



Louisiana Federation of Teachers

American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO

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Secretary of Education Arne Duncan
U.S. Department of Education
Office of Elementary and Secondary Education
Public Comment: Race to the Top
400 Maryland Avenue, SW, Room 3W329
Washington, DC 20202

Re: Race to the Top Fund [Docket ID ED 2009 - OESE – 0006]
Program Type: Discretionary/Competitive Grants

The Louisiana Federation of Teachers, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, represents more than 19,000 public school teachers and school employees. On behalf of its membership and in support of a high quality public educational opportunity for every child, we are appreciative of the opportunity to comment on the Notice of Proposed Priorities, Requirements, Definitions, and Selection Criteria published in the July 29, 2009 *Federal Register* relative to the initiative entitled the **Race to the Top Fund**.

We understand the significant opportunities, particularly for children in America's highest poverty schools and at greatest risk, presented by President Barack Obama's commitment of more than four billion dollars to this competitive grant program. We acknowledge and applaud this administration's focus on and historic investment of federal dollars in the education of all children.

However, as cliché makes clear --- *the devil does and will always lie in the details*. In Louisiana, wholesale cataclysmic changes spawned by four major hurricanes over the course of four short years have caused us to be much more sensitive to both the intended and the unintended consequences of every policy decision.

Thus, while we remain hopeful that RTTT will help to provide every child with a real opportunity to succeed, experience has taught us that the details **do matter** and even the best intended initiatives --- poorly defined and/or poorly implemented --- can produce painful consequences.

The LFT is aware that our national organization, the American of Teachers will address the RTTT draft proposal in great detail, thus the LFT will attempt to restrict its public comment to a smaller number of specific concerns.

Turning around "failing schools"

More than any other state, Louisiana has been a laboratory for "school reform." Our four major hurricanes altered more than our coastline – natural disasters were used as pretext for wholesale changes in public education policy. Arguably, some were driven more by ideological persuasion and the profit motive than in

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educational improvement.

In the City of New Orleans, for example, some 7,500 teachers and school employees were summarily fired after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. By a special act of the legislature, most of the city's schools were taken over by the state or chartered.

While state law prohibits for-profit entities from chartering schools, non-profit organizations that are granted charters may sublet their charter to one of the growing number of money-making educational enterprises. Not coincidentally, many of the problems associated with Louisiana's charter schools involve allegations of financial mismanagement.

Critics accurately noted that achievement was low in city schools before the storm. What they fail to acknowledge is that in the four years prior to Katrina, city schools improved by 10.5 points, largely due to the heroic efforts of teachers and school employees. In the four years after Katrina, scores in the state Recovery District have improved by 9.5 points, despite having a per-pupil allowance about a third higher than other public schools in the state.

What does this tell us? Perhaps it is that education was on the right track in the city before the storm, and that the disruption of state takeovers and privatization of education services might have exacerbated what was already a dire situation because of the hurricane.

While LFT accepts that charter schools are now part of the educational landscape, we believe that they have certain obligations that mirror those of traditional public schools. They must be accountable to the public, ensure educational equity, open themselves to all students and give their employees a real voice in decisions.

Our analysis of the New Orleans experiment exposes five areas of concern:

- The funds spent on charter schools may often lack accountability. Mosaica, Edison, and others have seized the profit opportunity presented by the experiment, extracting profits of up to 12.5%.
- Charter schools often rely on traditional public schools to provide special education services.
- Charter schools don't provide the same insurance and retirement benefits to educators as regular public schools. In fact, not one Louisiana charter school offers retiree health insurance to its teachers and other employees.
- All charters are not created equal. There are charters with comparatively high school performance scores, and there are charters with dismal scores.
- Because of their fund-raising ability, charter schools can create a gap between Haves and Have-nots, leading to the creation of a separate but unequal, semi-private school system.

A recent study by Stanford University's **Center for Research on Educational Outcomes** was generally positive about Louisiana's charter school experiment. One reason for the apparent success, the study's author noted, is that Louisiana has had more stringent guidelines for establishing charter schools than other states. Louisiana school districts, with the exception of the state-seized system in New Orleans, have not embraced charters as a proverbial magic bullet.

But partly in response to RTTT guidelines, the state recently lifted its cap on charter schools. As they proliferate in Louisiana, our concerns are also spreading geographically. Around the state, citizens are alarmed at the prospect of charter schools as a backdoor to creating a separate but unequal, semi-private school system. The Louisiana Federation of Teachers' official position on charter schools is attached to this document.

It is a Federation core belief that all children must have a real opportunity to succeed in school and in life. Thus, so-called "struggling schools" must be viewed in a greater context than the parameters of the school proper. Turn-around reforms must be evidence based, and they must be paired with earnest efforts to address other

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powerful realities that affect student achievement such as, student health and nutrition, parental capacity to support their children's education, early childhood education, and hard poverty.

