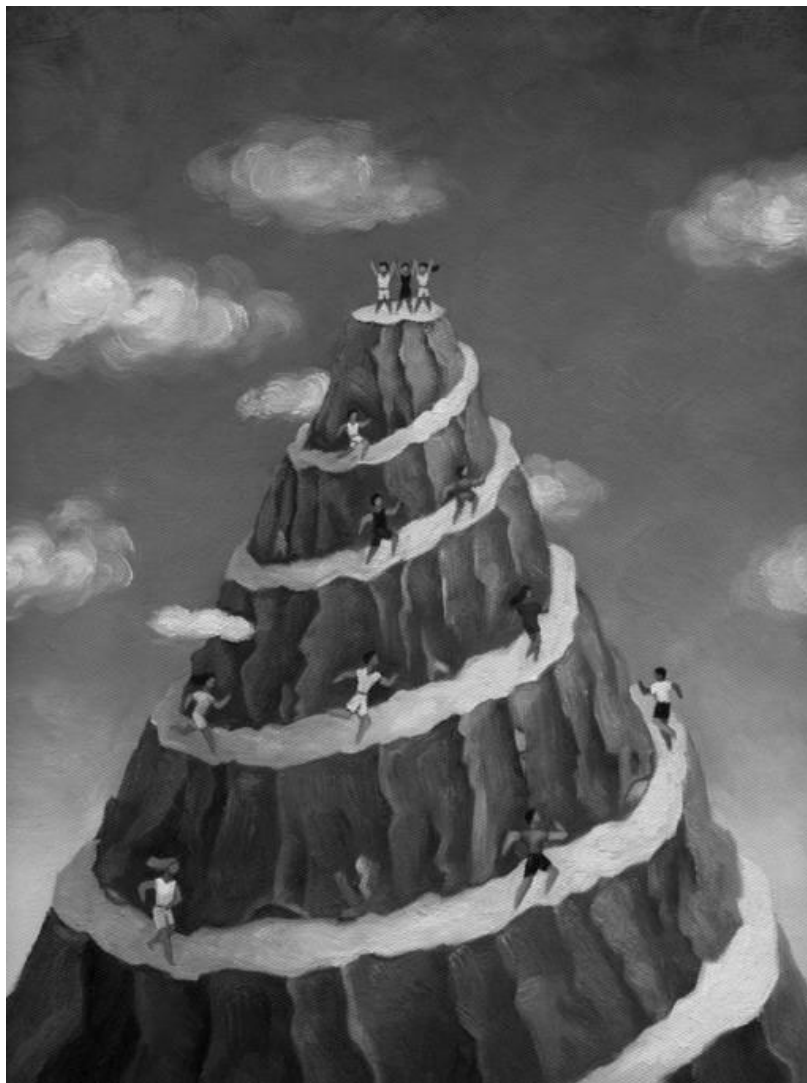


Racing To The Top:
American Recovery and Reinvestment Act
Issues Brief Series

#4: World Class Standards And Assessments



DEMOCRATS
for **EDUCATION REFORM**

June 17, 2009

Dear Education Reformer:

This is the fourth of a series of issue briefs in which Democrats for Education Reform will present innovative ideas for Education Secretary Arne Duncan's \$5 billion "*Race to the Top*" initiative. (For more on the *Race to the Top* issues brief series go to www.dfer.org.)

The *Race to the Top* fund represents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take steps at the federal level to help bring bold, inventive, and effective reform models to scale across the nation.

We've never seen anything like *Race to the Top* in our lifetimes, whether it is judged by the size of the financial commitment or the sheer amount of ambition that comes with it. Nor are we likely ever to see another such chance to implement meaningful reforms at this scale. Indeed, the stakes are incredibly high. It is absolutely critical that we get this right.

The higher we set the bar on the *Race to the Top*, the more likely we are to enable those with proven approaches to expand their efforts, and in turn set the right example to which we expect other states to strive. This series will put forth some of the key components essential to a *Race to the Top* initiative that would truly live up to its title.

We look forward to continuing to work with our elected officials and advocates at all levels of government to advance these goals over the coming months.

Joe Williams
Executive Director

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World Class Standards And Assessments

It is widely agreed that the U.S. should: raise academic standards, in-line with global economic demands for a college-educated, high-tech workforce; move toward a system of common standards across states; and, improve academic assessments so that they rely less on multiple choice or “fill-in-the bubble” questions and tap a broader range of student knowledge and skills.

We think the Race to the Top initiative on standards should embrace *all* of these goals and weigh them *equally* in deciding where to invest at least \$1 billion of federal funds.

