

Legislative Objective

Education & Training

Background:

The federal “Race to the Top” (RTTT) education reform grant program was designed to support states in their efforts to improve student achievement, close achievement gaps, improve graduation rates and ensure students are able to succeed in whatever career or educational choices they pursue beyond high school. RTTT grants required states to take a systemic approach to education reform including implementation of world-class standards and assessments, enhancing teacher effectiveness, providing transparent data systems that support instruction, and turning around low-performing schools. Legislation passed in 2010 was intended to improve Washington’s prospects for receiving a grant. However, the state’s RTTT application fell significantly short of both the program requirements and the reform plans submitted by other states. The application was criticized for weaknesses in the areas of teacher and principal evaluation; effective use of student and school performance data; authority for clear and decisive intervention in persistently struggling schools; and its lack of support for creating charter and other innovative school models. Given these shortcomings, Washington’s K-12 school system will not receive additional federal support in the form of a RTTT grant.

Problem:

As Washington struggles to emerge from its deepest and most persistent recession in half a century, the state’s competitive position increasingly rests on the cornerstone of a well-educated and technically competent workforce. Unfortunately, our state also continues to struggle in closing two critical educational gaps. The first is the gap between the needs of the economy and the results being produced by our education system. While we are among the most innovation-driven states in the nation, Washington ranks near the bottom for enrolling high school graduates in community colleges or universities. While two-thirds of the jobs available in our state by 2018 will go to adults with at least some college education, our high school graduation rate is in the bottom third nationally and remains stagnant. This gap is even more disparate in the STEM disciplines. The second gap is more potentially significant and destructive to the future prospects of individual students and our state as a whole. Washington is one of only a handful of states where the achievement gap – between rich and poor, and white and non-white students, is growing. Significant improvements are necessary in all levels of the education and workforce training system to ensure Washington maintains its edge in an ever-globally competitive environment.

Solution:

- Strengthen K-12 system accountability and support meaningful authority to intervene in the persistently lowest performing schools.
- Require the use of teacher and principal evaluation information in hiring, promotion and retention decisions. Extend authority to demote ineffective principals to all district superintendents, as well as expand alternative routes for principals. Tie teacher and principal evaluation and compensation to student achievement of established standards and school accountability.
- Support the creation of public charter schools, STEM schools and other innovative organizational school designs that will be held accountable to the same education standards as existing public schools.
- Provide school districts with flexibility to allow students to meet graduation requirements through recognized non-school supported activities such as participation in club sports and musical training
- Support the enhancement of Career Technical Education (CTE) and STEM programs in middle schools and high schools to create more concrete connections for students to potential careers, especially careers in high demand and family wage jobs.