



Delaware education: Next step, bold reform

Delaware has promised radical changes to save failing public schools

By NICHOLE DOBO • The News Journal • April 4,
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For more than a decade, Delaware has tinkered with its public education system -- letting parents move children to better schools through choice, expanding access to charter schools, teaming with Teach for America to place young college graduates in urban schools.

The tinkering is over.

With \$100 million in federal education reform money headed to the state, radical changes are in store for struggling public schools. And for the first time, the people funding Delaware's reform agenda have a track record of removing teachers in the quest to improve schools.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who was impressed with Delaware's Race to the Top grant application, led Chicago's school system when teachers and principals at more than 20 schools were removed.

In his speech Monday announcing Delaware's \$100 million Race to the Top grant, Gov. Jack Markell warned that there are "tough decisions ahead."

To help students at underperforming schools, Markell and his secretary of education, Lillian Lowery, already have made it clear they are not a afraid to make bold or unpopular decisions. Despite student protests and threats of a lawsuit, Markell vehemently supported the Delaware Board of Education's decision to close Maurice J. Moyer Academy Charter School due to low test scores.

"When it comes to education, we need to focus on the kids, not the adults," Markell said last month. "We need to focus on whether kids are getting the best education they can, and that was what the independent Board of Education decision was about, not about the adults that work there. The board's decision was about whether this school was performing. Their decision, based on hard data over a period of years, was that it was not."

If there is any consolation to teachers, Duncan and Obama said support from teachers unions was a key to selecting Delaware and Tennessee as the first two Race to the Top winners. Tennessee will receive \$500 million of the \$4.35 billion education stimulus program. States that missed out on the first round of awards, Florida and Louisiana among them, are expected to court teachers before resubmitting applications.

The Obama administration expects states to work with teachers unions to implement changes, said Lisa Snell, director of education at the Reason Foundation, a Los Angeles think tank.

But some teachers fear the strings tied to Delaware's new-found money will cost jobs.

"I think we are going to lose a lot of good teachers," said Barbara Finnan, a teacher at Austin D. Baltz Elementary School in Wilmington.

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Part of Delaware's Race to the Top plan includes restructuring 10 schools with low academic achievement rates. Up until now, those schools' improvement plans have included mainly changes in curriculum, but no big staff changes.

Drastic changes now

These schools will need to enact major changes now, said Dan Cruce, deputy secretary of education. "We are expecting some bold and big ideas."

The majority of Delaware's schools meet federal standards set by the No Child Left Behind Act. Of the state's 206 schools, 131 met all the test scores, participation and achievement goals set by the federal government. Eleven schools did not receive a rating in 2009 due to changes in student population. Another 64 schools did not meet federal targets, a category often referred to as failing schools.

There are a variety of ways schools can fall into one of these categories, including poor graduation rates and low achievement by subgroups of students, such as those living in poverty.

Efforts at reforming 24 failing schools since 2004-2005 have not been successful, the state wrote in its application for Race to the Top. There wasn't enough accountability and there were problems with staffing inflexibility, the state wrote.

That's going to change, the state said in its application. The consequences for failing to reform test scores will have more bite. The state is going to create a team to oversee these schools, with leadership coming from Mass Insight Education & Research Institute, a Boston group that favors replacing the staff and leadership when overhauling a failing school.

Mass Insight, which receives funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, among other corporations and educational reform partnerships, supports the type of reform model that led to the recent firing of the principal and teachers at Rhode Island's Central Falls High School.

The Rhode Island district's move also won praise

from Duncan and Obama.

In the coming months and years in Delaware, there will be penalties -- including loss of funding -- for schools that fail to improve, according to the state's Race to the Top application.

Previous attempts at school reform in Delaware were unsuccessful because they focused on changing programs, said Justin Cohen, the president of Mass Insight. Research has shown that to make a change there needs to be far-reaching staffing changes, he said, but school leaders have historically chosen the "path of least resistance."

"Those things are not always easy, and aren't politically easy," Cohen said.

Delaware will participate in a similar reform program with Mass Insight, which is working with Delaware and five other states for a \$75 million public-private partnership. This pilot program will use the same models as Race to the Top..

The first test of Delaware's reform agenda will come this summer when the state Department of Education selects a few schools for restructuring, a decision based on performance history and scores from this year's round of student testing.