Highly effective teachers

It is an LFT core value that all students have a right to be taught by high-quality, effective teachers. As a goal, providing those teachers is especially challenging when resources are inequitably divided among school systems.

In Louisiana, that disparity means teachers in one district may earn many thousands of dollars more or less than identically qualified peers just across a school district line. Adequate funding is an issue that must be addressed. If the \$15,500 per pupil spent in the New Orleans Recovery School District is the true cost of educating a student, then children in the rest of the state deserve no less.

High teacher turnover has been shown to be costly and detrimental to student achievement. It is an established fact that teacher turnover is highest in our most challenged schools. It should follow that every effort is made to provide those schools with teachers who want to build successful professional careers. A stable, high quality faculty brings not only competence to the classroom, but helps to bring stability to our communities.

This does not mean that only teachers who earn certification through a traditional curriculum need apply. It does mean that alternative certification routes must offer the budding professional entree into a field that promises a decent salary, commensurate health and retirement benefits, and the academic freedom to teach according to their best professional judgment. Teaching should never be considered a "starter job" or a place-holder occupation until an individual discovers what he or she really wants to do in life.

With professionalism firmly established and schools that are well-resourced, safe and orderly, we have a right to expect highly effective teachers in all our classrooms. That requires high standards of practice for teachers as well as evidence of student achievement. Any evaluation system must balance those two elements. However, a corruption of the very concept of accountability will be the end result if we continue to make quantitative accountability systems, specifically the "darken the bubbles" standardized test, the sole determiner of either student competence or teacher effectiveness.

If the evaluation instrument values student achievement above good teaching practice, the result will be a narrowing of curriculum and "teaching to the test." On the other hand, the instrument(s) must consider student achievement in order to make the proper connection between teaching and learning. Thus, a process that includes competent evaluations of teachers by well-trained assessors must continue to be a major component of determining teacher quality.

Standards and assessments

Longitudinal data collection and value added education are buzzwords of the day, but they have limitations. Research shows that even the best value-added models provide measures of student learning that vary enormously from year to year. When the measures involve individual teachers versus whole schools, or teachers in small classes and small schools, the variance is even more pronounced.

To be true indicators, longitudinal or value-added models must include much more data than is obtainable from standardized tests. Only multiple sources – written work, group activities, student performances, portfolios, etc. – can accurately assess the evidence of student learning.

In the broadest sense, longitudinal data and value-added models should anticipate the final product: how children grow and mature into productive citizens, and how they interact with and thrive in society.

We submit that such an assessment cannot be made by focusing narrowly on what teachers do in school. Only a bolder, broader approach to public education, one which lifts entire communities, can truly succeed.

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That means any long-term evaluation must include components that measure the contributions of parents, administrators and school boards to student success. Broadened further, the process should include the roles played by systems of health care, juvenile justice, higher education and all the other elements of community that have an impact on the growth and development of an individual student.

Overarching Statement and Concerns: RTTT and the Future of Reform

Educators by their very nature embrace each day as an opportunity to build upon past successes and learn from past mistakes. That is integral to the very process of learning.

However, any educator with any history in his or her profession has witnessed any number of education reform efforts devolve from practices with possibilities into overly prescriptive mandates that reduce the student to little more than raw, pliant material to be shaped to our liking or carried over a metaphorical goal line. In 2009, it seems that some reform efforts have achieved the grand status of sacred dogma to be questioned at the peril of questioner.

But we must question and we must learn from our mistakes. While we recognize the promise of standards based reforms, we must also admit that unchecked standardization, from curriculum to testing, does bring unintended consequences. The issue is not whether standards are necessary, but whether we have unintentionally reduced “standards” to numbers of numbers that vary from state to state both in meaning and understanding. This is evidenced in an accountability strategy that has directly or indirectly led to an alarming overuse of standardized testing which contribute almost nothing to the process of teaching and learning.

And, sadly lost in the discussion and re-definition of standards, is the role education and educators play in preparing young people to meet the real challenges of family and community.

Therefore, the Louisiana Federation of Teachers, realizing that RTTT presents educators and Louisiana with perhaps the opportunity of a lifetime, believes that Race to the Top must:

- Provide our schools and teachers with both resources and choices. Choices should be provided from a menu of research based and experience tested instructional programs and models, and resources must be available to fully implement the program.
- Afford schools, and specifically our teachers, with the flexibility necessary to adapt research based, experience tested instructional models and programs to the needs of their students.
- Support the continued use of programs and instructional models that are working. RTTT should not become tainted with a perception that once again we must begin from scratch.
- Acknowledge and respect the fact that there are thousands of successful public schools students operating across America. Encourage and solicit proposals from school districts that promote the replication of these programs and practices.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on proposed RTTT Proposed Priorities, Requirements, Definitions, and Selection Criteria. We hope that our ideas can be incorporated into the program, and that the ultimate product will help enhance the educational opportunities of the children we teach.

Sincerely yours,

Steve Monaghan, President
Louisiana Federation of Teachers