



WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE

P. O. Box 7882 Madison, WI 53707-7882

November 3, 2009

Arne Duncan, Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary Duncan:

I applaud you and President Obama for recognizing that the economic and social health of our communities and our country depends on educating all of our children and taking dramatic action to achieve that goal. I very much want this effort to succeed but as chair of Wisconsin's Senate Finance Committee, I am concerned that uncertainty about significant aspects of the *Race to the Top* program may cause states to hesitate embracing the program or, if it is embraced, put states in positions of financial instability.

Policymakers in Wisconsin are considering fast-tracking sweeping statutory changes and advanced financial commitments in our educational system with the hope that these changes will improve our state's candidacy for a *Race to the Top* grant. According to draft rules governing these grants, states will be favorably looked upon if at least some of their proposed legislative changes have been enacted in advance of applying for *Race to the Top* dollars.

While it is true that certain elements of education reform under consideration in Wisconsin may be of little or no cost to the state, others come with a significant price tag. For example, the cost to implement a Children's Zone in Wisconsin similar to one which was successfully implemented in Harlem could cost our state more than \$400 million on an ongoing basis. As much as I and other public officials want to improve public school performance, we can only do so if we can pay for it. Wisconsin will be gambling with our educational future if we make these financial and policy commitments and then fail to keep them. Because so much is unknown about how *Race to the Top* grant dollars will be allocated and for how long, we feel like a gambler trying to draw to an inside straight.

Like other states, Wisconsin is confronting fiscal challenges from Medicaid, unemployment compensation, debt service, pension costs, and future commitments. We do not have the fiscal resilience to sustain another long-term financial commitment based on the mere possibility that we may be awarded one-time federal dollars in the future. Once these proposed educational policy and fiscal changes are enacted into law, Wisconsin legislators and taxpayers will be responsible for the accompanying financial commitment regardless of the outcome of Wisconsin's *Race to the Top*

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application. This promise to fund new requirements without the promise of federal dollars puts at risk other social safety net programs that rely on adequate state funding to operate.

Because the social and economic success of our country and our state relies on a strong public school system and a sound financial foundation, I strongly encourage the Department of Education to provide additional information detailing the expected size of *Race to the Top* grants; specific policy recommendations that improve a state's chances for success in winning a grant; and, what the federal government's ongoing financial commitment and technical support will be for states who are awarded *Race to the Top* grants.

I deeply appreciate the Obama administration's commitment to economic recovery and for its willingness to address the challenges facing our public school system. Our public schools are, and will continue to be, at the heart of our nation's economic engine. The steps the Administration has already taken go a long way towards renewing our faith in the strength of our schools and the future of our county. My fervent hope is that this Administration, in partnership with the Department of Education, will continue its commitment to our schools and its promise of transparency as it considers this request.

Sincerely,

Mark Miller, Senate Chair
Joint Committee on Finance
Wisconsin State Legislature

cc: Wisconsin Congressional Delegation
Governor Jim Doyle
Senator John Lehman, Chair, Senate Committee on Education
Representative Sondy Pope-Roberts, Chair, Assembly Committee on Education