

# THE RACE IS ON



BY SUZANNE WEISS

**C**ompetition among states for a piece of the multi-billion federal Race to the Top fund has spawned a wide range of reaction and action—from handwringing to soul searching to partnership building, and from relatively minor policy changes to groundbreaking legislative initiatives.

Forty states and the District of Columbia are awaiting the decision of judging panels established by the U.S. Department of Education to review states' applications for the \$4.35 billion in Race to the Top money, which will be awarded in two rounds.

The first round of grant awards—and only a handful of states are expected to receive them—will be announced this month. Applications for the second round are due June 1, with the announcement of winners at the end of September. States that apply for the first round of funding but are not awarded grants may reapply for funding in the second round, together with those states applying for the first time in the second round.

States will be given points for what they

plan to do or what they have already accomplished on four fronts: adopting world-class standards in language arts, math and other subjects; tracking each student's academic growth from year to year; improving the performance of teachers and principals; and turning around chronically low-performing schools.

The Race to the Top competition is designed to provide incentives to states to trail-blaze and develop effective reforms that can be replicated in schools and districts across the country. The Obama administration has positioned change and innovation in public education as essential to building “a new foundation for growth and prosperity”—and equally important as reforms in health insurance, energy and the financial sector.

“This competition ... will be based on a simple principle—whether a state is ready to do what works,” said President Barack Obama at the unveiling of the competition last year. “We will use the best data available to determine whether a state can meet a few key benchmarks for reform, and states that outperform the rest will be rewarded with a grant.”

The president described Race to the Top

as “one of the largest investments in education reform in American history. And rather than divvying it up and handing it out, we are letting states and school districts compete for it.”

To some observers, however, the Race to the Top funds are “a carrot that feels more like a stick,” in the words of Michael Petrilli of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. “The Obama administration could have asked states for their best ideas for achieving big objectives. Instead, it has published a list of 19 of its best ideas—few of which are truly ‘evidence-based,’ regardless of what President Obama says—and told states to adopt as many of them as possible if they want to get the money,” Petrilli wrote in a recent article posted on the institute's website.

But many legislators say they have no problem with the ground rules, and feel the competition has served to energize and focus their states' education reform agendas.

“What Race to the Top has done is create more urgency, more emphasis on using our resources strategically and much more buy-in across the state,” says North Carolina Representative Rick Glazier, who chairs the House Education Appropriations Committee.

*Suzanne Weiss is a freelance writer in Denver.*

*“It’s time for us to face the fact that we’re competing not with one another but with other nations.”*

REPRESENTATIVE ROY TAKUMI, HAWAII

## STATES ARE MAKING CHANGES IN THEIR EDUCATION PROGRAMS AS PART OF APPLYING FOR BILLIONS IN FEDERAL GRANTS.

“If you’ve done this right, especially in terms of building consensus, it’s been very beneficial.”

Representative Roy Takumi of Hawaii, a veteran legislator and chairman of the House Education Committee, agrees. “Race to the Top has forced states to be a bit more introspective, and that’s a good thing,” he says. “It was helpful for Hawaii to go through this process in a thoughtful way, and it seems to have changed thinking on some issues—like how to go about reconstituting low-performing schools.”

Even those with strong misgivings about the federal initiative agree that the application process has had positive effects.

“I have to say that it did help surface some important issues and generated more productive discussion,” says Representative

Cindy Winckler of Iowa, who serves on the House Education Committee and co-chairs the Education Budget Committee.

Even though she wound up supporting Iowa’s Race to the Top application, Winckler is troubled by the extent to which the U.S. Department of Education is “overstepping its authority in areas like defining effective and highly effective teachers, or saying ‘If you have more charter schools, you’ll do a better job of educating kids.’”

### STATE POSITIONS VARY

At the risk of being marked down by the Race to the Top judging panel, Iowa leaders in their application argued for being allowed more flexibility and time to develop its own definitions and measures of effective teaching, based on the state’s strong track record

in supporting instructional leadership.

Iowa did give ground on one key issue, recently lifting strict limits on the number and location of charter schools. But the state also offered a vigorous defense, Winckler says, of Iowa’s longstanding tradition of using waivers to give regular public schools the latitude to develop innovative calendars, configurations and programming.

“My biggest fear going into this was that we would make a bunch of huge policy changes just to chase after the money,” Winckler says. “But now I’m OK with what we did. I feel we really kept our values and we’ve invested a lot in continuing to head in the right direction.”

