

Montgomery County Council of PTAs (Montgomery County, Maryland)
VP of Educational Issues Report on
White House Community Partnership Summit
University of Pennsylvania, March 2, 2012
by: Laurie Halverson

I was invited to a day long summit in Philadelphia with senior staff from the Obama administration and decided to go because, 1) how can you turn down an invitation from the White House? and, 2) I felt very strongly that I should take this opportunity to be heard about the concerns that are emerging with the Race to the Top initiative that is spurring our new MCPS curriculum.

Who attended: About 300 or so people attended this event. Most were from the Philadelphia area, representing government workers from many sectors of the government and nonprofit employees representing many issues from human rights issues to homelessness and urban development and education. I was the only parent advocate, although I met several who were involved in the Philadelphia area in the nonprofit business of empowering parents.

White house senior staff were present and came to the microphone to introduce themselves. **Sean Donovan**, Department of Housing and Urban Development, **Martha Johnson**, Administrator, General Services Administration, and leaders from many departments such as the Department of Education, Department of Energy, Department of Commerce, Department of Transportation, Department of Labor, Department of Housing and Urban Development and many more.

Philadelphia's mayor, **Michael Nutter** and Congressman **Chaka Fattah** were speakers who focused on housing and urban development issues.

Topics covered: The four topics of discussion throughout the day were:

- jobs/ economy
- livable communities
- healthcare
- education.

Break out Sessions: After initial introductions and speeches, everyone was told to attend 2 of 4 breakout sessions to hear overviews of department activity from the four main areas. I attended "Education," led by **Donald Yu, Special Advisor to the Secretary** and "Health," led by **Joanne Grossi, Regional Director, Region III**.

Donald Yu's main points in his presentation:

- His job is the "catch all" for Arne Duncan. He works with LBGT issues, Native American concerns, testing integrity and more.
- Arne Duncan has secured additional funds for early learning- \$500 million, \$2 billion for community colleges, \$70 billion to save teacher jobs.
- Arne is focused on bottom 5% of schools and wants to turn them around with school improvement grants.
- Data based driven decision making-using longitudinal data system
- Trying to rethink teaching
- Base teacher evaluations on multiple measures such as student achievement and surveys.
- While Arne Duncan wants to focus on quality teaching he realizes that "wraparound services" are necessary and teachers can't succeed without this support.
- Note: **Race to the Top** was not mentioned until someone asked a question about its sustainability after the federal funds are used up. Yu's response: That's a good question. It's not about the policies put into place but is about the hard work that you guys are going to do. It is all about the implementation of the grants.

Open Space Format

To enable all to participate in discussions, the staff implemented an open space format. Anyone who wanted to lead a group discussion got in line and pitched their idea at the microphone along with a time and designated area to meet in the building. About 55 topics were pitched.

I got in line and pitched: **“The Race to the Top Policy: How it affecting us at the local level and suggestions on how to improve it.”** I set the meeting time for 1 hour. About 12 people attended my session, including Donald Yu and two others from the Department of Education, Craig Rorie, Training Officer, Federal Student Aid, and Joseph Mahoney, Program Manager, Office for Civil Rights. The others who attended included a college student, studying to be a teacher, a young entrepreneur who is starting an online college counseling business, and a couple people in the nonprofit education sector. Most did not know much about Race to the Top and wanted to learn more. I was surprised that I was the most educated person on the topic, and was not as prepared as I would like to be to be as facilitator of the discussion-but I had done some research on the topic and brought my notes fortunately! I emphasized that I was not an expert on the topic, but wanted to share some concerns on how the implementation of RTTT is affecting us at the local level.

Here are some of the highlights of the discussion:

- **Concerns about tying federal funds to certain behaviors** that are resulting in some states not getting federal funding and others are getting funding. Tying federal funds to merit pay is creating friction with our teacher unions. Merit pay may create competition among teachers that may prevent sharing of materials and teaching strategies. How do you factor in poverty with teacher pay and how can you be objective in evaluating teacher performance? Tying federal funds to testing results on only two subjects, Math and English literacy may result in the same issues or worse compared to NCLB-with teaching to the test and less emphasis on other subjects such as science and social studies. There is also pressure in RTTT to require that states create legislation and other regulations that promote charter school growth. How is this helpful?
- **Concerns about testing:** so much is uncertain at this point. “Through tests” are now optional, but were once mandatory-things have been watered down since initial plans. Who will manage and overhaul tests when federal funds are depleted?
- **Concerns about technology:** Many of our schools are not equipped for wireless access to the internet and don’t have tablets for every child. Books are not provided and there is much reliance on using interactive white boards to teach the curriculum. It would be much more costly to grade tests without online technology, and there would be more opportunities to cheat with paper grading, so how can we get the appropriate technology in all schools?
- **Concerns about lack of materials:** Publishing companies are slapping the CCSS seal of approval but are really not aligned with CCSS. Many school systems don’t have the funds to design their own curriculum and they are waiting for some materials to use.
- **Concerns about NCLB-**Donald Yu acknowledged there would be “growing pains” and a gap between NCLB and RTTT. What will happen in that gap period? How will students be measured and how will teachers be evaluated without testing in this gap period?
- **Professional Development:** If teachers are not properly trained, then RTTT will be pointless.
- **Parent involvement:** One participant said she was laid off because she was too effective at her job in the school system as a Director of parent involvement: parents started advocating “too much” for the comfort level of the school system. Parents need to know how to advocate for their child and school systems need to be encouraged to support these efforts. Parents will need access to courses and need to be informed about the concerns coming up. Our communities need to know that we have some obstacles that are coming up, such as tight budgets, increasing costs that are squeezing out education, and lack of teacher quality and supports for our teachers. Without understanding, our elected officials will not hear from parents and education may not be the priority. For this to work, parents and community involvement are key.

Afterward, I spoke to Donald Yu, told him I was impressed with Arne's basketball skills from the All Star game last week, and he said we can continue the conversation about RTTT-so the door is open for another meeting!

After my own session, I attended two other sessions on arts in education and college and career readiness. The person who led the college and career readiness was promoting his new business for online college counselors. He is already getting the buy in from a number of districts at going through the "back door" in school budgets by adding 1 hour or so per high school student for online college counseling. There are many college counselors who do most of their work at night helping college students and they get paid handsomely by individual clients. This entrepreneur is appealing to these professional counselors by offering them a chance to work from home online during the day (which is usually a time they don't work) to assist students in preparing for colleges. He says as school budgets are cutting counselors, this is an alternative to be able to still assist students with college prep.

All in all, I think it was a successful day. I entered the discussion points into a White House computer for submission before I left. My main goal of spreading concern about RTTT policy was met and I was especially glad that leaders from the Department of Education were there to listen. While I was hoping to learn more information about Race to the Top, I ended up being the speaker on the topic. It made me appreciative of the partnership MCCPTA has with MCPS which enables parents to learn what we need to know about initiatives that are affecting our school system. After talking to some people in the education field in Philadelphia, I was grateful that our PTAs in Montgomery County have a good working relationship with our school system which I think is an essential asset connected to the success of our students' academic achievement.