

Winning the Race to the Top: What are the best reform strategies for K-12 education?

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The “Race to the Top” efforts are welcomed sign of a new era of expectations. We stand at intersection of opportunity and challenging the dysfunction of business as usual in Education. We have the opportunity to create and execute a vision for a well educated and prepared citizenry that is evidence of the best of who we are as a state and nation. The administration is challenging all of us to innovate, to think outside the box, and to try new things all in the name of educational excellence.

This is not about the states’ ability to get more money to employ the same old strategies and expect different results. In the words of Dr. Howard Fuller said it best, if we allow the same people [and strategies] who raced us to the bottom to lead us in the “Race to the Top”, we are guaranteed to see the same kind of results. For Georgia, we are relegated to bottom five in SAT scores, we don’t know the true number of dropouts in our state, and we will keep lying to some students because as Secretary Duncan has said, “we dumb down our tests”, thus providing an unrealistic picture of academic success among our students.

There are three things that must change if we are to ever see Georgia’s ascension to the top. The first is ensuring that every child in our state benefits from highly effective not just “qualified” teachers. Setting the priority for our state to create a working longitudinal data system that tracks a student and their teachers from the time they enter a Georgia public school to the time they leave. This empowers us to make better decisions based on data instead of what we hope will work for our students. It’s imperative no matter where a child lives or his socio-economic status that he or she obtains a world class education thanks to the quality teacher whose focus is their growth from year to year. Additionally, we should compensate those teachers based on student growth rather than years of service or number of degrees.

Secondly, we have to open up the options available to our families. The one-size fits all model simply no longer works. Whether it’s choice among traditional public schools, virtual schools, charters, magnets, or other

programs, we owe it to Georgia's families to provide a quality education that best meet the needs of the child. Parents know what's best for their children and it's time we do what's best for the child and not necessarily what's best for the institution.

Finally, we have to fortify our political will. We sometimes think that fixing the woes of Education can be addressed in a 20 year plan, except some of us forget that within those 20 years are generations of students whose futures are adversely affected the longer we take to act. It's not only our moral obligation to give every child a quality education also a constitutional one. In educating our children, there are no "do-overs", and "no try again next times". We have to do this right the first time and with a sense of urgency. It's time to abandon what we know is not working and embrace meaningful change. That also means loosening the grip of the status quo and opening our minds and creating policy that gives parents and families what they need to succeed.

We in education are in the business of transforming lives. To do that, we need real accountability and data, true options for parents and the political will among policy makers, special interest groups and parents to speak for the most important constituency, our children. We must seize this great opportunity and compete for the "Race to the Top", against other states and other countries. In the end, not only will our students win, we all win.