

THE RACE TO CHANGE

The competition for \$4.35 billion spurred legislators to make far-reaching changes in state education policy. Will they make a difference?

BY SUZANNE WEISS

In years to come, the Obama administration's Race to the Top competition may well be viewed as having significantly altered the landscape of public education in America.

For cash-strapped states, the prospect of winning a share of the \$4.35 billion Race to the Top money compelled all but a handful to participate in one or both rounds of the hard-fought, year-long competition—and, in the process, undertake a variety of key reforms.

“With a relatively small amount of money, [the federal government] has catalyzed a large amount of worthwhile education-reform activity in a great many places,” says education policy expert Chester E. “Checker” Finn, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. And the directions in which Race to the Top compelled states to move “are important directions to move in.”

Some of the reforms include:

◆ Thirty-four states and the District of Columbia have formally adopted rigorous new K-12 “common core” standards in English and mathematics, and an additional 14 states have committed to doing so. The new standards were created by a voluntary partnership of states, not by the federal government.

◆ Forty-four states are working together, in two federally funded design groups, to develop better ways of measuring the performance and progress of students. The new assessments have the potential “to turn the current testing system upside down,” says Bruce Fuller, an education professor at the University of California at Berkeley.

◆ Since mid-2009, 15 states have lifted their caps on public charter schools. Mississippi enacted a charter school law, and efforts to pass such legislation in several other states—

AND THE WINNERS ARE...

The first round of the Race to the Top competition culminated in the award last March of \$500 million to Tennessee and \$109 million to Delaware. Ten second-round winners were announced in late August.

- ◆ District of Columbia, \$75 million
- ◆ Florida, \$700 million
- ◆ Georgia, \$400 million
- ◆ Hawaii, \$75 million
- ◆ Maryland, \$250 million
- ◆ Massachusetts, \$250 million
- ◆ New York, \$700 million
- ◆ North Carolina, \$400 million
- ◆ Ohio, \$400 million
- ◆ Rhode Island, \$75 million

Alabama, Kentucky, Maine, South Dakota and West Virginia—have gained momentum.

In addition, several states have made notable legislative and regulatory changes, from the use of long-term study data to the evaluation of teachers and principals to state intervention in chronically low-performing schools.

New York, for example, plans to expand its “partnership zones” for turnaround schools. The zones include clusters of restructured and charter schools that will use a central district office for services, but have separate scheduling, curriculum and staffing controls in exchange for agreeing to make significant improvements within two years.

Hawaii recently committed to lengthening the school year to 190 days, 10 days longer than the national average. Connecticut is in the process of imposing more rigorous high school graduation requirements, revamping the state's education data collection system, and creating a fast-track system for training and licensing school principals.

The District of Columbia is using a new way to evaluate teachers that covers a range

of factors, including their presence in front of the class and how carefully they check whether students understand the material.

Rhode Island now prohibits districts from assigning any student to a teacher deemed ineffective for two years in a row. And in Colorado, lawmakers made it more difficult for teachers to earn tenure and easier to lose it.

But not everyone sees the competition as a positive course for education. North Dakota Representative RaeAnn Kelsch, whose state was one of four that didn't enter either round of Race to the Top, denounced the idea of “dividing states into winners and losers, and leaving millions of students in losing states without the benefit of this federal money.”

She and others also complained that some of the reform models for which states have been rewarded are unproven or have produced mixed results at best.

But Joe Williams, executive director of Democrats for Education Reform, a New York-based advocacy group, says Race to the Top helped jump-start reform efforts.

“We've noted more political activity around education reform in the last 12 months than we saw in the last decade,” Williams says. “This gave a green light to reformers all over the country to really push some ideas that hadn't gotten a lot of traction in the past.”

Hawaii Representative Roy Takumi thinks the competition made lawmakers and educa-



REPRESENTATIVE
ROY TAKUMI
HAWAII

tion officials decide what was important.

“It forced people to establish priorities, to look hard at the components of our education agenda.”

Suzanne Weiss is a freelance writer in Denver and frequent contributor to State Legislatures.



RACE RULES

The Race to the Top competition began in June 2009. The U.S. Department of Education used a panel of judges to score each application based on 19 criteria.

States were given points—up to a maximum of 500—for what they planned to do or what they had already accomplished on four fronts: adopting world-class academic standards and assessments in core subjects; tracking individual students’ academic performance and year-to-year growth from the early grades on; recruiting, training and retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most; and turning around or reconstituting chronically low-performing schools.

WIN SOME, LOSE SOME

“It was really remarkable. It was one of the only times I have ever seen us forget about rural and urban, Republicans and Democrats, representatives and senators. Instead, we were Tennesseans, all working together to make a difference for kids and change the way we deliver education in our state.”



**FORMER
REPRESENTATIVE
MARK MADDOX
TENNESSEE**

MARK MADDOX ON A SPECIAL SESSION ON THE STATE’S RACE TO THE TOP APPLICATION. TENNESSEE RECEIVED \$500 MILLION IN THE FIRST ROUND

“We are excited about winning this grant, but I think I was most pleased by the level of buy-in and ownership of the changes we’ve committed to. That really is more important than the money.”



**SENATOR
DAVE SOKOLA
DELAWARE**

DAVE SOKOLA, WHOSE STATE RECEIVED \$109 MILLION IN THE FIRST ROUND.

“It was supposed to be about supporting bold reform. We had the boldest reforms in the country and for some reason the reviewers didn’t get the scores right.”



**SENATOR
MICHAEL JOHNSTON
COLORADO**

MICHAEL JOHNSTON, WHO SPONSORED SUCCESSFUL EDUCATION REFORM LEGISLATION. THE STATE WAS A SURPRISE LOSER IN THE COMPETITION.

“The first part of it is the mistake of putting the wrong piece of paper in. It drives people crazy and, believe me, I’m not thrilled about it. But the second part is, does anybody in Washington, D.C., have a lick of common sense? Pick up the phone and ask us for the number.”



**GOVERNOR
CHRIS CHRISTIE
NEW JERSEY**

CHRIS CHRISTIE, WHO FIRED HIS EDUCATION COMMISSIONER AFTER THE STATE LOST THE COMPETITION BECAUSE OF A CLERICAL ERROR IN THE APPLICATION.

CHECK OUT State Legislatures’ previous coverage of the Race to the Top competition at www.ncsl.org/magazine.