



Great Public Schools for Every Student

Talking Points on NEA New Business Item #2 2010 Representative Assembly (RA)

New Business Item 2 (Adopted)

“While the National Education Association (NEA) Representative Assembly (RA) supports and appreciates the significant increase in federal funding for education, the NEA takes a position of ‘no confidence’ in the U.S. Department of Education's Race to the Top competitive grant policies and guidelines, the use of competitive grant policies and guidelines as a basis for the reauthorization of ESEA, and similar initiatives and policies that undermine public education.”

Background

The 9,000 delegates attending the 2010 NEA Representative Assembly took a position of “no confidence” in the U.S. Department of Education’s Race to the Top program. New Business Item #2, which required a standing vote, passed by a narrow margin. The narrowness of the vote reflects the differences of opinions on Race to the Top among NEA’s state affiliates and members.

The fact is that many of our members live in states that applied for, and received funding from, the Race to the Top program, including Delaware and Tennessee. Others live in states that were unsuccessful in the first round but applied in the second round. Still others reside in states that decided not to compete for the funding.

NEA applauds the Department of Education’s commitment to funding education and the goal of providing all students with what they need to succeed. But NEA members are in schools and classrooms everyday, and we know that the policies proposed by the administration will not accomplish that goal. NEA members are committed to helping students thrive and become lifelong learners, but NEA and its members believe in an approach that is markedly different from the Obama administration’s competitive grant policies.

NEA believes that Race to the Top’s competitive grant process, one in which some students will “win” and others will lose, is a radical departure from the original intent of federal education funding. Federal education programs created by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act were created to give schools serving children in poverty an equal chance at a quality public education. Competitive grants will only hurt children of poverty, the students who need the most help.

Key message: NEA members believe the Department of Education is committed to America’s students, but we are very frustrated, as outlined in New Business Item #2. What we really need in order to help students learn and succeed is not reflected in federal policies that instead hold up struggling students as products to be tested.

- Because of devastating budget problems across the country, states are laying off educators and increasing class sizes. A competition for grants is a cruel hoax on state and local taxpayers, who desperately need a reliable stream of funding.
- The administration’s competitive approach creates winners and losers. In states that win the federal jackpot, many students will end up winners because they will be able to attend schools with the tools and resources they need. In states that lose out on the federal prize money, more students—through no fault of their own—will attend schools that don’t receive adequate resources.

- We've worked closely with the administration on health care reform, the jobs bill, and other legislation to improve the lives of children and NEA members. And we appreciate the relationship when it benefits students and public education.
- Our relationship with the administration is just like any other—we do not and will not always agree. But we remain committed to working collaboratively when we can to advance public education in ways that help students.
- The Department's competitive approach is a dramatic shift from a stable, consistent source of federal support toward an approach that will force states to compete on an uneven playing field for scarce resources.
- The proposed shift away from formula grants and toward competitive grants is deeply troubling. At this time of unprecedented fiscal crisis, the federal government should focus on being a reliable partner to states, rather than a casino that picks winners and losers.
- States simply cannot afford federal policies that force them to gamble, devoting considerable resources to applying for federal money that will be bestowed on only a selected few.
- The potential ramifications of moving from formula aid to competitive grants do not bode well for the ability of ESEA to deal with equity and is a great disservice to students everywhere. When adequate funding is lacking in states across the country, the first priority should be to provide adequate funding for every student in every school rather than creating more winners and losers.
- This scenario also puts school districts in rural states at a severe disadvantage since they do not have the resources or staff to apply for the dizzying array of competitive grants.
- All states want and need a reliable source of federal funding so that programs and services for students are not subject to additional cuts. Schools and school districts cannot develop budgets based on grant money they may not even win. They need to be able to plan responsibly so that critical support for students is not interrupted or terminated.
- Deciding whether or not to pursue Race to the Top funds is a state-based decision involving multiple players, including the state department of education, preferably working with educators. NEA believes the key to creating positive, substantial, sustainable change in our public schools requires a collaborative approach, one that involves all stakeholders.