UNIVERSITY of ARKANSAS
Office for Education Policy

COMPETING IN THE FEDERAL *RACE TO THE TOP*

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The federal *Race to the Top* is a national competition between states intended to support education reform and innovation in classrooms. States at the forefront of school reform are eligible to compete for $4.3 billion in *Race to the Top* grants. Since this is a competitive grant, it is possible that some states will not receive awards, and President Obama assures that "politics won't come into play."

On July 24, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) announced the guidelines for *Race to the Top*. Education Secretary Arne Duncan and President Barack Obama spoke about the goals of the fund and a notice was released to provide details for the application process. The application is not yet available, but the notice describes the proposed priorities, which are available for public comment until August 28, 2009.

The four education reform areas reviewed in the *Race to the Top* competition are:

1. Adopting internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the workplace;
2. Building data systems that measure student success and inform teachers and principals how they can improve their practices;
3. Recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals; and
4. Turning around the lowest-performing schools.

> *"The program is also a competition through which states can increase or decrease their odds of winning federal support. For example, states that limit alternative routes to certification for teachers and principals, or cap the number of charter schools, will be at a competitive disadvantage. And states that explicitly prohibit linking data on achievement or student growth to principal and teacher evaluations will be ineligible for reform dollars until they change their laws."*
>
> – Education Secretary Arne Duncan

DISTRIBUTION OF FUNDS

The $4.3 billion will be distributed in two phases. Phase one applications will open in late 2009 (and awarded in early 2010) and phase two applications will open in late spring 2010 (and awarded in fall 2010). This national competition is a high enough priority that the governor and education commissioner of participating states must both sign the application for the state funds. States that receive funds in phase one cannot apply for additional funds in phase two. States that applied during phase one but did not receive funds may apply for phase two funds. States may also wait if more time to plan is needed, and only apply during phase two.

ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

There are two eligibility requirements. First, in order for a state to be eligible, the state's application under the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund (SFSF) program of the ARRA must have been approved. Because both programs have the same four education reform areas, if a state did not meet the requirements for SFSF, then the state will not meet the requirements for *Race to the Top*. Second, the state must demonstrate the ability to link student achievement or student growth data to individual teachers and principals. If a state is eligible based on these two requirements, the state may complete the *Race to the Top* application.

APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS

There are several topics a state must address in the application. The application should highlight the current effort of the state in the four reform areas. Current achievement levels and graduation rates must also be described, including the achievement level of student subgroups (economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and limited English proficient students). The application must address how the state will use the funding to improve student achievement, how funds will be allocated to high-need local education agencies (LEAs), and how plans will move toward closing achievement gaps. At least half of the grant money must be used directly for LEAs (including public charter schools) and the LEAs must agree to fully implement the state's proposed plan.

Selection Criteria: Seeking a Competitive Advantage

Arkansas may be well-positioned to be competitive for these awards. Indeed, a recent report by *The New Teacher Project* rates Arkansas among the fifteen states in the nation with the best chance to be granted *Race to the Top* funding. The 19 selection criteria that will guide the federal government in granting these awards are presented on the right column of this page. Some of the criteria are "reform conditions" (noted in the sidebar as RC), which focus on the state's past progress in key areas. We have created a report card at the end of this policy brief to highlight Arkansas' status in these areas, and you will see that Arkansas has a good start to compete for these funds.

Other selection criteria points are "reform plans" (noted in the sidebar as RP). For these criteria, states will be given credit for the extent to which the *Race to the Top* proposals address these areas. This is where Arkansas can begin to increase the chance of receiving a piece of the $4.3 billion *Race to the Top*. For example, based on the recommendations the USDE provided in the notice, a state should align high school exit criteria and college entrance requirements. While Arkansas is modifying End-of-Course exams, policymakers should also consider making sure the EOC exams are rigorous exams that align with the ACT.

Based on the guidance given in reform area 2, a state might propose to encourage the use of continual formative assessment along with a plan to assist teachers in using the relevant data. Under the third education reform area, *great teachers and leaders*, it would be wise for a state to create or improve alternative routes to licensure. This means states should have more than one alternative route to licensure, and should not be limited to only higher education institutions. Another category under *great teachers and leaders* is "differentiating teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance." A state may consider performance pay to evaluate teachers and principals, provide feedback, and compensate based on their effectiveness.

