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Delaware plans education changes to win federal grant

State meets most criteria for federal Race to the Top

By *JENNIFER PRICE*
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Delaware officials are preparing to overhaul the way the state turns around failing schools and evaluates teachers in an effort to win a potential \$75 million federal education grant.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan plans to award a portion of the \$4 billion federal Race to the Top Fund early next year -- and again in 2011-- to states willing to undertake changes in the way schools are run. He hasn't said how many states he expects to win a chunk of the money, but has indicated that only states that lead the way in education reform will have a chance.

Duncan will evaluate states on six major factors: high-quality assessments and rigorous international standards; data systems that track student achievement; teacher and principal evaluation systems; improvement of lowest-performing schools; support of charter schools; and progress closing the achievement gap.

Delaware Education Secretary Lillian Lowery thinks the state is in a good position to win a grant.

Next fall, Delaware will replace the 12-year-old Delaware Student Testing Program with a computer-adaptive test. Earlier this year, the state agreed to develop common international standards in English and math. Delaware already has a statewide data system that tracks students' test scores and grades from the time they enter public school until they graduate. The state has 18 charter schools and three more set to open in the fall. In July, Delaware was recognized by the National Center for Education Statistics for being a model in closing the achievement gap between white and black public school students.

But state education leaders recognize that they will need to make some regulatory changes to the teacher evaluation system and the way failing schools are restructured if they want a shot at the federal money. Lowery said she plans to announce changes in the coming weeks.

"If we do get these resources, we could move faster than any other state because we've already done the legwork, we're all on the same page and we're smaller than other states," said Paul Herdman, president of the Rodel Foundation of Delaware, an educational nonprofit. "We could very easily move to the top tier of states."

About 99 percent of teachers in the Lake Forest School District were rated effective last school year under the state's teacher evaluation system, Delaware Performance Appraisal System II. In seven Indian River schools, almost 100 percent of teachers were deemed effective, while the other district schools reported percentages in the high 90s. In Red Clay, an overwhelming majority were effective.

The Delaware Department of Education does not track the outcome of the DPAS II on a statewide basis, but education leaders say these results are representative of the entire state.

"As a system, we don't know the difference between the top 10 percent and the bottom 10 percent.

Virtually no one gets fired," said Herdman, whose foundation helped fund the Vision 2015 school reform plan.

In Delaware, teachers are evaluated in five areas: planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, professional responsibilities and student improvement. Each area is worth 20 percent of the evaluation.

At the beginning of the school year, a teacher meets with his or her administrator and sets a specific goal for student improvement. While achieving the goal is encouraged, "total attainment" is not required for a "satisfactory" rating, according to a DPAS II guide for teachers.

A teacher is given one of three ratings: effective, needs improvement or ineffective. If a teacher is rated ineffective, he or she is required to follow an improvement plan. If a teacher receives an ineffective rating two years in a row, he or she can be dismissed.

"I do believe that our evaluation system is probably one of the better evaluation systems across the country," said Diane Donohue, president of the Delaware State Education Association, the state's largest school employee union.

Failing schools

While most Delaware teachers are rated effective, 40 percent of the state's public schools did not meet federal education goals last year, and about 5.8 percent of public high school students dropped out in the 2007-2008 school year.

"You can't have as low performance as we're having nationally if all the teachers are satisfactory," said Greg Meece, director of Newark Charter School.

Delaware is not the only state where most teachers are rated effective.

A report by the New Teacher Project -- a Brooklyn, N.Y., educational nonprofit that studied 12 districts in Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois and Ohio -- found that less than 1 percent of teachers receive unsatisfactory ratings even in schools where students fail to meet basic academic standards year after year.

According to the National Council on Teacher Quality, Delaware is one of 15 states that require a teacher's evaluation to include an objective measure of student improvement.

But Duncan is looking for states where student growth data is a significant portion of the evaluation system.

According to the National Council on Teacher Quality, Florida is the only state that requires teacher evaluations to be based primarily on student improvement, including state assessment data.

Duncan also wants to see states ensuring equitable distribution of highly effective teachers and principals in high-poverty and high-minority schools.

"Usually your newest teachers are in the highest-poverty and highest-minority schools, because the more experienced teachers go to the suburbs," said Dan Cruce, associate education secretary and project manager for Delaware's Race to the Top application. "And your best teachers usually go into administration to make more money."

Turning them around

Of the state's 204 schools, 11 have been forced to restructure under the federal No Child Left Behind Act and plans are in place for five more to restructure next fall. Most have chosen to replace their principals, change their schedules or receive more district oversight.

But few have made progress, and most are falling even farther behind.

Duncan is calling for more radical interventions, such as dismissing a failing school's principal and at least 50 percent of the staff, closing a school and sending students to higher-achieving schools, or reopening it as a charter school or under a management company.

"There's been nothing transformational" with Delaware schools undergoing restructuring, Cruce said. "The schools haven't been able to make the massive changes that's needed to turn around."

"For us to do something to make sure that our children are successful, there needs to be different answers," Lowery said.

Duncan also has said he will not consider states that do not allow charter schools or limit their number.

Last year, the General Assembly passed a moratorium preventing any new charter school from applying to the state. Four schools were exempted, including the three set to open next fall.

Cruce does not think the moratorium, which expired in January, will hurt Delaware in its Race to the Top application.

"It's just a blip on the map. ... For at least a decade, we've had a really robust charter school law," he said. "The state hasn't looked at charter schools as the stepchild but as part of its portfolio for public school options."

Capital funding for charters

While the state provides operational funding to its charter schools, it does not give capital funding -- a criterion on which states will be evaluated for the Race to the Top.

"We have an extra burden by trying to pay for our facilities within our own budgets," said Meece, whose annual mortgage payment for Newark Charter School is \$1 million.

According to Susan Harris, executive director of the Delaware Charter School Network, 13 states and the District of Columbia provide charter schools with capital funding, including Pennsylvania and New York.

Because Delaware's General Assembly doesn't reconvene until a week before the Race to the Top application is due, it's unlikely that legislation would be passed to provide charter schools with capital funding.

But Meece hopes that doesn't stop the Legislature from discussing the possibility.

"It's simply the right thing to do," he said.