



California Federation of Teachers
American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO

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California Federation of Teachers:
Legislature Shouldn't Pass a Bad Law Just to Get Money;
Teaching Reforms Should be Based on Research and Experience

SACRAMENTO, CA - The California Federation of Teachers (CFT) today told the State Assembly Education Committee considering legislation regarding the federal "Race to the Top" education funding program that the Legislature should not pass a bad law just to compete for federal funding. "In a year that Governor Schwarzenegger and the legislature have made billions of dollars in catastrophic cuts to school funding, it is ironic that the Legislature is rushing to adopt bad policy to compete for a relative pittance in federal funding," said CFT President Marty Hittelman. "The money offered by the federal government will not begin to replace what has been taken away. Legislators are rushing to make permanent changes without a solid basis in facts or research in return for the possibility of three years of funding."

CFT Legislative Representative Jeff Freitas told the Assembly committee that "a plan should be developed with the participation of all education stakeholders, including classified employees and parents. Some legislation may be needed, but care should be taken regarding any long-term effects. California should not pass a bill that adds to the education bureaucracy without improving schools."

Student Data

CFT believes the "data" issues in SB1 5X have already been resolved by SB 19 (Simitian) that has just been signed by the governor.

"We believe that student achievement and student growth data may be worthwhile tools in helping to improve school instruction when the data instruments contain information that is useful to the teacher. But we must ensure the privacy of our students and of our staff while still providing the information needed to improve instruction. The primary use of the data system must be to support instruction," said Freitas.

Charter Schools

"Charter schools are not a panacea for our education challenges," said Hittelman. "No evidence suggests that more charter schools enhance educational outcomes. We need to hold charter schools accountable for claims to parents, students and the state, and protect the public interest. Schools closed because of academic, financial, low enrollment or mismanagement should not be considered successful. We need to look at the private use of public funds, and teacher, principal and classified staff turnover as we evaluate charter schools," said Hittelman.

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We believe that the heavy hand in favor of charter schools in Race to the Top is misplaced. Most of them do not do better than regular public schools, and many of them do worse. A recent study has shown that only 17 percent of charter schools produced higher academic gains than the traditional public schools and 37 percent did worse. The rest were about the same.

If charter schools are to become labs for new directions they should be required to serve English-language learners, students with disabilities, and very low income students. They should be held accountable for academic achievement the same way that our traditional public schools are. They should be financially sound and based on the same state standards as those proposed for traditional public schools.

Standardized Testing, Student Assessment, and Teacher Evaluation

We believe that the emphasis on standardized tests is misplaced and destructive. Multiple-choice tests in math and reading do not address the real goals of education. Teaching to the test not only narrows the curriculum but also tends to destroy any love of learning. When tests drive the curriculum, instruction suffers. It is not fair to teachers, students, and schools to have standardized test scores as the main determinant of teacher and school quality. It is not fair to base high stakes decisions on these test scores. Anyone who has spent much time in the classroom will tell you that one day's performance is not a valid indicator of a student's mastery of his or her school year curriculum and growth. That is why educators use ongoing quizzes, tests, written assignments, and portfolios to determine how much a student is growing. Not only are children's performances on one standardized test not a valid measure of quality, but it is also unfair to determine things like compensation and dismissal based on these test scores. Such an approach will cause some teachers to fight for the easiest group of students to teach in order to maximize pay. This is just not a productive approach.

Making Progress in Closing the Achievement Gap

Any effort to close the achievement gap in our schools that does not address the conditions that children grow up in is doomed to failure. Schools can only do so much in the time that they work with students. Until this country closes the gaps in job opportunities with a livable wage, health care, and affordable housing, efforts for improvements in the schools will have limited success. In addition, you can develop all the best tests in the world but if you don't improve the conditions in the schools in which students and teachers operate in, the test scores will not improve either. As the famous farmer said, "Weighing my hog accurately doesn't help it to grow heavier."