

January 7, 2010

Dear Member:

As I write this email, the State School Boards Association and the State School Superintendents Association and FEA are still in negotiations with the Commissioner of Education in an attempt to resolve issues regarding the state's application for the Race to the Top Grant.

The January 19th deadline for the Race to the Top application is rapidly approaching. I'm in Tallahassee ready to meet again with Education Commissioner Eric Smith to review FEA concerns over the state Memorandum of Understanding and reach an agreement. Yet, the Commissioner has found it more worthwhile to travel the state on a PR campaign to add pressure for us to sign a document that has more unanswered questions than answers.

By now, I am sure you have heard about FEA's apprehension over Florida's Race to the Top (RTTT) application and the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that your local union president has been asked to sign. You probably have heard comments that the Florida Education Association is actively working to block additional education dollars that could result from the federal RTTT grant.

I know that you have been very busy in your classroom working with your students, but I am reaching out to you as the President of your state organization because I think it is important that you understand FEA's concerns and issues surrounding the state's grant application and what it could mean for you.

Florida needs funding for public education. We're concerned that the state Department of Education's approach to the Race to the Top grant will cost local districts much more in the long run than the short-term infusion of cash. The grant represents non-recurring dollars for recurring costs.

After the four-year grant period, school districts will be left to scrounge for funding out of their operational budgets to continue to pay for the DOE reform plan. The federal application guidelines suggest offering school districts a choice of reforms, but that option is not being offered in Florida. There is no flexibility for districts or teachers. While effective teaching is important in student achievement, the DOE refuses to consider any of the other factors that hinder student progress.

To add to that concern, this Memorandum of Understanding will bring significant changes to your professional life. Our concern lies in the current scope of work the DOE mandates which includes:

- District-wide implementation
- Altering your workday
- Changing the evaluation system
- Creating a new teacher compensation system
- Increases student testing
- Establishing a new high-tech high school in all participating districts

...And much more.

As a teacher I have asked myself: *Does this improve the lives of our students? Will this improve instruction? Does this improve the lives of teachers? Is this even financially sustainable?*

I believe that the answer to these questions is no. Wouldn't locally negotiated pilot programs focused on individual struggling schools make more sense?

The state's proposed plan will remove local control from county school districts and replace it with a one size fits all micro-managing approach to education reform controlled by the Florida Department of Education, with no input from those who know their local schools the best.

The federal guidelines clearly stress local autonomy, innovation and collaboration, but the DOE is taking this top down prescriptive approach that is based on non-proven theories that lack strong research and may only hinder student academic progress in the long-run.

This proposed reform plan is another recipe for failure. This direction violates everything that we stand for and the progress we have made over the past decade. Look at our overall track-record: Graduation rates have hit their highest point, achievement gaps are closing on NAEP scores, there's an increase in the number of schools climbing to an "A". This is all due to your hard work and dedication.

I want to be clear: **FEA does not oppose the spirit behind the RTTT grant. We are not opposed to education reforms or changes to improve student academic performance and increase graduation rates.**

Since August, FEA has been meeting with state education stakeholders including Commissioner Smith, members of the state School Board Association, the state Superintendents Association, and the Governor's Office. We have worked and continue to work to leverage this unique opportunity to increase student achievement, especially in struggling schools, and explore alternative ways to compensate and evaluate teachers.

But the state's top-down, one-size-fits-all approach in the MOU doesn't mirror the agreements and assurances agreed to by ALL stakeholders in previous months. A list of guiding principles were drafted and agreed upon to ensure a common understanding by all involved in this grant seeking process. Those principles included:

- Focusing on raising student achievement, particularly for low performing students
- Using a pilot based approach to first test bold ideas and prove efficacy
- The pilots would be based on evidence or research-based best practices
- Local district participation would be by choice not by mandate
- Our proposal would address all grant requirements
- And, focus on sustainable policies

The state is asking unions and school districts to sign this agreement without a full understanding of how it will be implemented, or the impact it will have on you and your students.

In fact, school districts have not received the full state plan because it hasn't been completed. It's similar to your principal telling you don't worry, trust us. Just sign a blank contract and administration will fill in the rest for you. Would you do that?

My most serious concern is that under Florida law, if your union signs the current MOU and begin talks in a hostile environment, the end result could be imposition.

We recognize that you are already overwhelmed by additional work, so we are not asking you to take any action. But as your professional advocate, we do believe that you should be fully aware of what is going on.

FEA is firm in its belief that collaboration and cooperation are mandatory for the state to begin to achieve its goals, but in the meantime, FEA will not give up the fight to protect your contractual and bargaining rights.

Thank you for all you do for our students!

In Unity,
Andy Ford, President
Florida Education Association