

Student's forum

Will California Race To The Top?

By Darren Sepanek

The Obama administration, under the leadership of Education Secretary Arne Duncan, launched an American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 federal grant program called Race to the Top (RTTT), intended to promote education reform.

Through Race to the Top, the federal government is asking states to advance reforms around four specific areas:

- Adopt standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and enable them to compete in the global economy
- Build data systems to drive instruction, measure student growth and success and

inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction

- Recruit, develop, reward and retain effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most
- Prioritize and transform persistently low-performing schools

At stake is a total of \$4.35 billion in grant money to achieve prescribed goals. Financial awards will go to states that create innovative yet achievable plans for compelling and comprehensive education reform.

RTTT is completely voluntary. States wishing to participate will compete for dollars by submitting grant applications that outline their plans for education reform. Plans must

address the four primary areas summarized in the RTTT program and must be approved by the Education Department.

There are two rounds of competition – the first applications are due in January 2010 and the second round in June 2010—with all grants awarded by the end of September 2010. States that do not receive funding in round one may compete in round two. To avoid handing over money that is not used for its intended purpose, states will receive the money in phases and will be required to show they have met established benchmarks in order to receive their total grant funds. If they do not achieve the benchmarks, funds will be withheld until acceptable progress is made.

A cornerstone of the RTTT program is the absence of legal barriers that would prevent a state from accomplishing reforms. Of significance to California is that states will be required to use multiple measures, including student performance data, to evaluate teachers and principals. California had a law that prevented linking student achievement data to teacher evaluations, and as a result the state was unable to compete for RTTT dollars. Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell fully support RTTT and want as much of this federal stimulus money as possible. To this end, Schwarzenegger recently signed Senate Bill 19 (authored by Senator Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto), which lifts a statewide ban against tying student test scores to teacher evaluations.

In further support of RTTT, Schwarzenegger convened a special session of the State Legislature in order to pass Senate Bill X5 1, authored by a bipartisan committee including Senators Gloria Romero (D-E. Los Angeles), Bob Huff (R-Glendora), Elaine Alquist (D-Santa Clara), and Mark Wyland (R-Escondido). SB X5 1 will repeal California's charter school cap, calls for a strategy to turn around its lowest performing schools, allows students at these institutions to attend any school in the state and steps up turnaround efforts at the five percent of schools in the state that consistently fail to meet performance benchmarks. The Senate Education Committee, the Senate Appropriations Committee and the full Senate have approved the bill. The legislation now goes to the Assembly.

Although some committee hearings have been moved up and there is talk of calling legislators back early, the State Assembly is not scheduled to reconvene until January 4. The RTTT application is due on January 20,

leaving very little time to draft, pass and sign bills that would then enable the completion of the RTTT application. It is impractical to prepare a comprehensive education reform plan in advance of knowing which laws will be in place.

The California Teachers' Association and the United Teachers of Los Angeles both oppose SB X5 1, stating that it was prepared in haste and has unnecessary elements that will ultimately provide restrictions that could hinder reform. Additionally, these organizations take particular exception to the assumption that California does not tie student performance to teacher performance. The CTA contends that these measures are in place at the local level and they object to a state level monitoring system that relies on test data for teacher evaluation.

