

Delaware State Education Association Position Regarding RTTT and the Delaware Department of Education Strategic Plan

November 2009

The Race to the Top (RTTT) program has been characterized as education reform's "Moon Shot," an opportunity for states, districts, and unions to partner with the federal government in an effort to boost student achievement and prepare the students of our nation for successful entry into the future job market (Duncan, 2009). Within this context, the Delaware Department of Education (DOE) developed its Strategic Plan for the next three years. While DSEA supports many aspects of the proposed RTTT criteria, as a responsible education partner, it adopts the following positions to make DOE's Strategic Plan and Delaware's application for RTTT funds more effective vehicles for change.

Great Teachers and Leaders

The RTTT Condition and Plan Criteria

- Have alternative routes to teacher certification in place that meet certain requirements, such as approving providers other than institutes of higher education, and allow testing out of required coursework
- Differentiate teachers and principals based on effectiveness, using student growth data as one measure
- Use data on teacher and principal effectiveness for the purposes of evaluation, compensation and promotion, tenure granting, and dismissal
- Increase the number of highly effective teachers and principals in high-need schools and the number of effective teachers in shortage subject areas
- Annually publish student performance data, as linked to teacher and principal preparation programs
- Use rapid time (less than 72 hours) student data to inform and evaluate teacher and principal supports such as professional development and collaboration/common planning time

DSEA Recommendations

Teacher Preparation and Alternate Routes to Certification

DSEA endorses a variety of strategies to improve teacher effectiveness and the equitable distribution of qualified teachers for all of Delaware's students. DSEA would like to see a

highly qualified teacher in every classroom, a teacher who is well-prepared and has sufficient time to teach and reflect upon that practice.

DSEA supports many of the recommendations made by the DOE Innovation Action Team sub-committee dealing with teacher quality and teacher preparation programs. The sub-committee strongly recommended that DOE take a greater role in ensuring the quality of Delaware's teacher preparation programs. In part, this would include assessment of the college faculty and adjunct faculty since their ability to deliver effective instructional experiences is the foundation for a successful teacher preparation program. The sub-committee also recommended that the bar be raised for student admission into teacher preparation programs with consideration given to SAT scores and a minimum grade point average for acceptance.

DSEA supports teacher preparation programs that will continue to recruit and prepare talented graduates, with specially designed programs for those choosing to work in Delaware's high need schools. Whether traditional or alternative, teacher preparation programs must prepare all candidates to meet the special challenges and learning needs of all students in a variety of social, economic, and educational environments.

DSEA supports the implementation of teacher residency programs as part of the DOE strategic plan. In its preliminary recommendations, DOE's Enhancing Teacher Effectiveness Committee asserted that teacher preparation programs should include a residency period for beginning teachers regardless of their certification program. The residency component would provide the novice with the time needed to teach and reflect under the guidance of a master teacher before becoming the teacher of record in any school. **DSEA strongly believes that the fast tracked enthusiasm of alternative preparation programs is no substitute for the deliberate preparation provided by a residency program.**

Providing Effective Teacher Supports for Instruction

DSEA favors the use of timely student data to inform and evaluate teacher and principal support programs such as professional development, collaboration, and common planning time. A collaborative work place is essential for developing effective school and teacher leaders and creating a school culture that supports data driven decision making (National Staff Development Council, 2001). Gains in student achievement occur in schools where teachers receive quality professional development embedded in the school day and time within the school schedule to prepare and collaborate with colleagues (Johnston, Knight, & Miller, 2007; Scherer, 2009).

Although the Federal Government will reward innovation through the RTTT grants, educators find it difficult to embrace innovative education strategies when districts cannot supply the basic necessities for their students. Since the start of the current school year, Delaware teachers have met with Governor Markell and Secretary of Education Lowery to share their concerns including the lack of time they have for teaching, planning and collaboration and the lack of essential supplies – paper, pencils, books and even toilet paper – in their schools. With or without the RTTT grant, Delaware must supply its teachers with the necessary resources – time, books, materials and technology – to support effective instruction.

