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Stimulus could boost Del. school reform plan

Feds offer unexpected chance to fund Vision 2015

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Almost three years ago, a coalition of education, business and community leaders warned that if the state's "mediocre" public education system was not revamped, Delaware children would be left behind.

Their wide-ranging reform plan called for changes such as a longer school year, a statewide curriculum, recruiting and retaining more highly qualified teachers, a greater investment in preschool education and a funding system that provides more money to educate students with greater needs. Full implementation was estimated to cost more than \$100 million over several years.

While the bold reform plan has won the endorsement of many educators and elected officials, it has received virtually zero public dollars and limited private backing. With the state's dismal budget projections, any hope to make it a reality by 2015 appeared dead.

Until now.

Thanks to the federal education stimulus package, Delaware has a chance to receive millions -- perhaps hundreds of millions -- of dollars to drive education reform.

"It is an unprecedented amount of money. This is the only time and probably the only time in the foreseeable future that there are billions of dollars on the table for education," said Paul Herdman, president of the nonprofit education-oriented Rodel Foundation, a key leader in the Vision 2015 plan. "That, compounded with the fact that state dollars and all private sector dollars are down because of the economy, those federal dollars become even that much more important."

U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan plans to award a portion of the \$4 billion federal Race to the Top grant early next year -- and again in 2011 -- to states committed to changing the way schools run.

Duncan outlined four commitments states must make: To adopt rigorous international standards and high quality assessments; to create data systems that track students from pre-kindergarten through college and into the work force; to improve teacher effectiveness and ensure qualified teachers for all students; and to support and intervene at the lowest-performing schools.

"Traditionally, federal money is spread out like peanut butter, but [Duncan] wants to use this leverage to encourage states to really be bold," Herdman said.

Already moving forward

Delaware Education Secretary Lillian Lowery thinks the First State is in a good position to win the money.

Work already is under way here in the areas Duncan identified.

Last month, the Legislature passed a bill that replaces the 12-year-old Delaware Student Testing Program with a computer-adaptive, growth-model test. Because the new test is computerized, students will receive their scores almost immediately, and teachers will receive diagnostic feedback

reports, which will allow them to alter instruction.

Also last month, Delaware and 45 other states committed to develop common international benchmarked standards in English and math. And in March, Delaware joined a multistate consortium to be more competitive in winning federal stimulus funds. The New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce's mission is to help states begin pilot reform efforts and to allow states to share what works with one another.

Lowery said Delaware already has a robust data system, which tracks students' test scores and grades from the time they enter public school until they graduate.

If the student attends a Delaware college or university, the student can continue to be tracked. What Delaware needs to improve on is how to use the data, she said.

Duncan has said he wants to see states' data systems track not only student achievement, but also teacher effectiveness.

That, though, may be a hard sell in Delaware. Teachers unions have opposed linking student test scores to teacher accountability, arguing that students' performance on a single test does not fairly demonstrate a teacher's ability.

Under Delaware's evaluation system, administrators observe a teacher in five areas -- planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, professional responsibility and student improvement -- before assigning a rating. Student achievement isn't a required part of the equation.

"If administrators and teachers follow the current evaluation system properly, then I think we have a pretty good basis on whether teachers are effective or not," said Diane Donohue, president of the Delaware State Education Association, the state's largest school employee union.

Paul Sedacca, who teaches fourth grade at Christina's McVey Elementary School in Newark, said he doesn't think teachers' pay should be tied to student performance.

"It's very hard to teach long division when you're worried if you are going to have your job next year," said the 13-year classroom veteran. "They need to trust teachers."

Help for poor districts

Another priority for Duncan's administration is attracting more highly qualified teachers to high-poverty schools.

Delaware already has efforts under way in that area, too.

In April, the Delaware General Assembly passed legislation that will bring at least 20 Teach for America recruits to Red Clay Consolidated School District elementary schools and the charter schools Prestige Academy, East Side, Kuumba Academy, Edison and Delaware College Preparatory Academy.

The Legislature also passed a measure creating the Academic Achievement Awards Program, which rewards schools that make the most progress in closing the achievement gap with \$150,000 in federal stimulus money.

Vicki Seifred, who teaches social studies at Red Clay's Stanton Middle School, would still like to see higher pay for teachers who work in the toughest schools, a proposal from Gov. Jack Markell that got put on the back burner because of the state's budget woes.

"Your best teachers really should be in the toughest schools, and if there's some sort of compensation, it might attract more teachers to those schools," she said. "It really does take a special person to work with kids that come from disadvantaged backgrounds."

Last on Duncan's education agenda is turning around the lowest-performing schools.

When schools are classified as "under improvement" for not making adequate yearly progress under the federal No Child Left Behind Law, they receive school improvement money and some are forced to restructure. Last year, 47 Delaware schools were "under improvement," and 10 schools were required to restructure.

Critics of NCLB argue that not enough funding is given to failing schools and therefore schools never fully turn around.

Duncan wants to change that by providing more dollars but requiring bold restructuring such as closing a school and reopening it with new teachers and administrators, or turning a district school into a charter -- both of which are unpopular in the education establishment.

In an effort to allow schools to use their state dollars where they're needed most, the Legislature passed a bill that provides local school districts with more funding flexibility.

The Delaware Department of Education must approve district budgets, and each district must create a community financial review committee.

There's no question that Delaware would benefit from millions of dollars pumped into its education system, but is there enough political will to ensure that real changes will be made?

Show of support

At the very end of the legislative session, both the House and the Senate passed a resolution that supports the state's application for the Race to the Top grant.

The symbolic resolution doesn't carry much weight, said Rep. Teresa Schooley, D-Newark. But by passing bills that create a new assessment, reward successful schools, give more funding flexibility to districts and bring the Teach for America program to Delaware schools, the state shows that there is legislative support to transform the education system.

Markell said it is important to note that these education bills were passed because they align with Duncan's priorities.

Vision 2015 Chairman Marvin "Skip" Schoenhals said winning the grant money would put Delaware in a much better position to achieve the reforms laid out in Vision 2015 by 2015.

Herdman agreed: "It's going to take tremendous political will to act on the four assurances that Secretary Duncan has laid out. But if we do get what could be \$100 million or \$200 million, we could very easily become a national leader in public education.

"We have a great opportunity, but if we don't capitalize on it, then we face some severe consequences," he said.
