



Race to the Top—of What?

The administration is taking on the teachers' unions—sort of.

by **RiShawn Biddle**

WHEN BARACK OBAMA TOOK OFFICE, few thought he would prove as fervent as George W. Bush about reforming America's woeful public schools. But these days, Obama's attempts to overhaul public education through Race to the Top—a \$4.3 billion competitive grant program funded out of the federal stimulus—is proving too tempting for states and school districts to ignore. And the effort is rocking the once-servile relationships these entities have had with the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the teachers' unions that strongly oppose any change in the status quo.

In February, Central Falls School District in Rhode Island, home to 3,000 students, grabbed national headlines when it fired all 93 teachers and staff members at its underachieving local high school after the teachers' union rejected a plan for significant reform. The school district's action won praise from President Obama, who, to the annoyance of the AFT (which represents the teachers), noted that the mass firing was a "last resort" for fixing a "chronically troubled school." Race to the Top was largely responsible for the district's hard line: Central Falls's move was prompted by the state of Rhode Island, which began targeting lagging schools in the hope of getting a \$75 million share of Race to the Top dollars. (As it turns out, the effort proved unsuccessful.)

In late March, the Florida senate—looking to get as much as \$750 million in Race to the Top funds—voted to fully reform the generous compensation and employment package enjoyed by the state's teachers. Under the proposed law, teachers would no longer have tenure—the protected job status that guarantees them near-lifetime employment—would be evaluated largely on how well their students performed on tests, and could be fired if they failed to improve student learning for four out of five years. The plan naturally earned the ire of Florida's teachers' unions. Declared the president of the AFT's Brevard County local: "We demand that legislators vote no on this insidious and destructive bill."

Even in California, where the NEA's powerful affiliate has poured \$200 million into political campaigns over the past decade, Race to the Top's bountiful kitty has united Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Democrat-controlled legislature against the union and its allies. Since last September, the Golden State's political elite have stopped their usual squabbling and passed a series of reforms. California joined seven other states in passing laws allowing for the growth of charter schools—the publicly funded yet privately managed entities that are the nation's most successful version of school choice. The state also passed a more radical measure called Parent Trigger, which allows parents at a failing school to replace the principal, teachers, and even the school district itself with new management.

At the very least, Race to the Top has given Obama a rare measure of success during his term. The law's focus on expanding charter schools has helped increase educational options for families—especially the poor urban whites, blacks, and Latinos usually forced to attend the worst public schools. If Obama can incorporate elements of Race to the Top's emphasis on competitive grants into the proposed revamp of the No Child Left Behind Act—the Bush II-era school reform law that is the bane of teachers' unions and suburban school districts—he may even reshape how the federal government ladles its \$64 billion in education funding to states and school districts. It also makes clear to the NEA and AFT that they can no longer count on the Democratic National Committee—now dominated on the education front by centrist school reformers—for unquestioned support.

AS WITH BUSH AND THE MOTLEY CREW of conservatives and centrist Democrats who make up the school reform movement, Obama believes that public schools can be fixed only with a prescription that includes school choice, more rigorous curriculum standards, improving how teachers work in classrooms, and an overhaul of failing schools. But as

Bush and others have painfully learned, reforming public education involves battles with teachers' unions—which have successfully used their collective bargaining power and lobbying in statehouses to gain virtual control of how traditional public schools operate—and their allies among generally mediocre suburban school systems. Neither increasing federal funding (the method embraced by liberals during the Great Society Era), nor imposing more stringent restrictions (the method Bush favored) has achieved measurable gains.

By structuring *Race to the Top* in the guise of a competition, Obama cleverly gets states on board with his formulas for school reform they would have otherwise resisted. Even if a state doesn't get a dollar of federal funding, the competition is making it easier to start new charter schools, subject teachers to private sector-style performance management, and force districts to fix their schools. It also forces states to begin addressing the single biggest threat to their fiscal solvency: the \$600 billion in unfunded teachers' pensions and retirement obligations. Best of all, these steps cannot be easily overturned (unless the state wants to lose future federal funding). It also means that Obama isn't accused of imposing unfunded mandates on state and local governments even if, in essence, that's exactly what he is doing.

Obama is also applying this competition approach to his proposed revamp of *No Child*. States would compete for traditional federal school funding by proving that they embrace new college-preparatory reading, math, and science curriculum standards.

But aside from the much-needed shock value they provide, these changes aren't likely to spur long-term reform. One reason why: *Race to the Top* emphasizes that states order districts to replace teaching staffs and principals at failing schools in a manner similar to corporate restructurings in the private sector. Theoretically, that should lead to improvement in school (and student) performance. But it only works if the new staff is better than its predecessor—and if the district itself isn't one giant dropout factory. This is rarely so. Under *No Child*, just 11 percent of 968 California schools deemed as perpetually academic failures made “exemplary progress” in turning around performance; the Center on Education Policy concluded in a 2008 report that fewer than 14 percent of targeted schools were successfully revamped.

Shutting down failing schools and replacing them with a wide range of options—including private and parochial schools through school voucher programs—

is the best solution. But Obama only goes half-way. Through *Race to the Top*, he has certainly shown that he favors charter schools—which now serve more than 1.2 million students and are the dominant schools in New Orleans, Detroit, and Washington, D.C.—but there aren't enough of them in enough places to provide truly wide-ranging choices. Meanwhile, vouchers—which would help poor families, especially in urban and rural areas—are a no-go. Obama all but formally expressed his opposition to vouchers last year when he failed to stop congressional Democrats from shutting down the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, which helped 1,716 children avoid the Beltway's woeful public schools.

MEANWHILE, OBAMA STILL has to deal with the political reality that the Democratic Party depends on the NEA and AFT for its vast campaign war chests and rank-and-file workers. Obama has already weakened *Race to the Top* with mutually contradictory decisions in other areas of his education policy. As part of his revamp of *No Child*, Obama is eliminating something called *Adequate Yearly Progress*, a series of statistical breakdowns that monitors the performance of poor white, black, and Latino students—the very children most schools neglect academically. The NEA and AFT (along with suburban districts) are certainly pleased. But, as the Heritage Foundation's Lindsey Burke pointed out, the end of accountability means “discarding those [provisions] that were among [*No Child*’s] redeeming qualities.”

At the same time, Obama is also weakening *Race to the Top* with his funding selections. In March, for example, the administration chose Delaware and Tennessee—which weakened their proposals to gain consensus among teachers' unions—over states such as Florida, which is now the leading state in school reform thanks to the willingness of its politicians to tussle with NEA and AFT locals. Manhattan Institute scholar Jay P. Greene is only half-right in surmising, “This means that the unions will dictate what reforms will be pursued, which means that there will be virtually no reform.”

Obama deserves credit for taking a full step toward improving public education. But one step won't get you very far. ❧

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