

## **Getting on the Right Track**

### **Using *Race to the Top* funds to support research-based reforms**

#### ***Executive Summary***

The Pennsylvania State Education Association represents more than 191,000 educators who share a common purpose -- the goal of quality education for all children. We advocate for strong, effective public schools because our members know that strong schools build strong, effective communities. Our members work every day to deliver the power of a great education.

PSEA strongly supports evidence-based reforms in public education. PSEA endorses the goals of Race to the Top (RTTT) to improve standards and assessments; improve the use of data to support instruction; develop great teachers and leaders; and turn around struggling schools, but only when and where evidence-based reforms are used to achieve these worthwhile goals. We believe that each of these components is integral to a strong system of public education, and improvement in these areas will raise outcomes for all students. Based on that assertion, we believe it is prudent for the U.S. Department of Education (USDoE) to ensure that states receiving RTTT funds demonstrate the ability to systematically address these four areas with evidence-based approaches.

PSEA is concerned the draft regulations mandate that states implement a narrow list of strategies that have little basis in research to achieve the RTTT goals. The regulations mandate these strategies regardless of how they may fit into a state's larger system of school support and improvement, and they overlook many more effective research-based initiatives. As a result, the draft RTTT regulations effectively undermine the Obama administration's own vision of a logical, coherent system of innovations based soundly in research.

PSEA also is concerned that the RTTT regulations are crafted in a manner that could divert states' attention from research-proven interventions designed to meet specific needs defined at the state and local level to meet RTTT goals. PSEA recommends that the final regulations allow states the flexibility necessary to adopt, where appropriate, the high-quality, research-based reforms outlined in this document, reforms that would help them meet specific, locally identified needs.

PSEA recommends that the RTTT proposed guidelines be revised to encourage a wide range of research-based strategies to achieve the RTTT goals, rather than mandating a narrow list of strategies that do not have a strong basis in research. Our comments focus on two of the criteria, "Great Teachers and Leaders" and "Turning Around Struggling Schools," because we believe these areas are the most critical and must be changed to best facilitate the goals of RTTT.

## Great Teachers and Leaders

Great teachers and great leaders are the basis of great schools. The RTTT proposed guidelines are correct to encourage thorough preparation and equitable distribution of effective teachers and effective school leaders. Yet the proposed guidelines prioritize a small number of unproven practices at the expense of sound, comprehensive systems designed to improve teacher and school leader effectiveness.

Improving teacher effectiveness and equalizing the distribution of excellent teachers requires states to examine all aspects of teachers' careers: recruitment, preparation, distribution, professional support, and retention. Prioritizing only a few of these areas is unlikely to lead to substantial improvements in the system. The RTTT proposed regulations should encourage states to develop innovative, evidence-based responses to each of the five areas. PSEA's formal comments to the USDoE include 18 recommendations for using RTTT funds to help states. Some examples include:

- Effective teacher recruitment programs that address a wide range of needs and concerns among potential teaching candidates. These programs would provide early access to information and highlight teaching as a career as well as recruitment strategies based on local needs, rather than encouraging only fast-track entry alternatives.
- High-quality teacher preparation programs that include study of content and pedagogy paired with significant, closely monitored in-classroom clinical experience, and that will articulate the relationship between content, pedagogy, and clinical practice.
- Policies and programs that encourage equitable distribution of teachers and address the circumstances that drive teachers to choose certain schools and districts over others.
- Comprehensive programs that attract high-quality teachers and provide professional support, including effective induction and mentoring programs for new teachers and high-quality, research-based, job-embedded professional development.
- Teacher retention programs should address factors that chase teachers away from the profession, including issues around school safety, high-poverty conditions, and critical teaching and learning conditions like chronic absenteeism and class size.

States need help ensuring that every student has access to high-quality, well-trained teachers. Limited approaches with scant evidence of effectiveness, such as alternate routes to teaching, will not provide states with the help that they need. A systematic approach to improving teacher quality and distribution requires states to use data to identify specific state and local problems across the professional spectrum and address them with evidence-based approaches. PSEA urges USDoE to re-write the regulations to encourage comprehensive, data-based approaches that will improve teacher recruitment, preparation, distribution, support, and retention.

