



Illinois Education Association-NEA

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September 1, 2010

Mr. Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We are writing to express our profound disappointment about the fact that Illinois did not receive a Race to the Top grant. To be honest, we feel we have been misled.

Time and time again we heard that bold reforms, coupled with collaboration, would be recognized. We also listened to the words spoken by you and President Obama; words stating that "*working with unions and not doing something to unions*" was the goal. With that understanding, we engaged wholeheartedly, keeping front and center what we believed would help students and be fair to the adults as we pursued an aggressive but achievable agenda as part of the *Race to the Top* grant process.

We worked hard with the Illinois State Board of Education, our legislators, our management colleagues, foundations and advocacy groups. We made progress, and we moved the needle on reform. No external controversy, little drama, just a lot of internal hard work, commitment and the understanding that we were engaged in a process that would ultimately be fair, just and move education forward.

By all accounts, we submitted a competitive application. Yet, we were denied a grant.

We are dismayed and disillusioned. In our view, the process was unfair and fatally flawed.

We compare it to something we are very familiar with; grading students. Imagine this scenario: A teacher gives an assessment. She has distributed the grading rubric ahead of time and lets the students know that they will ultimately have two opportunities to pass. Students who fail the first time will get plenty of feedback and will be told specifically how they can improve, thereby significantly improving their chances of passing the second time. So, imagine that the students who fell short the first time get

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their feedback, seriously address their weaknesses (keeping intact what they were told were their strengths) and then fail again because another teacher graded this assessment and the two teachers did not talk to each other. As the parent of that child, you would say that something very wrong had happened, and your child would rightfully be shouting, "This is not fair!"

This is exactly what happened to Illinois. Several things went wrong:

- There was no inter-rater reliability between the two sets of reviewers.
- The reviewers did not have common working definitions of things like capacity, commitment and innovative schools.
- The two sets of reviewers did not speak to each other so they could get on the same page about any state's strengths and weaknesses. Illinois addressed the major deficiencies highlighted in round one, kept our strengths and received lower scores in round two for some of the same things that were rated highly in round one.

This defies common sense.

We understand, and you have made it clear, that "it's all about the points" and that our point score was simply not high enough to win. Mr. Secretary, with all due respect, that is not good enough.

As the secretary of education, you had an obligation to ensure the grants went to the right states. You had an obligation to make sure the reviewers were properly trained and understood what each applying state had done to improve after round one. You needed to make it clear to them that true union/management collaboration, coupled with real reform, was a winning combination.

Illinois' application deserved to be funded, because we were as poised and ready as any state to make this work. Our involvement, along with our leadership, was a large part of why we should have been successful. This was not reflected in our point score, and it makes us wonder whether the department truly values and understands how important unions are to successful deployment.

We remain focused on moving forward our agenda for improvement in education. We will remain true to our organization's mission of effecting excellence and equity in public education, as we advocate for education employees. This was a wasted opportunity.

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IEA leaders were courageous in their support of educational reform. They stepped up to the challenge. Unfortunately, the Department of Education did not.

Sincerely,



Ken Swanson, President



Audrey Soglin, Executive Director

KS/mjb

cc: President Barack Obama
U.S. Senator Richard Durbin
U.S. Senator Roland Burris
Governor Patrick Quinn
Jo Anderson
Charlie Rose
Chris Koch
Dennis Van Roekel
John Wilson