



# Reporter

January, 2010

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## RACE TO THE TOP

By now you may have heard of Race To The Top. RTTT is a program of federal education grants that will be distributed to states via a competitive bidding process. In order to qualify for funds, states have to have laws and regulations in place governing public schools and public school employees that conform to federal guidelines. Not all states will receive RTTT grants; I've read estimates that range up to 20 states. However, most states will probably pass the legislation that is necessary to compete for grants.

The nature of the legislation that states must pass to qualify for RTTT funds is problematic. Several features of the legislation undermine the interests of union members and alter public education in significant ways. The two areas of greatest impact to teachers and students are the linkage of student standardized test results to teacher evaluations and the linkage of test results to school takeovers by a state appointed manager. These two provisions relegate the definition of student and school success to math and ELA test scores and create a top down managerial model, as opposed to a site based collaborative

model, as the basis for school decision making.

Under the new legislation, teacher evaluations will be conducted annually and student achievement must be a "significant" part of the evaluation. The language in the Michigan Department of Education's plan encourages the removal of ineffective teachers via the evaluation process. Elsewhere in the legislation a compensation system based on the evaluation of effective teaching is specified. The MDE's draft regulation states that attaining a Master's degree and advanced coursework has not been shown to enhance student achievement, therefore salary advancement should not be based on those factors or teaching experience in schools. (I find it mind boggling that the MDE no longer supports higher education for teachers.)

The school takeover portion of the legislation is also very damaging to teachers and public schools. Essentially, the 5% lowest performing schools can be taken over by an "Emergency District Manager" who will have the power to unilaterally alter a union contract. This also means that local school boards are subordinate

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## ***RACE TO THE TOP (Continued from Page 1)***

to the Manager who can be appointed by the state for up to nine years. Under this provision of the state legislation - which was designed to conform to federal guidelines - public education will not be locally controlled or democratically run by a check and balance system of school boards representing parents and the community, unions representing employees, and administration representing (charitably) budget and programmatic concerns. In fact, much of public education won't even be public given that the legislation expands charter schools and allows EDMs to hand over the operations of a school to an "Educational Management Organization" which is a for profit business that runs charter schools.

There was one helpful aspect to the legislation. Districts can no longer summarily privatize support services and fire support staff. A unionized group of employees has to be allowed to submit bids for services along with private companies. If this was in place last year, Royal Oak would not have been able to fire the kitchen staff and enrich the coffers of Chartwell Company. This gives our support staff, a group of people who are extremely dedicated to the needs of our students, better leverage in their fight to remain public school employees.

One sop was thrown to teachers. We can now complain to the state if the district doesn't provide us with the supplies that we need to implement our instruction. In theory, the state will insist that the district provides the supplies. (Between us, I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for state ordered supplies.)

There are, of course, many more facets and details to the federal and state legislation. I tried to cover the main points that impact most strongly upon us, our profession, and our passion for great and genuine public schools. I believe RTTT to be an attack on the fundamentals of public education which essentially bases itself on the punitive structure of No Child Left Behind. There is absolutely no consideration in any of the legislation to help schools and students in impoverished communities nor is there any way of defining success other than test scores. Ultimately, the individual teacher, who will be linked under the legislation to all of their students by a big computer in the sky, is the only factor responsible for student success or lack thereof. At the core of the legisla-

tion is the massive conversion of public schools to for profit chartering organizations. Cynically, less than half of the states will qualify for funding under RTTT which is tantamount to saying that more than half of the students in our nation are considered undeserving of more support for their education through no fault of their own.

The final irony for Michigan is that the legislature, bitterly divided over financial support for schools, managed to collaboratively pull together a complex packet of bills in a matter of weeks given the twin themes of anti-unionism and the transfer of tax dollars to corporation profits.

Please note that the MEA fought for our interests in every step of the legislative process. There were, for example, several attempts to entirely throw out tenure, making us at will employees without any rights of due process and judicial review. The MEA was able to protect in total our tenure rights. The legislature also wanted to affix a number to the concept of student achievement being represented in our evaluations. Sixty percent was bandied about. The MEA successfully kept student achievement as an evaluation factor to "significant" which is the terminology used in federal guidelines.

