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Delaware schools: Markell sets bar higher in bid for \$75M grant

Board must approve plan to change evaluations, emphasize test scores

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Delaware will change how teachers are evaluated and failing schools are revamped under new policies that will help the state compete for up to \$75 million in federal education money, <http://www.state.de.us/governor/>">Gov. Jack Markell announced Tuesday.

<http://www.ed.gov/>">U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan plans to award a portion of the <http://www.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html>">\$4 billion Race to the Top Fund early next year -- and again in 2011-- to states willing to undertake changes in the way schools are run. Markell wants to help Delaware's chances by improving student readiness, ensuring teacher quality, effectively using student data and turning around the state's lowest-performing schools.

"This is as important as anything we could possibly do to advance our state," he said.

Duncan is requiring applications to include statements of support from superintendents, local school boards and school employee unions, which may be a tough sell to those who oppose changes such as the evaluation system.

Markell's plan -- which the <http://www.doe.k12.de.us/>">State Board of Education must approve -- will require teachers to show student growth to be rated effective. Test scores from the state's new assessment will be a required measurement for those who teach core academic subjects. Education Secretary Lillian Lowery will define what student growth means for other subjects.

Stacey Heller, an English teacher at Christina's Gauger-Cobbs Middle School, said she supports using scores to measure her students' growth because the new state assessment is a computer-adaptive, growth-model test and will be given three times a year, "it's not just a single snapshot of the student's ability."

But Dave Bradley, a Brandywine High social studies teacher, thinks Markell's plan focuses too much on test scores.

"There's ... a lot more to teaching than raising test scores," he said, adding they alone aren't a fair assessment of a teacher. "If I've got kids in my class that don't really care about education, and that's how I'm being held accountable, then that's a little rough."

Markell also plans a "highly effective" rating and to provide financial incentives for those highly effective teachers to stay or transfer to a challenging school or critical area.

Peter Boyer, a social studies teacher at Christina's Bayard Middle in Wilmington, said providing an incentive will keep good teachers at city schools. "That's where the tough kids and the tough situations are. You have to be on your game everyday."

Currently in Delaware, teachers are evaluated in five equally weighted areas: planning, classroom environment, instruction, professional responsibilities and student improvement. Teachers meet with administrators to set goals for student improvement, together selecting what measurement they will use such as standardized or classroom assessments or a portfolio of student work. There is no requirement to use state test data, and "total attainment" of the goal is not required for a satisfactory rating.

A teacher can be rated "effective," "needs improvement" or "ineffective," but under the current system, almost all are rated effective.

Under the governor's plan, teachers also could become a "teacher leader" and earn a bonus.

"There is only so far you can go in our current system. We have many teachers that have two master degrees and have become nationally board certified. They can't move anywhere but [to] become an administrator," said Diane Donohue, president of Delaware State Education Association -- the state's largest school employee union.

Markell also wants to expand teacher recruitment efforts by developing a statewide marketing strategy, expanding alternative routes to certification programs, creating a statewide teacher application and altering the state's funding system to allow districts to hire teachers earlier than midsummer.

Even if Delaware doesn't win the grant, the state will move forward with the reforms, Lowery said.

About 40,000 students are enrolled in state schools that did not meet federal education goals last year. Of those, 26,000 are in schools that have not made their targets for at least five consecutive years.

If Delaware wins the grant, the lowest-performing schools would join a "partnership Zone" and receive funding. Districts in the zone will have more spending flexibility and performance incentives to attract and retain effective teachers and principals. The state and the district will negotiate a plan to turn the school around, such as closing the building, converting to a charter school, contracting with a management company, dismissing at least half of the staff, replacing the principal or changing the length of the school day or year.

"This is about what's doing right for our kids," Lowery said. "And it means bold changes."