An unprecedented collaborative effort led by the Gates Foundation, ACHIEVE, and the NGA (National Governor’s Association) is underway now to establish a single set of national standards and to develop aligned assessments.¹ The project is on an ambitious timeline, with a full set of academic standards to be developed by the end of the year.

We fully expect the role of Race to the Top with regard to standards and assessments to be determined and informed by the success the Gates-led effort has in achieving its goals and meeting its timelines.

We recommend that the Race to the Top be used to spur implementation of the Gates/ACHIEVE/NGA initiative, to fill in any gaps that emerge, and compel states and districts to adopt standards and assessment systems in ways that correct current shortcomings of such systems.

The following recommendations are offered toward that goal.

Higher Standards for ALL States

❖ While we hope that all states join the big Gates-led effort, we recommend that a reserve fund be set-up for states that choose not to do so or, for whatever reason, drop out of the process.

We think that **the opportunity to push states to develop *higher* standards should not be sacrificed** on the altar of an absolute requirement that such standards be *common* across all 50 states, especially if such “rogue” states form a consortium to allow inter-state comparisons amongst themselves.

College Ready Means College Ready

❖ **Use Race to the Top funds to ensure that standards are aligned with college entry requirements in each state.** In states with large statewide university systems, there are often clear requirements for the work students must complete to be considered for admission.

Implementation of national “college-ready” standards should include articulation agreements in each state that meeting such standards would ensure that students are eligible for admission to state colleges and universities. Inter-state agreements would be an absolute homerun, and at the very least should be a long-term goal.

Vertical Alignment Is Absolutely Essential

❖ **Standards must be part of a seamless, integrated state system of P-16 education.** If new standards are to truly drive improvements in student achievement, Race to the Top must guarantee that standards are aligned with assessments, and that creating higher standards should be the beginning, not the end, of implementation. In fact, the follow through is more important than standards creation itself. Without this, the setting of national standards will be a hollow victory.

For example, as a result of tightly and diligently integrating standards, assessments, professional development, and curriculum, Delaware has among the highest NAEP scores for Black, Latino, and low-income students of any state in the nation. Average NAEP scores for Black, Latino, and poor students in Delaware are higher than the *statewide* averages for *all* students in states like California, which arguably has higher standards than Delaware.

❖ **Higher standards require more rigorous coursework, which in turn requires qualified teachers who can provide college-prep driven instruction.** Any effort to implement higher standards must be coupled simultaneously with an aggressive and sustained push to put educators in place who can teach to them. Efforts in New Jersey, for example, to fully implement algebra as part of New Jersey’s high school exit exam have been hampered by uneven quality of instruction between schools, usually along the class and racial lines.

Break the Cycle of “Assessments on the Cheap”

❖ **Race to the Top must heed the lessons of past efforts to establish “world class” assessments.**

We think that the opportunity to push states to develop higher standards should not be sacrificed on the altar of an absolute requirement that such standards be common across all 50 states, especially if such “rogue” states form a consortium to allow inter-state comparisons amongst themselves.

Since 1994, the shortcomings of state assessments exist despite strong statutory requirements that such tests should, among other things, “involve multiple up-to-date measures of student academic achievement” and “include measures that assess higher-order thinking skills and understanding.”ⁱⁱ

The record shows that there are a number of political, logistical, and economic obstacles standing in the way of realizing these objectives, including the fact that a relatively small number of companies create tests, these companies try to maximize their profit margins, and states are under great pressure to buy and administer assessments on the cheap.ⁱⁱⁱ

This time around, the federal government must ensure that states and the major testing companies break the patterns that have rendered mediocre and unimaginative assessment products in the past. This may involve bringing individuals and companies to the table who have not been involved previously.

Special consideration should be given to states that set up technology-driven systems that allow adaptation and sharing of items between states and over time, and use technology as part of an integrated system of assessments and instruction.

❖ **Ensure state assessments meet the letter and spirit of Title I and other federal laws related to the inclusion of limited English proficient students and adaptations and accommodations for students with disabilities.** (Fourteen states are out of compliance right now; these are simply the most egregious cases^{iv}).

States should have to show that their assessments meet these criteria before they get a dime of money for implementation, given that many states have been chronically delinquent in ensuring that assessments are appropriate for special education and LEP students.

ⁱ <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/united-states/Documents/investing-the-recovery-funds-for-student-success.pdf>

ⁱⁱ States were allotted \$2 billion for these purposes between 1994 and 1999 under President Clinton’s Goals 2000 Act.

ⁱⁱⁱ [This paper](#) by Tom Toch describes the key political and logistical obstacles that got in the way of implementing the ESEA law’s stringent assessment requirements.

^{iv} See the "[Assessment Fact Sheet](#)" issued by the U.S. Department of Education in January.