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Race to Top fails students

Funding smaller class sizes improves achievement more than federal program

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In the days following Michigan's submission of its Race to the Top application for federal school money, many have been quick to point a finger of blame at the Michigan Education Association for recommending that our locals not sign on to the state's plan.

To be sure, we were as interested as the next in any extra funding our schools could receive. But in the end, the price was just too great -- we could not support a plan that is not in the best interest of our students, especially one crafted with political objectives instead of educational goals and without regard for strategies proven to help struggling schools.

The future of Michigan's students is more important than any negative press.

The real regret, though, is that Race to the Top could have been so much more.

If the program -- and Michigan's part in it -- were truly about raising the achievement of our state's students, it could have done some real good. We could have taken what has already been shown to work and used the federal money to help fund it here. If Michigan were serious about "Racing to the Top," our plan would have looked much different -- and been much more effective.

First, school districts would have been required to reduce class sizes and would have received the funding to support them.

This is no secret -- smaller class size leads to higher student achievement. Major research studies in Tennessee and Wisconsin have shown that not only do students in classrooms with fewer than 18 students outpace their peers in performance, but the results last, with continued benefits throughout their academic careers.

And yet, many students here in Michigan sit in classrooms nearing 40 students, more than double the amount that research has shown to be optimal.

The second key component of a real "Race to the Top" is: Make early childhood education a priority, not an afterthought. Every child would have the opportunity to attend a high-quality preschool.

A 2008 Rutgers University study found that all children reap long-term benefits from highly effective early childhood programs, with students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds benefiting the most.

Without a solid foundation, many of those students go on to struggle in later academic years -- if we, as educators, can get to them early and help them to develop needed skills, perhaps the idea of entire schools "struggling" would cease to be an issue.

This is what research has shown us works -- but there are additional practical ingredients that a good Race to the Top plan should promote. Teachers must be supported and parental involvement encouraged at every level. As President Obama has said, "the government cannot turn off the television or put away the video

games."

In the end, Race to the Top is a catchy name and the promise of federal funding was alluring. But if we truly want to invest our money where it will have a real impact on student achievement, we need to enact reforms that will actually help our students.

All of the policymaking and bureaucracy and standardized testing in the world can't come close to investing in smaller class sizes, early childhood education, parental involvement and support for the educators who make a difference in a child's life.

That's what MEA believes in and what we'll continue to advocate for -- regardless of what critics say.

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Additional Facts

Labor Voices

Labor Voices columns are written on a rotating basis by United Auto Workers President Ron Gettelfinger, Teamster President James Hoffa, Michigan AFL-CIO President Mark Gaffney and Michigan Education Association President Iris Salters. Look for Labor Voices every Wednesday in The Detroit News.