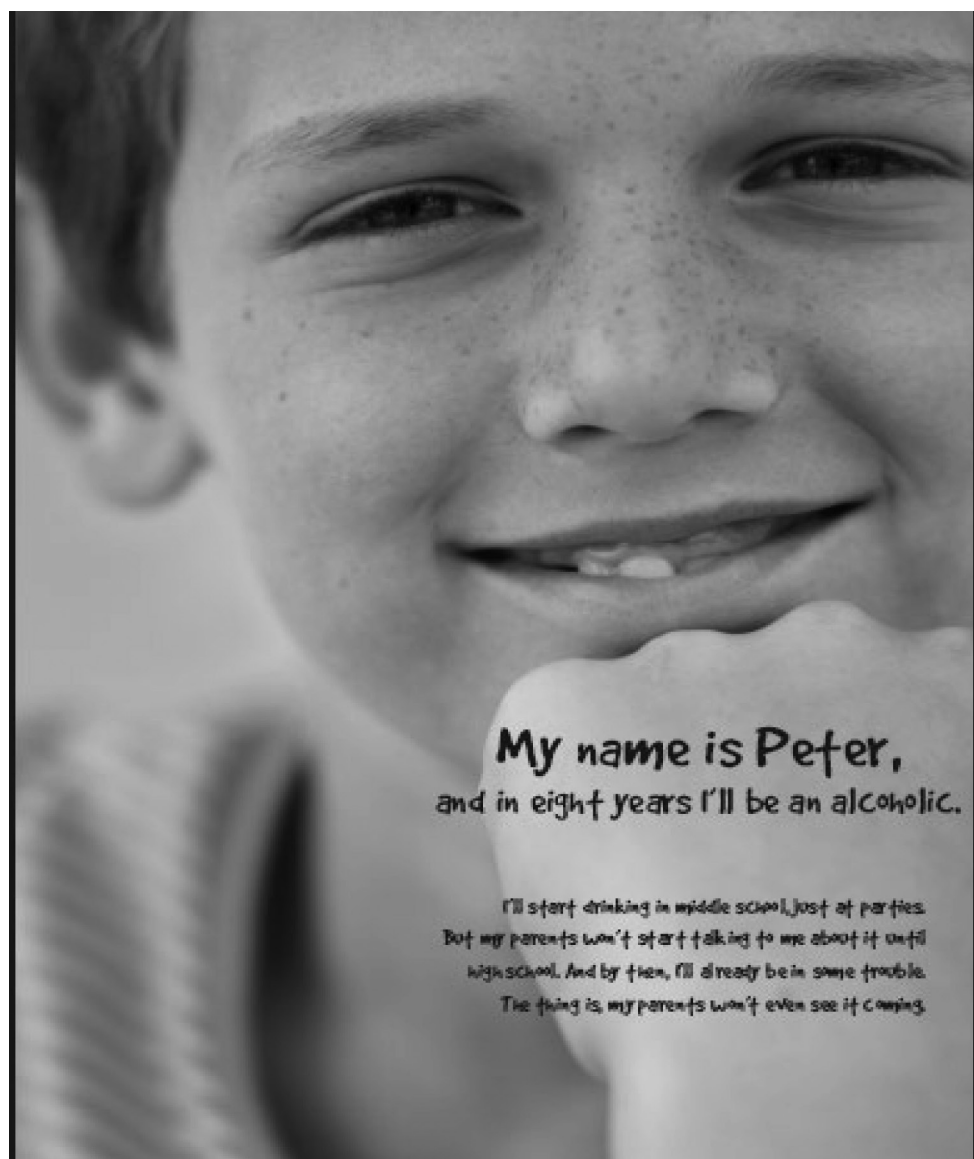
The CA School Board Association also took exception to some elements of SB X5 1, stating that legislation related to charter school caps and open enrollment are not only not necessary for the RTTT application, but that the legislation does not address measures required to properly administer and monitor these aspects of the bill.

States that receive a Race to the Top grant must use at least 50 percent of the award to provide sub-grants to local educational agencies (LEAs), including public charter schools identified as LEAs under State law. These sub-grants are primarily intended to turn around low-performing schools and districts.

"Some have questioned whether it is worth the effort to build a reform plan just to win one-time federal funds," said Superintendent O'Connell. "This competition is simply pushing us to make these tough decisions sooner rather than later.

And the potential reward is millions of dollars that can help us more quickly make the systemic changes that we need to improve our schools. The reform plan we are building based on those four reform areas is the right plan to improve public education in California, whether we win the Race to the Top or not."

While the prospect of California receiving hundreds of millions of dollars in federal stimulus money for education reform is exciting, one wonders if any funds would trickle down to a district like the Manhattan Beach Unified School District. Ours is a high-performing district, leading the way in educational opportunities for students. If California competes in Race to the Top and receives funding, hopefully we will all benefit, either directly or indirectly, from its intended reforms. •



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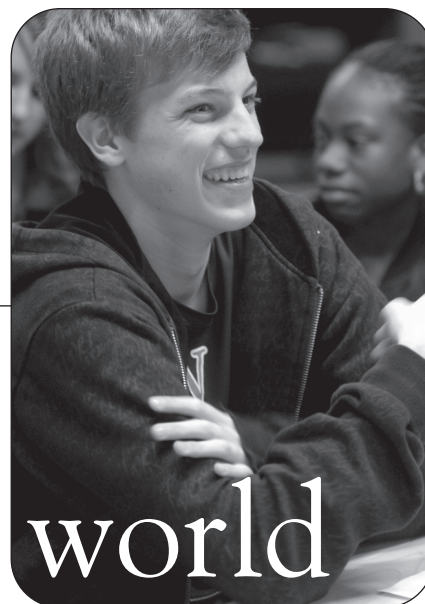
- Saturday, December 12
10:00am-12:00pm
- Saturday, January 9 (2010)
10:00am-12:00pm
- Thursday, January 21 (2010)
6:30-8:00pm

Reservations requested.
Check in begins 15 minutes
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