## **Measuring Student Academic Growth**

PSEA believes that effective teacher evaluation is important to ensuring quality education, but USDoE's proposed use of achievement tests to measure the value teachers add to the education of their students is fraught with problems. Studies of this practice, commonly known as value-added measurement, are critical of its effectiveness because current methods simply cannot isolate the influence of teachers, or measure such influence in a valid or reliable fashion. Moreover, the "growth in achievement of a teacher's students" is not a direct measure of the behavior of teachers.

Statements in the draft regulations implicitly admit that the nation currently lacks high-quality assessments that can be objectively tested. Despite this recognition, the USDoE still relies upon test-based accountability as one of RTTT's pillars. The proposal recommends using the standardized tests currently in place, regardless of the fact that these tests have not been validated for evaluating teacher performance, and despite the fact that nationally recognized professional and technical standards require validation of tests for all of their intended uses. It also is important to note that due to the limitations on state achievement tests, value-added measurement does not provide data at the academic standard level, thus providing little if any data to help teachers make improvements in instruction.

We are concerned that despite all the unresolved methodological concerns surrounding value-added measurement, the measures resulting from their impenetrably complex quantitative calculations will be given undue weight in all evaluation processes. To many, value-added results simply will appear "objective" and "scientific." However, given all the problems with value-added measurement, we do not see how any plans that use it will meet RTTT's transparency or equitable criteria.

## **Effective Teacher Evaluation**

Most education advocates agree that effective teaching supports student learning, but the art and science of teaching are both complex and multifaceted. As researchers develop a clearer understanding of the various and layered components of effective teaching, experts also have examined traditional teacher evaluation systems in an effort to make them more effective and robust. Evaluation experts continue to examine how best to measure effective teacher behaviors and how to use those measurements to improve teaching.

One fact has become crystal clear as the research about effective teaching continues to grow: student performance and teacher performance, while related, are not the same thing. Suggesting that one person's job performance is causally responsible for another person's outcome requires stronger inferences and evidence than have been produced to date, or are likely to be produced.

Scholars and researchers agree that the purpose of an effective evaluation system should be to improve practice, not simply to measure its outcomes. After a comprehensive review of pertinent research, PSEA recommends the inclusion of evidence-based evaluation systems in the regulations.

RTTT funds should:

- Encourage states without standards-based systems to adopt a set of professional teaching standards and align their evaluation and professional development systems to the standards.
- Strike a balance between setting standardized expectations for all teachers, while still allowing enough flexibility that local districts can ensure all teachers are focused on the same set of local goals. RTTT funds should help states develop evaluation systems that are sufficiently flexible to support the needs of schools and districts to prioritize specific teaching knowledge and skills.
- Support states that choose to experiment with evidence-based evaluation systems that differentiate expectations and support teacher growth across the career continuum.
- Help states develop comprehensive evaluation systems that consider all aspects of the instructional system, including local curriculum, professional development, instructional leadership, and instructional materials, and how they relate to each other. This will ensure that the entire system is held accountable for supporting high standards in the profession.
- Help states build iterative feedback systems of evaluation that improve teaching practice by including teachers in the evaluation process.
- Foster professional evaluation systems measuring all of what matters in many different ways: teacher performance, knowledge, skills, and practices with students, parents, and colleagues, as well as educational resources, and instructional outcomes.

### **Compensation and Teacher Effectiveness**

There is no proven method to differentiate teacher effectiveness based on student performance. For this reason, alternative compensation tied to student performance or standardized tests is ineffective and inappropriate for professional educators. In fact, such alternative compensation systems, commonly termed merit pay or performance pay in literature, have been tried before and have repeatedly failed for significant reasons that the new criteria do not begin to address.

If these guidelines become final, USDoE could erroneously lead states and school districts to embark on a futile, expensive process - expensive in time, money, effort, and trust. This would be a wasted effort designed to replace a process that, in most Pennsylvania school districts and many other states, is working. Merit pay is rarely used with success in the private sector, and the evidence of its usefulness as a motivator in educational settings is lacking. In fact, the evidence demonstrates that attempts to use merit pay in school settings in Pennsylvania and other states have consistently proven to be unsuccessful.