Concern over the scope and requirements of Race to the Top was a major factor in the decision of 10 states—Alas-



**REPRESENTATIVE**  
**RICK GLAZIER**  
**NORTH CAROLINA**



**REPRESENTATIVE**  
**ROY TAKUMI**  
**HAWAII**



**REPRESENTATIVE**  
**CINDY WINCKLER**  
**IOWA**

## TASK FORCE OFFERS GUIDANCE ON EDUCATION POLICY

As the Obama administration works toward a new policy to replace No Child Left Behind, NCSL's Task Force on Federal Education Policy has released recommendations for how the federal government should approach re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

The purpose of the task force, a follow up to an earlier task force that dealt with No Child Left Behind, was to generate guidelines to help the president and Congress draft an effective and efficient federal K-12 policy that respects the governance structure of public education as well as basic principles of federalism. The final report, released in February, included these recommendations.

- ◆ Federal funding should be focused on at-risk students instead of trying to leverage systemwide reforms with limited federal resources

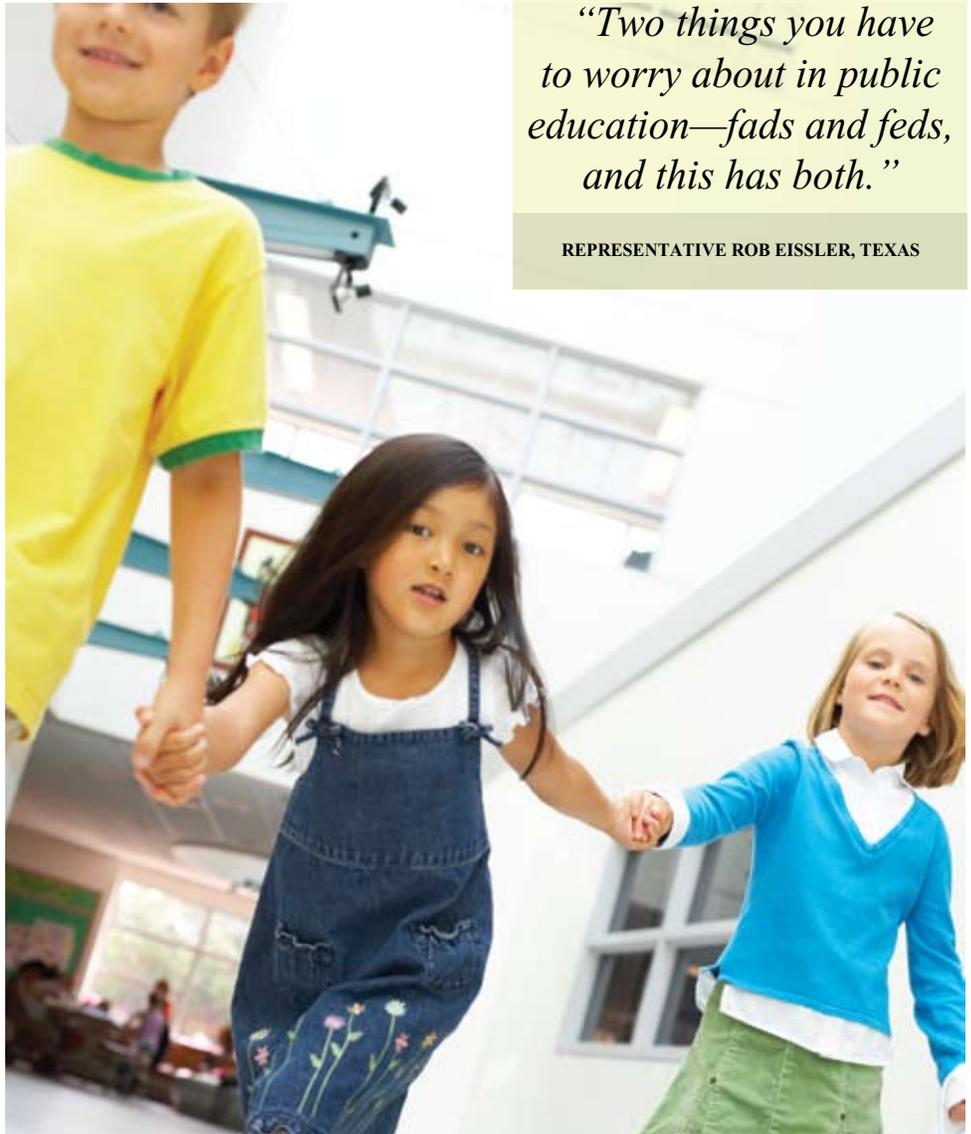
- ◆ Federal resources should provide money for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act at promised levels. Currently, this unfunded mandate costs state and local taxpayers \$16 billion a year.

