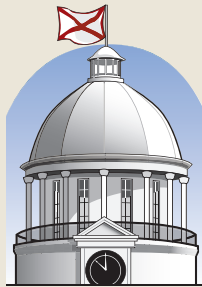




# The Capital Breaks

March 12, 2010



## AEA leaders meet with U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan

Take a role in creating plans to help the lowest performing schools in Alabama was the charge U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan left with AEA leaders in a meeting at George Wallace Community College in Selma. Duncan went so far as to ask AEA's President Anita Gibson, Dr. Paul Hubbert, and Dr. Joe Reed to come up with proposals to help turn around schools with the poorest performance in the state.

Duncan's suggestion came during a meeting March 8, when AEA leaders took the initiative to offer more active input with the U.S. Department of Education. AEA also wanted to re-affirm Duncan's often reported contention that charter schools were not a requirement to be competitive with other states at the highest point level.

Some finalists even had fewer beginning points than Alabama because their state education associations refused to approve the grant application. AEA did consent to Alabama's application.

Duncan's dismissal of charter schools as a funding requirement for Race to the Top (RTTT) funds has been reported repeatedly in newspapers and television.

Kentucky, another state that recently said no to charter schools, was a finalist, and 23 states that did have charter schools were not finalists.

Gibson explained to Duncan that AEA members had the same dedication and compelling interest for students as the secretary had, but that Governor Riley and the State Department of Education only allowed AEA cursory participation in the RTTT application process. Alabama's

\$250,000 application was compiled by an out-of-state consultant.

After Hubbert explained that Alabama has a state law to allow intervention in failing schools, a cornerstone of school reform for the Obama administration, Duncan took his own notes. Hubbert explained that the state department had abandoned enforcement after No Child Left Behind was enacted. Duncan took with him a copy of the state law permitting intervention.

After a discussion about how destructive charter schools could be to a state with a high number of rural schools and a state system woefully underfunded, Duncan said, "I don't care about charter schools. What I care about is turning around the lowest performing schools."

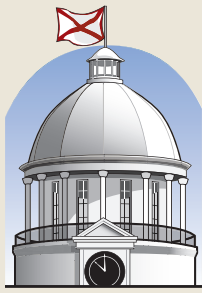
Duncan suggested that AEA become involved in picking the 13 lowest performing schools representing about one percent of schools in the state and come up with a plan to turn the schools around. He went on to say that the U.S. Department of Education had grants of \$50 million that could go to such projects.

Duncan said if such a program works, it could be repeated the following year with more federal money to help with the next 13 low performing schools.

One of Duncan's chief aides, Joe Anderson, told President Gibson that the Selma meeting would be the first to begin a series of meetings in Washington with the Secretary of Education's office to develop a deeper working relationship between the secretary's office and the Alabama Education Association.



**AEA leaders, Dr. Paul Hubbert, President Anita Gibson, and Dr. Joe Reed, met with U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan at George Wallace Community College in Selma to discuss issues relating to Race to the Top funding.**



***A comparison between Alabama's application and other Southern states also points to another reason why the cut was missed: Alabama's application simply wasn't as good.***

***Neither Kentucky nor Alabama have charter schools, yet Kentucky was able to describe innovative efforts for six pages, while Alabama had only two paragraphs.***

## Comparisons show weak application Riley blames AEA for RTTT failure

Last week, Alabama was informed it did not make the first cut for Race to the Top (RTTT), the Obama administration competition for federal funds based on education innovation. The second round will begin June 1, and state officials will have an opportunity to look at states that made the cut, discuss with U.S. Department of Education evaluators why Alabama fell short, and redraft its application to be more competitive.

Gov. Riley wasted no time to blame AEA for the state's failure, citing its opposition to a charter school bill that was defeated twice in committee in the Legislature. Riley said the absence of a charter school law was the sole reason Alabama missed the cut, and much of the state media seemed to take this at face value.

U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan flatly contradicted the governor on March 8, saying charter schools were "not the reason" Alabama was not among the finalists. Duncan was reiterating what he had said weeks earlier, that charter schools would not "make or break" Alabama's application.

A comparison between Alabama's application and other Southern states also points to another reason why the cut was missed: Alabama's application simply wasn't as good.

Kentucky made the first RTTT cut, and like Alabama it does not have charter schools. Side by side evaluation of the Kentucky and Alabama proposals, especially in the area where charter or other innovative schools are delineated, shows clearly where Alabama's effort was lacking and where it can improve for the second round.

The difference in depth and breadth of the two state applications is noticeable to the most casual reader. Kentucky goes into greater detail in almost every aspect of its application, and

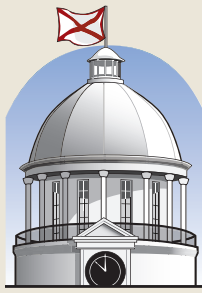
the total text is more than one-third greater than Alabama's. While length is not necessarily an indicator of quality, impressing federal grant reviewers often requires detail and extensive implementation descriptions. More is better in competitions like this.