Teacher working conditions are student learning conditions. **DSEA urges DOE to partner with Dr. Eric Hirsch and the New Teacher Center to conduct an ongoing teaching and learning conditions survey statewide.** This study would be similar to the study conducted in several other states and some Vision 2015 schools by Dr. Hirsch as part of a North Carolina initiative with the Center for Teaching Quality (<http://www.newteachercenter.org/tlcsurvey/about.php>, 2009).

Teacher Compensation

Traditional teacher compensation schedules were initially developed to address gender related compensation inequities, to recognize employee longevity, and to reward additional knowledge acquired through continued study. **DSEA believes any proposed teacher compensation system must recognize the skills and knowledge of educators while promoting a collaborative work environment to enhance student growth.** Compensation systems must be accompanied by adequate funding to support and sustain the essential working conditions needed for student success. **In addition, DSEA believes that teacher compensation systems must be:**

- Cooperatively developed by the state or district and the collective bargaining representative for the educators
- Developed with a differential pay component to recruit and retain teachers for low performing schools
- Structured to recognize the additional leadership roles and responsibilities assumed by many Delaware educators
- Fully funded and sustainable.

In the RTTT guidelines, the US Department of Education mandates that a state cannot apply for RTTT funds if a barrier exists that prevents it from linking teacher evaluations to student achievement. The Department maintains that linking student performance to pay systems will improve student achievement despite evidence to the contrary. The Economic Policy Institute (Adams, Heywood, & Rothstein, 2009), the Institute for the Study of Labor (Martins, Pedro, 2009), Brafman, (2008), and Christensen (2008) have shown that performance pay, recruitment bonuses, and incentives have not sufficiently resulted in improved student achievement. Moreover, there is little that is innovative or new about merit pay for educators. Since the 1920's merit pay and career ladders have a history of failed attempts in the United States (Pfeffer, 1998; Darling-Hammond & Berry, 1988). Merit pay is particularly uncommon with private sector professionals, especially if the compensation is based on client outcomes, which is the equivalent of linking teacher pay to student test scores (Adams, Heywood, & Rothstein, 2009). **DSEA does not support compensation systems that link teacher pay directly to student performance based primarily upon student assessment.**

Delaware already has an alternative compensation system that rewards teachers who achieve National Board Certification and those who participate in approved professional development clusters. Due to the state's fiscal crisis, a moratorium has been placed on both supplements.

Moreover, educators are currently working for a base salary reduced by 2.56% from the previous year. **Delaware must first restore educator salaries to their previous level and lift the moratorium on the supplements before it explores alternative compensation initiatives.** Finally, Delaware must guarantee sufficient and sustainable funding prior to implementing any alternative compensation system.

Determining Teacher Effectiveness

DPAS II, the Delaware teacher performance appraisal system, is a nationally recognized, well researched evaluation process, built upon and supported by the work of Charlotte Danielson. The system was the product of a multi-year, collaborative effort involving teachers, administrators, DSEA and DOE. The process was piloted and assessed before full state implementation in 2008. Using Danielson's *Framework for Effective Teaching* (2007), the system focuses on those components shown to demonstrate teacher effectiveness. Though not recommended by Danielson, a student achievement component was added to the DPAS II process. This component requires educators to validate student achievement through scores on the state assessment instrument (a limited testing snapshot of student performance) and/or through teacher collected artifacts that demonstrate student proficiency throughout the year. All five components of the DPAS II system are weighted equally. There is no empirical evidence to suggest that the DPAS II system is not fulfilling its purpose of effectively assessing teacher performance.