- ◆ There should be permanent changes to the tax credit provisions of the bonding laws that apply to school construction. This action would free tens of billions of dollars in resources without expanding the federal reach into the daily operations of the schools.

- ◆ There needs to be a revitalization of the federal focus on research without mandating how and when "winning strategies" should be required by law or "encouraged" by withholding additional federal resources

- ◆ Remaining money should be used to reward and encourage true innovation and achieve progress toward performance gains, not conformity with others or compliance with a checklist of reforms.

*David Shreve, NCSL*



*"Two things you have to worry about in public education—fads and feds, and this has both."*

REPRESENTATIVE ROB EISSLER, TEXAS

ka, Maine, Maryland, Mississippi, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Texas, Vermont and Washington—to opt out of the competition or to hold off applying until the second round.

"I've always been skeptical about accepting federal dollars, especially for programs that leave states on the hook once the money is gone," says Representative RaeAnn Kelsch of North Dakota, who has chaired the House Education Committee since 1997. "I'm a strong states' rights person, and it seems to me that the



REPRESENTATIVE  
RAEANN KELSCH  
NORTH DAKOTA

federal government has been meddling more and more, to the point where it's nearly taken over states' education systems."

In North Dakota, the recommendation not to apply for a Race to the Top grant was made in October 2009 by the statutory Commission on Education Improvement, a group that includes legislators, K-12 and postsecondary educators, executive branch officials and representatives of professional and business groups.

"We talked about applying, and the question was, 'OK, will we even be able to compete?'" Kelsch says. "North Dakota has always done a good job of educating its children, and it's done a lot of good things in all four [judging] areas. But we don't have charter schools or pay-for-performance, for instance, so clearly we don't meet some of the basic requirements for the grant."

Another consideration, Kelsch notes, was



**REPRESENTATIVE**  
**ROB EISSLER**  
**TEXAS**

that North Dakota lawmakers meet only every other year, so they would have had to go into special session to address any issues that required legislation.

In Texas, another state that decided not to enter the competition, Governor Rick Perry and legislative leaders denounced the requirement that states commit to adopting national curriculum standards and tests.

“Texas is on the right path toward improving education,” Perry said in a mid-January press release. “If Washington were truly concerned about funding education with solutions that match local challenges, they would make the money available to states with no strings attached.”

Representative Rob Eissler, who chairs the House Public Education Committee, derides the portrayal of Race to the Top as a competition. “We’re all for solid education reform,” he says, “but this is just a bribe for compliance, with states blindly following the federal government.”

Eissler cited the findings of a recent analysis of the Texas College and Career Readiness Standards showing they meet and, in many cases, exceed the proposed national standards put forth by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association.

He also noted an estimate by the state education commissioner’s office that the most the state was likely to receive in Race to the Top funds—about \$600 million—was far outweighed by what it would cost to revise curriculum, textbooks and tests around new national standards, estimated at more than \$3 billion.

“Two things you have to worry about in public education—fads and feds,” Eissler says. “And this has both.”

#### **CHANGES IN THE STATES**

Over the past year, a number of states have enacted reforms aimed at improving their chances of securing a Race to the Top award.

◆ Six states—Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana,

Massachusetts, Michigan and Tennessee—removed or modified caps on the number of charter schools that can be authorized statewide and in any one school district.

◆ Michigan legislators, meeting in a special session last December, passed a measure strengthening the power of the state superintendent of public instruction to intervene in the operation of schools with the worst academic performance.

◆ Tennessee and Louisiana have secured the support of teachers’ unions for using test-score results to count for 50 percent of teacher evaluations, and expanding the use of data to help drive decisions of hiring, retaining and promoting teachers and principals. California and Wisconsin changed their laws to eliminate “firewalls” that prevented schools from using student achievement data to evaluate teachers.

◆ Colorado legislators, in the opening days of the 2010 session, passed a bill requiring the state department of education to produce an annual report on how the academic growth of students in new teachers’ classrooms corre-

lates to the colleges or alternative programs where those teachers were trained.

Considering that only a handful of awards might be made in the first round of the competition, North Dakota’s Kelsch predicted there will likely be “huge disappointment” among states that invested so much time and resources in preparing their application. “It’s unfathomable,” she says. “You can’t expect a state to go through all this and not see some results.”

But some legislators say they aren’t fretting about being passed over.

“The way we looked at it is that we want to use our application as a blueprint for reform in our state,” says Hawaii’s Takumi. “The money definitely has the potential to accelerate what we want to accomplish. But if we don’t get it, we still have our blueprint and then we’ll have to focus on to what degree we can implement it.”

 **CHECK OUT** more on Race to the Top at [www.ncsl.org/magazine](http://www.ncsl.org/magazine).