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Obama chides California for not using test scores to evaluate teachers

At stake are billions in federal stimulus funds to be allocated in 'Race to the Top' grants. Schwarzenegger says state law will be amended if necessary to comply.

By Jason Song and Jason Felch

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President Obama singled out California on Friday for failing to use education data to distinguish poor teachers from good ones, a situation that his administration said must change for the state to receive competitive, federal school dollars.

Obama's comments echo recent criticisms by his Education secretary, Arne Duncan, who warned that states that bar the use of student test scores to evaluate teachers, as California does, are risking those funds. In an announcement Friday at the Education Department in Washington, Obama and Duncan said the "Race to the Top" awards will be allocated to school districts that institute reforms using data-driven analysis, among other things.

"You cannot ignore facts," Obama said. "That is why any state that makes it unlawful to link student progress to teacher evaluations will have to change its ways."

The remarks escalate a disagreement between the Obama administration and California education leaders. While a 2006 law prohibits the use of student test scores to evaluate teachers on a state level, it does not mention local districts, where state officials say pupil data can be used to judge instructors. A handful of districts currently are doing that; L.A. Unified is not.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said Friday he would push to amend state law if necessary.

"We will seek any reforms or changes to the law deemed necessary, including changes to our data system laws, to ensure California is eligible to compete" for federal funds, Schwarzenegger said in a statement.

California's top education officials sent the Obama administration a letter earlier this month saying no changes were needed to state law and that any attempt to modify it could distract from reform efforts, but the administration has not responded.

Obama's speech could also mark the beginning of a protracted fight with teachers unions, which have resisted some of the reforms advocated by the administration, including performance pay and data-driven teacher evaluation.

The state's teachers unions have already voiced their opposition to such a move. When the 2006 law was drafted, teachers unions insisted that it include an amendment saying: "Data in the system may not be used . . . for purposes of pay, promotion, sanction, or personnel evaluation of an individual teacher or group of teachers, or of any other employment related decisions related to individual teachers."

Obama and Duncan made their position clear. "This competition will not be based on politics, ideology, or the preferences of a particular interest group," Obama said. "Instead, it will be based on the simple principle: whether a state is ready to do what works."

"Race to the Top" applicants must show progress in four key areas to compete for the \$4.35 billion: adopting rigorous academic standards, recruiting and retaining talented educators, turning around chronically low-performing schools, and building data systems to track student and teacher effectiveness. But Obama also pointed out that teachers should not be judged solely on student test scores.

Seven states have already lifted restrictions on public charter schools to better compete for the funds, the Associated Press reported Friday. Other states, such as Colorado and Massachusetts, are trumpeting their recent progress on issues like merit pay and higher educational standards, which they believe will give them an inside track to secure the federal dollars.

Federal officials have said that California legislators do not have to necessarily revise current law. Instead, the attorney general could certify that the state law is not a barrier to teacher accountability.

But some California education officials questioned whether it would be possible to comply with the administration's demands.

California ranks 41st among states in collecting and using data to evaluate teachers, according to a 2008 survey by the Data Quality Campaign, a nonprofit based in Austin, Texas.

"There is . . . [a] possibility nobody will apply" for the funds, said California Deputy Supt. for Public Instruction Rick Miller, who stressed that state leaders share the Obama administration's goals. "They're asking for fundamental changes in all sorts of areas, and you have to commit to all of it by October. . . . That's a heavy lift."

The draft guidelines for the federal funding released Friday are open for public comment for 30 days. States are required to submit applications by October for the first round of grants.

The money is a portion of the roughly \$100-billion educational stimulus package approved by Congress. But much of that money is expected to be used by districts to make up for state budget cuts.

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