

Testimony to the Illinois Senate Education Committee  
On Illinois' response to the USDE Race To The Top program

by Julie Woestehoff, executive director, Parents United for Responsible Education (PURE)  
Chicago, IL

October 1, 2009

## **PURE opposes compliance with misguided RTTT demands**

PURE is a parent-run advocacy and training organization that has been working with parents and local school councils in Chicago for 22 years.

Our organization has major, serious concerns about the Race To the Top (RTTT) program. We believe that the Department of Education is trying to force Illinois to worsen an already bad situation for our schools and our students under No Child Left Behind as a condition of receiving the federal funds that our schools desperately need.

If Illinois submits to RTTT demands, PURE believes the result will be more of the bad outcomes we have already seen in Chicago – more neighborhood schools destroyed, more misuse of biased and uninformative standardized tests, more students pushed out of charter and turnaround schools, parents voices ignored, public schools sold to private management companies, and, ultimately, the waste of nearly \$5 billion in precious education dollars that could be spent actually improving the schools we have.

RTTT guidelines require research-based approaches to school improvement, yet the program restrictively mandates the use of strategies that have either no track record or a poor track record.

Our children can't wait for the adults to get their act together. We are fighting over glib slogans and political posturing. Illinois needs to stand up for our children and do right by them. We need to say NO to RTTT funds under these conditions.

### **Problems with RTTT “reforms”**

#### **1) National standards and tests will increase inappropriate test use and teaching to the test**

RTTT requires states to tie teacher evaluations to student test scores, even though *the tests are not valid for that use*. It also requires states to participate in a consortium that is developing national standards. Standardized tests already have a stranglehold on our schools (72% of the Golden Apple teachers in a recent survey agreed). This will only get worse when teacher raises and jobs are at stake, and scores on national standardized tests are used to measure everything.

## **2) Adding more charter schools will not improve achievement, and will increase push-outs and system instability.**

RTTT requires states to change any local laws that limit charter schools. But independent research here in Chicago and across the nation consistently shows that charter schools are either worse than or on about the same level as regular schools (see attached).

## **3) Turnarounds and other interventions aren't working, and can have severe negative effects**

RTTT requires school districts to intervene in the lowest-performing schools. Clearly, charters are not a great option. Turnarounds modeled on Renaissance 2010 also have a questionable track record, as the 2009 SRI International report made clear. SRI researchers found no differences in test score growth between Ren10 schools and other schools. They also found strikingly weak classroom-management skills among teachers, initiatives that were too rapidly implemented and expanded, and principals who didn't sufficiently understand or get support for the initiatives they were participating in. We don't need more of this kind of reform.

In Chicago, the severe negative impact of Renaissance 2010's school closures and proliferation of turnarounds, charters and other programs are gaining strength. Some neighborhoods are in meltdown due to the restrictive enrollment policies of schools which used to belong to the community. Veteran teachers have been fired on a wholesale basis and replaced with inexperienced newcomers. Students are forced to cross unfriendly territories to get to school, and the consequences have been deadly.

### **What Illinois should do instead**

We recommend that Illinois' application for RTTT funds propose only positive practices and strategies that will actually strengthen schools, improve teaching and learning, and offer our children the real educational opportunity our nation has promised them. The state's proposal should:

- 1) Focus on assisting the schools that we currently have.
- 2) Promote sound, research-based improvement practices based on the best information available from the USDE's own "What Works" files and other trustworthy sources rather than those narrowly focused on teaching to the test and test preparation.
- 3) Require true multiple measures of student and school progress such as those outlined by the Forum on Educational Accountability.
- 4) Assure that all planning for school improvement is done locally and that it meaningfully involves *all* stakeholders (not the limited list cited in RTTT guidelines), including parents, students, teachers, and community members.

## **Parents United for Responsible Education**