

Race to the Top: One-Size-Fits All Hurts Students

The California Teachers Association anticipated some fundamental changes in federal education policy, priorities and funding with the arrival of the Obama administration. For the preceding eight years, the needs of struggling schools and underserved students were ignored while the platitude of *No Child Left Behind* was considered an adequate substitute for genuine reform. Unfortunately, the proposed *Race to the Top (RTTT)* application and selection priorities and criteria released on July 29, 2009 reveal that this administration is repeating the past mistakes of NCLB, including an over-reliance on test scores as an accurate measure of student achievement and support for interventions that do not have a track record of success, such as unregulated charter schools and compensation tied to test scores. RTTT may be a voluntary application process, but the priorities and criteria in the proposal privilege certain past and future actions by state and local educational agencies and hold them hostage by their purse strings.

CTA's comments on the RTTT fall into five overarching areas, summarized below.

1) Continuing to Link Student Achievement to Success on a Test


Since 2001, the emphasis on standardized testing as the primary measure of student achievement has been scrutinized and criticized on many fronts. During the presidential campaign, Mr. Obama contended that teachers should not be forced to spend the academic year preparing students to fill in bubbles on standardized tests and that students deserve to learn in an individualized manner. Unfortunately, the RTTT proposal does not reflect a substantive change toward a more balanced method for evaluating student learning and achievement.

The narrowness of most tests used today is virtually undisputed. Many state tests address a small subset of student standards using a multiple-test format. The narrow content focus encourages teaching to the test, which artificially inflates test scores while simultaneously narrowing the curriculum taught in the classroom

In addition, the RTTT proposal also calls for states to develop and adopt new student standards and a new testing system. California has standards that are recognized as among the most rigorous in the country. RTTT will judge state applications for funding based on the extent to which a state has actively collaborated in a multi-state consortium to adopt a new set of common standards by June 2010, less than one year from now. This would mean a complete overhaul of California's rigorous content standards and creating a new testing system at a time when California's fiscal resources are stretched beyond their limits.

CTA Supports:

CTA supports student assessment systems that use multiple measures instead of a one-day snapshot based solely on test scores. Multiple measures that include a range of assessment types and that evaluate the full continuum of achievement are the only means for assessing a



comprehensive range of content and skills expected across the full range of ability and achievement levels. We support an assessment system that measures and encourages a focus on writing, research, scientific investigation, problem solving, technology applications and a host of other critically important skills. These skills and abilities are exactly what are necessary to make progress towards the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) priorities established in RTTT.

2) Balancing Federal Mandates with Priorities for Local Control

Underlying many of the issues in the RTTT proposal is an expansion of authority by the federal government into areas of traditional state and local control. How much state and local autonomy must be surrendered in order to receive federal funding under Race to the Top?

This incursion into areas traditionally reserved to the states is plainly visible throughout the RTTT proposal. However, nowhere is the federal top-down attitude more visible than in the RTTT eligibility requirement that a state must not have any legal, statutory, or regulatory barriers to linking student achievement or student growth data to teachers for the purpose of teacher and principal evaluation. California law not only allows but requires that teachers be evaluated on the progress of their students in achieving state standards; that progress can be measured through state-adopted criterion referenced tests. All of the student data necessary for the purposes of evaluation are available to site and district administrators, the individuals who are required to conduct the evaluation of teachers. California links student and teacher data at the local level where it can be better protected for privacy purposes rather than linking it at the state level where it serves no purpose in the evaluation of teachers or administrators.


Yet California may be penalized in their eligibility for funding, not because teachers are not evaluated on their students' academic progress, but because the U.S. Department of Education does not approve of the way in which California handles its data systems.

It is important for decision makers at the local level to have access to an array of indicators, some of which may be inappropriate or unnecessary at the state or federal level. For example, student data that are useful for informing instruction and professional development are readily available to school instructional staff. This type of "just-in-time" student data are generated through student work at the classroom level and best analyzed collaboratively by teachers at the same grade level or sharing the same course assignment.

Maintaining the right balance of local and federal control is crucial if we are to achieve the best educational opportunities for all of our students. CTA believes that the ability to combine data with good judgment resulting in optimal outcomes requires knowledge of the students, the schools and the communities where those decisions will be implemented. Truly, one size does not fit all.

CTA Supports:

CTA continues to support California's efforts to develop a statewide data system that encompasses a comprehensive database for students (CALPADS) and teachers and administrators (CALTIDES). Quality data systems should be used to help improve student learning, identify professional development needs, evaluate preparation programs, and monitor teacher and principal assignments.



CTA understands that accurate and timely student data are essential to effective teaching and that such data are most useful when collaboratively examined with professional colleagues in order to improve teaching practice. On a local and statewide basis, we advocate for ongoing, sustained collaboration built into the workday as recommended by the National Staff Development Council and practiced by teachers in other nations that consistently outperform the United States on international student achievement assessments. We also support rigorous evaluation of the outcomes of such professional development by using local and state level data to do so.

