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Delaware schools: State on board in Race to the Top

All education groups endorse application for federal funding

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Delaware leaders and educators hope statewide collaboration will give the First State an edge in winning up to \$107 million in federal grant money for school reform.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan plans to award the first round of the \$4 billion Race to the Top Fund grants in April to states open to bold changes to improve their schools. But to ensure reform isn't hindered by infighting, he required applications, due Tuesday, to show backing from superintendents, school boards and employee unions.

Included with the 230-page application Delaware officials hand-delivered to Washington on Tuesday were support statements from every board of education, superintendent, teachers association, charter school board and charter school leader in the state.

"Each one of us is personally committed to driving the kind of transformative change that will be necessary," Gov. Jack Markell wrote in the cover letter.

"Delaware really came together to get the job done," Markell said Tuesday.

It wasn't easy.

Getting 100 percent sign-on from districts, superintendents and local teacher unions "is nothing short of remarkable," Markell said.

"It's been quite dramatic in other states as far as the public disputes," he said. "[We] came together around one plan."

To make Delaware more competitive for the grant, Markell proposed regulatory changes to how failing schools are restructured and educators are evaluated, something controversial among teachers who worry about tying their ratings to student test scores. The <http://www.doe.k12.de.us> state Board of Education approved the changes Thursday.

Duncan will evaluate states for <http://www.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html> Race to the Top funding on six factors: high-quality assessments and rigorous international standards; data systems that track student achievement; educator evaluation systems; improvement of lowest-performing schools; support of charter schools; and progress closing the achievement gap.

On Tuesday, President Obama announced plans to continue Race to the Top, requesting \$1.35 billion for the program in his 2011 budget. He also wants to open the competition to individual districts.

Based on Delaware's size under the current plan, the state could be eligible for up to \$75 million in this round. Markell said Tuesday that the state strategically applied for \$107 million.

The changes approved last week redefine the student-improvement component of educator evaluations to require rigorous and comparable measures of student growth, and they create a rating system that requires growth for an educator to be rated "effective." Teachers not rated "effective" must receive a mentor as part of an improvement plan.

The school-restructuring plan creates a "partnership zone" and more funding for the lowest-performing schools. Districts in the zone will have more spending flexibility and performance incentives to attract and retain effective educators. The state and district will negotiate a plan to turn around the school.

Teacher unions backed the plan because state leaders pledged test scores would not be the sole measuring factor for student progress. Rather, success will be evaluated using several yet-to-be-defined measures, such as portfolios, said Diane Donohue, president of <http://www.dsea.org/> > **Delaware State Education Association**, the state's largest school employee union. DSEA will be part of a work group state Education Secretary Lillian Lowery will convene to draft the measures, she said.

Delaware had a head start.

In 2006, the state's top business executives joined with education and community leaders to create Vision 2015. The reform plan aimed to revamp Delaware's school system into a world leader by 2015 with more time in school, tougher standards, statewide curriculum, principal autonomy and greater investment in preschool education. At an estimated cost of \$100 million, the plan incorporated international research from the commissioned Boston Consulting Group as well as the results of focus groups with hundreds of Delaware teachers, parents, principals, students and community members.

While the group leveraged some private support, it didn't garner needed state dollars. But it did bring important players to the same table.

"We had the DSEA, the districts, the charter schools, and others engaged in what a common vision might look like," said Paul Herdman, president of the education nonprofit Rodel Foundation, a Vision 2015 backer. "We've learned how to work together and disagree in a way that is productive."

The implications of winning Race to the Top funding are broad, Herdman said.

"This could really be a game-changer. Not only could this result in significant federal funds, but there are national foundations kind of waiting on the sidelines to see what states are going to step out," he said. "There are great people looking to be a part of winning coalitions. We'll see a flood of great people and organizations that want to be a part of this."

Ernie Dianastasis, chair of the Delaware Business Roundtable, said the implications for the state's businesses are great, too.

A strong education system is a building block for success, he said. Vision 2015 gave us "a running start.

"This is a major step to have Delaware not only in a position to retain some of the companies we have here ... but continue to make it an attractive place for new entrepreneurs."