The fourth reform area, *turning around struggling schools*, includes a category for "increasing the supply of high-quality charter schools." States that do not cap charter schools, that consider student achievement in renewal or closing decisions, and that fund charter schools equitably, would have an advantage.

All in all, it looks like Arkansas policymakers have a good opportunity to bring *Race to the Top* funds to Arkansas schools, as long as we pay attention to the federal government's priority areas.

Race to the Top 19 Selection Criteria:
These are the areas upon which the state proposals will be rated.

Reform Area 1: *Standards and Assessments*

- Developing and adopting common standards *(RC)*
- Developing and implementing common, high-quality assessments *(RC)*
- Supporting transition to enhanced standards and high-quality assessments *(RP)*

Reform Area 2: *Data Systems to Support Instruction*

- Fully implementing a statewide longitudinal data system *(RC)*
- Accessing and using state data *(RP)*
- Using data to improve instruction *(RP)*

Reform Area 3: *Great Teachers & Leaders*

- Providing alternative pathways for aspiring teachers and principals *(RC)*
- Differentiating teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance *(RP)*
- Ensuring equitable distribution of effective teachers and principals *(RP)*
- Reporting the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs *(RP)*
- Providing effective support to teachers and principals *(RP)*

Reform Area 4: *Turning Around Struggling Schools*

- Intervening in the lowest-performing schools and LEAs *(RC)*
- Increasing the supply of high-quality charter schools *(RC)*
- Turning around struggling schools *(RP)*

Overall Selection Criteria

- Demonstrating academic progress *(RC)*
- Making education funding a priority *(RC)*
- Evidence of statewide support and commitment for reform *(RC)*
- State's plan includes additional measures to raise achievement and close gaps *(RP)*
- Building strong statewide capacity to implement, scale, and sustain proposed plans *(RP)*

How Does Arkansas Stand on Reform Conditions?

We have also created a "report card" to highlight how Arkansas rates in each of the four reform areas. This report card focuses on the "reform conditions," which highlights Arkansas' past progress toward each area.

Reform Areas
1 = Standards and Assessments
2 = Data Systems to Support Instruction
3 = Great Teachers and Leaders
4 = Turning Around Struggling Schools

Rating
A = Meets Criteria
B = Partially Meets Criteria
C = Lacks Criteria

Reform Conditions Criteria - Arkansas' Past Progress

Reform Area	Selection Criteria	Arkansas' Status	Rate
1	Developing & adopting common standards	On June 1, 2009, Arkansas joined the Common Core State Standards Initiative, a state-led process to develop a common core of K-12 standards.	A
1	Developing & implementing common, high-quality assessments	To our knowledge, Arkansas is not working to create common, improved assessments that are internationally benchmarked.	C
2	Fully implementing a statewide longitudinal data system	Arkansas has a statewide data system that tracks student achievement, employee and finance information, and allows for the examination of individual student data over time, etc.	A
3	Providing alternative pathways for aspiring teachers and principals	There is one form of alternative certification for teachers, which is controlled and provided by the Arkansas Department of Education. Arkansas also does not have an alternative route to licensure for principals.	B
4	Intervening in the lowest-performing schools and LEAs	The state does not have clear guidelines for intervening in schools that are not academically performing adequately. There is a list of reasons why a school could be put on probation or lose accreditation – like not offering the appropriate courses, not having enough school days, lacking a special education program, having financial troubles, etc. – but low performance was not a clear a category in which the state has intervened.	C
4	Increasing the supply of high-quality charter schools	The number of charter schools has increased in Arkansas, from 6 in 2001-2002 to over 30 in 2008-2009. However, Arkansas does cap charter schools at 24 open-enrollment charter schools. There is only one authorizer in the state, the State Board of Education who can grant a charters up to 5 years in length; capital expenditures are not provided. The State Board of Education reviews the charter school in the final year of the contract in order to renew. The State Board of Education can revoke or modify a school's charter at any time if the school is not meeting its requirements. We have not found evidence of a charter being revoked for academic performance.	B

To view the notice of proposed priorities and submit your comments before August 28, visit the Race to the Top website: http://www.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html Comments should be submitted through the Federal eRulemaking Portal or via postal mail (not by fax or e-mail).