



National Review: Race To The Top Limpes to a Finish

BY Frederick M. Hess

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That was another \$4.35 billion poorly spent. Last week, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced the winners of the second and final round of the administration's heavily promoted and widely cheered Race to the Top school-reform program. Unfortunately, after all the headlines and hullabaloo, the results were so dismal they threatened to bring the entire exercise into disrepute. Heralded education-reform states Colorado and Louisiana were left out in the cold, while Duncan bizarrely found himself naming Ohio, Maryland, New York, and Hawaii among the ten round-two winners. (Tennessee and Delaware had been named round-one winners this spring.)

Several of the winners clearly trail the pack on key reforms that Duncan had said RTT would reward. When it comes to state data systems, the Data Quality Campaign has ranked the states: Hawaii tied for 17th, Maryland tied for 35th, and New York tied for 48th. When it comes to the clarity and strength of the states' charter laws, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools has rated Ohio 26th, Hawaii 34th, and Maryland 40th. On teacher policy, the National Council on Teacher Quality has graded the states, with Ohio and New York each earning a D+, Maryland a D, and Hawaii a D-.

Meanwhile, less than a month ago, Duncan described Louisiana as "leading the way" with data systems that monitor teacher-preparation programs and student performance. Louisiana has been ranked a top-ten state for teacher policy, data systems, and charter schooling. Colorado enacted the single most important piece of legislation to come out of the RTT process — its remarkable Senate Bill 191, which overhauled teacher evaluation and tenure and introduced a smart statewide framework for gauging teacher performance. (In announcing the results, Duncan did say that Colorado "will continue to be a national leader." Presumably, it will just have to lead from the rear.)

Conservative education analyst Chester E. Finn Jr. concluded that the review process didn't reflect "what's really going on in these states and the degree of sincerity of their reform convictions." Andy Rotherham, veteran Clinton education hand and key Democratic education thinker, acknowledged that there were "raised eyebrows"; specifically, he anticipated questions about "how New York went from not meeting the absolute priority for the competition to being

a winner," and noted concerns about "reviewers that didn't reflect the administration's avowed reform priorities." Colorado's lieutenant governor, Barbara O'Brien, fumed, "You can't say it's an objective process. . . I just have no confidence in this process the U.S. Department of Education has put together."

This was largely a bed of Duncan's own making. Last year, the administration opted for a competition that primarily rewarded grant-writing prowess and allegiance to the fads of the moment rather than concrete structural changes. Skeptics warned that the administration's hurriedly assembled contest was not equal to the weight it was being asked to bear and raised questions about the murky criteria for judge selection, ambiguity of the scoring process, emphasis on promises rather than accomplishments, and preference for "inclusive" efforts rather than focused ones.

Moreover, when announcing round-one winners Tennessee and Delaware in March, Duncan took pains to note that the two states had had 100 percent or near 100 percent signoffs from their local teachers' unions. Not surprisingly, the judges followed Duncan's lead. Among the winners, North Carolina, Ohio, and Hawaii had 100 percent of their union locals signing off on their proposals, and New York had 70 percent doing so. States like Colorado and New Jersey got hammered for not collecting enough unenforceable assurances from their unions. An official from one losing state steamed, "To have peer reviewers praise the application up and down but still explicitly penalize us because of our union opposition is almost too much to bear."

The disheartening close of its prized program is bad news for the administration and probably signals rough seas ahead for its education agenda in 2011. Despite Duncan's expressed hope that "This may be the end of phase two, but it's not the end of Race to the Top," and the president's request for another \$1.35 billion for RTT next year, it will be a surprise if Duncan gets to give this another try. Given that the president's standing on education has already fallen precipitously, with Gallup reporting this month that just 34 percent of adults give him an A or a B when grading his performance on education, the messy endgame may weaken the administration's credibility on reform. One respected charter-school advocate lamented, "With the inclusion of Maryland, North Carolina, and Ohio and the exclusion of Colorado and Louisiana, the administration has lost its ability to push states to make tough changes in matters like charter schools or teacher policies."

In the meantime, Duncan now confronts a whole new headache. While the winning plans are mostly about grand promises, the cast of characters in most of those states is about to change. Half of the RTT winners will be inaugurating new governors come January, and four others may be doing so. In other words, ten of Duncan's twelve RTT winners may have new leaders in

2011. How wedded will these new governors be to the airy promises contained in the winning RTT applications? If and when they balk, the Obama administration will have two bad options.

Either Duncan will have to admit he handed out 4 billion borrowed bucks on the basis of unenforceable paper plans, or he'll have to start trying to strong-arm states by holding new governors and state education chiefs to the commitments of their predecessors — and clawing back dollars from states that don't comply. Neither of those scenarios is too appealing, especially in a year when a number of amped-up Republican gubernatorial candidates seem all too eager to tangle with the Obama administration.

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