

## EDUCATION WEEK

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## Local Buy-In Helps Two States Win Race to Top

By [Michele McNeil](#) and [Lesli A. Maxwell](#)

Delaware and Tennessee beat out 14 other finalists today to win the **first-round competition** for \$4 billion in Race to the Top Fund grants, as U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan delivered on promises that he would set a “very, very high bar” for the economic-stimulus money.

Mr. Duncan praised the two states, which edged out front-runners Florida and Louisiana, for mustering strong district and teachers’ union support for their plans, for having superior data systems, and for submitting comprehensive proposals that touched “every single child” statewide.

“We now have two states that will blaze the path for the future of education reform,” Mr. Duncan said [in a conference call with reporters](#) (6.1MB|MP3). “This isn’t about funding nice pilot programs. This is about taking student achievement to an entirely different level, and doing it at scale.”

Delaware, which was ranked No. 1 on the competition’s 500-point grading scale, will win about \$100 million, while Tennessee, which came in second, will garner about \$500 million.

Georgia missed the cut by just over 10 points, coming in third, while Florida, Illinois, and South Carolina, in descending order, rounded out the top six. Forty states and the District of Columbia applied in round one of the competition.

Mr. Duncan, who had sole discretion in picking the winners, said the point spread between those in the first and second places, and all other states, was wide enough for him to easily identify the winning applications. Although it was within Mr. Duncan’s discretion to pick any state to win, the secretary said he stuck strictly to the points awarded by the peer reviewers in making his decision.

By choosing only two states with relatively small student populations—both states together educate about 973,000 students—the Education Department is leaving \$3.4 billion on the table for the remaining states to compete for in round two. Mr. Duncan said he expects 10 to 15 winners in the last round of competition, which is sure to be just as fierce, as cash-strapped states scrape for dollars to help prop up their K-12 school systems. Second-round applications are due June 1.

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Putting so much money up for grabs in round two “sets up the best possible dynamics for states,” said Charles Barone, the director of federal legislation for the New York City-based political action committee Democrats for Education Reform. He noted that states now have the added benefit of seeing peer reviewers’ comments, which will provide a road map for winning in round two.

Beyond their bragging rights for winning round one, Delaware and Tennessee got a financial bonus, too: Their grants will amount to more per student than states that win in round two. In its round-one guidelines, the department suggested a state of Delaware’s size would win up to \$75 million, but the state is getting about \$25 million more than that. Tennessee’s top-line budget estimate was \$250 million, and the state is getting twice that.

The department is changing the rules for the second round, capping the awards at its top-of-the-line estimates, which vary by student enrollment. Florida, for example, submitted an application that asked for \$1.1 billion, but if it applies in the next round, its application must be built on programs that can be funded with no more than \$700 million.

### Stimulus Funding

The \$4 billion in Race to the Top grants, which seek to reward states for their commitment to reforming teacher effectiveness, data systems, low-performing schools, and academic standards and assessments, are paid for through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act passed last year by Congress. The Obama administration is seeking an additional \$1.35 billion in the fiscal 2011 federal budget to continue the contest next year.

A separate \$350 million pool of Race to the Top money will go to help states develop common academic assessments.

With the announcement of the winners came **the public release of the scores of all 41 applicants**. They show, for example, that South Dakota ranked last in the race at 135.8 points, falling more than 100 points behind the next-closest laggard—Arizona, which scored 240.2 points.



The announcement that just two states won in the first round quelled much criticism that Mr. Duncan drew earlier this month when he selected as finalists 16 applications, representing one-third of all submitted, even as he was promising to make the competition very tough.

Earlier this month, the 16 finalists came to the nation’s capital to make a final, in-person pitch to peer reviewers—presentations that altered the final scores, but not the ultimate outcome, of the top two states.

### Delaware Advanced Cause

Delaware pulled away from the pack and ended up with the highest number of points—454.6—after the live interviews with Race to the Top judges, improving on its position when the 16

finalists were announced. (Delaware originally was second, behind Tennessee, which ended up with 444.2 points.)

Delaware, which requested \$107 million to pay for its reform plan, brought a delegation that included Gov. Jack Markell, Education Secretary Lillian M. Lowery, Diane Donohue, the president of the statewide teachers' union, a district superintendent, and a leader from the state's business community. Every school district and every local teachers' union in the state signed on to the plan, which also helped put the state in first place.

"We know now that the interview was a huge piece for us," said Daniel Cruce, Delaware's deputy secretary of education. "We were able to successfully demonstrate that the governor and all of our panelists were intricately involved and committed to the plan. We had the union president present the piece around teacher accountability, which is one of the most controversial parts of the application."

Delaware's teacher-effectiveness plan includes a new law that allows teachers with tenure to be removed from their jobs if they are given "ineffective" ratings for two to three consecutive years, and teachers can only be given an "effective" rating after demonstrating adequate growth in their students' academic achievement.

Through new regulations, the state's education secretary can order any of Delaware's lowest-performing schools to participate in the state's "partnership zone," which effectively forces the leaders in those school districts to choose one of four turnaround models outlined by the Education Department.

