

DEMOCRATS

for EDUCATION REFORM



Change We Can Believe In: A Year-Long Race For Education Reform

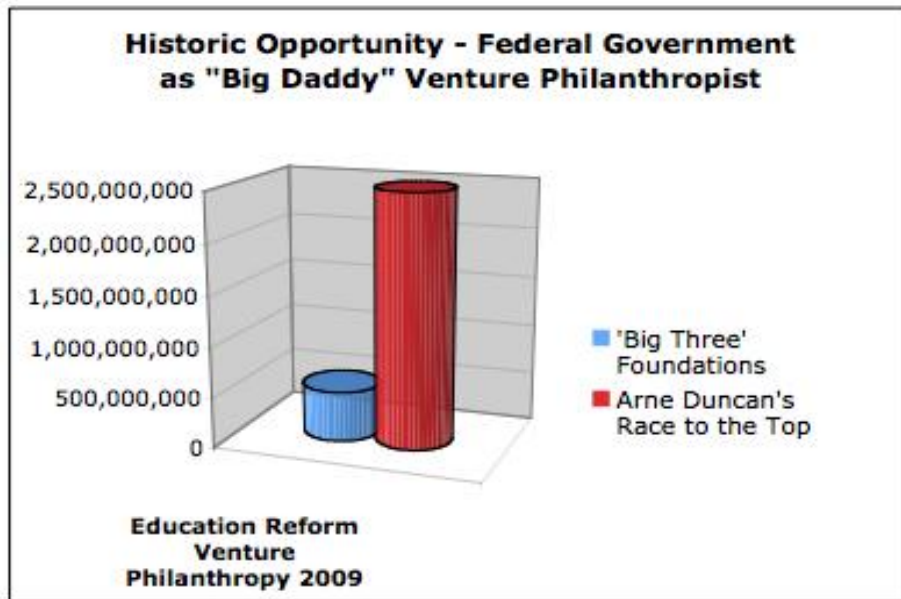
When we at Democrats for Education Reform issued our [Race to the Top "Memo to the Secretary"](#) on February 23rd last year, the jury was out on whether the Administration could fully realize Race to the Top's potential and withstand the enormous political blowback that such groundbreaking education reforms invariably bring about.

Eleven months later, we can say unequivocally that President Obama and Secretary Duncan's political resolve, and commitment to what works rather than what's easy, has exceeded our wildest expectations.

Truth be told, those of us who thought Race to the Top had any chance of success at all were a small minority. No one had ever seen a Democratic President stand up to well-heeled inside-the-beltway lobbyists with an almost unblemished record of strangling the education reform baby in the cradle. And dangling money out there with the hope that states would rise to the occasion, instead of sending the money out first and trying to monitor compliance later, was a new way of doing business.

Still, we saw potential. In an analysis we commissioned in April, we found the \$2.5 billion in Year 1 funding for Race to the Top alone (which does not include other

discretionary monies at Duncan's disposal) dwarfed by a factor of 5 funding by the top three education philanthropists (Broad, Gates, and Walton)¹ combined.



And now, one year later, the number of states that enacted real education reforms has proven the federal government to be one of the most cost-effective education venture capitals in any sector, public or private.

Consider:

California – Back in August, the state took down its student data/teacher evaluation firewall (which school reform lobbyists in the state, prior to RTTT, had come to see as impregnable) without which it would not have been eligible for the Race to the Top competition. On January 6th, lawmakers there shifted power away from bureaucrats and foot-dragging school boards and placed it in the hands of parents, passing new Race To The Top legislation which allows parents from failing schools to yank their kids out and/or vote to take drastic measures at their local zoned schools (state teachers' unions are apoplectic over this provision and have somehow likened democratic decisions by poor

In many states (e.g., California, New York, and Wisconsin)...there is legislation which assures a firewall-like separation between teachers and student performance. If this nation is to live up to its obligation to bring our education systems into the 21st century, this type of progress-killing legislation should instantly disqualify a state for even being considered for Race to the Top funding.

- Democrats for Education Reform, Memo to Secretary Duncan, February 23, 2009

¹ Broad, Gates, and Walton shared this information exclusively with Democrats for Education Reform on the condition that we not break out the exact numbers separately for each foundation.

and minority parents around school policies to “lynching”). Kudos to DFER friends, Ben Austin, at Parent Revolution, and State Senator Gloria Romero (DFER’s December education reformer of the month) for their inspiring leadership on this one. The Governor quickly signed both bills and put them into law to easily make the Jan. 19th RTTT deadline.

Delaware. Delaware had a running start compared to most other states because of its "Vision 2015" project, a comprehensive reform effort created prior to Race to the Top and supported by a broad range of players in and outside of government. It also has one of the strongest track records on narrowing achievement – NAEP scores for poor and minority students in Delaware are better than the *statewide averages* for many of the lowest performing states, disproving the “demography is destiny” arguments of education reform naysayers. But RTTT catalyzed the state to rev up its momentum and take things to a new level. At the end of November, Delaware passed some of the nation’s most far-reaching regulations on managing teacher and principal performance as well as giving local communities more power to turn around their lowest performing schools.

