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ISSUE BRIEF

RACE TO THE TOP FUND FINAL GUIDANCE

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Overview

Today, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan released the final application for the \$4.35 billion Race to the Top Fund (RTT), which will reward states that have raised student performance in the past and have the capacity to accelerate achievement gains with innovative reforms. Of this amount, Duncan will reserve up to \$350 million to help states create assessments aligned to common sets of standards while the remaining \$4 billion will be awarded through today's announced national competition. In addition to the final application, a 775-page final Notice of Priorities, Requirements, Definitions and Selection Criteria for the program was also released. The official notice of these two documents will appear in the Federal Register on Wednesday, November 18.

Analysis

According to most analyses, the final notice did not change drastically from this summer's proposed regulations. It therefore reflects the Department of Education's (ED) vision of giving states a very detailed set of requirements and priorities to meet in order to receive funding. The 1,161 comments received and reviewed by the ED regarding the draft version did result, however, in some key revisions. The most notable modification is in response to teachers' union concerns over teacher evaluation. The final application clarifies that states should use *multiple measures* to evaluate teachers and principals, including a strong emphasis on the growth in achievement of their students. But it also reinforces that successful applicants will need to have rigorous teacher and principal evaluation programs and use the results of teacher evaluations to inform what happens in the schools in addition to having strong buy-in from LEAs. In the end, Duncan stated that "The public's input on this application was invaluable to us."

In response to this change, Randi Weingarten, President of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), who had criticized major elements of the proposed rules earlier this summer,

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praised the final version. She said ED made changes to ensure that teachers are included and that "They worked hard to find the right balance. I see a real culture shift in these regulations from what we had seen in the previous administration...At the end of the day the culture shift is about can we collaborate, work together to make schools better."

In contrast, the response of Dennis Van Roekel, President of the National Education Association (NEA), was not enthusiastic. Roekel noted that the final rules were "better." He said, however, that he was disappointed by the continuing focus on tying test scores to job evaluations commenting that "I think they missed the mark." Amy Wilkins, Vice President for Government Affairs and Communications for the Education Trust, was even less pleased noting that ED's "single-minded focus" on teacher effectiveness tied largely to student test scores leaves out a large group of teachers. "The Department ignores other factors that contribute to teacher quality, such as experience, teachers' college majors, scores on licensure exams, and certification status," according to Wilkins.

Two other noted areas of change include an increased emphasis on states' reform agendas and proof that it can carry out proposed activities. This includes requiring states to demonstrate LEA support and buy-in from all levels. This new section called, State Success Factors, is worth a great deal in the overall application scoring rubric. And lastly, new language was added to allow states without charter schools to make the case that they have other, autonomous, "innovative public school options."

Purpose and Priorities

Under the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)*, the purpose of the RTT is to encourage and reward states that are creating the conditions for education innovation and reform; achieving significant improvement in student outcomes; and implementing plans in four core areas of reform:

1. Adopting internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the workplace;
2. Recruiting, developing, retaining, and rewarding effective teachers and principals;
3. Building data systems that measure student success and inform teachers and principals how they can improve their practices; and
4. Turning around the lowest-performing schools.

While the purpose of this funding is clearly stated in statute, ED's final RTT application includes more than 30 criteria with different point values and funding priorities. These funding priorities did not change from the draft proposal and include:

Priority 1: Absolute Priority – Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform:

- Applications must "comprehensively and coherently address" all four reform areas and State Success Factors Criteria to demonstrate a systemic approach to education reform.
- States must demonstrate sufficient LEA participation and commitment to successfully implement the State's plan to increase student achievement; decrease

achievement gaps across student subgroups; and increase student graduation rates from high school prepared for college and careers.

Priority 2: Competitive Preference – Emphasis on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM):

- To meet this priority, applicants will receive 15 additional points and must have a “high-quality plan” to address the need to:
 1. Offer a rigorous course of study in STEM subjects
 2. Cooperate with industry experts, museums, universities or other STEM-capable community partners to better prepare teachers; and
 3. Prepare more students for advanced study and careers in STEM .

It is interesting to note that in response to comments seeking to include an emphasis on improved literacy skills as a competitive preference, ED stated, “Advancing the literacy skills of all students, particularly students from low-income families, English language learners, and students with disabilities, is the foundation for many of the criteria in the Race to the Top competition....We believe that applicants must necessarily place priority on improving and advancing the literacy skills of students if they are to adequately address these criteria, and therefore, do not believe that a separate competitive preference priority focused on literacy is necessary.”

