



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

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**California Federation of Teachers, UTLA comment
on “Race to the Top”:**

Feds demand too much, too soon, for too little

SACRAMENTO, CA - The California Federation of Teachers has a number of serious concerns regarding Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s proposed “Race to the Top” competition for state education funding. CFT President Hittelman told the State Senate Education Committee today that the proposed regulations for federal funding would require changes that could harm California students, are not based on research, and won't turn around struggling schools. Here are a few of those concerns, excerpted from a letter to the Education Secretary from Hittelman. For the complete text of the letter, go to www.cft.org. In addition, United Teachers Los Angeles President A.J. Duffy told Legislators, “This is yet another example of non-educators not understanding how education works. What schools need in California is to be fully –funded, not to tie funding to merit pay schemes or having teachers evaluated solely on test scores,” said UTLA President A.J. Duffy. “That is the businesses model, and in the last two years that model has gotten us into the worst recession since the Great Depression. Why would we want to emulate that model in our schools?”

Student Data

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. We do not believe that current standardized tests being administered as part of the No Child Left Behind meet those criteria. In terms of the “firewall” between student and teacher data, California has no restrictions on the use of such data at the local level, where it matters, for such evaluations. California should be judged to be in compliance with this requirement.

We need the right reforms

It takes more than the ability to fill in bubbles to be considered an educated person. We thought President Obama understood that. With the proposed requirements of The Race to the Top, we are led to believe that he subscribes to the No Child Left Behind ideology of narrow testing and one-size-fits-all education. We are disappointed.

We are concerned that the governor and legislators of California will succumb to the temptation of increased funding while, at the same time, giving up traditional state and local autonomy in the area of education. We believe that many of the requirements of Race to the Top will be detrimental to our students’ education. We believe that it is unwise for California to accept, and for the federal government to impose, changes that have not been shown to be productive. It is one thing to try new ideas; another to impose them before they’ve been proven to work.

California Federation of Teachers news release, Race to the Top, page 2, Aug. 26, 2009

Our experiences indicate that schools improve when teachers are provided: relevant professional development; supports such as mentoring and induction and manageable class sizes; supportive principals and qualified and trained support staff; a voice in school-level decisions; and, the schools are safe places to work. Firing or moving staff hasn't been proven a successful solution. Closing a school has the devastating effect of disrupting communities and displacing children, disruptions that weigh most heavily on minority communities.

Charter Schools

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 non-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.

In addition, it is unclear how the proposal would base teacher evaluation, compensation, promotion and dismissal on standardized tests, when most teachers teach grades and subjects not captured in standardized tests or repeated. We are also concerned that the use of data does not violate student and educator privacy rights. We are concerned that the programs being proposed have not shown success in turning around schools while proven, school-based programs are not under consideration.

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 at 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 that students and teachers operate in, the test scores will not improve. As the famous farmer said "weighing my hog accurately doesn't help it to grow heavier." #30#