

Race To The Top; A Never Ending Race?

Federal Race to the Top Efforts Heat Up In California



By Dr. Jeffrey Frost

As a part of the federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) stimulus program implemented by the Obama Administration in 2009, there is a segment called the Race to the Top (RTTT) program. This program, which contains \$4.3 billion in one-time competitive grant funds, is designed to spur states toward making progress on four specific reforms areas: 1) Development of high-quality standards and assessments, 2) Implementation of data systems that support instruction, 3) Expansion of programs to improve the effectiveness of teachers and principals, and 4) Expanding support for each state's lowest performing schools.

Governor Takes Lead in Efforts to Win a RTTT Grant

On August 20, 2009, Governor Schwarzenegger officially announced a fifth extraordinary legislative session to ensure that "California meets the Obama Administration's eligibility requirements to be highly competitive for Race to the Top funding." As a part of this effort, the Governor is sponsoring SB x5 1, which is being authored by Senators Romero (D-Los Angeles) and Huff (R-Diamond Bar).

Senate Approves Bill on Narrow Vote

In November 2009, the Senate approved SB 5x 1 on a vote of 21 to 12 and sent the bill on to the Assembly. All Republican members supported the bill along with Democratic members Steinberg, Romero, Simitian, Alquist, Cedillo, Florez, Price and Kehoe. All other Democratic members either voted no or abstained from voting. Part of the reason for the narrow vote was the level of controversial issues in the bill. As it was presented in the Senate, the bill contained language that allows the use of student test data for purposes of teacher evaluation, a provision for expanding the number of charter schools and an open enrollment policy for all students. These provisions generated opposition from the California Teachers Association, Association of California School Administrators and the California School Boards Association.

The Governor issued the following statement of approval of the Senate's action:

"The Senate's action takes us one step closer

toward an historic victory for California's schools. I called this special legislative session and proposed this package because as elected leaders, we must do everything in our power improve our schools and secure additional funding from President Obama's multi-billion dollar national education funding competition. I urge the state Assembly to immediately pass this historic education reform package to unlock hundreds of millions of federal education dollars for our children."

Content of Senate Version

SB 5X 1, as amended on November 3, does all of the following:

- 1 Use of Test Data - Repeals existing law that prohibits the use of data in the state's teacher database (CALTIDES), alone or with data on pupil achievement from another state data base (CALPADS), for the purposes of employment decisions or evaluation of teachers. This data can only be used in accordance with the collective bargaining procedures. The language in the bill that specifically tied the use of data to the Education Code sections on the teacher evaluation process or the section establishing compensation have been removed.
- 2 Charter Schools - Repeals a statutory limit on the number of charter schools in the state and requires the Superintendent of Public Instruction to convene a working group to make recommendations to the Legislature on existing processes for authorization, revocation and renewal of charter schools and the extent to which the state provides facilities for charter schools.
- 3 Open Enrollment - Establishes an open enrollment option to allow pupils in low-performing schools to transfer to public schools in other districts based on a specific priority list and subject to specified restrictions. Low-performing schools are defined as being in Decile 1 to 3 and identified in the 2008-09 school year as being eligible for the High Priority Grant Program pursuant to Section 52055.605.
- 4 Lowest Performing Schools - Provides for the identification of the persistently lowest performing

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- 5 percent of schools in the state, requires parent and employee notification and requires the SPI and SBE to direct each identified low performing school to take at least one of three actions: a) Reopen the school as a public charter school, b) replace all or most of the school staff or c) enter into a contract with an entity with a demonstrated record of effectiveness to operate the school.
- 5 Requires the Fiscal Crisis Management and Assistance Team to convene a task force to develop and submit recommendations to the Legislature for a standardized process for reporting of financial and accounting data and for providing annual independent financial and compliance audits for charter schools on or before December 1, 2010, as specified.

Assembly Introduces Its Own Version of RTTT

New Race to the Top legislation was introduced in the Assembly on December 3, and it is clearly a proposal to give voice to the many concerns expressed by the major education groups and others over just what California's participation in RTTT should look like.

AB 5x 8 (Brownley) is an alternative to the administration's proposal embodied in Senate Bill 5x 1 (Romero). The school community and many in the Legislature were especially concerned with the proposals in SB 5x 1 dealing with required open enrollment for Decile 1 -3 schools, the definition of and sanctions to be imposed on "persistently low-performing" schools, and the lack of additional accountability requirements on charter schools.

In response to some of these concerns, the Assembly has now introduced its own version of what they think the state's RTTT plan should look like, and it goes in some very interesting and controversial directions. It contains significant new charter school accountability provisions, very prescriptive requirements as to how persistently low-performing schools should be identified, supported and funded, and it includes a detailed, but relatively broad, set of parameters governing how recipient districts could spend the funds. The assembly bill also takes on the State Board of Education, including language that would remove its authority to amend the content standards developed by the state superintendent, requiring the Board to adopt them as presented. This bill is to be heard in the Assembly Education Committee on December 9 and based on the outcome, negotiations on a final version will take place between legislative leaders and the Governor.

RTTT Guidelines Set – The Race Begins

The U.S Department of Education has finalized the guidelines for Race to the Top and established criteria and a point system to determine the value of each state's application. For the first round, each state's application is due on January 19, 2010, and funding awards for Phase I will be announced this April. Each state submitting an application will be judged on criteria that will total 500 points. The criteria will include the following areas and each seg-

ment will have a point value: 1) Standards and assessment including the development of common core standards and assessments; 2) Data systems to support instruction including fully implementing a statewide longitudinal data system and using data to improve instruction; 3) Effective teacher and leaders, which will include improving teacher and principal effectiveness and providing high-quality pathways and improving the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs; 4) Turning around lowest-performing schools including intervening in lowest performing schools; 5) Charter school expansion and innovation; and 6) Implementing science, technology, engineering and mathematics programs. In the end, what is not known is how many grants will be approved.

RTTT Grant Funding and Sustainability of Reforms

It is too early to know how many states will win grants that will total \$4.3 billion. The funding for each state receiving a grant will be predicated on the number of school districts that have signed a memorandum of understanding with the state promising to participate in the reforms outlined in the state's application. The larger the number of districts participating, the larger the grant will be for that state. The estimate by the state's legislative analyst is that California is likely to receive somewhere around \$700 million if it is successful. Additionally, the goals of the California application can be funding with School Improvement Grant funds and federal data and assessment grant funds. However, because the funds are one-time in nature, there are concerns in the school community that ongoing multi-year reforms will not be able to be sustained in this time of fiscal austerity.

Is RTTT a Look at the Future?

Finally, the Race to the Top program is likely to mirror the ongoing approach that will be used by the Obama administration as it seeks to reauthorize the No Child Left Behind Act and Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The President and Secretary Duncan are focused on the fundamental objectives of high standards, data systems that support instruction, developing quality teachers and principals, and fully supporting low performing schools. So, while RTTT is actually a modestly funded, one-time program, it probably shows the road to the future. California's policymakers ignore these priorities at its peril if they do not pursue Race to the Top funds aggressively. ■

Dr. Jeffrey W. Frost is CETPA's Legislative Consultant. The addition of his services is part of CETPA board initiatives intended to improve the delivery of critical information related to California technology initiatives to the CETPA membership. Dr. Frost has a wide-ranging background in academia, legislative advocacy, and public policy development and more than 20 years of experience lobbying the California State Legislature on behalf of school districts and education associations.