A prime example is when the federal officials asked about student data. Kentucky outlined its already existing Statewide Longitudinal Data System, which meets the 12 criteria asked by evaluators. This portion of Kentucky's application also lists the state's extensive investment in technology in schools, and how that is integrated with the student data to improve teaching and learning.

Alabama notes the state does not have a fully functioning data system, meeting only eight of 12 federal requirements, most noticeably not collecting student data statewide. There is no mention of how the state has been investing in classroom technology and linking high speed data systems to schools, or how those improvements translate into student gains. Grant writers did not describe Alabama's technology efforts well.

Yet nowhere did Alabama fail worse than in the section devoted to charter and other innovative schools. Neither Kentucky nor Alabama have charter schools, yet Kentucky was able to describe innovative efforts for six pages, while Alabama had only two paragraphs.

Kentucky did three very smart things in its RTTT application that Alabama did not: it highlighted existing laws that promote things like school autonomy; it promoted its magnet schools and school choice in urban areas; and it recognized that Kentucky has a large rural population where charter schools simply could not function.



***“Kentucky highlighted education innovation in lieu of charter schools and we did not. We paid lip service to something that had not a political prayer and would not advance our chances. There was so much more Alabama should have written in this area, and comparing it to Kentucky shows just how poorly the grant writers did.”***

### Alabama’s weak RTTT application

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Alabama had one paragraph on pending charter school legislation and one paragraph on magnet schools and individual schools such as the Alabama School of Math and Science.

“Alabama’s application was very poor in critical areas compared to Kentucky’s application,” said AEA staffer Jim Wrye, who did grant evaluations while attending the Harvard Graduate School of Education. “Kentucky highlighted education innovation in lieu of charter schools and we did not. We paid lip service to something that had not a political prayer and would not advance our chances. There was so much more Alabama should have written in this area, and comparing it to Kentucky shows just how poorly the grant writers did.”

Wrye notes the rural perspective is an important point, where more than one-third of Alabama schools are in small rural communities, and another third are in towns no bigger than 10,000 citizens. Most often, evaluators and reformers come from urban and suburban settings; reminding these experts of issues of distance and resources in Southern rural communities is important and valuable to an improved evaluation.

Another deficit was the dearth of information on magnet and torchbearer schools, the state program recognizing high-poverty, high-performing public schools. Magnet schools in Alabama are proven successes, with Jefferson County IBS in Irondale and LAMP in Montgomery recognized as some of the best schools in the nation. The Alabama application

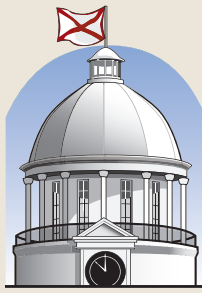
simply notes that the state has 15 magnet schools, allowed where people want them. Torchbearer schools offer a model of urban school transformation, yet they were not mentioned in this area of the application at all.

AEA would look favorably on expanding innovative schools similar to magnet schools and the Torchbearer schools modeled in Mobile.

There were very good sections to the Alabama RTTT application, and it did make a persuasive case that the state has created a foundation of innovation where new federal dollars could make a tremendous impact. AMSTI, ARI, distance learning, the state’s ability to take control of failing schools, and the uncompleted longitudinal data system all could benefit from RTTT funds.

Once RTTT reviewer comments and scores have been released, a strategy can move forward on improving the next Alabama RTTT application. However, there are clear deficits in Alabama’s effort that must be addressed, including improving the area of the application focused on innovative schools.

“Charter schools will not happen for this competition, and quite frankly they are not a good policy for Alabama, regardless of what short-term funding is dangled from Washington,” said Wrye. “We have a persuasive case to be made about reform and advancement in Alabama schools, but it will take all of us working together and recognizing we have innovation worthy of funding, instead of decrying what we don’t have.”



**Secretary of Education Duncan personally told me that Alabama did in fact start with the full points possible even though we do not have charter schools.**

## Accusations against AEA don't add up

As educators and parents, we teach children to take responsibility for their own failures. Some of our elected officials have forgotten that lesson. Once again, Governor Bob Riley has blamed the 105,000-member Alabama Education Association for the state's failure to be one of 16 Race to the Top finalists. I've done a little research on this subject. I have found some interesting information that shows Riley's blame game is off base.