Selecting a reform plan

There are four overhaul models allowed under Race to the Top rules. All require some sort of staffing or

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governance change.

One of the most drastic reform models, called "turnaround," is similar to what happened in Chicago. Duncan described the model as "the adults go away, the kids stay," said Tim Cawley, managing director of **finance** and administration at the Academy for Urban School Leadership, the group that's taken control of nearly 20 Chicago schools since 2003.

"It's a massive reset at a school," Cawley said.

After a plan is chosen, the district and the union negotiate changes.

"For Delaware, the question is how aggressive will negotiations with the unions be, and how bold will they be," Snell said.

The four choices for underperforming schools are: closure -- shutting down the school; restart -- handing over management to a private company or turning it into a charter school; turnaround -- removing the principal and at least half the teachers; or transformation, which has four components -- replacing the principal and increasing school leader effectiveness, instructional reforms, increasing learning time, and creating community-oriented schools with operational flexibility.

The state Department of Education says it's open to all four reform models.

Mass Insight says it's in favor of two -- removing the principal and 50 percent of the staff or converting the school into a charter school.

Union's chosen course

The state's teachers union favors only one option, "transformation," said Diane Donohue, president of the Delaware State Education Association. "I don't believe that anyone in Delaware wants to fire everyone in a building and start from scratch."

School districts with at least nine schools that are deemed chronically troubled will not be able to exclusively use the "transformation model," the union-favored model that is considered the least radical change. These districts must select one of

the three remaining options for at least half of the failing schools. Districts that are most likely to be impacted by this rule are Christina and Red Clay, Cruce said.

Asked if he believes any schools would voluntarily select something other than the transformation model, Cruce said, "I do."

Outside problems

Children at the most troubled schools have challenges not seen by their peers, said Finnan, the teacher at Baltz, who plans to **retire** after more than four decades. The students are more likely to come to school hungry and many face pressure to make bad decisions, she said. Replacing all the teachers won't fix those problems; smaller classes, something that's not part of the state's plan, is what works, she said.

Previous reform efforts have not been successful because they lacked funding, said Dave Bradley, a social studies teacher at Mount Pleasant High School in Wilmington and president of the Brandywine Education Association. His school has begun brainstorming new ways to improve student achievement, he said. Flexibility in teacher schedules and finding a way to increase parental support are some main components that are being discussed, he said.

Every state public school will get a piece of the \$100 million headed to Delaware in the next four years. Half will go to the state and half directly to

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public schools. Each district and charter school will work with the state to write a plan that must be approved by the U.S. Department of Education. Once approved, the money will be divvied up according to a federal funding formula.

Delaware's plan includes programs meant to reward good work and efforts to boost struggling schools. Five top-performing schools a year would each get a \$150,000 bonus. The state would pay for all state students to take the SATs. Highly rated teachers who are willing to transfer to the neediest schools would be eligible for a \$5,000 bonus, teacher leaders would be placed at high-need schools, development coaches would work with school principals, and fellowships would be awarded to highly effective educators.

Firing all the school's teachers isn't likely, Bradley said.

"Not in this state," he said. "We've had such a history of working together. I really see it as more of a cooperative effort with the awareness behind it that this is serious."

No history of cooperation

Since Rhode Island fired teachers at Central Falls, the union and district have resumed negotiations.

Rhode Island doesn't have the level of cooperation that Delaware has forged between union leaders and the state, said Larry Purtill, president of National Education Association Rhode Island, one of the state's two teachers unions. In Rhode Island, the state did not work much with the union on its Race to the Top application, he said.

Now that union support was shown to be crucial in Delaware and Tennessee's applications for Race to the Top grants, Purtill expects "much more of a collaborative effort" in the second round of the Race to the Top grant competition.

"We want the money, too," he said.

Starting with a new staff doesn't always work best, some experts say. In areas that don't have large populations, it's not practical to replace all the teachers -- there isn't a deep pool of replacements.

In Tennessee, a private group helped change the culture of failing schools and improved test scores using current teachers, said Dan Challener, president of the Chattanooga Public Education Foundation, the group that led the reform. Teachers had new expectations and were given better training. Financial incentives were used to attract the best teaching candidates.

"We invested in the people," he said.

There's been an "impressive gain" in test scores at these Tennessee schools, according to the U.S. Department of Education. The federal government has held the program up as an example of the "transformation model," the reform program favored by the Delaware teachers union.

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