

# An Open Letter to Florida Education Commissioner Eric J. Smith

Honorable Eric J. Smith  
Commissioner of Education  
Florida Department of Education  
Turlington Building, Suite 1514  
325 West Gaines Street  
Tallahassee, Florida 32399



Dear Commissioner Smith:

## **We're running out of time.**

I've read and reread the documents on the federal Race to the Top grant, and I know with certainty — and no small degree of frustration — we're wasting time.

For months, our friends and colleagues in the education community waited for the U.S. Department of Education to open the Race to the Top competition. Thousands of us had pored over early iterations of the application and draft rules, providing input. In mid-November, the department released the final application guidelines for the Race to the Top and challenged states to submit proposals for bold reform agendas designed with a particular focus toward struggling schools.

## **Race to the Top is the nation's largest competitive education grant program, and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan insists it will reshape the public school landscape.**

### **But it won't happen here, based on what I see in your proposal.**

I have studied the key documents that are a part of Florida's application. **I can say with certainty that even if we are awarded a grant, the Race to the Top dollars will not have the desired impact.** While the proposal appears to include some "bold innovations" and substantive reforms, the proposed implementation is fatally flawed. The proposal does not focus on struggling schools. The proposal doesn't provide the local community with an opportunity to pilot innovative programs. In fact, any sense of collaboration is absent in your proposal. Your approach is prescriptive, top-down and unreasonable.

That's a shame, because in the contest for Race to the Top funding, Florida is considered a strong candidate. We're ranked as a "highly competitive" state because we meet the eligibility requirements and criteria, which include demonstrating progress in standards and assessments, and turning around struggling schools. As a state with a large student population, we have been making strides in identifying and assisting those students most in need. That's quite an accomplishment when you consider that we have sustained billions of dollars in education cuts over the past three years. **We need to work together if Florida is to win as much as \$700 million if our grant proposal is successful.**

But we may not have a choice, given the approach being taken by the Florida Department of Education.

Race to the Top has been praised for its efforts to foster collaboration between education stakeholders. Grant eligibility requires that each district's education leadership, including the union president, sign a Memorandum of Understanding agreeing to work together to implement the plan.

With the notable exception of the cover letter, it seems the Florida Department of Education intended to impose reforms unilaterally.

My decision — the Florida Education Association's decision — to discourage Local Education Associations from signing the current Memorandum of Understanding for the Race to the Top application has been agonizing. Educators understand that the transformative path is riddled with potholes, but we fully expected to participate in the process rather than have that process dictated from Tallahassee.

Now, the Florida Department of Education has jeopardized our state's standing in the competition, which may result in a potential loss of hundreds of millions of education dollars. Worse, it represents a deep failure — an inability to put aside differences long enough to sit down at the table, work the challenges, and have the difficult conversations about how we better assist struggling schools.

**We had hoped Race to the Top would be the first of many successful partnerships, but now, I'm not so sure.** If Florida is to achieve its education goals, we must implement the right reforms. And those reforms need to be forged with the full cooperation and understanding of all education stakeholders, including parents, students and teachers.

We've been given a new model for education funding by the federal government. Meeting the minimum eligibility requirements is no longer enough. Race to the Top is a contest; it's a competition to determine just how high states can raise the education bar in collaboration with each other. We have an obligation to get it right, or at least try to get it right. We've all waited far too long for this opportunity, this moment.

### **Unless we change directions, we're wasting time.**

**More importantly, we are losing an opportunity to assist students, build community involvement and strengthen Florida.**

Sincerely,

Andy Ford, President  
Florida Education Association

