

NJEA details concerns with “Race To The Top”

January 6, 2010

Barbara Keshishian, President of the 200,000-member New Jersey Education Association (NJEA), today released the following statement detailing NJEA’s concerns with the federal “Race To The Top” (RTTT) grant program:

“NJEA supports the state’s efforts to find new funding for public education. But like so many previous federal education mandates, Race To The Top (RTTT) is both economically and educationally unsound.

“New Jersey’s perilous economic situation certainly requires us to identify and pursue new sources of funding for our public schools. Unfortunately, RTTT raises a number of red flags that policymakers should consider before accepting just four years of federal funding with so many strings attached. It could end up costing us more than it provides, both educationally and economically.

“Here’s why. From an educational standpoint, it is clear from the state’s application that New Jersey would need to significantly increase the number of students tested annually and the number of tests administered to each student. We have already learned from ‘No Child Left Behind’ that a singular focus on standardized tests requires teachers and students to spend far too much time on test preparation, robbing them of opportunities to focus on critical thinking skills and non-tested subjects.

“By requiring all students to be tested every year in even more subjects, teaching to the test will become the sole focus in our classrooms. NJEA believes that is terrible educational policy.

“In addition, the cost of these additional tests could far outstrip the \$100 million in annual RTTT funding we are seeking. And after those four years of RTTT funding are gone, then who will pay for the testing?

“As Commissioner Davy pointed out in the Jan. 5 RTTT meeting, the RTTT funds are limited; once those funds are spent, the state and local districts will be forced to scramble for funds to maintain these efforts. Just the cost of administering the number of additional tests required to meet the standards of RTTT would be significant and could be greater than the amount of the grant. The state could be left holding the bag for another unfunded federal mandate.

“Our concerns with RTTT do not mean NJEA opposes serious reforms. NJEA has been a leader in many successful educational reform efforts statewide. At the Jan. 5 meeting, Commissioner Davy lauded the Progressive Science Initiative (PSI), which NJEA implemented through its Center for Teaching and Learning. Through the Center for Teaching and Learning, NJEA is also implementing a Progressive Math Initiative and has developed a leadership program for county teachers of the year to lead school improvement efforts in their regions.

“NJEA has strongly advocated for greater access to high-quality preschool. Few educational innovations have demonstrated clearer, more concrete benefits than high quality preschool

programs, which are the primary reason that New Jersey leads the nation in closing the achievement gaps between white and minority students.

“NJEA also supports other proven reforms such as Professional Learning Communities that encourage collaboration among teachers and school leaders, smaller class sizes, smaller schools, better mentoring programs for educators, family involvement, universal full-day kindergarten, and many more.

“We look forward to working with the state and federal departments of education to implement real reform that is data-driven and proven to succeed.

“The proposals called for in RTTT are not supported by the research, and will therefore not be engines for improving student achievement.

“Our students deserve nothing less than our best, and RTTT falls far short of that standard.”