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In this race, Delaware had a head start

Vision 2015 group laid groundwork

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In the eyes of local education reformers, the state's Race to the Top was not a sprint. It was a marathon.

"Education reform is a very long and complicated process," said Marvin N. "Skip" Schoenhals, chairman of the education reform group Vision 2015. "The success of winning this competition is only because we've been working at it for 20 years."

The U.S. Department of Education said it would favor states open to changing their school systems and evaluated them in six key areas: 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's application included a track record of reforms other states have only begun to consider or implement, education experts said, and more than a decade of sometimes-difficult reform helped Delaware fit the criteria to secure the \$100 million federal grant.

"We are building on a legacy of academic innovation," Gov. Jack Markell said Monday.

The examples are numerous, said Nancy Brickhouse, deputy dean of the University of Delaware's College of Education and Public Policy.

Delaware developed statewide education standards in 1994. Most states did not do so until the enactment of No Child Left Behind in 2001, she said.

Delaware has embraced charter schools. Many states would need to change their laws to implement them, she said.

Some of Delaware's most significant reforms came more than 10 years ago under Gov. Tom Carper's administration, Markell said. After a long battle, lawmakers passed a bill that aimed to tie teacher evaluations to student performance.

The measure cost Carper the endorsement of the Delaware State Education Association, the state's largest union, when he ran for the U.S. Senate. But it laid the groundwork for more reform. Earlier this year, Delaware's state Board of Education reworked teacher evaluation standards to enhance its Race to the Top application. And testing as a measure of student improvement finally became part of teacher evaluations, along with planning, classroom environment, instruction and professional responsibilities.

The state could do that "because we already had that authority," Schoenhals said. Only 14 other states use student improvement to assess teachers, according to the National Council on Teacher Quality. In 2006, Delaware became one of 10 states to pilot a computer-adaptive test tracking

students' improvement over time, rather than a simple pass-fail written test. The system gives teachers immediate feedback on a student's needs.

Race to the Top emphasizes the use of data, and Delaware has been ahead of the curve in that area as well, Brickhouse said. The state's application called for the addition of "data coaches" at schools to help them use the information they're already collecting.

Delaware also did not have to scramble to get ideas on paper for the federal application. The state benefited from the work of Vision 2015, a privately funded coalition of business, community and education leaders who have studied education reform in Delaware since 2006. Many of Vision 2015's proposals were reflected in the application almost exactly, Schoenhals said.

"Some states were starting this summer," said Paul Herdman, president and CEO of the Rodel Foundation of Delaware, a major backer of Vision 2015. "We had a four-year head start."

Although the state has tackled some reforms aggressively, other proposals have languished. Vision 2015 has pushed for a statewide curriculum, plans to address failing schools and improved data-tracking of student performance. A 2007 study determined those and other suggestions would be expensive to implement.

The cost? At least \$100 million, the exact amount of the Race to the Top grant. The infusion will help make those proposals possible, Schoenhals said.

"This will allow us to try things that we never had the implementation money for before," he said. "It will continue to be a long process. This is just a huge step."