Linking content-based test scores to evaluation and compensation produces other unintended consequences. While there is no doubt that parents, teachers, and policymakers see acquisition of basic skills in core academic subjects as a critical education goal, it is not the only goal. A 2006 survey by Rothstein and Jacobson asked the public, school board members, state

legislators, and school superintendents how they would structure an accountability system for schools. Basic academic skills was the top choice, but it was closely followed by critical thinking and problem solving, social skills and work ethic, citizen and community responsibility, preparation for skilled work, physical health, emotional health, and arts and leisure. These other important school goals could be shortchanged if the regulations tie content-based test scores to evaluation and compensation.

The Rothstein and Jacobson survey is particularly relevant in light of USDoE's realization that all partners in the education community must work together to implement reforms. Indeed, the explicit and much-appreciated requirement of teacher union involvement in the RTTT grant process underscores the value the Obama administration places on teacher input in classroom and workplace issues. In fact, President Obama has given implicit recognition that teacher support of any education reform is important to its success.

PSEA members recognize that standardized tests capture only a portion of what students actually learn. They also know that test scores reflect many other socio-economic and family influences beyond the influence of teachers. A standardized test cannot account for the student who is not sure where he or she will sleep at night. It cannot be adjusted for the student who is forced to work 40 hours-a-week to help support a family. It does not measure the value a student's family does or does not place on education.

PSEA members support the development of compensation systems, within the collective bargaining process, that allow for appropriate local decision making, not a top-down approach that does not have the requisite support at the district level. Many other teacher pay reforms suggested by the Obama administration would fit into this category, such as awarding professional educators for:

- progress through the “learning curve” of teaching;
- professional development and mastery of teaching associated with National Board Certification;
- professional development appropriate either for their current subject areas or subject areas in which they seek to teach;
- additional duties associated with school-wide or district-wide educational improvement goals;
- additional responsibilities associated with school-wide or district-wide educational improvement goals; and
- assignments in hard-to-staff schools, under particular conditions.

From a policy perspective, it would be beneficial to use some RTTT funds to design experimental tests in pilot districts with the intent of measuring the effect of teacher pay reform in comparison to other reforms that have been proven to work, such as smaller class sizes and parental involvement. This method of using the funds would have a more significant long-term

impact because it would provide sufficient data for significant research on which changes have the greatest effects on student learning.

## **Turning Around Struggling Schools**

The charter school law in Pennsylvania meets the requirements of the RTTT. However, PSEA is concerned about the draft regulations' emphasis on charters with no means of addressing the funding strain that charters place on school districts, particularly struggling districts. While some charter schools operate efficiently within public school districts, research indicates they are not the solution for struggling districts. In fact, one review of evidence from studies of charter schools concluded: (1) charter schools do not differ from regular public schools in average student achievement; (2) they have not improved the educational performance of urban, low-income, minority children; (3) charters have higher student turnover than regular public schools; and (4) competition from charters has not improved public school performance.

Likewise, there is little evidence to support the proposed RTTT embrace of school reconstitution. As a matter of fact, replacing substantial numbers of staff in a turnaround effort can actually make school improvement more difficult. Schools in need of improvement often exist in communities with chronic local teacher shortages, and so letting go large numbers of teachers can often result in less capable, less experienced, and less committed staff. In communities characterized by teacher shortages, large-scale replacement of staff can weaken rather than strengthen a school.

PSEA's formal comments on the proposed regulations outline several evidence-based professional development practices, such as mentoring, that would be better uses of RTTT funds than wholesale reconstitution of schools.

Finally, PSEA appreciates the USDoE's focus on innovation. However, PSEA has seen no research evidence that charter schools, reconstituted schools, or privately managed schools are inherently more innovative than other public schools. As a matter of fact, traditional public schools are engaged in a tremendous amount of research-based innovation. Career academies, cyber learning opportunities, early college high schools and dual enrollment options are just a small number of innovations taking root in traditional public schools. The key to innovation is not the administrative structure of the school. It is an ethos of leveraging resources in new ways to meet both ongoing and emerging needs among children. States have varying ways of supporting innovation, and in many cases states choose to support research-based innovation within traditional public schools. RTTT funds should be employed to support research-based innovations wherever they reside: in charter schools, where appropriate within a specific state context, but also in traditional public schools, where the vast majority of our children in every state continue to receive their education.

The ideas reflected in this summary, and other ideas expressing support for and concerns with the RTTT funds, are explained in the full text of our comments.