DSEA supports DPAS II's use of multiple measures to assess both student performance and teacher effectiveness. DSEA does not support an educator evaluation system based primarily upon student achievement data derived from a single test. In a speech at the National Education Association Representative Assembly in July, 2009, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan affirmed DSEA's position by telling delegates, "Test scores alone should never drive education, compensation or tenure decisions. That would never make sense." The Forum for Education and Democracy and Consortium for Policy Research in Education assert that multiple measures must be used to assess both student and teacher proficiency since use of a single test limits assessment to those teachers of the subjects covered by the test; reliably distinguishes only between the top and the lowest performers; only shows how well a teacher's students are doing in comparison to another teacher's students; and does little to improve teacher recruitment, induction, professional development and retention (Wood & Chaltain, 2009; Milanowski, Heneman III, & Kimball, 2009). In the end, student achievement assessment instruments were created to assess student achievement, not teacher effectiveness, an end they cannot accomplish without additional multiple measures needed to produce a reliable outcome.

As previously noted, DPAS II includes five equally weighted components. **DSEA opposes changing the current weighting between and within the DPAS II components.** By all appearances, any proposed weighting change is not necessary to make Delaware eligible for the RTTT grant process. In fact, RTTT guidelines only mandate that there be no barrier preventing student achievement from being tied to teacher performance, a requirement exceeded by the current DPAS II system. RTTT guidelines do not mandate that student assessment be a preponderance of the evaluation, nor is there any indication from the US Department of

Education that raising the weighted value of the student achievement component will increase Delaware's chance to succeed in the RTTT grant process.

Turning Around Struggling Schools

The US Department of Education has prescribed four models for turning around struggling schools. Districts must choose from these models when developing their School Improvement Grant applications. These models include:

- **Turnarounds:** Replace the principal and at least 50 percent of the staff and also adopt new or revised instructional strategies. The new leadership needs to consider extending the school day and year, offering social services, and recruiting, placing, and developing highly effective teachers.
- **Re-starts:** Close the school and re-open it under the management of a charter organization or an education management organization. The school must admit, within the grades it serves, all former students who wish to attend.
- **Closures:** Close the school and transfer its students to higher-performing schools in the district.
- **Transformations:** Implement a comprehensive transformation strategy that, at a minimum, replaces the school leadership and develops and rewards teacher and leader effectiveness; adopts comprehensive instructional programs; extends time for students and staff and offers community-oriented services; and provides operating flexibility and intensive support.

DSEA Recommendations

DSEA acknowledges the immediate need to deal with low-performing schools and endorses the work of the Learning First Alliance (2009), a partnership of 17 major national education groups, as a responsible plan of action. The Learning First Alliance recommends the following operating principles for turnaround schools:

1. **Measure progress toward a broad vision of student success.** When identifying or moving forward with turnaround efforts, schools should include evidence of student learning in areas other than just those currently tested.
2. **Measure the conditions for school and student success.** Address the root causes of poor student performance and address the conditions necessary for student success, i.e., school working conditions, professional development for staff, teacher retention and transfer rates, student attendance, school safety and student discipline, quality of the facilities, etc. Turnaround schools should also gauge the effectiveness of their strategies to engage parents and their communities and develop stronger ties with social service agencies.

3. **Ensure that measures are clear and available for all stakeholders.** Stakeholders should readily be able to track the progress of turnaround efforts through easily accessible clearly understood performance measures.
4. **Track progress over time.** Turnaround schools should have ambitious, yet attainable goals with ample time provided for sustained student improvement. It may take more than the one or two years that are funded by the RTTT program.

In Delaware, DSEA points to the school improvement process used by the Vision Network as an example of the thoughtful, measured approach advanced by these principles. The Vision Network partners with districts and schools to use a research-based, multi-year process to change school culture through enhanced leadership, planning, and staff development. Additionally, the Vision Network engages other key stakeholders and the community to support the school improvement process.

DSEA believes a district developed plan provides the best opportunity to turn around schools and improve student achievement. District led efforts have been successful in cities like Philadelphia where, over a three year period, restructuring efforts in 21 schools resulted in greater student gains than in privately managed schools. (Gill, Zimmer, Christman, & Blanc, 2007). Due to limited district and DOE capacity to identify root causes and develop a systemic strategy and limited resources to support systemic change, previous district improvement efforts have not produced significant student gains. **DSEA maintains that district reform efforts receiving adequate resources and support from DOE provide the best opportunity for success in improving student achievement.** These efforts should be given adequate time for implementation before Delaware makes any decision to employ a more radical approach such as conversion to charter schools or the creation of Performance Zones.