If district leaders and their union counterparts either disagree on how to overhaul a particular school or submit a proposal for turnaround that the state education secretary deems as too weak, the secretary can override it. In the event that a chosen turnaround model doesn't deliver improved results within two years, the secretary can force the school to start over with a new approach.

Delaware's size may also have been an advantage, Mr. Cruce said. With just 126,800 students, 19 districts, and 18 charter schools, executing those reforms on a statewide scale is doable, he said.

### **Tennessee's Teacher Focus**

Tennessee, where lawmakers passed legislation that mandates using student achievement as half of a teacher's annual evaluation in every district, stood out for its mature "value-added" data system that has been around for nearly two decades. All of the state's teacher-preparation programs, whether traditional, university-based ones, or nontraditional programs like Teach For America, must train their candidates in how to use the data system. Teacher candidates will have to demonstrate that they can use the system before they can be licensed.

At the behest of Democratic Gov. Phil Bredesen, lawmakers held two special legislative sessions over the last year on education to enact a series of Race to the Top-related changes that included making the state's cap on charter schools less prohibitive and overhauling teacher evaluations.

The governor, who will leave office next year because of term limits, also secured the signatures of all seven major gubernatorial candidates who vowed to back all of the changes outlined in Tennessee's Race to the Top plan. He said in a conference call with reporters that his state clearly distinguished itself from most of the other finalists because its overhaul of teacher evaluations will be done statewide, not just in a limited number of willing school districts.

"We said at the outset it's all or nothing," Gov. Bredesen said. "We are past the point of demonstration projects or pilot projects."

The governor was clearly thrilled that Tennessee, which has 846,000 students, will receive nearly all the money it asked for, which is more than twice what the Education Department had suggested as a nonbinding estimate for the state.

"We were supposed to ask for no more than \$250 million," the governor said. "We said 'to heck with that,' and basically we got all we asked for."

### **Stakeholder Buy-In**

By selecting two states that have near-universal support from school districts and state and local teachers' unions, and in touting that achievement in press briefings, the federal Education Department is telegraphing the importance of stakeholder buy-in. That could help shape states' strategies for round two.

"I think it gives unions and districts veto power" over states' applications, said Andrew Smarick, an adjunct fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington think tank. "The real question is," added Mr. Smarick, who has been a prolific writer on the Race to the Top program, "can any other state pull off what Tennessee and Delaware did?"

Florida and Louisiana, considered front-runners for the competition, did not have such strong local support.

Florida had an aggressive plan to improve teacher effectiveness, and was another of the four finalist states to base 50 percent of teacher evaluations on student data. The state went even further than the other finalists by requiring that all districts use the data to inform new performance-pay programs as well.

But insistence on those policies may have been the state's downfall in the end. Of all of the 16 finalists, Florida, which ended the competition with 431.4 points, had the least amount of buy-in from its teachers' unions, at 8 percent of participating districts.

Florida's education commissioner, Eric J. Smith, issued a brief statement saying that he is "confident that with ... continued support, the feedback from our first application, and the possibilities contained in ongoing legislative efforts, we will be in a very strong position to win this next phase."

Louisiana had been singled out for praise, time and again, by Mr. Duncan for its student and teacher data systems and the way it tracks how well teacher-preparation programs are doing. The state's plan on teacher effectiveness was built principally around its pledge to design new teacher evaluations with a heavy emphasis on student performance. Louisiana is also one of six states (along with Delaware) that is part of a new, \$75 million initiative to turn around low-

performing schools using strategies created by the Boston-based Mass Insight Education and Research Institute.

With its state-run Recovery School District in place since 2005 to intervene in low-performing schools, Louisiana also has more experience at intervening in large numbers of schools than most other states.

But unlike in Delaware and Tennessee, state officials did not muster the broad-based support from Louisiana's school districts, school boards, and teachers' unions. The state came in 11th, with 418.2 points.

State Superintendent Paul G. Pastorek acknowledged that lack of local support was a likely factor in the state's final score, but he said he does not want to water down any of the state's proposals in order to garner more buy-in for a round two Race to the Top bid.

"I hate to adjust what we think is right just so that we can get a bigger score on collaboration," he said. "We want to remain as ambitious as we've been in the past."

Randi Weingarten, the president of the 1.4 million-member American Federation of Teachers, emphasized the importance of collaboration, not union leverage over Race to the Top applications.

"The key lever to changing schools is changing systems, which means you have to change the labor-management dynamic to be one that is very disciplined and very collaborative," she said, noting the combative environment in New York, a finalist state that didn't have an overwhelming amount of local district and union buy-in. "The screaming you heard from the [newspaper] tabloids in New York compared to the working together quietly in Tennessee and Delaware teaches us a thing or two," she said.

Mr. Duncan maintains that no one factor is the key to winning the competition. "This is a 500-point competition. There are no make-or-break categories," he said.

To that end, Georgia fared very well in the competition, placing third with 433.6 points, even though only 12.7 percent of its districts participated in the state's Race to the Top plan. Still, peer reviewers knocked points off for that low participation. In fact, if Georgia had gotten the full points for district participation, it would have been enough to push it ahead of Tennessee.