

Race to the Top

Delaware's Winning Plan

Overview

On March 29, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced that Delaware will receive about \$100 million in federal Race to the Top funds to improve education in our public schools. The grant is a tremendous opportunity for Delaware to make the system-wide reforms needed to achieve world-class schools for every student and to become a model for the nation as The First State — in Education.

What is Race to the Top? Race to the Top is the federal government's largest competitive grants program, designed to spur innovative state-based school reform plans. It is funded with \$4.35 billion in federal stimulus dollars under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Of that, \$4 billion is available for direct grants to states and \$350 million will be used to support new, improved student assessment systems. Approximately \$3.4 billion remains to be awarded in Phase 2 of the Race to the Top competition this summer.

Why is it called a Race? The competition was designed to reward a handful of states that submitted bold, comprehensive plans for reforming their state education systems and demonstrated the capacity to carry out those plans. Delaware was one of only two states to win funding in the first round, along with Tennessee. Delaware had the highest score among the 16 first-round finalists, which included 14 other states and the District of Columbia. Approximately a dozen more states may win funding in Phase 2.

How will the money be used? The grant will be used to carry out several specific public school reform initiatives outlined in Delaware's winning application, based on four priorities identified by the U.S. Department of Education. These include:

- Adopting challenging academic standards that will prepare students for success in college and the workplace;
- Increasing the number of highly effective teachers and principals, especially to serve in low-performing schools;
- Providing new resources and intensive supports to our lowest-performing schools; and
- Building a data system that measures student progress during the year, enabling teachers and principals to tailor instruction to meet the unique needs of every child.

Grant funds *cannot* be used to reduce state or district deficits. Half the dollars will go to local school districts and public charter schools, and half will support state-level initiatives, such as new student assessment and data systems.

Funds that go directly to districts and charter schools will be based on plans created by the districts/charters and approved by the state. Funding will not be overly prescriptive, yet accountability goals will be clear. The goal is to be “tight on ends, loose on means,” so that districts and charters have the flexibility they need to fulfill local needs.

When will Delaware receive the money? The budget will be finalized after discussions with the U.S. Department of Education and the first funds will be disbursed in summer 2010. Payments will continue over the next four years, based on Delaware’s progress in meeting clear goals.

What happens after the grant ends? The impact is likely to be limited, because Race to the Top funds will be used mostly to build infrastructure, such as data system improvements, and to provide “seed capital” for changes that make our education system more efficient, effective, and accountable over the long term. Once most of these “start-up” initiatives are in place, we will not need to fund them at the same level, if at all. For start-up projects that prove successful and worth future support, we might need to raise funds or reallocate money from existing sources after Race to the Top funding ends.

What made Delaware’s application stand out? According to Secretary Duncan, both Delaware and Tennessee offered some important plusses:

- **We are committed.** We have strong state leaders who developed a clear and coherent plan built around making the tough choices required to enable all our children to succeed.
- **We backed our commitment with specific changes to our laws.** Our Governor, Secretary of Education, and State Board of Education approved new policies focused on accountability and results, including a teacher evaluation system that requires teachers to demonstrate student progress in order to be rated “effective.”
- **We have a realistic approach for raising performance.** We are one of just a few states to create the policy framework for turning around our lowest performing schools and to demonstrate ongoing progress in that effort.
- **We have everybody on board.** We secured universal buy-in among all the major stakeholder groups for Delaware’s plan. Delaware’s application was a collaborative effort led by Governor Jack Markell and State Secretary of Education Lillian Lowery, with input by more than 100 teachers, principals, superintendents, school board members, union leaders, charter school leaders, parents, and business leaders from across our state.

- **We have both a far-sighted vision and a demonstrated track record of accomplishments.** Delaware benefitted from its multi-decade legacy of reform, including the creation of Vision 2015, which provided a four-year “on-ramp” that prepared Delaware for Race to the Top.
- **We’re putting the plan to work at scale and statewide.** In announcing Delaware’s win, Secretary Duncan observed, “What is so impressive about Delaware and Tennessee, and why they scored so well, is that their plans touched 100 percent of students in their states.”

What are the next steps?

This spring, education leaders in Delaware will confirm the amount and conditions of the grant with the U.S. Department of Education. After that, the local school districts and public charter schools will prepare their implementation plans for review by Delaware’s Department of Education.

Funds should begin to flow to Delaware in late summer, 2010, and be applied to the projects outlined in our Race to the Top application.