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Issues Outlook

A Briefing for the California Legislature on Issues of Importance to California's Educators

Teachers Back Effective Educational Reform that Addresses Student Needs

But the Rush to Qualify for Race to the Top Competitive Grants Can Hurt Students

The Obama Administration has created "Race to the Top" (RTTT), a package of competitive grants authorized by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. The program of \$4.35 billion provides one-time grants to local states, although only 10 states are expected to be awarded, possibly fewer.

Currently, the RTTT regulations are up for comment and review by the public. CTA, other state affiliates of the National Education Association (NEA), and the NEA are writing responses to the proposed RTTT regulations in commentary due to federal officials by Aug. 28. After the US Department of Education (USDOE) reviews the comments, the USDOE is expected to finalize the regulations in October 2009.

At that time, states will be able to apply for Phase 1 of the RTTT competitive grants, and the awards are expected to be made early in 2010. States that apply but are not awarded grants in Phase 1 may reapply in Phase 2, along with states that are applying for the first time in Phase 2. Phase 1 grantees may not apply for additional funding in Phase 2; they will receive full-sized awards in Phase 1.

NEW REGULATIONS: MORE OF THE SAME

The RTTT proposed regulations require states to change their current educational system in order to even apply for the grants. These demands are not about "minor details." Federal officials want a fundamental change to state standards and accountability systems; teacher credentialing, evaluation, compensation, and promotion; and charter schools. The Phase 1 applications require state governors to make assurances that their states will take action and make progress in the following areas of reform:

- 1) Adopting internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the workplace.
- 2) Recruiting, developing, and retaining effective teachers and principals.
- 3) Building data systems that measure student success and inform teachers and principals how they can improve their practices.

- 4) And turning around our lowest-performing schools (See www.recovery.gov).

Providing additional dollars is hugely important, and CTA has been at the forefront in supporting comprehensive education reform. But these proposed regulations are not education reform. They are onerous, unnecessary, and reminiscent of the failed NCLB. The proposed regulations really require:

- Overhauling California's content standards and creating a new testing system.
- Creating alternative credentialing systems in order to "fast track" unprepared and unsupported teachers in the classroom.
- Mandating student test scores are used as a "significant" factor in teacher evaluations. (School districts are already required to use criterion referenced tests as part of a teacher evaluation.)
- Mandating that teacher compensation and promotion be linked to student test scores.
- Encouraging charter schools to be the number one reform for turning around failing schools.

Educators believed that the new administration would eliminate the onerous one-size fits all model of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) but the RTTT competitive grant continues the same philosophy.

A HEADLONG RUSH TO DISASTER?

California is being pushed by US-DOE Sec. Arne Duncan and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to change state law to make California eligible for these one-time federal funds. Gov. Schwarzenegger is pressing legislators to move quickly before the Sept. 11 end of the session. To meet this unrealistic deadline, legislators are being pressured to "gut and amend" a bill without a formal policy hearing. Sen. Gloria Romero has scheduled an informational hearing

about RTTT on Wed., Aug. 26. In reality, lawmakers will be hit with amendments at the last minute. Policy consideration on the gutted bill would either not take place at all or occur in Appropriations committees, panels charged with looking at cost issues alone. In the worst case, lawmakers could have their only chance for policy review of the plan on the Assembly or Senate floor.

ACTION NEEDED AT THE STATE LEVEL

- California lawmakers must delay any action on RTTT until the federal government releases its final regulations.
- California can apply for its full allocation of funding during Phase 2.
- Waiting until Phase 2 will give California policymakers the opportunity to vet these issues fully and come up with a package of reforms that will help educators prepare California's students to meet the challenges of the economy.

Key Messages on Race to the Top

- Lawmakers should not rush into reform by changing effective state laws just to meet an arbitrary deadline set by the USDOE.
- The proposed regulations are more of the same one-size-fits-all approach of the NCLB that has failed California students and schools for the last several years.
- These proposed regulations would undermine California's high academic standards, some of the most rigorous in the nation.
- The grants represent just one-time federal money. The governor could hold onto 50% of the funds to use as he sees fit. Those dollars might never reach the classroom.
- California can apply for this one-time money in the second round of federal grants. That would give everyone time to review the proposed regulations and do what's right. California schools and students need reforms that make sense.