

Important memo from MEA President Iris K. Salters on Race to the Top decision

January 11, 2010

Fellow proud MEA members,

Due to many factors which I'll lay out below, **MEA's final decision is that we cannot recommend to our local association presidents that they sign memorandums of understanding that commit their members to implementing the state's incomplete and flawed Race to the Top plan.**

We have made this decision after working diligently since last spring to help make Michigan's application for RTTT funds as competitive as possible. But we have reached a crossroads in our discussions with education policymakers who seem bent on making changes to both the RTTT process and plan that we believe are not necessarily in the best interest of students or the school employees who serve them.

MEA's decision is based on several key points:

- 1) A signed MOU is a binding, legal document that commits your district and local to adhere to every aspect of the state's RTTT plan – even though the plan is not final.** The laws passed in December leave many things to local control, such as decisions over evaluation and compensation. Yet the MDE's summary of their incomplete plan usurps that control in many ways. The exact wording of the final plan will determine what control those districts who have signed MOUs are agreeing to hand over to MDE and the state superintendent. Your right to bargain your wages and working conditions would be stripped away by signing what is essentially a blank contract.
- 2) The RTTT plan and process are moving targets, with changes happening every day that make it impossible to make sound, firm decisions.** Publication dates for the final plan keep shifting. Each plan summary that comes out has new language that has never been discussed before. Deadlines for signing MOUs and requirements for what is in them change. Even the rules about who will get money are changing – now it seems that districts that sign an MOU *are not* guaranteed to share in whatever RTTT money Michigan gets, instead having to submit yet another plan to MDE that may or may not be approved.
- 3) Even if \$400 million comes from the federal government, it is not enough to fix our fundamental school funding problems or pay for the new mandates required by RTTT.** There is no guarantee that Michigan will get any of this one-time money – in fact, State Superintendent Mike Flanagan has been lowering expectations about our chances for the past week. And even if we do, many districts would not receive adequate funding to cover even the changes required by the draft state plan, let alone actually invest in their classrooms and their students. To put it in perspective, that \$400 million would run Michigan schools for about *one* week – while the RTTT money would certainly help, it's not going to solve our serious, ongoing school funding problems. To do that, Michigan must update its antiquated tax structure and develop a system that provides adequate, equitable and stable funding for schools.
- 4) The reforms called for in the draft RTTT plan run counter to what research tells us about how to improve student achievement.** Changes in education need to be based on research, not rhetoric – and the research simply doesn't back up what is in the draft plan. There is no research that says relying mainly on student growth models to evaluate teachers helps students. In fact, the overwhelming majority of the research says that increasing our over-reliance on student results from high-stakes tests will not help improve teacher quality or student achievement. The pitfalls and unintended consequences of using high stakes tests to measure student growth and teacher effectiveness are well documented. How will we staff our struggling schools when teacher performance is measured significantly on student achievement? How will this impact teachers of special needs students? What will the impact be on the curriculum – even more teaching to the test that saps teachers of their creativity and students of their joy of learning?

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5) **Most important, we simply don't have the trust in our education policymakers to make the "leap of faith" they want us to.** "Trust us." We've heard it dozens of times throughout the RTTT process. But each time we hear that, it has become a signal that a promise, commitment or agreement is about to be altered or ignored. During the past several months, we have spent countless hours working with legislative leaders, the state superintendent and his MDE staff and the governor's office in a good-faith effort to improve Michigan's application for RTTT. When we think we've made progress through an agreement, within days, we find that our input has again been disregarded.

Ignoring months of joint work and negotiations that led up to the late night and weekend sessions before the holidays, the Legislature's final package of bills violated critical agreements about the bargaining rights of some MEA members in so-called failing schools. That is why MEA opposed that final package of bills, despite the existence of some good policy changes in them (such as new requirement for bidding before outsourcing school employee jobs and a "Teacher Bill of Rights" that provides recourse for teachers being denied basic classroom supplies).

Throughout the legislative process, we were willing to accept necessary changes for Race to the Top. However, driven by an erroneous belief that surpassing federal guidelines would result in more points in the RTTT judging process, the Legislature went far beyond those requirements and our recommendations for meeting them. Then, MDE went even farther in the draft state plan, taking authority over evaluation and compensation packages that the Legislature intended be left at the local level and including a controversial three-tiered licensure plan despite the fact that their own committee was still working on the concept. Unfortunately, none of these changes will earn us more points on the federal government's RTTT judging rubric – there is no extra credit.

MEA representatives spent countless hours working with MDE to address our concerns about the draft state plan and to set reasonable deadlines that would allow people to see the final plan before making final commitments. When we made such arguments, the department's answer was simply to make local union presidents' signatures optional, cutting us out of what was meant to be a collaborative process. When agreements on our issues finally were made regarding timeline and language changes, those promises were quickly broken, often with MEA finding out through department press releases and memos. These broken promises don't end with MEA – many school districts have given up on participating in RTTT due to the department's ever-changing rules, putting the needs of their students ahead of a mad dash for federal dollars.

In conclusion, we recognize that this decision to not support Michigan's RTTT plan will redouble the efforts of many politicians and pundits who are already blaming MEA for standing in the way of obtaining extra funds for schools. But the future of Michigan's students and school employees is more important than negative PR or one-time funds that won't address the full scope of our education funding crisis.

Through personal experience and solid, academic research, the dedicated educators in this state know what is necessary to help our students succeed – early childhood education, smaller class sizes, greater individual attention, adequate books, supplies and technology, and well-trained and supported teachers and school support staff. Even though these proven strategies aren't the focus of Michigan's Race to the Top plan, we will remain committed to them – and to our students, whose futures we help mold each and every day. Remain proud of that fact and we will weather this storm together as members of a union that is steadfast in its beliefs and in its commitment to public schools, their employees and, most important, our students.

Sincerely,



Iris K. Salters
MEA President