

The Washington Post

Education Reform's Moon Shot

Friday, July 24, 2009
By Arne Duncan

To every governor who aspires to be his state's "education governor," this is your moment. Today, President Obama is to announce the draft guidelines for applying for the \$4.35 billion Race to the Top fund -- by far the largest pot of discretionary funding for K-12 education reform in the history of the United States.

Since its inception in 1980, the U.S. Department of Education has traditionally been a compliance-driven agency with only modest discretionary funds available for reform and innovation. By contrast, the Race to the Top fund marks a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the federal government to create incentives for far-reaching improvement in our nation's schools. Indeed, the \$4.35 billion available in Race to the Top easily outstrips the combined sum of discretionary funds for reform that all of my predecessors as education secretary had.

For states, school districts, nonprofits, unions and businesses, Race to the Top is the equivalent of education reform's moon shot -- and the Obama administration is determined not to miss this opportunity. We will scrutinize state applications for a coordinated commitment to reform -- and award grants on a competitive basis in two rounds, allowing first-round losers to make necessary changes and reapply.

What are we looking for? The president starts from the understanding that maintaining the status quo in our schools is unacceptable. America urgently needs to elevate the quality of K-12 schooling and boost college graduation rates, not simply to propel the economic recovery but also because students need stronger skills to compete in a global economy. As he has put it, "education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity and success -- it's a prerequisite for success." Yet tragically, too many schools fail to prepare their students for college or the workforce.

Under Race to the Top guidelines, states seeking funds will be pressed to implement four core interconnected reforms.

-- To reverse the pervasive dumbing-down of academic standards and assessments by states, Race to the Top winners need to work toward adopting common, internationally benchmarked K-12 standards that prepare students for success in college and careers.

-- To close the data gap -- which now handcuffs districts from tracking growth in student learning and improving classroom instruction -- states will need to monitor advances in student achievement and identify effective instructional practices.

-- To boost the quality of teachers and principals, especially in high-poverty schools and hard-to-staff subjects, states and districts should be able to identify effective teachers and principals -- and have strategies for rewarding and retaining more top-notch teachers and improving or replacing ones who aren't up to the job.

-- Finally, to turn around the lowest-performing schools, states and districts must be ready to institute far-reaching reforms, from replacing staff and leadership to changing the school culture.

The Race to the Top program marks a new federal partnership in education reform with states, districts and unions to accelerate change and boost achievement. Yet the program is also a competition through which states can increase or decrease their odds of winning federal support. For example, states that limit alternative routes to certification for teachers and principals, or cap the number of charter schools, will be at a competitive disadvantage. And states that explicitly prohibit linking data on achievement or student growth to principal and teacher evaluations will be ineligible for reform dollars until they change their laws.

Neither I nor the president is naive about reform. I served as superintendent of the Chicago Public Schools for seven years -- and saw firsthand that the system often served the interests of adults better than it did its students. Still, I reject much of the pessimism and age-old apathy about school reform. I have visited 23 states in the past six months and have met countless students, teachers, parents and administrators who hunger for change. I have seen high-performing schools and districts that are closing achievement gaps, raising graduation rates and shipping off to college kids who never thought it possible.

Since President Obama took office, numerous states have adopted reforms that would have been almost unthinkable a year ago. This spring, 46 states signed on to a state-led process to develop a common core of K-12 standards in language arts and math. At the same time, Tennessee, Rhode Island, Indiana, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Colorado and Illinois have lifted restrictions on charter school growth.

Despite the obstacles, I remain optimistic about America's capacity for transformational change. The edifice of education reform may take years to build. But the Race to the Top starts today.

The writer is secretary of education.