### ***Postscript***

You may also have heard of the Memorandum of Understanding that union locals have been asked to sign. The MOU expresses union support for the district's implementation of an RTTT plan. It helps the state in a minor way in the application process, constituting a few points out of very many that can be earned. Dr. Moline asked me to sign a MOU. My response was that I would sign in the context of progress in bargaining. He laughed. It wasn't an impolite laugh; rather it was a laugh indicating that working collaboratively with us in bargaining was not an area of administrative interest. The conversation pointed to the nature of RTTT in microcosm: unions are valuable enough for the legislature and our administration to solicit our support, but not important enough for the needs and professional interests of our members to be recognized.

-Sid

# DEMOCRACY AND CIVIL RIGHTS

From the point of view of Royal Oak administrators, the spectacle at Burton Elementary School in Huntington Woods on this past Election Day must have been a worrisome one. Adult voters, a notoriously nefarious bunch, walked through the main hallway to the media center. All manner of community residents were there: men and women of different color, age, size, and shape. Some of them likely were members of the gay community. At the very same time children were in the halls and classrooms, exposed to this cultural diversity, the process of democracy, and possibly vulnerable to any danger emanating from such.

Sarcasm aside, students in the Berkley School District were learning about their community and democracy first hand on November 3rd. On the same day in Royal Oak, students stayed home and faculty huddled in the high school auditorium for the purpose of learning about cultural diversity.

Diversity and democracy seem to be one and the same. No matter who you are you have one vote, the great equalizer between a man and a woman, a Black and a White, a gay and a straight. Women didn't get the right to vote until 1920; Blacks didn't have the uncontested right to vote until 1965. Gays, harder to discern at a glance have the individual right to vote, but diminished access as a cultural group to full inclusion in our society with commensurate rights such as health care for their families. No coincidence then, that a district which feels a need to shelter students from community members on voting day denies staff equal access to our union contract rights by fighting against the inclusion of sexual orientation as a protected category. The exclusion of gay teachers from our civil rights language means that the district will not protect their right to teach should a parent not want their child in a teacher's classroom if the teacher is gay. And the district doesn't give gay teachers with families the same benefits that other teachers with families receive.

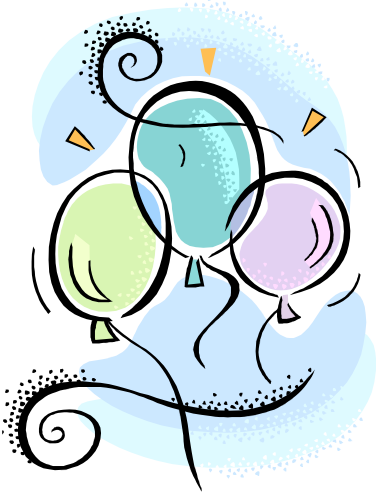
Other groups and different categories of employees are covered under the civil rights language in our contract. Both the Board and union are, "mutually committed to respect for, and furtherance of, the human rights and dignities of all persons who have contact with the Board and the Association..." For both parties this includes non-discrimination based on race, creed, religion, national origin, age, sex, marital status, and disability. But only the ROEA is contractually committed to non-discrimination and the furtherance of an individual's rights regardless of their sexual orientation. The Board, even though willing to add the categories of height and weight to civil rights language, continues to discriminate against gay teachers.

The irony of having a seminar on diversity instead of immersion in democracy and diversity on November 3<sup>rd</sup> is palpable. Not only were our students not a part of our nation's most overt expression of democracy (which, of course, is a part of the curriculum). But the workshop was about more than cultural acceptance; it was about celebrating the intrinsic worth of all individuals for the cultural beings that we are. The presenter, Dr. Howard, gave several examples of the disenfranchisement of gay students. He noted that the real inclusion of staff has to precede the real inclusion of students.

It's time for the administration and Board to fully include gay staff members into the Royal Oak educational community. It is also time for them to include members of the straight community who value the gay community-for we are not really fully included when our friends and colleagues are not. Until that happens, gay students will continue to be unprotected, unincluded, unrecognized, and ultimately unaccepted by the school community, their peers, and most tragically, themselves.

-Sid

# MID YEAR PARTY



Friday, January 29th

3:30—6:30

**Bailey's Pub**

1965 W. Maple Road

248/435-3044



DOOR PRIZES!

50/50 RAFFLE!

DRINK!

FOOD!



CAMARADERIE!

Looking forward to seeing everyone...