Priorities 3 through 6: Invitational (these factors do not result in any additional application points):

- Innovations for improving early learning outcomes. Of particular interest are programs and strategies that improve educational outcomes of young children (pre-K through grade 3) by improving quality of preschool programs.
- Expansion and adaptation of statewide longitudinal data systems.
- P-20 coordination and vertical alignment.
- School-level conditions for reform, innovation and learning. Can include such thing as:
 - ⇒ Implementing new structures and formats for the school day or year that result in increased learning time
 - ⇒ Creating school climates and cultures that remove obstacles and support student achievement
 - ⇒ Implementing strategies to effectively engage families and communities

Funding Distribution Timeline and Process

Each winning state’s share will be dependent on its population of children ages 5-17 according to nonbinding estimates provided by ED. Two rounds of competition for the grants will be held. Applications for the first round will be due January 19, 2010. Peer reviewers will evaluate the applications and ED will announce the winners of the first round of funding in Spring 2010. Applications for the second round will be due June 1, 2010, with the announcement of all winners by September 30, 2010.

States that apply for the first round of funding but are not awarded grants may reapply for funding in the second round (together with those States that are applying for the first time in the second round). First round winners receive full-sized awards, and so will not be allowed to apply for additional funding in the second round.

To determine winning applications, the scores of all the applications will be ranked in order (perfect score being 500) and will be funded in that order until the money is gone. Duncan does have final approval of all funds, but according to Joanne Weiss, Director of the Race to the Top Fund, “he will have to make a strong case if he decides to deviate from the scores.” According to ED, the winning and losing applications, along with their scores, will be made public. In addition, ED announced that it will hold two technical assistance planning workshops. The first will be in Denver, CO on December 3 and the second will be in Washington, DC on December 10.

States that receive a RTT Fund grant must use at least 50 percent of the funds to provide subgrants to Local Education Agencies (LEAs), including charter schools, based on their relative share of Title I funding. However, States only need to send money to LEAs that have agreed to participate in RTT reforms. The remaining funds are available to the State for state-level activities and awards to LEAs and other entities through the use of formulas or competitive grant processes. LEAs that choose to participate in their State’s RTT proposal must agree to use their funding to support the State’s plan.

Applications

Each State’s application must be signed by the Governor, Chief State School Officer and the President of the State Board of Education (if applicable). The State must:

- Have an approved State Fiscal Stabilization Fund application for *both phases* of funding;
- Not have any “legal, statutory, or regulatory barriers to linking student achievement or student growth data to teachers for the purpose of evaluation at time of submission;
- Describe the progress it has made over the last several years in each of the four education reform areas;
- Articulate its education reform agenda and LEAs’ participation in it;
- Provide a budget that details how it will use grant funds and other resources to meet targets for improving student achievement and graduation rates;
- Provide for each State Reform Conditions Criteria it chooses to address a description of current status and performance measures as specified;
- Provide for each Reform Plan Criteria it chooses to address a detailed plan for use of funds, key goals, key activities, performance measures and evidence as specified;
- Meet specified requirements when addressing issues relating to assessments required under ESEA; and
- Submit a certification from the State Attorney General that the State’s description of, and statements and conclusions concerning, State law in its application are complete, accurate and constitute a reasonable interpretation of State law.

Conditions on States that Receive Funding

- The State and participating LEAs must take part in national evaluation(s) conducted by the Institute of Education Sciences; however RTT grantees will *not* be required to conduct independent evaluations, but *may*, propose to use funds to support such evaluations;
- The State must make available all of the materials and outputs (e.g., promising practices, processes, systems) that it produces related to its grant;
- Participating LEAs must submit a scope of work section which will be considered preliminary until 90-days after the grant is awarded;
- The State must participate in technical assistance activities; and
- No funds may be used to pay for costs related to statewide assessments.

Application Selection

Each Application will be reviewed using two types of selection criteria to rate a State's application for funds: State Success Factors and State Reform Conditions and Plan Criteria. State Success Factors will be used as evidence of a State's past progress and creation of conditions for reform. State Reform Conditions Criteria will be used to assess a State's plans for future efforts for reform.

State Success Factors include (possible 125 points):

- Articulating a state's education reform agenda and LEAs participation in it;
- Building strong statewide capacity to implement, scale up and sustained proposed plans; and
- Demonstrating significant progress in raising achievement and closing gaps

State Reform Conditions and Plan Criteria which are linked directly to four core areas of reform and include:

- Standards and assessments (possible 70 points and includes developing and adopting common standards and participating in NGA/CCSSO consortium);
- Data systems to support instruction (possible 47 points);
- Great teachers and leaders (possible 138 points); and
- Turning around low-performing schools (possible 50 points).

In addition, General Factors will be considered such as (possible 55 points):

- Making education funding a priority;
- Ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative structures; and
- Demonstrating other significant reform conditions.

The final notice provides examples of the evidence and performance measures the Department will expect applicants to provide under each Criterion.

Additional Information

To view full notice visit: <http://www.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/applicant.html>