
- Douglas C. Comer, President, U.S. National Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS-USA)
- Ann B. Friedman, Founder, Planet Word
- Rene Jones, Partner & Chief of Social Impact, United Talent Agency
- Laura E. Kennedy, Ambassador (Ret.)
- Rachel Pittman, Executive Director, United Nations Association of the USA
- Nilmini Rubin, Former Director, National Security Council (George W. Bush Administration)
- Emily Vargas-Barón, Director, RISE Institute
- Peter Yeo, President, Better World Campaign