



Florida House of Representatives

Democratic Office

Franklin Sands
Democratic Leader

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December 18, 2009

Dr. Eric J. Smith
Commissioner of Education
Florida Department of Education
Office of the Commissioner
325 West Gaines Street
Suite 1514
Tallahassee, Florida 32399

Dear Commissioner Smith,

Florida's Race to the Top application holds the potential, as you have stated, for creating "a defining moment for Florida schools," but only if it is cooperatively developed and boldly positions our public school system to be a national leader in education reform.

We write to bring urgent concerns on behalf of the Florida House Democratic Caucus pertaining to certain requirements imposed in the Memorandum of Understanding that the Florida Department of Education developed for Florida's Race to the Top application.

According to recent news articles, some Florida school districts do not plan to sign the memorandum, which was submitted to Local Education Agencies on December 9; and the Florida Education Association has raised deservedly sharp criticisms of several components of the document.

As you know, Florida House Democratic Caucus members embrace efforts to expand the measures by which student progress and school accountability are based. We have long felt that the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test is an insufficient and problematic tool for

determining the performance of students, teachers and other school personnel. Unfortunately, in contradiction to our views about the FCAT, the Memorandum of Understanding that you developed appears to mandate to school districts that they use the FCAT as the “primary factor” in determining such important matters as compensation for teachers, evaluations for teachers and principals, financial and other incentives for school employees, teacher tenure, and the circumstances in which an ineffective teacher can be terminated.

It is troubling that the Florida Department of Education appears to want to put such strong emphasis on the status quo rather than moving, as we suggest, toward more accurate measures of student progress, which would include the use of end-of-course exams and an array of other progress measures.

We fully recognize the January 12 deadline for local education entities to decide whether to sign the Memorandum of Understanding. However, we implore you to begin an earnest, open and urgent dialogue with all interest groups, including the FEA, in order to develop a revised Memorandum of Understanding that gives Local Education Agencies necessary flexibility and autonomy to truly make Florida’s Race to the Top application bold and innovative.

Florida should not miss this historic opportunity to improve our public schools with the Race to the Top money that is being made available by President Barack Obama and his administration. It is inappropriate, though, to use the Race to the Top initiative as a political scheme to deepen Florida’s dependence on the flawed FCAT or to quietly abolish teacher tenure.

The Memorandum of Understanding must be urgently revised. Thank you for your serious and urgent consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Bill Heller, Representative
Florida House District 52
Democratic Ranking Member, Florida House Education Policy Council

Dwight Bullard, Representative
Florida House District 118
Democratic Ranking Member, Florida House PreK-12 Policy Committee

Martin David Kiar, Representative
Florida House District 97
Democratic Ranking Member, Florida House PreK-12 Appropriations Committee