

March Madness from the Education Dept. - April 1st Edition

- By Douglas W. Green, EdD - dgreen@stny.rr.com
- If you read this before, goto slide 15 for the update.
- As you may recall, President Obama's secretary of education, Arne Duncan, played basketball for Harvard and as a professional in Australia. With March bringing us the administration's blueprint for NCLB overhaul and the finalists for the Race to the Top grants, there does seem to be some madness in the details. The following slides offer a lighter look at both items.

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The Sweet Sixteen

- The sixteen finalists only contain one state that lies entirely west of the Mississippi River. This “Big East” favoritism indicates that proximity to Washington may be one of the unannounced criteria. (Yes, the District of Columbia is one of the finalists. Can you say “home court advantage?”)

Some Not So Sweet?

- o Many of the “sweet sixteen” have some questionable baggage. Teacher union buy-in varies from 100% in four states to 5% in Vermont and 0% in D.C. where there is only one union. Getting teachers to change is difficult enough if the union is on your side. When the union is not on board, your chances are slim to none.

Some Not So Sweet II?

- The percent of districts in a state buying-in also varies widely from 100% in four states to 42% in the president's home state of Illinois, 28% in Pennsylvania, and only 13% in Georgia. One might wonder how these states made the cut with such a low level of commitment.

New Yorkers are Baffled?

- On the day applications were due, the New York State Legislature, known for its high level of disfunction, failed to pass a law that would expand charter schools. They also have a law that bars the use of test scores in tenure-granting decisions. Many in New York assumed that these two point losers would cost the state any chance.

Greed is Good.

- The maximum amounts each state could get if they won were clearly stated in the application. This didn't stop all save one of the finalists from asking for more than the max! In some grant application processes, this would be enough all by itself earn a fast trip to the loser's pile.

Impossible Dreams 2010

- As part of the original NCLB legislation, all students were to be proficient by 2014. Anyone who believed that this would happen was in need of a big dose of reality therapy. The blueprint calls for all students to be career **and** college ready when they graduate from high school. If you think this might happen you should pick up a copy of *The Emperor's New Clothes* (Anderson, H. C., 1837) at your elementary school library.

College **AND** Career Ready?

- If you replace the "and" with an "or" it almost makes sense. Any school that tries to do both will give all of their students watered down versions of both career and college preparation. High schools can get kids ready for some careers, as can some colleges. Some college majors, however, only get students ready for grad school. Think psychology, philosophy, and more than a few others.

Fewer Fatal Beatings

- Under NCLB, there was no limit to the number of schools that could fail. As a result, about one-third have ended up on the needs improvement list somewhere along the way. The blueprint limits the pain to the bottom 5% for the most pain and those in the 5% to 10% range for “warnings.” It is ironic that the old law, in theory at least, allowed all districts to succeed. The new proposal determines how many schools will fail as if it were part of a norm referenced process.

Mediocrity Isn't What it Use to be.

- Under NCLB, you could have all of your students just passing and look like a super school. The new plan now rewards the top schools with a promise of money at the same time it offers “help” for the low performers. One must assume that “help” means “money”, which means that if you are a mediocre school, you are out of the money.

The New York Times Weighs In.

- In a March 18, 2010 editorial, the liberal New York Times states that “Teachers’ unions, state governments and other interest groups have long wanted to water down or kill off the provision of the law that requires the states to raise student performance — especially for poor and minority children — in exchange for federal money. They will likely gin up their lobbying. Congress must resist.” With the liberals on the side of test score accountability, you can see why the original NCLB was a product of a collaboration between George W. Bush and Teddy Kennedy. What they all seem to miss is that poor performance correlates with poverty as opposed to race.

Don't Hold Your Breath

- The March 18th Times editorial also states that “If Congress adopts the plan, states would be required to create new, fine-grained data systems that rate teachers and principals based in significant part on the performance of their students. These ratings could be used to reward strong educators, create training programs for newcomers, and assess the effectiveness of teacher-preparation programs. The evaluation systems could have an enormous effect on the quality of the profession and the quality of education. But right now most states lack the capacity to perform sophisticated, data-driven studies and evaluations. While Congress should require this reform, it should not set unrealistic deadlines. Some observers think it could take as long as a decade before the states develop the systems, test them for accuracy and fairness and put them in place.”
- Great, so we only have to wait a decade or so for something to happen. That will only take us through the presidential cycles of 2012, 2016, and 2020. Is there any chance that our politicians will be that patient?

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No Black Face?

