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Delaware's 'Race to the Top'

Why education quality matters so much

President Obama and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan are trying to send a strong message to the nation's school, political and community leaders:

Fix U.S. education.

To do it, they are using part of the federal stimulus money to get everyone's attention.

More than \$4 billion worth of attention.

That's how much is available to the states that can show innovation, commitment and actual accomplishment.

The program is called Race to the Top.

It won't be an easy race to win. Some of it will be tough politically. For example, it requires states to allow student test scores to be tied to teacher evaluations, a notion that offends many teachers, their unions and their political partners. But money talks, as they say. Last week, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger of California signed a bill that reversed his state's long-standing prohibition against linking scores and teachers. The reason: Federal dollars.

Other states have changed their laws to allow charter schools or have started other reforms to catch up.

Delaware, though, is considered to be in good shape, primarily because of local efforts and the three-year-old Vision 2015 program that combines the efforts of school professions, parents and the business community.

A daylong session will be held Oct. 27 at the University of Delaware to try to connect the dots between Vision 2015 and the Race to the Top. One of the speakers will be Secretary Duncan.

The essays on this page examine some aspects of those challenges, looking at what Delaware has done and should do.

To understand some of the challenge, consider Secretary Duncan's criteria:

Under Race to the Top guidelines, states seeking funds will be pressed to implement four core interconnected reforms.

- To reverse the pervasive dumbing-down of academic standards and assessments by states, Race to the Top winners need to work toward adopting common, internationally benchmarked K-12 standards that prepare students for success in college and careers.
- To close the data gap -- which now handcuffs districts from tracking growth in student learning and

improving classroom instruction -- states will need to monitor advances in student achievement and identify effective instructional practices.

- To boost the quality of teachers and principals, especially in high-poverty schools and hard-to-staff subjects, states and districts should be able to identify effective teachers and principals -- and have strategies for rewarding and retaining more top-notch teachers and improving or replacing ones who aren't up to the job.
- Finally, to turn around the lowest-performing schools, states and districts must be ready to institute far-reaching reforms, from replacing staff and leadership to changing the school culture.

The conference on "Vision 2015 and Delaware's Race to the Top" will be Oct. 27 at the University of Delaware's Clayton Hall.

The conference and formal luncheon are sold out.

However, limited seating is available so that attendees can watch complete live-satellite coverage of the conference at Clayton Hall. For more information on the conference, visit www.udel.edu/partnerships