**Anita Gibson,  
AEA President**

- 41 states including Washington D.C. applied
- 16 states were chosen to compete for first round final grants (most won't get any funds)
- 11 state applications chosen as finalists were supported by the state education affiliate
- Four state applications chosen as finalists were not supported by the state education affiliate
- Two states that do not allow charter schools submitted applications
- One state that does not allow charter schools was chosen
- 24 states that were not chosen have charter schools
- Five states chosen as finalists are among the top 10 best funded state systems in the nation

Secretary of Education Duncan personally told me that Alabama did in fact start with the full points possible even though we do not have charter schools. He also stated again that charter schools were not a requirement to receive RTTT funds. We didn't lose points because Alabama already has innovative schools as noted in our application.

Also, I explained to Sec. Duncan that the 105,000 members of AEA go to work daily with the common goal of making sure that all students succeed to the best of their ability. I let him know he should not believe the untrue things that were being said about us.

Every major professional education association in the state along with almost every member of the Legislature's key educational committees oppose charter schools.

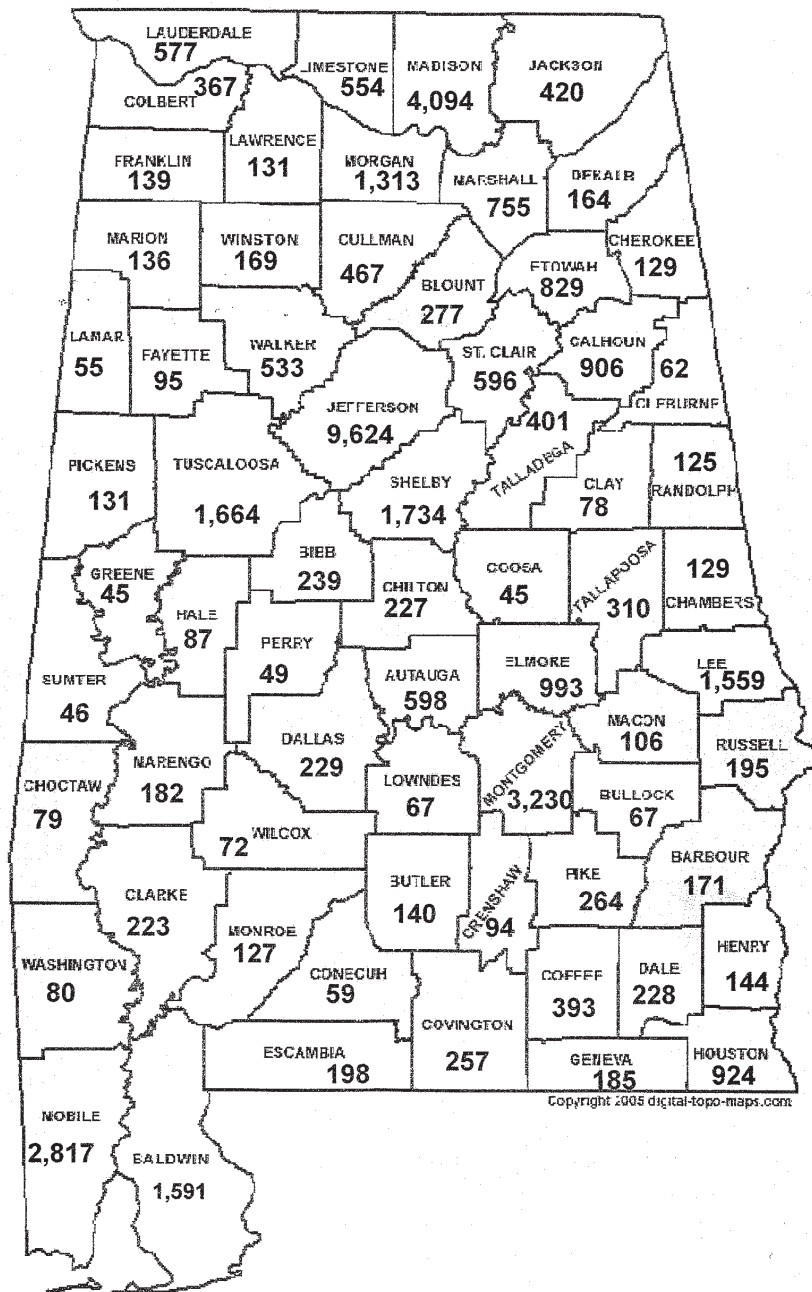
For AEA to repeatedly be the only group to be falsely blamed for the state's failure in the application process becomes an increasingly personal attack against every member of AEA.

Don't believe the untruths being printed about your professional organization, and do not let your students' parents and community members believe it either. Encourage them to visit [nocharterschoolsalabama.org](http://nocharterschoolsalabama.org) for the truth about the effect charter schools will have on the public education of our children.

Don't let certain elected officials continue to divert the attention away from the fact that we do not have an education budget, or the money to give our students the opportunities they need to succeed.

Let's keep the discussion where it belongs – the proper funding of Alabama's K-12 public school systems!

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