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Del. to compete for education grant

Federal 'Race to the Top' aims to spur reform

By *JENNIFER PRICE*
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Delaware could receive up to \$75 million to drive education reform if it's selected as a recipient of the federal Race to the Top Fund, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced Thursday.

Duncan plans to award a portion of the \$4 billion Race to the Top competitive grant to states willing to undertake changes in the way schools are run.

Among the criteria states will be evaluated on is their support for charter schools, including whether they provide capital funding to charter schools.

Charter schools in Delaware receive operating money from the state, but state law denies them state capital money.

"We will award states [that] have led the way in education reform and have the capacity to lead us in the future," Duncan said in a conference call with reporters Thursday. "Race to the Top is absolutely a competition. There will be winners and losers, and only the best proposals will win. This is a historic opportunity."

He hasn't said how many states he expects to win a part of the fund.

Duncan released the final rules Thursday, which emphasize supporting charter schools, using standardized test scores in teacher evaluations and requiring districts to intervene at failing schools.

Applications must also include statements of support from local school boards and school employee unions.

"It's time to stop just talking about education reform and start doing it," he said.

Delaware Secretary of Education Lillian Lowery thinks the First State is in a good position to win a portion of the fund and said Delaware will apply for its share.

"There will need to be some political will along the way, but I think our chances are very good," she said.

States will have two chances to win. Applications are due in mid-January for the first round of the competition with awards being given out in spring. Applications for the second round are due in June, and winners will be announced in fall.

Duncan grouped states together by their student populations and is urging them to seek amounts of money proportionate to their sizes. Delaware is one of 15 states plus the District of Columbia that could potentially receive \$20 million to \$75 million. California, Florida, New York and Texas, the

states with the largest student populations, could win anywhere from \$350 million to \$700 million.

States will not receive their awards all at once. Instead, they'll be required to meet benchmarks, including the charter school capital funding requirement, after which the money would be given out in increments.

Delaware has 18 charter schools with three new ones -- Reach Academy For Girls, Las Americas Aspira Academy and The Delaware Academy for Public Safety and Security -- set to open next fall.

The state law barring capital funding is why Delaware Military Academy was shut out of the state's conduit bonding program in 2007. The Newport-area school later received a \$12.2 million conduit bond through Pima County, Ariz.

"No matter who you talk to in charter schools, they'll tell you you should get capital funding," said Jack Wintermantel, the superintendent of Delaware Military Academy charter school near Newport.

The Charter School Network, a conglomerate of Delaware charter schools, has been trying to get the law changed in the state to allow capital funding to charter schools.

"Capital funding comes from the state," he said. "Charter schools don't get any capital funding. We're on our own. If we're going to construct a building, it's on us, we have to pay for it. And if you use your operating money to pay for it, there's less money to pay for academic programs."

Delaware Military Academy, chartered by the Red Clay Consolidated School District, cost \$12 million when it was built in 2003.

Wintermantel said the school would probably receive between \$75,000 and \$100,000 in capital funding a year if the law allowed that funding.

"That's \$100,000 that I'm taking out of my operating budget to pay," he said.

Rigorous selection process

Duncan also wants to see teacher evaluation systems include student achievement.

Under Delaware's evaluation system, administrators observe a teacher in four areas: planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction and professional responsibility. Student achievement is a required part of the evaluation, but it's up to the individual teacher to decide what measurement is used, such as classroom assessments or the Delaware Student Testing Program.

Lowery said Delaware has an advantage because some states prohibit student achievement from being linked to teacher evaluations.

One of the most controversial parts about Race to the Top is the requirement to turn around the lowest-achieving schools. Duncan wants to see states willing to dismiss a failing school's principal and at least 50 percent of the staff, close a school and send students to higher-achieving schools or reopen it as a charter school.

"We're going to award those states that are willing to fundamentally challenge the status quo," Duncan said.

Lowery said Delaware has also already begun work in other areas that Duncan has identified as a priority.

The state has a robust data system, which tracks students' test scores and grades from the time they enter public school until they graduate. Earlier this year, the legislature passed a bill that replaces the 12-year-old Delaware Student Testing Program with a computer-adaptive, growth-model test. Delaware also agreed to develop common international benchmarked standards in English and math.

"We're doing this because it's the right thing to do, and we need to do it with or without money," Lowery said.
