

THE CALIFORNIA COLLABORATIVE ON DISTRICT REFORM

December 31, 2009

Dear Senate pro Tem Steinberg, Speaker Bass, Senator Romero, Assemblymember Brownley:

As leaders of local school districts participating in California's Race to the Top (RTTT) application, we urge you to ensure that legislation addressing California's eligibility for RTTT include the flexibility we need to use these funds in ways that best meet the needs of the students we serve. More specifically, we urge you to include language that would provide participating local education agencies meeting certain specified criteria the same level of flexibility as that provided under current law to charter schools.

The RTTT competition presents an opportunity for California to take significant strides in improving our public education system. The four reform areas outlined in the application and discussed by U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan are the right areas on which to focus our efforts to close California's persistent achievement gaps. The competition for RTTT dollars is stiff – the most recent information indicates that 39 states and the District of Columbia intend to apply, and Secretary Duncan has made clear that awards will go to only those states that submit strong, bold and coherent plans. In the continuing challenge of the state budgetary cuts and local fiscal constraints, California's potential RTTT award will give much needed fiscal and strategic support to students, teachers and school districts and their families. The flexibility provisions we support would demonstrate a real commitment to the sorts of fundamental changes needed to move California's educational system into the future our children deserve.

Beyond its symbolic importance, the requested flexibility provision would offer a meaningful tool for local education agencies to design and implement reform efforts targeted to closing achievement gaps, turning around our persistently low-performing schools, creating a culture of continuous improvement and developing and supporting teachers and leaders. Such work is not easy, particularly under current policy constraints. The Getting Down to Facts studies and the report issued by the Governor's Committee on Education Excellence both documented the need to remove obstacles to local innovation imposed by existing state policy and regulation. The RTTT goals and competition make the need for such change even more critical. Our districts appreciate the categorical flexibility provided in the state budget in 2009, but more change is needed if California is to succeed in our ambitious reform agenda.

To ensure that the authority we propose is thoughtfully applied, legislation could outline criteria that local education agencies must meet in order to be eligible to exercise full discretion. The criteria should be based in some measure on the following elements: fiscal stability; sound and stable district board, superintendent and teacher relationships; use of some kind of performance management framework (e.g., a district data dashboard); agreement to link superintendent evaluation to key performance or

dashboard metrics; and board policy that supports a student achievement oriented theory of action. Applying such criteria could help ensure that the requested flexibility is used well at the local level and that resulting innovations are evaluated and modified as needed.

Providing flexibility for RTTT participating districts that meet the criteria can also support more widespread and lasting reform efforts throughout the state. RTTT calls for both immediate and long-term reform – not only must we make improvements for our current students, we must also address the longer-term system changes needed to ensure our ability to sustain improvements into the future and to spread them across the state. Targeted flexibility can help California meet this goal. First, it offers an opportunity for districts and the state to innovate and then to observe and learn from results. Such experimentation and learning was one of the recommendations of the Getting Down to Facts researchers as a way to strengthen long-term state policymaking. Second, the promise of increased local discretion provides an incentive for districts to create the enabling conditions and renewed focus on student achievement that the qualifying criteria reflect. Such conditions in themselves will help to spread innovation and improved performance.

We believe that local flexibility is a key element in efforts to realize the goals of Race to the Top. Flexibility would support district efforts to think outside of the box in order to address the needs of students, teachers and site leaders, to drive the use of data to improve instruction and to significantly improve our schools. As we face another year of fiscal challenge, districts are seeking innovations that will continue and leverage our academic reform efforts. We want to identify problems, develop and implement solutions, focus our efforts on students throughout our districts who most need them. The flexibility provisions will encourage and allow such innovation.

Thank you for your work on behalf of the students, teachers and families of our school districts and for California's six million K-12 public school students. Do not hesitate to call upon us for more information or to discuss this proposal. Please contact Chris Steinhauser, Superintendent of Long Beach Unified School District at (562) 997-8242 or Michael E. Hanson, Superintendent of Fresno Unified School District at (559) 457-3884.

Sincerely,



Christopher J. Steinhauser
Superintendent of Schools
Long Beach Unified School District



Michael E. Hanson
Superintendent
Fresno Unified School District



Ramon C. Cortines
Superintendent
Los Angeles Unified School District



Carlos A. Garcia
Superintendent of Schools
San Francisco Unified School District



Jonathan P. Raymond
Superintendent
Sacramento City Unified School District



Anthony Smith
Superintendent
Oakland Unified School District



Marcus P. Johnson
Superintendent
Sanger Unified School District