

ED Announces “Race to Top” Guidelines, With Value-Added Assessment a Core Element

Washington, July 24 — With a \$4.3 billion carrot, you don't need much of a stick.

States are expected to vigorously compete for a share of the “Race to the Top” grant program unveiled today by Education Secretary Arne Duncan. And in an accompanying editorial published today in the *Washington Post*, Duncan celebrated the fact that Obama administration jawboning has helped launch a 46-state initiative to develop world-class standards and persuaded at least seven states to remove restrictions on charter schools — both of which are administration priorities.

Removal of state barriers to value-added assessment of teacher and principal performance will be a prerequisite for receipt of the reform funds. States that bar measures of student growth as a component of staff evaluation, such as New York, Wisconsin and California, will be ineligible to receive funds.

In announcing the [proposed guidelines](#) for the competition, Duncan emphasized that the funds would be awarded in two rounds, one to be held this fall and one in spring 2010. States that are currently ineligible can try again, he said, if they unblock barriers to reform.

The \$4.3 billion in “RTT” funds is part of almost \$100 billion in grants and bonding authority appropriated to the U.S. Department of Education (ED) as part of the massive economic stimulus bill enacted in February. ED has already granted more than half that amount to states, largely to offset cuts in state aid for education.

Four Priorities

Speaking to an audience of Title I and Title III program directors Thursday morning, Duncan previewed the guidelines, which were officially released today. He said that the RTT grant criteria would focus on four administration priorities:

1. Adopting world-class standards and assessments to measure student achievement against them. He noted that the administration has already earmarked \$350 million to fund the assessment end of the joint state initiative.
2. Establishing effective data systems to track student growth and link it to the performance of teachers, principals and ultimately teacher training programs.
3. Getting the best teachers and principals into the highest-poverty schools and hardest-to-staff subjects.
4. Focusing resources on the lowest-achieving 5 percent of schools.

Priority #2 places the Obama administration firmly on the side of the swelling — and controversial — value-added assessment movement, which is designed to measure how much individual educators contribute to the academic growth of individual students — and reward or punish them accordingly. Ultimately, Duncan said, the data would allow states to track student growth back to the college programs that trained educators, and hold those institutions accountable for their effect on student achievement

“Unprecedented Carrots”

In his speech, Duncan said the department was trying to change the system by offering “unprecedented carrots” rather than mandating lots of new requirements.

“We’re investing hundreds of millions of dollars in states that are willing to challenge the status quo,” he said. “This is not going to be anything mandatory. This is not about compliance. This is about who’s willing to innovate, who’s willing to push the envelope, who’s willing to make a difference in students’ lives. If states don’t want to play, that’s fine. That’s more money for other states.”

He said he hopes the Race to the Top fund fosters “healthy competition” and that ED staff “have some horrendously tough late-night discussions because there are so many good applications. That’s good for the country.”

But he acknowledged that some states will have farther to go than others, and reminded the audience that the funding will be offered in two phases. “States that aren’t quite there yet and might not be eligible in the first round can come back in the second round and show what they’ve done to change behavior,” he said.

The RTT guidelines unveiled today are actually preliminary proposals. Interested parties will have 60 days to comment on them before they are finalized. The actual invitation for state applications is projected to be issued in October with awards to be made in early 2010. The second round of applications will be issued in spring 2010.

Once states receive their funds, one half will flow automatically to school districts under the Title I formula, although the funds will not be constrained by Title I rules. The rest will be available to states to subgrant or otherwise use to promote reform as they wish.

Other Programs

Although most attention was focused on the Race to the Top fund — which Duncan pointed out was by far the biggest pot of discretionary funds ever placed in the control of the Secretary of Education — information on several other stimulus-funded programs was announced today. Combined with regular 2009 appropriations, amounts available include:

- \$3.5 billion for Title I school improvement;
- more than \$900 million for educational technology;
- \$330 million to improve state data systems; and
- almost \$300 million for incentive grants for teachers to move to high-need schools.

Together with the RTT, the Education Department estimated these programs will total \$10 billion.

Schedule

Although all these programs were announced in one big package for maximum media impact, the actual phasing of applications will be staggered over the next few months. An invitation for applications for state data systems is now available, and funding for the ed tech formula program will be released on Monday. The teacher incentive program invitation for applications will appear sometime in August.

And, according to the department, the invitation for states to apply for the Title I school improvement program is expected to be issued “soon.”

Education Stabilization Fund Reporting

Less prominent, but actually involving the biggest pool of funding, was a notice explaining the data states must submit to get their second pot of Education Stabilization Funds. To get their first pot, amounting to \$36 billion, states had to agree to work toward four reform objectives: (a) achieving equity in teacher distribution, (b) improving collection and use of data, (c) improving standards and assessments, and (d) supporting struggling schools.

To get their second pot, amounting to \$12.6 billion, states must now show how they will report their progress in each area. ED has now invited 30 days of public comment on its guidelines for this process. ED made no projections about when states would be invited to apply for these funds.

The full range of fact sheets and guidelines issued today are available [here](#).

SchoolGrants2009 will provide wall-to-wall coverage of this avalanche of information over the next week.

— Charles Edwards and Andrew Brownstein