

## RACE TO THE TOP

Direct federal Race to the Top grants to school districts allow the U.S. Department of Education to bypass balky state education authorities and work directly with districts to change education policies. The RTT-District grant program ties grant eligibility to adoption (among other things) of policies and practices conforming instruction and assessment to commonly accepted standards of college and career readiness. Adherence to Common Core national standards, developed in recent years and adopted in most states, is deemed acceptable; so is reliance on state standards equivalent in federal eyes to the Common Core standards.

Here in Texas, where the governor and key lawmakers have rejected state-level participation in the Race to the Top program and the Common Core project, nearly 80 school districts nonetheless are chasing federal RTT-District grants. Hence the state commissioner of education, Michael Williams, felt compelled to remind school administrators that state law bars any adoption or use of the Common Core.

There's a real problem with some of the RTT-D grant applications from Texas school districts, but it's not the potential for use of Common Core standards. As the commissioner's warning letter itself makes clear, Texas school districts already operate under equivalent standards of college and career readiness. (In fact, the state has secured a partial waiver of federal requirements under the No Child Left Behind Act partly on the strength of the Texas college and career readiness standards.) The real problem uncovered by an informal Texas AFT survey of teachers is that some grant-seeking districts have all but ignored other

federal grant criteria, which call for meaningful involvement of teachers as stakeholders in developing the grant proposals and for demonstrated approval of the grant proposals by 70 percent or more of affected teachers. Teachers from more than 20 districts responded to the Texas AFT survey last month, and their responses are instructive.

One teacher said flatly: "They haven't asked us how we feel about this" proposal. Another said: "We have not been told what this grant entails—at all." Yet another wrote that "we had NO input at all."

A teacher from one district reported that a letter was "sent from central office to the principals with instructions to collect signatures ASAP." In another district a teacher similarly said that the district's Race to the Top application process "was more like a race to submit it."

One of our survey respondents commented: "The district did ask us to complete a survey regarding Race to the Top; however, the survey included instructional questions about technology and personalized learning. It did not ask questions connected to our opinions or concerns about the Race to the Top grant. Many secondary teachers feel that by having us complete the survey, the district is attempting to 'count us' as supporting the grant—when in reality our school board has not provided any information or answered specific questions about the grant before applying."

Another observed that the district's survey "did not really talk about Race to

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the Top. The survey was made up of questions asking teachers to rate how much or how little they would like to have certain technology programs, etc.” Another teacher said, “I am not in favor of being tricked into supporting something I know little about. The district had us fill out a survey under the guise of a...job happiness survey.”

Another survey respondent described a similar process: “At a faculty meeting, we were told about an opportunity to earn money for things we were already doing. Who wouldn’t want that, right? A short survey was sent out via e-mail asking if we were interested in getting money by participating in the program. No name of the program nor extra info regarding strings attached were given to teachers.”

Summing up the common experience of RTT-D stakeholder “involvement” of many teachers across a variety of districts large and small, one respondent said: “We are told, not asked.”

Teachers deserve to know that an RTT-D grant, whatever its merits otherwise may be, carries with it a demand from the federal government that the district tie teachers’ individual evaluations to students’ scores on standardized state tests. The policy demand of the U.S. Department of Education for this high-stakes use of standardized test scores has the support of some self-styled education “reformers” but little or no support in educational research. Teachers should have a chance to address this aspect of the RTT-D grant program before their supposed “approval” of a grant proposal can be assumed.

Texas AFT has communicated with federal education officials regarding the inadequacy of stakeholder involvement and mechanisms for teacher approval reported by teachers on our informal survey about RTT-District grant discussions in Texas school districts. Decisions by U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan on applications from Texas districts and others around the nation are due by the end of the calendar year. If the federal grant criteria calling for meaningful stakeholder involvement of teachers and demonstrated approval by 70 percent of those affected mean anything, a number of Texas applicants will be disqualified.

*~Texas AFT Hotline, November 7, 2013*

### **YOUNG CHILDREN LOSING OUT ON EARLY EDUCATION**

A new national study finds that Texas ranks in the bottom third of states for the percentage of children who attend preschool. The report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, brought to our attention by Texas Kids Count director Frances Deviney of the Center for Public Policy Priorities, shows that 67 percent of low-income three-year-olds and four-year-olds in our state are not enrolled in preschool.

Moreover, by the same two-thirds margin, these children will not have had a single developmental screening by a physician before the age of six. The result of these failures to invest in children’s early development is that we are unable to spot potential problems that could be addressed with early intervention. In fact, current policy at the state and

national level is making matters worse.

As Deviney notes, “Texas’ elimination of pre-K expansion funding and the impact of the federal sequester [automatic funding cut] on Head Start programs leave a huge early learning hole for the kids who need it most . . . You can’t get returns on investments you don’t make. And right now, we are actively cutting many of our investments in early childhood. That’s penny-wise and pound-foolish for our kids and the long-term strength of our state.”

*~Texas AFT Hotline, November 4, 2013*

### **MORE EDUCATION CUTS**

The pain of the cuts is going to spread soon, however, because they are scheduled to continue year after year unless the two parties in Congress can agree on a better option. To that end, the American Federation of Teachers has a modest suggestion: Stop these mindless cuts! U.S. Senate and U.S. House negotiating teams are now meeting to work on alternatives to the meat-ax approach of sequestration. The deadline for a budget deal is December 13. AFT and Texas AFT will keep you informed as the negotiations proceed and will alert you when the time is ripe for another wave of calls and e-mails in support of a sensible solution.

*~Texas AFT Hotline, November 4, 2013*