Charter Schools

Delaware created charter schools in order to develop a new type of public school that would have the support of parents and teachers and share innovative practices with all public schools. The intent was not to "...divide limited public resources across parallel systems that perform at similar levels and suffer from similar breaches in accountability" (Miron, 2009). Current research shows that charter schools and the four turnaround strategies are not more successful in helping struggling schools. The mixed success record demonstrates that charter schools struggle with student achievement and graduation rates as much if not more than regular public schools (CREDO, 2009). A Western Michigan University study showed that Delaware's regular public schools performed better at the elementary grade levels while some of its charter schools showed greater gains at the middle and secondary grade levels (Miron, Cullen, Applegate, & Farrell, 2007).

DSEA believes that charter schools have a niche in the education community, but they are not the answer to all of the challenges in education today. DSEA points to the Delaware Military Academy, Prestige Academy and Kuumba Academy as examples of charter schools that have been able to serve a unique population or provide a unique service otherwise not available in the regular public school system. However, equal examples of success exist where regular public schools have been developed for a similar purpose, most notably the Cab Calloway

School of the Arts and the Southern Delaware School of the Arts. DSEA believes that magnet schools have been underutilized and that regular public schools should be given the same flexibility from bureaucratic regulation as Delaware currently affords to its charter schools. DSEA was pleased to see that the final RTTT application adds a section whereby states can enhance their chances of success if they enable school districts to operate innovative, autonomous public schools – such as magnet schools – other than charter schools.

Delaware charter schools have benefitted from public money without being subject to public scrutiny or oversight. As a result, decision makers do not know if Delaware is utilizing charter schools for the best benefit of its children, including those in low performing schools. **DSEA believes that Delaware needs to improve its current regulation of charter schools to ensure their responsible growth within the public school system.**

Performance Zones

DSEA believes that the Performance Zone concept for low-performing schools included in DOE’s strategic plan should be used only where other well implemented strategies have failed. DSEA favors the creation of a performance zone only under the following conditions:

- Schools within the zone will be part of a “reform network,” but the District retains oversight for the schools.
- DOE oversees the “reform network.” DOE will monitor the schools within the zone and provide the technical assistance, resources and support needed for improvement. This may require DOE to engage “partners” in the short term to provide the expertise and other resources they may lack, and in the long term, build capacity within the DOE to work with low performing schools. This may also require DOE to create a separate department dedicated to working with low performance schools, with additional staff and resources provided to support that work.
- DOE will develop transformational capacity within districts to support their schools in the zone. This may require districts to create separate management structures for oversight of those schools.
- School improvement plans will be developed within a collaborative, collective bargaining environment. Other key stakeholders, such as parents and community groups, will also be involved in the development of the plan. Their involvement will develop support for and ownership of the plan.

Delaware’s approach for turning around struggling schools must also include a district audit with consideration being given to what is best for the students, what is best for the communities, and what systems Delaware can reasonably sustain after the federal dollars are spent. Delaware must cautiously evaluate every plan framed as education reform’s “silver bullet” and carefully assess the impact on students and educators as well as the economic cost. Delaware must audit any external programs used in struggling schools to ascertain whether funds are supporting students, classrooms and educators versus supporting education management organizations and consultants. **DSEA believes that sustainable funding must be part of any reform effort in**

order for Delaware to avoid the “funding cliff” when federal stimulus money is no longer available and improvement efforts are left without funding.

Standards and Assessments

The RTTT Condition and Plan Criteria

- Participation in a consortium of states developing a set of internationally benchmarked common standards and assessments that builds toward college and career readiness.
- High-quality plan to implement new standards and assessments, including alignment of high school graduation and college entrance requirements, and development of curricular materials and professional development for educators.

DSEA Recommendations

In 1992, Delaware was one of the first states to develop state education standards. This year Delaware was one of the first states to join in the effort by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) to create the common core standards referenced in the RTTT criteria. Currently, Delaware is in the process of selecting a new student assessment program. DOE plans to have some districts pilot the new assessment system in the spring of 2010, with statewide implementation in the fall of 2010.

