

Race to the Top: Frequently Asked Questions

Prepared by the Louisiana Federation of Teachers

Steve Monaghan, President

9623 Brookline Ave., Baton Rouge, LA 70809 • (225) 923-1037 • 800-634-5089 • <http://la.aft.org>

What is Race to the Top?

It is a \$4.4 billion competition sponsored by the federal Department of Education. Grants will be awarded to some states, which will then funnel money to local school districts that agree to participate. Louisiana is competing for some of the money. Superintendent Paul Pastorek wants about \$314 million, but experts believe the state could get less than half that amount.

How will the grant money be spent?

Half of the money sent to each state must be set aside for districts that have partnership agreements with the Department of Education. The other half will be retained by the Department to implement the Louisiana Education Reform Plan.

How many Louisiana school districts will participate?

The State Department says that 28 districts and 56 independent charter schools have signed on as Participating Local Education Authorities, agreeing to implement reforms outlined by the state. Participating districts must apply changes required by Race to the Top in all schools, not just those targeted to receive funds.

Why is Race to the Top controversial?

It will mean big changes in the way student progress is tracked, and how teachers are evaluated and paid. It will require many schools to be reorganized. That can mean changes as small as reassigning administrators or as large as closing whole schools.

If my district does not participate in Race to the Top, why should I be concerned?

Race to the Top can be seen as a pilot program for new education policies that will soon be applied to all schools. It will be the model for the next version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also known as No Child Left Behind. Support for this change is wide on both sides of the political spectrum. President Barack Obama, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, Governor Bobby Jindal and Louisiana Superintendent of Education Paul Pastorek all strongly support it.

Some organizations oppose participating in Race to the Top. Why did the LFT decide to engage in the process?

LFT leaders faced the choice of helping to guide the coming changes, or sitting on the sidelines as spectators. The LFT chose engagement. While others balked at "R2T," the Federation negotiated hard and smart, making sure that teachers can be partners in setting a new direction for our schools.

In what ways did LFT affect the state's Race to the Top application?

LFT was the only organization to actually sit down with state leaders and demand changes in Louisiana's Race to the Top application. While others balked, the Federation negotiated hard and smart, making sure that teachers can be partners in setting a new direction for our schools.

Throughout the process, LFT insisted on the respectful treatment of teachers and our issues. Examples of LFT influence on the final application include:

- **The insertion of a Learning environment Index into teacher evaluations.** That means conditions which may not be under the teacher's control must be included in the evaluation. (See How will "Race to the Top affect teacher evaluation" for more details.)
- **Teacher Confidentiality respected.** The original Race to the Top application would have made individual teacher evaluations public records that could be seen by anyone. LFT successfully insisted on maintaining the confidentiality of personnel files. *We will continue to oppose efforts to make teacher evaluations available as public records.*
- **A guarantee that teacher organizations can be partners.** The application now requires school boards that do not have collective bargaining agreements to include teacher organizations in their Race to the Top programs, specifically the development of their Scope of Action plans.
- **Teacher retention included in principals' evaluations.** The evaluation of principals will include their ability to recruit, retain and help develop high-quality teachers at their schools.
- **Respect for teacher tenure.** Instead of attacking teacher tenure, the application now aims to ensure that tenure "is a meaningful and active process" with "respect and value." For the first time, teachers will receive official notification when they earn tenure. *Since the Federation does not believe that tenure is the problem, we will never consent to its elimination or weakening.*
- **Projection of "ineffective teachers."** The federal program requires states to project the number of "ineffective" teachers in their schools. Without citing any data, Louisiana's application originally projected that 50% of our teachers would be judged "ineffective." LFT worked with the department to reduce that guesstimate to a high of 23%, and to state very clearly that there is no data to back up the assertion. *We still maintain that any projection is folly and unnecessarily taints the professed objectivity of the process.*
- **Defense of the salary schedule.** LFT insisted that the teacher salary schedule pertaining to experience and academic qualifications be respected. *We expect this debate to continue in other forums, including the legislative session.*

How will Race to the Top affect teacher evaluation?

In the past, evaluations have been largely based on subjective judgments by principals. That will change. In the future, half of a teacher's evaluation will be based on student's academic achievement (using a growth or value added model based on standardized tests). The "added value" is determined by how much a student improves during the school year. The other half can be based on a number of other factors, including – at LFT's insistence – a Learning Environment Index. That means conditions which may not be under the teacher's control must be included in the evaluation. Those issues can range from the physical condition of the school to discipline issues, to adequate resources such as textbooks and educational materials. Other factors that may be included in evaluations include principal evaluations, peer evaluations, self assessments and external observations.

This half of the evaluation is to be developed by local districts in collaboration with stakeholders, including teacher unions. *It is important that unions demand their proper place at the table when programs are written.*

How will Race to the Top affect teacher pay?

"Performance-based" pay is clearly part of the federal mandate for R2T, but what form it will take has not been determined. We know that in the future, some portion of teacher salaries will be based on the evaluation process described above.

LFT believes the pay plan must be fair and transparent. It must provide teachers with the right to question and, if necessary, contest compensation decisions. The current teacher salary schedule, including lanes and steps, should be

retained. Any performance-based pay should be a supplement to that salary. This is an issue that may be negotiated between stakeholders and school districts – *yet another reason for unions to be involved.*

How will Race to the Top affect teacher tenure?

Tenure is a right guaranteed to teachers in state law, and cannot be changed without amending the law. Probationary teachers will still earn tenure after three years of satisfactory evaluations and completion of other requirements.

Superintendent Pastorek has agreed with us that tenure should be celebrated, valued and respected. He has said that he does not believe Race to the Top will require changes in the law. If bills are filed this legislative session to eliminate or diminish tenure, we're hoping that we can count on him to stand with us against them.

Governor Jindal, on the other hand, has said that he wants to make tenure harder to achieve and easier to revoke. There will probably be a fight in the legislature over teacher tenure, whether or not it is connected to Race to the Top.

What will happen to my school if it participates in Race to the Top?

Over the next four years, and in all schools, the State Department will require participating districts to adopt common standards, implement data-driven instruction and value-added management, and improve teacher and principal effectiveness. Stakeholders will have a role to play in developing these issues.

As an option, participating districts may place low-performing schools in a special program. They will be exempt from state takeover for four years. During that time, the district may use one of four strategies to improve academic performance at the school. They are:

- Turnaround model: Put in place new leadership and a majority of new staff
- Restart model: Convert the school or close and reopen under a charter or education management organization
- School closure: Close the school and transfer its students to high-performing schools in the district
- Transformation model: Hire a new principal and implement best practices, including a comprehensive instructional management reform

Obviously, this program could have major consequences for teachers in participating schools. Once again, it will be very important for teacher unions to demand their proper place in developing and implementing these changes.

of
**TEACHERS &
SCHOOL EMPLOYEES**
AFT / AFL-CIO