



Written by on July 24, 2009

## Obama Education Dept. Announces “Race to the Top”

The Department of Education on July 24 featured a live video webcast where President Barack Obama, as the closing speaker, summed up the draft guidelines for his administration’s \$4.35 billion “Race to the Top” education fund.



U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan led off the program, followed by other speakers including Gene Wilhoit, executive director of the Council of Chief State School; Jean Clements, president of the Hillsborough (Florida) Classroom Teachers Association; Dr. Jarvis Sanford, managing director of elementary schools for the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL); Mike Feinberg, co-founder of the KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) Foundation and the Superintendent of KIPP Houston; Eric Smith, commissioner of education for the state of Florida; and Matthew Austin, a student at Washington D.C.’s Howard University Public Charter Middle School of Mathematics and Science. Young Matthew then introduced the president.

Here’s a YouTube video of the president’s remarks:

The *Washington Post* reported on July 23 that the \$4 billion-plus education grant program was created under the \$787 billion economic stimulus plan passed by Congress and signed into law by the president in February. In an Oval Office interview with the *Post*, Obama plainly admitted that the federal funding would be tied to the states’ changing current standards to comply with those coming from Washington:

What we’re saying here is, if you can’t decide to change these practices, we’re not going to use precious dollars that we want to see creating better results; we’re not going to send those dollars there. And we’re counting on the fact that, ultimately, this is an incentive, this is a challenge for people who do want to change.

A key feature of “Race to the Top” will be for states to lift restrictions on the number of charter schools (semi-autonomous, government-funded, results-oriented schools) they allow, or face a denial of federal grants. Other basic elements of the program are requirements to link teachers’ pay to student achievement and federal pressure on states to adopt common nationwide academic standards.

Although the July 24 D.C. event marked the official unveiling of “Race to the Top,” Education Secretary Duncan has been stumping for the plan since it was enacted into law in February in his travels across the country, sometimes lobbying state legislatures to adopt measures that will make them eligible to



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compete for the federal taxpayer dollars.

One example of the new education czar's influence was in Rhode Island, where the legislature was debating whether to spend \$1.5 million for two charter schools.

All Duncan had to do was drop a little not-so-subtle hint during a June 22 charter school conference in Washington by saying: "We are fighting this on a state-by-state battle, that's the battleground. And places like Rhode Island that are thinking of underfunding charters are obviously going to put themselves at a huge competitive disadvantage going forward. So we don't think that's a smart thing for them to do, and we're going to make that very, very clear."

The Rhode Island legislators took the hint and voted to fund the schools.

A *Washington Post* report observed: "In similar ways, Duncan has stepped into legislative debates in Indiana, Illinois, Tennessee and Massachusetts to advance or defend charter schools, though he points out that he wants to shut failing charter schools as much as he wants to open new ones."

Another key component of "Race to the Top" is that states must remove all laws and regulations preventing the use of student achievement data from being used to evaluate teachers and principals. If they do not, they will not be eligible for the federal funds.

Furthermore, according to a July 24 report in the *Wall Street Journal*, states competing for their piece of the federal pie will also be "judged on how well they work with other states in developing common academic standards. Currently, under the federal No Child Left Behind law, states are free to set their own standards for what students should learn. They vary widely and, in many cases, scores on state achievement tests appear out of sync with national test results."

Under "Race to the Top" states will be told: get in step or you're out of the money.

Or, as Secretary Duncan told teachers at a meeting of the National Education Association this month in San Diego: "You must be willing to change."

During his address at the Department of Education, President Obama sounded almost like a host for a TV game show like "Let's Make a Deal": "If you set rigorous challenges and assessments, you're state can win a race to the top grant."

And, noted the president, in order to accomplish these wonderful education reforms: "We're going to have to put the interests of our children ahead of our parochial interests."

In other words, if you don't forego the rights of states, local school districts, and parents to determine the best way to educate their own children, you have not made "the best interests of our children" a priority.

Andrew J. Coulson, the director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, authored an excellent article about "Race to the Top" posted on the institute's website on July 24 entitled, ["Education Reform's Moon Shot Moonshine."](#)

He wrote, in part:

"Race to the Top" funds will be used to reward states that pursue education policies favored by Duncan and President Obama, and, by extension, to punish states that don't. It is obedience training writ large. States that Duncan felt were going in the wrong direction in recent weeks, like Rhode Island, were rapped on the nose: keep it up, and we'll withhold millions in education funding kibbles, they were told.



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We recommend you read the entire piece, which isn't long. We loved all of it, and his concluding sentence is a model of common sense: "Obama and Duncan may well train state education leaders to follow their commands, but there's no reason to believe those commands will improve American schools."

We can think of one beneficial result from "Race to the Top," however. For years, federal politicians have denied — much against the warnings of constitutionalists — the basic maxim that states: *what the federal government finances, the federal government controls*.

With "Race to the Top" the connection is undeniable: The doggie that rolls over, sits up, and begs perfectly will be the one that gets the Milk-Bone®.



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