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Delaware education: Every public school to share 'Top' dollars

Half of \$100 million award will go to state

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Every state public school will get a piece of the \$100 million headed to Delaware in the next four years as part of a new federal reform program.

Half will go to the state and half directly to public schools. Each district and charter school will work with the state to write a plan that must be approved by the U.S. Department of Education. Once approved, the money will be divvied up based on an existing federal funding formula.

In the coming days, allocations for each district and charter school will be calculated.

"There is lots of excitement and interest," said Dan Cruce, deputy secretary of the state Department of Education. "Everyone is ready to start working."

On Monday, Delaware and Tennessee were the only two states chosen to receive funding in Round One, winning a collective \$600 million. Delaware scored highest among the 41 applicants vying for more than \$4.35 billion in federal stimulus money under President Barack Obama's Race to the Top grant program.

Next week, the state hopes to convince the U.S. Department of Education to increase its grant to \$107 million -- the amount Delaware requested in its Race to the Top application, Cruce said. The governor's office and state department of education officials will meet with federal officials Friday.

"We are going to defend the \$107 million," Cruce said.

For the first round, the U.S. Department of Education set guidelines, but not requirements, for state spending plans based on the state's size. Delaware asked for \$107 million, despite a suggestion that it seek up to \$75 million. After Delaware's grant was approved, the rules were changed to prevent states in the second round from requesting more than those guidelines allow.

If Delaware's allocation remains at \$100 million, then the state's plans might need to be tweaked, Cruce said. The state's final spending plan and the plans of each district and charter school, must be submitted 90 days from Monday.

The state's plan includes programs meant to reward good work and efforts to boost struggling schools. Five top-performing schools a year would each get a \$150,000 bonus. The state would pay for all state students to take the SATs. Highly rated teachers who are willing to transfer to the neediest schools would be eligible for a \$5,000 bonus.

A similarity in winning Race to the Top applications is a focus on statewide implementation, said Andrew Smarick, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute who has studied the proposals. The

states that won't have programs that would be used in every school. In Delaware, all public schools signed on to be a partner with the state.

"Other states were leaving a lot of things up to the districts," he said. "In hindsight, I think that really hurt them."

There are still local choices to be made in Delaware, Cruce said, such as calls for increased parental involvement. Just how that's accomplished is left up to local leaders, providing flexibility for local context. What works in Red Clay might not work in Lake Forest.

Locals are best able to assess ground-level needs, said Delores A. Lee, of Newark, who works with children at her church's after-school program. Some of the children who come to the Mother Africa Union Church in Wilmington have parents who are working two or three jobs to stay afloat, leaving little time to help with homework, Lee said.

"Of course there are big problems in the school system," she said. "We are their stopgap."

At Indian River School District in Sussex County, parent Dawn Zimmerman said she hopes the money will bring more technology. New computers are needed so students can use them to take the state academic assessment, said Zimmerman, who is president of the parent teacher organization at Lord Baltimore Elementary School.

Parent Joan Kelley liked that the state's plan includes financial incentives and additional professional development for teachers. Delaware plans to give several boosts to the pay of teachers, including about \$1.4 million that will be used to retain effective educators in high-need schools. The mother of an autistic son in the Brandywine School District, Kelley said she would like to see some of the money go to students with special needs.

Most of all, Kelley hopes the \$100 million is closely monitored.

"I think the fear is misappropriation of funds," she said.