DSEA supports the need for rigorous standards and a robust curriculum to support them. Respected school leaders and practitioners dedicated years to creating Delaware’s current standards and curriculum. In fact, Delaware has regularly revised its content standards; matched them to curriculum; and written performance indicators for all the core subjects. The alignment of Delaware’s rigorous standards, curriculum and assessment is a well respected model for many states. While the Common Core Standards have the potential to provide educators with far more manageable curriculum goals to promote student success, the standards alone do not guarantee student achievement. **All states, including Delaware, must provide effective teachers and the necessary educational and community resources to ensure quality education (Education Law Center, 2007).**

DSEA supports Delaware’s effort to develop a student assessment instrument that is both formative and summative in nature. This instrument will provide classroom educators with valuable data to shape their classroom instruction. **However, to ensure the success of the new instrument, DOE must determine its validity and reliability and align it with the proposed “Diamond State curriculum” before moving to full statewide implementation to assess student achievement.**

Data Systems to Support Instruction

The RTTT Condition and Plan Criteria

- Implement a statewide longitudinal data system that:
 - Includes extensive student demographic, education history, and achievement data;
 - Communicates with higher education data systems;
 - Matches individual teachers and students; and
 - Incorporates an audit system for continually assessing data quality, validity, and reliability.
- Make data available to key stakeholders, including parents, students, teachers, principals, and district and union stakeholders.
- Use data to improve instruction and allow researchers to access data for program evaluation.

DSEA Recommendations

DSEA sees great potential in the use of data systems to support education. Delaware's current data systems are recognized nationally for meeting all of the assurance metrics required by the Data Quality Campaign and the America Competes Act. **DSEA supports the implementation of data systems that will provide educators with timely information to help shape instructional practices; parents with needed information about their child's school; and higher education institutions with valuable information to transform teacher preparation programs to meet the needs of today's students.**

DSEA does not support the use of data systems that link student tracking information to individual teachers for the purpose of performance evaluations. Use of this performance data as the sole measure of student achievement is insufficient to adequately gauge teacher effectiveness in the classroom. Hassell (2002) found that tying evaluations to skills and knowledge using standards based evaluation systems produces more positive change than evaluating teachers solely on test score results. Delaware's teacher evaluation system, DPAS II, supports this premise. The evaluation system assesses skills and knowledge in the areas of planning and preparation, classroom environment, and instruction and combines performance in these areas with professional responsibilities and student improvement to determine an overall performance rating. DPAS II provides the evaluator with a complete picture of teacher performance rather than the fragmented snapshot provided by state tests that focus only on student performance in a limited number of subject areas.

Effective, Efficient Service Delivery

Regional Centers

Education tax dollars should be used efficiently to deliver a world class education to Delaware children. **DSEA supports the idea of piloting regional centers for the purpose of consolidating school district purchasing and providing various human resources tasks. DSEA also supports a performance and cost benefit analysis on those centers, but believes it should be conducted as soon as possible, not in 2012 as suggested in DOE's strategic plan.**

School District Consolidation

Proponents of school district consolidation see an opportunity for savings in administrative costs and the elimination of duplicated services. However, lingering questions remain. What is the educational value of consolidation? Is it exclusively a financial issue? DSEA questions the educational value of consolidation since it would disrupt community identity, values, cultures, and traditions. **Decision makers must examine Delaware's experience with consolidation, review previous studies and commission new studies before determining whether it is an educationally sound strategy that will enhance the education process for all students.**

Delaware must also assess the costs associated with consolidation to determine its true economic value. For instance, the salary schedule for a newly consolidated district must match the best paid district that was absorbed, a process known as "leveling up." **DSEA believes a thoughtful discussion involving all stakeholders must occur before serious consideration is given to consolidation.**

What's Missing from the State and Federal Education Reform Efforts

The DOE Strategic Plan presents an opportunity to reshape the future of Delaware's public education system using a fair, balanced, and researched approach.