- A five-person team from Louisiana presented its case in Washington to a panel of judges for why the state should land a piece of the \$4 billion federal Race to the Top prize. At the same time a state school board member claimed that the group failed to represent the thousands of poor minority children who stand to be affected should the state prevail in the competition. Linda Johnson, an elected member of Louisiana's board of elementary and secondary education, said in an interview Tuesday that she was angry that the delegation did not include an African-American educator.

With Friends Like This, Who Needs Enemies?

- Stephen Sawchuk, A blogger at Edweek.org points out that teacher unions are wondering if they really won the 2008 presidential election. They really don't like this plan. It isn't terribly surprising that they don't like the focus on incorporating test scores in teacher evaluations or the school turnaround strictures requiring some teachers to be laid off. In their statements on the blueprint, the NEA and the AFT have a slightly different focus. The NEA doesn't like the preservation of annual testing, even though the law would no longer specify interventions for the vast majority of schools. This makes more sense if you've ever read NEA's policy resolution on testing, which lays out more than a dozen different things that the union asserts tests shouldn't be used for. The AFT doesn't mention the fact that this draft preserves annual testing at all. Instead, the union's president, Randi Weingarten, claims that it places 100 percent of the responsibility on teachers and gives them zero percent authority. The unions both say there's too much scapegoating and not enough collaboration in the proposal.

The Final Two

- If Butler is the Cinderella team in the final four of the NCAA basketball tournament, Delaware must be the Cinderella for the Race to the Top. After adding 16+ points to their score during their final presentation, Delaware finished first and joined second place Tennessee as the only two “winners” in round one of the competition.

Unions - buying-in or caving-in?

- The Obama administration made a big deal of buy-in from the teacher unions in the applications of the winners. In other states that were considered strong contenders, the teacher unions were anything but “on-board”. This will no doubt result in animosity or (fill in your own adjective) between union leaders who are buying-in and those who see them as caving-in. Delaware’s teacher-effectiveness plan includes a new law that allows teachers with tenure to be removed from their jobs if they are given “ineffective” ratings for two to three consecutive years, and teachers can only be given an “effective” rating after demonstrating adequate growth in their students’ academic achievement. I can’t imagine this selling in many states where union leaders are determined to “protect” all members regardless of their performance.

How dysfunctional is New York?

- Thanks to the New York Post we have a close look at some details that shows you how dysfunction their state education department is. In order to set up offices for the people who would manage this grant, they put new furniture in the grant to the tune of \$200,000. When you are looking for transformational change, you don't want to hear about new furniture. My point is, that if you have talent and ability and you live in New York State, you are not likely to be looking for work at the state education department.

More New York Folly

- I hate to pick on my home state, but it is just too easy. Governor Patterson chided the state legislature for failing to pass legislation that would increase the cap on charter schools and allow schools to use student performance data as part of tenure decisions. After losing in round 1, he stated that "I think it's one of those situations where we can't afford the luxury of letting ideological differences get in the way." At the same time he has proposed a \$1.4 billion cut in state aid to schools. This is twice the maximum that New York can win if the state is successful in round 2. Even the generous democrats in the state assembly are proposing \$800 million in cuts. Are we supposed to believe that New York is ready to reform education with less money?

The Illusion of Precision

- With scores like 454.6 and 444.2 for the winning states, you get the idea that the scoring model is very exact. This is clearly false. When you rely on opinions for scores, you cannot have the high precision that scores with numbers after the decimal point imply. In Florida's scores, one peer reviewer thought the state's plan for turning around lowest-performing schools was worthy of a perfect score, or 50. Another peer reviewer thought it was worth only 30 points. In Colorado, there was a 42 point difference in how the peer reviewers individually scored the teacher and principal effectiveness category.

A cheat sheet for the other states

- With \$3.4 billion dollars left for round two winners, it will be interesting to see how the losers and non participants in round one copy and paste from the winning applications for round two.

Ready to follow the Blazers?

- As he announced the “winners’ Arne Duncan stated that “We now have two states that will *blaze the path* for the future of education reform.” Although I hesitate to cite Wikipedia, here is what they say: “Figuratively, **trail blazing** can mean avant garde or inventive work in arts or sciences, evoking the literal meaning of going into new territory which has no marked paths.” Ironically, the so-called trail blazing states are the ones who are most closely following the path that the federal application carved out for them. Davy Crockett is no doubt rolling in his grave, which is in San Antonio, Texas if you would like to visit. I also wonder how bad states with a high opinion of themselves (probably all of them), want to follow a trail being blazed by Delaware or Tennessee?

Dr. Doug's Final Take

- If I am a teacher or an administrator in a “losing” state, I am breathing a deep sigh of relief. The problem with “winning” a competitive grant is that you have to do what you said you were going to do. I would like to be optimistic about this process, but I know that top-down changes in education have a history of failure. If you want some backup for this send me an email.