

FairTest

National Center for Fair & Open Testing

TO AVOID SLIPPING BACKWARDS ON EDUCATION REFORM, DRAFT "RACE TO THE TOP" GUIDELINES MUST BE REVISED

FairTest general comments on the draft guidelines for the Race to the Top Fund

During his campaign for the Presidency, Barack Obama said, "We should not be forced to spend the academic year preparing students to fill in bubbles on standardized tests." Candidate Obama added that the nation needs to use "a broader range of assessments that can evaluate higher-order skills, including students' abilities to use technology, conduct research, engage in scientific investigation, solve problems, present and defend their ideas." Just this June, President Obama explained that assessments could include "one standardized test, plus portfolios of work that kids are doing, plus observing the classroom. There can be a whole range of assessments."

Unfortunately, many of the "Race to the Top" (RTTT) draft guidelines issued by the Department of Education represent a step backwards from the President's goals. The proposals would actually make high-stakes testing problems worse without providing sufficient support for "a broader range of assessments." The guidelines are not rooted in evidence of how to improve schools. By focusing on new national standards and tests, they distract attention from necessary reforms, such as overhauling state assessment systems and supporting collaborative efforts to improve schools. They also overemphasize the value of test scores in data systems.

RTTT's focus on high-stakes testing goes well beyond what even the test-centric No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law now requires. The Department of Education must overhaul its draft guidelines. Here's what's wrong with the current draft and how to improve it:

- ***Basing teacher and principal pay on how well their students fill in multiple-choice test bubbles will undermine school reform, not advance it.*** As President Obama indicated, the use of test scores to judge schools, as mandated by NCLB, has harmed education. By encouraging states to make student test scores a "significant factor" in teacher and principal evaluation, RTTT will intensify the damage.

There is no evidence that paying teachers for increased student scores improves education. International research shows the practice leads to narrowing the curriculum and teaching to the test, to the detriment of all-around learning. Researchers have concluded that similar sorts of problems resulted from "performance pay" in other professional fields, such as medicine, which helps explain why payment for results is quite rare.

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Re-written guidelines should provide funds for professional learning – helping educators improve the knowledge and skills that will enable them to do their jobs well -- and to support high-quality evaluation systems. Those systems would look at the full range of desired learning outcomes, with test scores only one small part, as well as the many other important things teachers and principals do, such as ensure a supportive climate for learning.

- ***National exams will not reduce the problems caused by over-reliance on testing.*** The Department proposes to spend \$350 million for teams of states to create new tests based on new national standards. The Department should support improving state and local assessment systems, not focus on pressuring states to swap one standardized test for another.

National test proponents argue that "tougher tests" will improve student learning. But tougher tests do not necessarily lead to better education. While South Carolina's tests are as difficult as Massachusetts', South Carolina has not shown much progress on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), though Massachusetts has. Montana, Idaho and Wyoming have very similar NAEP scores and gains, but the difficulty of their tests varies considerably. Something other than "tough tests" must explain these results.

Internationally, top-ranked nations such as Finland, Hong Kong and Singapore do far less testing with far lower stakes. These nations do well by focusing on the quality of the teaching force and the curriculum.

- ***While states can and should use RTTT funds to develop new assessments, the guidelines need strengthening.*** They should authorize what leaders of the House Education Committee proposed in 2007: funding for states to create new systems that include performance assessments (such as Obama's call for measuring how well students "use technology... solve problems, present and defend their ideas") and the use of local and classroom evidence that Obama also called for. These approaches are supported by the 151 national education, civil rights, religious, disability, parent, labor and civic organizations that have signed the *Joint Organizational Statement on NCLB*.* They will make assessment into a powerful tool for educational improvement in ways that single tests, whether national- or state-mandated, cannot.

- ***The continued overemphasis on test scores will limit the value of data systems.*** Though it suggests states gather various sorts of information, including out-of-school factors, RTTT treats test results as the most important data. Good information is essential for evaluation, planning and improvement by teachers, principals and systems. Test scores provide woefully insufficient data about learning. There are too few questions on any topic, the format is too narrow, and they shed little light on what is not working well or on how to get better.

Revised guidelines should focus on building rich information systems such as those proposed by the Forum on Educational Accountability in *Empowering Schools and Improving Learning*.* The data on student learning outcomes must include far more than standardized test scores.

- ***RTTT would eliminate some of the major change options available to states.*** While blocking the more flexible options for "restructuring" schools allowed by NCLB that some states are using

successfully, it continues the law's automatic requirement to take extreme, often ineffective actions based solely on test scores. Revised guidelines should support tailored interventions designed to solve the particular problems faced by each school.

If the federal government truly wants to play a strong, positive role in improving education, the Department of Education must go back to the drawing board. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), which includes RTTT, imposes only brief and general requirements for use of these funds. The Department has instead issued prescriptive guidelines that amount to writing new laws. This anti-democratic approach will exploit states' desperate need for funds to micro-manage a misguided effort at "reform" that will perpetuate some of the Bush-Paige-Spellings regime's worst elements of test misuse and overuse.

* The *Joint Organizational Statement on No Child Left Behind and Empowering Schools and Improving Learning* are available at <http://www.fairtest.org> and <http://www.edaccountability.org>, along with supporting documents.

▪ The more detailed comments FairTest has submitted to the Department of Education can be found at http://fairtest.org/files/FT_Detailed_Comments_RT TT_Draft_Guidelines.pdf.