Florida. A decade of school reforms has put Florida at the head of the pack in the Race to the Top. A laser-like focus on the lowest performing schools, and the lowest performing students in those schools, has boosted student achievement on both state tests and the NAEP, and narrowed achievement gaps. Florida has one of the best data systems in the nation, which has helped inform its school reform efforts, and has been a pioneer in both distance learning and dual high school/college enrollment, which has boosted the quality of courses offered to students and at the same time resulted in significant cost savings and increased parental choice. Florida’s application is considered one of the strongest.

As a condition for receiving new school improvement funds, states shall not be allowed to cap the number of charter schools for the purposes of school restructuring. At the very least, states should have a “smart Cap” mechanism so that proven successes can become super-charters capable of replication without taking up new charter school slots under a statutory cap.

DFER, RTTT Memo to Secretary Duncan, February 23, 2009

Illinois. School reform efforts in Illinois had languished for years. Then, in June, at the close of its legislative session, the Illinois state legislature answered Duncan's call to raise charter school caps and ended its session by approving 45 new charter schools in Chicago, and an additional 15 charter schools for the rest of the state, for a total of 13,000 new charter school slots.

Over the subsequent six months, the General Assembly passed 3 more pieces of legislation laying the groundwork for improved teaching and learning. It established a longitudinal data system that permits teacher and student data to be linked for evaluation purposes; approved alternative teacher certification programs to independently accredit teachers, programs like Teach for America, the New Teacher

Project, Golden Apple, Chicago Fellows and other alternative certification programs that can certify teachers directly, rather than through universities, a change that should encourage innovation in the teacher pipeline; and passed legislation which requires all districts to incorporate student growth into teacher and principal evaluations by 2016.

Louisiana. The state quickly passed legislation by Rep. Walt Leger III (D-New Orleans) lifting its charter school cap in June at the end of its legislative session following public comments by Secretary Duncan that this is something the state would need to do to be competitive in Race to the Top. Louisiana is also pioneering as part of its RTTT application an accountability system that tracks graduates of teacher training programs so that they can be held accountable for the performance of the teachers they train and so that their programs can be improved and/or revamped. Many reformers in the nation see Louisiana's approach to teacher prep accountability as a national model.

Massachusetts. Early the morning of January 7th, the House passed RTTT legislation that will allow Boston school officials to shutter failing schools and convert them to new charter schools without having to allow the teachers union to decide which schools can and can't be closed. Boston Mayor Tom Menino told the

We urge the Secretary to take immediate action to ensure that states take the actions required under federal law to restructure chronically low-performing schools; these must include more fundamental restructuring actions such as reconstitution and/or closing and re-opening the school as a public charter.

DFER, RTTT Memo to Secretary Duncan, February 23, 2009

Boston Globe "this bill was made in Heaven." (Menino seemed to have a conversion to the reform side last year when, during a Duncan RTTT visit to Massachusetts he said he was "sick of" union road blocking of reforms and that the result was that the state was "losing kids.") The MA Senate had previously passed its version of the RTTT bills and conferencing on the two bills wrapped up quickly, incorporating most of the best elements of both.

Michigan. Right before the Christmas holidays, the Michigan state legislature, under the strong leadership of Governor Granholm, adopted a surprisingly robust and comprehensive package of reforms that would expand charter schools, create alternative paths to teacher certification, make it easier to fire teachers for poor performance, and give the state more power to take over failing schools. The legislation includes a highly innovative "smart cap" for charter

High quality alternative teacher certification programs are among the most promising strategies for expanding the pipeline of talented teachers, particularly for subject shortage areas and high-needs schools. Therefore, states should use stimulus funds to adopt policies and programs that support the development and expansion of [these] programs.

DFER, RTTT Issue Brief, June 17, 2009

schools, which expands only *proven* charter school approaches. The thoughtful Detroit Democratic State Senator Buzz Thomas deserves the praise on that one.

Rhode Island. The state had two big education reform plays in the past year. Back in June, an ed reformer from RI asked Secretary Duncan at a public event if RI could be competitive given its charter school caps and de-funding of planned charters; Duncan basically said no. At the end of its legislative session in June, the legislature funded a system of “mayoral academies” that had been stuck in limbo. The first one opened outside Providence in September. This is the first of a series of such schools. In the fall, Education Commissioner Deborah Gist announced that RI was ending its policy of basing teacher assignments and layoffs on seniority, and instead would make them based on quality. The move garnered massive media coverage, and lawsuits were filed by the teachers union, but Gist has held firm. Gist also, through administrative action, raised the cut score for passing teacher exams from among the lowest in the nation to among the highest in the nation; schools of education are fighting it but here, too, Gist has held firm. Race to the Top has provided “political cover” to leaders like Gist, who know what to do, but needed a broader basis of political support from which to act.

Tennessee. Governor Phil Bredesen and state legislators spent the week leading up to the Race to the Top filing deadline in special session. Bredesen cited the hard line set down by the President and the Secretary in convening state leaders: “[The Feds] don’t want any promises for the future, they want things in law,” Bredesen told reporters. Bredesen got much of what he wanted – new teacher evaluations, expansion of high-quality alternative teacher certification programs like the New Teacher Project, and a new “statewide school district” empowered to take swift and decisive action in chronically low-performing schools. This is the second Tennessee Race to the Top special session – the first (in June) saw Tennessee approve a new charter school law in response to comments by Duncan that without one, Tennessee would not be Race to the Top competitive.

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