

Millot: Three Data Points. Unconnected Dots or a Warning?



I have now heard the same thing from three independent credible sources - the fix is in on the U.S. Department of Education's competitive grants, in particular Race to the Top (RTTT) and Investing in Innovation (I3). Secretary Duncan needs to head this off now, by admitting that he and his team have potential conflicts of interests with regard to their roles in grant making, recognizing that those conflicts are widely perceived by potential grantees, and explaining how grant decisions will be insulated from interference by the department's political appointees.

Over the last several months a national education reporter, a senior manager at a national education research organization, and the head of a national nonprofit working in the field all volunteered that the Department's senior officials know exactly who they want to get RTTT and I3 money - in brief, the new philanthropies' grantees and the jurisdictions where they work.

These three hold positions of some responsibility. None have been prone to exaggeration in the past. They are not colleagues. They run in entirely different circles, live in entirely different parts of the country, and work in very different parts of the K-12 education space. They all relayed conversations with colleagues about the problem.

We do know that the Secretary benefited from a strong relationship with the new philanthropy in Chicago. We know that the Secretary is high on charter management organizations and the new teacher development programs that benefited from the new philanthropy. We know that RTTT czar Joanne Weiss was senior staff member at New Schools. We know that Assistant Deputy Secretary for Innovation and Improvement Jim Shelton was a senior program education officer at the Gates Foundation and NewSchools. We know that both managed investments in the organizations' Duncan favors.

Anyone who remembers the Reading First fiasco is familiar with the pattern. A Secretary inclined towards a particular education reform solution, subordinate political appointees with a personal investment in the same solution, connected to organizations practicing that solution - organizations with incredibly thin files of reliable evidence consistently demonstrating an educationally significant contribution to improvements in student performance in the schools where they work today. The last time education reformers saw this pattern, the organizations with the best evidence of efficacy were pushed aside in favor of those who met a tortured definition designed to produce the desired outcome. Given history, concerns that a repeat is in process are neither unreasonable, nor unwarranted.

Whatever is or is not going on at the Department, the principled response is for the Secretary to address the fear head on, explain how the feared outcomes cannot take place, and then make sure he and his people keep several arms lengths removed from the process.

TWIE Readers: If you have evidence for or against the concerns I've relayed, or if you've heard the same stories, heard the opposite, or haven't heard a thing, please post it here.