Though federal dollars would be welcome in these hard economic times, DOE must develop a sustainable plan that meets the needs of all Delaware children. This plan must include strategies for eliminating child poverty, increasing parent involvement, and mandating pre-school programs for all children.

Eliminating Child Poverty

Delaware's commitment to its children must extend beyond their education. At a Child Poverty Summit this spring, State Representative Teresa Schooley noted, "Children are 25% of our population, but 100% of our future" (2009). While the child poverty rate rose steadily from 16.2 % in 2000 to 19.0 % in 2008, due to the recession projections show that by 2010, 26.6 % of children in the United States will live in poverty (Shierholz, 2009). Though not referenced in the RTTT guidelines or the DOE Strategic Plan, Delaware cannot ignore the fact that schools do not operate in a vacuum safe from the realities of society. Even with the rise in poverty, there remains opportunity for positive change. DSEA and others in the education community must advocate for an end to child poverty just as they advocated for an end to child labor more than 100 years ago.

In a report issued in April, 2009, the Child Poverty Task Force - chaired by Representative Schooley and including legislators, representatives of the Governor's office, business people, and community activists - recommended reform efforts that include:

- Providing for the basic needs of each child
- Providing adequate health care
- Providing a safe home
- Providing a safe community environment.

These efforts must include strategies for educating both children and adults living in poverty. By educating the adults and members of the community, they then become the "Turnaround Specialists" for reform in their neighborhoods, working with teachers to provide their children with the best education possible.

Increasing Parental Involvement

DOE's Strategic Plan fails to mention helping parents and schools find ways to connect. **DSEA urges the department to follow the federal government's lead: States can enhance their RTTT application by showing that they are "implementing strategies to effectively engage families and communities in supporting the academic success of their students." DSEA hopes that DOE will modify its Strategic Plan to include support to school districts who do the same.**

Myriad studies have shown that parental involvement dramatically increases the chances of student success. Parents are their child's first teacher. Parents care deeply about their children and their education. Yet, we know from experience how difficult and frustrating it is for many parents to develop a working relationship with the schools their children attend. This difficulty is especially true for those parents who work two or more jobs and have little extra time; those who struggle due to language barriers; and those who find involvement with their child's school difficult because of their own negative experiences with school when they were young.

Some innovative schools are finding non-traditional ways to establish meaningful relationships with parents in order to truly partner with them, thus increasing the chance that their children will be successful. **All education reform efforts aimed at turning around struggling schools must include the development of effective ways to make schools more accessible to families.**

Instituting Mandatory Pre-School

One of the "Invitational Priority" items in the RTTT Final Guidelines for grant applications deals with examining the state's effort to enhance the quality of preschool programs. DOE's Strategic Plan does not include providing additional support for mandatory pre-school. Pre-school programs provide struggling students with a solid educational foundation that promotes their continued growth and improves their chances for graduation. As such, a pre-school program

in a struggling school would be the answer for many children from less-than-privileged backgrounds who are not ready for kindergarten. **Using RTTT funds to establish pre-schools should be one of Delaware’s top priorities to increase student readiness for kindergarten, particularly for disadvantaged students.** Policy makers question “how to close the achievement gap” and “turn around struggling schools”; Delaware educators know the answer: provide adequate resources and supplies; partner with parents; and provide effective school programs for three and four year-olds.

Conclusion

Delaware must strive to enable all students, especially those in low resourced schools and those with social and economic disadvantages, to reach their full potential and successfully enter the workforce of the future. The voice and input of educators expressed through their unions and their collective bargaining agreements are an essential and positive part of the process to achieve these goals. Every reform ends with implementation by an educator in the classroom. DSEA will ensure that the interests of its members and the children they teach have a voice in the Delaware reform process.

As President John F. Kennedy noted, “The Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word ‘crisis.’ One brush stroke stands for danger; the other for opportunity. In a crisis, be aware of the danger – but recognize the opportunity.”

DSEA recognizes its responsibility to forewarn of dangers and its obligation to seize the opportunity to shape educational and social change.

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