



## Education

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# JULIA STEINY: This time around, we can't afford to lose the Race to the Top

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What every mother wants on Mother's Day and every day is what's best for her child.

And what would be best for every mom, child, grandmother and, for that matter, anyone who cares about kids in this state is for school districts and unions to sign on to Rhode Island's application for the federal Race to the Top (RTTT) grant by Friday. In particular, union support could be the tipping point that could win or lose \$75 million for kids and teachers. We came very close to winning in the first round of applications.

God knows Rhode Island's education system could use the money.

But our unions balked at signing on to the first application. Many believe that's what sunk it.

Our high-energy education commissioner, Deborah Gist, who just made Time magazine's list of the 100 most influential people, has been very clear what Rhode Island's reform strategy is. Improving teacher quality is at the top of her list. This is not news. And she felt she'd worked pretty closely with the unions for the first round, making adjustments to their concerns, when possible.

But in the clinch, the unions refused to go along. This time, Gist has been scrupulously inclusive of the unions and made herself more available to them.

But our unions don't tend to like reform. They tend to dig in their heels, even when it means giving up \$75 million for their own teachers.

In the last round, the winners, Delaware and Tennessee, had nearly universal district and union buy-in to their proposals. It's not surprising that those who are handing out RTTT money want reasonable assurance that the recipients will accomplish what's in their application without obstructive resistance. And refusing to sign on certainly signals resistance.

In Race to the Top, the feds are looking for aggressive strategies that will improve schools quickly. They want to see reforms that will boost teacher quality. They want states to devise decisive, unflinching policies to deal

with chronically low-performing schools. In short, they want gutsy moves to ramp up the lackluster performance of U.S. schools.

And the strategies proposed by Delaware and Tennessee were really bold.

For example, both states proposed using student test scores as a large percentage of their teacher evaluations. Their unions agreed. The sky did not fall. In Delaware, if a teacher's students don't show a year's worth of growth that year, they're deemed "ineffective." After one year. No one is proposing anything so harsh here in Rhode Island. But research does show that a child taught by ineffective teachers two years in a row will probably never make up the lost time. We owe it to the kids to make sure that the teacher in front of every classroom is at least pretty good.

Gist is emphatic: "It's critical that we get Race to the Top. We need these resources to create the education system we envision to move from where we are today to where we all want to be. But it will be much harder to win without union support. Their support could be the difference between make it or break it."

All but a couple of small Rhode Island school districts signed on to the first application. They are expected to join this second effort.

Gist sighs, then sits up straight and announces, "The schools, including principals and teachers, are still going to be held accountable. But if we don't get Race to the Top, it will happen without giving them the extra professional development or the resources to develop the multiple measures they want. These things cost money. Even so, school improvement doesn't stop. Evaluation doesn't stop. It all proceeds. It's going to happen anyway. So I hope everyone can see that this money is needed to support the teachers."

The federal grant would give frontline teachers the tools and help they need to succeed in the new way of life.

For their unions not to sign the application only hurts them and, per usual, the kids.

The need to improve education in Rhode Island is urgent. The state has the fifth highest per-pupil expenditure in the nation, but produces mediocre results. Only 55 percent of our high school students go on to college, well below the national average of 61.5 percent. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the "nation's report card," our Hispanic students have the lowest performance in the nation. Dead last.

Enough, already.

Whether you and I agree with every detail of what Gist is doing doesn't matter. We need to take action. We need Gist's fierce energy and determination to break the gridlock of bickering. Rhode Island has made significant progress and built some strong foundations, but the pace of improvement has been painfully slow.

Mothers, call the union leaders in your school districts. I'm not kidding. Call the big union power brokers of the state. Let them know that whatever their quibbles are with the RTTT applications, the kids and the teachers need the money. Ask them to have faith that together, we'll work out the specifics and disagreements. Today, ask them to do it for all the mothers who want what's best for their kids.

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