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State Board of Education shows qualms over Race to the Top application

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Lansing -- State Board of Education members expressed concerns about the state's application for federal Race to the Top grants at the board's meeting today.

Board President Kathleen Straus said she's not willing to sign the application, as required by federal rules, until she's had a chance to read the entire document. She was told it likely won't be ready until Sunday, two days before it is due to be sent to the U.S. Department of Education.

"I'd like to see the whole plan before I sign it. I was raised by a lawyer," Straus said.

She said the application and the state reform plan should include a statement about how teacher performance evaluation systems will be negotiated in local collective bargaining.

State Supt. Michael Flanagan said, "It is all collectively bargained. It is not imposed by the state."

Board member Marianne McGuire said she's "really not seeing a whole lot of fairness with this plan" because it puts the onus of reform on teachers and does not talk about the role of the community, parents or business. She also said she has issues with a three-tiered professional licensure system that is part of the state's plan.

Board members John Austin, Reginald Turner and Nancy Danhoff said they support the state's plan.

"It's comprehensive, intense, rigorous and detailed," Danhoff said.

Straus said, "I know the board supports it. ... The board has been pushing (these reforms) for a lot of years."

The plan is the basis for Michigan's application for money through the federal Race to the Top competition. The application must be submitted to the U.S. Department of Education by 4:30 p.m. Jan. 19 to qualify Michigan for up to \$400 million in stimulus funding.

State Department of Education officials will present the summary of the plan, which lays out how the state will implement new laws that link teachers' evaluations with their students' test scores, provide new routes to teacher certification, and allow for the state to take over failing schools.

At least six Oakland County school districts, as well as East Detroit and Richmond in Macomb County, have refused to sign on to the application. More than 700 districts and charter schools have agreed to participate, according to state officials.

Many who didn't sign objected to the fast timeline for the application. Districts were required to file paperwork with the state Friday if they hoped to participate. The final application is not complete, but a 12-page summary is posted online.

"Signing (a memoranda of understanding) says you agree to all aspects of the state's Race to the Top plan," said Doug Pratt, spokesman for the Michigan Education Association, said Monday. The state's largest teachers union has advised locals not to sign on to the changes. "How can you agree to all aspects of a plan you haven't seen?"

The state board has voiced support for Race to the Top, and urged lawmakers, unions and districts to support the reforms needed to qualify.

Jan Ellis, spokeswoman for the Department of Education, said the final application will include budgets, a list of participating districts and other nuts-and-bolts details. The final package will likely total 100 pages or more, she said.

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