

From NEA March 4, 2010...
Race to the Top Finalists announced

The National Education Association urges the U.S. Department of Education to stress the importance of collaboration in selecting the Race to the Top winners from among the 16 finalists.

Background:

The U.S. Department of Education has announced that 15 states and the District of Columbia will advance as finalists for Phase I of the Race to the Top competition. Race to the Top is a competitive grant program that is set to provide \$4.35 billion in education funding (\$350 million is reserved in a separate competition for improving assessment systems).

States competing for Race to the Top funds were asked to document past education reform successes, as well as outline plans to: extend reforms using college and career-ready standards and assessments; build a workforce of highly effective educators; create educational data systems to support student achievement; and turn around their lowest-performing schools.

The following states, listed in alphabetical order, were named as Phase I finalists:

Colorado
Delaware
District of Columbia
Florida
Georgia
Illinois
Kentucky
Louisiana
Massachusetts
New York
North Carolina
Ohio
Pennsylvania
Rhode Island
South Carolina
Tennessee

NOTE: NEA state affiliates that did not support their states' applications are LA, FL, GA and RI.

According to agency officials, the 16 finalists that were selected all had initial scores above 400 (there are 500 total points available under Race to the Top), where there was a 'natural breaking point' in the scores of all the applicants.

The U.S. Department of Education plans to bring in the finalists during the week of March 15 to do in-person presentations for the Race to the Top peer review panels. The 16 finalists then will be ranked according to their final scores (the initial scores could be adjusted based on clarifying information in presentations) and the list delivered to the Secretary, who then will decide how many finalists will be selected to receive Race to the Top Phase I awards. The winners are expected to be announced during the week of April 1, 2010.

The scores and rankings of state applications, peer review feedback, and the identifies of the peer reviewers will be released by the Department after the awards are announced in April.

From NEA's President Dennis Van Roeckel: "The list of finalists is intriguing, and we encourage the Department of Education to spend its money wisely by focusing its resources where collaboration with key stakeholders already exists. Our combined efforts should focus on the needs of the students, and we want them to be successful in school and in life."

- The 16 state applications announced today are finalists, not winners, of the RTTT program. The USED will continue its process to selecting winners.
- The federal government has an important role to play in advancing equity by directing funds to those students with great needs. For some states, Race to the Top takes a step in the right direction. For the states that don't win grants, however, Race to the Top does nothing to close the gaps in equity.
- In today's economy, especially with a funding cliff looming, fiscal relief is welcome. However, NEA is deeply concerned about the long-term sustainability offered through such a competition. Students deserve a sustained commitment.
- Putting aside the very real flaws in a program that only rewards a few discrete programs throughout the country, we have major concerns about the level of consistency with which collaboration was embraced. Collaboration among core stakeholders is key if there are to be successful, sustainable changes in our schools, and this major component was left out of some of the finalists' applications. In particular, we are disappointed that Rhode Island is a finalist.
- NEA urges the US Department of Education to publicize quickly any high-quality approaches offered by the applicants that became finalists.
- NEA remains concerned about the RTTT program's encouragement of the use of student test scores in evaluating individual teacher performance. There is no reputable research that suggests this is a reliable indicator of teaching skills.
- The Race to the Top competition glorifies charter schools with no substantial evidence that they offer effective and scalable options to students with greatest

need. The competition also includes two other strategies for school improvement—turnaround and closure—that were not designed based on research.

- Importantly, the Race to the Top competition does not address the pressing needs of students in all states, and that is why it is vital that the Administration and Congress move forward to revamp and reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.
- Race to the Top is only a stopgap effort for some states. The competition cannot comprehensively take on the looming problems of fiscal inequity among America’s public schools or systemically improve our nation’s schools.
- NEA will continue to advocate for sustainable, focused and research-based policies that support great public schools for all students.

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