3) Defining Teacher Effectiveness Based on Student Test Scores

The RTTT proposal includes new definitions of teacher effectiveness and proposes that states use those ratings in high-stakes employment decisions such as evaluation, compensation, tenure and dismissal. Under the proposal, states select a measure of student growth (which must be primarily test-based) and use the data from that measure to differentiate the effectiveness of individual teachers and administrators.

Judging teachers primarily on students' test scores is a flawed process that has never been shown to improve teaching practice or student outcomes. The first concern is the low quality of tests being used and the narrow range of student learning that such tests can measure. Secondly, student test scores provide no information about conditions in which the learning occurs and over which the teacher has no control: class size, student composition (for instance, large numbers of GATE students or students with disabilities in the class), or instructional resources. Yet such a system allows others to generate conclusions about individual teacher effectiveness without knowing the context in which the teaching and learning occur. Finally, such a system does not acknowledge the contributions of others, such as prior teachers, towards student growth.


CTA objects to defining teacher effectiveness on the basis of student tests scores and recommends that it be eliminated from all sections of the proposal, including the selection criteria and definitions.

CTA Supports:

CTA believes assessment protocols that measure teacher quality should include multiple sources of evidence that have been validated for the purpose of teacher evaluation. Evaluations of teacher effectiveness should include measures of teacher practices, teacher performance and teacher contributions to improving student learning through a broad and comprehensive array of evidence. It is only through such documentation that information that can inform improvement can be utilized.

4) Raising the Stakes: Paying and Evaluating Teachers Based on Student Test Scores

Instead of using multiple measures of teaching practice and teacher performance in making high-stakes employment decisions, the RTTT guidelines default to a single effectiveness measure based on student test scores. These scores become the basis for teacher compensation, evaluation, and dismissal. Teacher effectiveness is thus tied to test scores which may differ for an individual teacher from class to class, year to year and even from test to test. Current state tests are not designed, and consequently not valid, for the purpose of determining student or school success much less teacher success.



Linking compensation to unstable effectiveness ratings simply compounds the difficulties of establishing a highly qualified and effective workforce in public schools, especially in placing teachers in the highest need schools. Whereas current statute as well as the RTTT proposal call for equitable distribution of teachers among high and low poverty schools, teachers will be less likely to choose to teach in schools where their compensation and permanent status possibilities may be curtailed because students in those schools have lower test scores. Studies in California and across the nation have consistently found that what attracts and retains teachers to all schools, and especially lower-performing schools, is strong leadership from a supportive principal, a safe and well resourced working environment, smaller class sizes, and a collaborative school culture where teachers and administrators work together with a clear vision for student success. Pay for performance sorely lacks evidence to support it as a high leverage intervention.

CTA Supports:

CTA believes that for any high stakes purpose associated with personnel decision making or compensation, multiple measures should be used in combination as all measures give a partial picture of teacher performance. These measures should include evidence of 1) teacher practices, 2) teacher performance and 3) teacher contributions to student learning.

Furthermore, CTA supports the operation of collective bargaining as codified in state statute, unfettered by federal preferences. Evaluation procedures, compensation, and discipline are mandatory subjects of bargaining under state law and this selection criterion in the RTTT proposal undermines California's collective bargaining requirements.

5) Advocating Expansion of Charter Schools without Adequate Quality Control

The RTTT proposed selection criteria evaluates whether states have laws that "prohibit or effectively inhibit" increasing the number of charter schools. CTA has long supported the establishment of charter schools to encourage the use of innovative instruction in order to improve student learning, while at the same time holding charter schools accountable for their student outcomes. California allows annual expansion of the number of charter schools while retaining the carefully crafted provisions in its Charter School Act, such as requirements that parents must sign petitions to indicate their support of start-up charters and that charter schools must be located in the district or county where the students will be served. These and other provisions ensure that the schools are subject to adequate community oversight and state supervision. Any one of these quality-control mechanisms might be viewed as effectively inhibiting the increase in charter schools under the ambiguous language in the RTTT proposal.

One recent study found that students in 37 percent of charter schools performed worse than their traditional public school peers, while only 17 percent produced academic gains that were significantly better than their peers. In 46 percent of charter schools, there was no significant difference between their students' achievement gains and those of their demographically similar peers in district-run public schools. The strongest charter schools have the support of their community and appropriate oversight for financial management, health and safety issues, and instructional quality. CTA believes that eliminating all restrictions on charter schools, including those requiring parental support for establishing the school, would be detrimental to student learning. The RTTT proposal appears to undermine the state's authority to ensure those charter schools are adequately serving the needs of students and the community.



CTA Supports:

CTA believes public demand and state capacity can be reasonable determiners of the number of charters allowed by the state. Rather than condemning all caps on charter schools; the state's needs and resources available to support charters should be considered. California law allows the number of charters in the state to expand by 100 schools annually. In California there have been 1,146 charter schools approved for operation since the institution of the Charter School Act, with 802 charters currently in operation. There is no evidence that the cap has discouraged charter petitions. In fact, no charter has been rejected because of our floating cap. CTA continues to support adequate oversight of charter schools with the same level of accountability for student outcomes as are applied to traditional public schools.