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June 15, 2010

MEMORANDUM

TO: Legislative Education Study Committee

FR: David Harrell

RE: STAFF BRIEF: NEW MEXICO PARTICIPATION IN NATIONAL SCHOOL REFORM INITIATIVES: RACE TO THE TOP – STATUS OF APPLICATION

Introduction

According to the US Department of Education (USDE), Race to the Top (RttT) is a competitive grant program through the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009* (ARRA) intended to encourage states to advance education reforms around four specific areas:

- adopting standards and assessments that help prepare students for college and the workplace;
- building data systems that measure student growth and success;
- recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals; and
- turning around the lowest-achieving schools.

Grants will be awarded, the USDE explains, to those states “that are leading the way with ambitious yet achievable plans for implementing coherent, compelling, and comprehensive education reform,” serving as models for the rest of the states to follow.

In January 2010, New Mexico joined 39 other states and the District of Columbia in applying for competitive RttT funding. Of those 41 initial applicants, 16 (New Mexico not among them) reached the finalist stage and received invitations to Washington to explain their plans more fully; of those 16 finalists, two – Delaware and Tennessee – were awarded funds. The 39 other applicants were invited to reapply during round two, which had an application deadline of June 1, 2010.

This staff brief will:

- provide an account of New Mexico’s decision to submit an application during round two;
- note some observations on the application process; and
- review decisions made and actions taken by other states with regard to round two.

In addition, a presentation by the Secretary of Public Education will provide more details about the state’s application, its prospects for success, and the anticipated benefits to New Mexico.

New Mexico’s Decision to Apply for Round Two of the RttT Program

To determine whether the state should apply during round two of the RttT program, in mid-April 2010 PED hosted a day-and-a-half meeting in Albuquerque, led and facilitated by the Secretary of Public Education, that focused on the two sections of the state’s round one application that had received the lowest scores: Section D, Great Teachers and Leaders; and Section E, Turning Around the Lowest-achieving Schools. There was also some attention to Section C, Data Systems.¹

At this meeting, participants examined the reviewers’ comments on New Mexico’s unsuccessful round one application, compared them to the comments about the successful applications, and considered a number of factors pertinent to the decision about round two. Perhaps the most fundamental question was whether New Mexico has the political will to proceed with the application. Although some participants expressed reservations about the process itself from the federal level, there was general agreement that the state should proceed with the round two application on the grounds that, even if the application were unsuccessful, the state will have identified and committed to important strategies for education reform. One specific point of agreement, as the RttT application explains, was that, with or without the RttT funding, “New Mexico will implement a student growth model linked to teacher and principal performance.”

¹ The other sections are Section A, State Success Factors, which includes the state’s reform agenda; Section B, Standards and Assessments; and Section F, General, which includes education funding and charter schools and other innovative schools.

After this meeting, the Secretary of Public Education announced her intention to pursue the round two application; and PED organized a number of small work groups to help draft new responses to sections D and E, according to the comments of reviewers from round one, attendees at the large statewide meeting, and participants in the small work groups. PED explains that, while sections D and E were substantially rewritten, there were revisions and updates to the other sections as well, in some cases in response to the revisions in sections D and E. “Overall,” PED says, “the goal was to strengthen the application and introduce some major new reforms,” such as tying student growth to teacher evaluation.

As an expansion of that point, one notable development during the round two process was the agreement among the participants in the revision of Section (D)(4), “Improving the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs,” to link student growth data used in teacher and principal evaluations to the in-state programs where teachers and principals received their preparation and completed their licensure requirements. This agreement also prescribes a process that could lead the Professional Practices and Standards Council to recommend that the Secretary of Public Education close an ineffective program.²

The final application was submitted on May 31, 2010. This time the field of applicants includes 34 other states and the District of Columbia, and the US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has said that, depending upon the size of the winning states, he expects 10 to 15 states to receive funding. New Mexico has applied for \$75 million. The USDE says that the department will select the round two winners over the summer through the same process that was used in round one; and the administration will announce the winners before the end of September.

As a final point about New Mexico’s RttT application, it bears noting that many of the commitments extend well into the future. For example:

- by January 1, 2013, PED will implement a model for measuring individual student growth as a significant factor in the performance evaluation process in the three-tiered licensure system; and
- no later than school year 2014-2015, PED will link results from the revised evaluation systems to all of New Mexico’s teacher and principal preparation programs.

Certainly most education reforms take time to implement and to be evaluated. However, to a large extent the success of reforms promised by this administration will depend upon the commitment to those reforms by the next administration.

Observations on the Application Process

The RttT program has attracted considerable attention and commentary. Some of this commentary has cited certain benefits from the program.

² Created in PED rule, the Professional Practices and Standards Council advises the Secretary of Public Education “on matters related to the approval of educator preparatory programs, licensure, professional development, and ethics of licensed school personnel.”

- In January 2010, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools praised the program for the attention it had drawn to the value of high-quality charter schools and the importance of accountability for charter schools.
- In the wake of the results from round one, an editorial in the April 8, 2010 *New York Times* (“Before It Ends, Schools ‘Race’ Is a Success”) referred to the “well-designed scoring system” and stated that, “even if the program ended today, it already has had a huge, beneficial effect on the education reform effort” by requiring states to build consensus among districts and unions and by spotlighting successful reforms “that deserve to be emulated,” among other benefits.
- More recently, the Chief Executive Officer of a parent-advocacy group called Stand for Children said, “The changes you’ve seen around the country show that Race to the Top has been an incredible catalyst.”

Other comments, however – especially those after the results of the first round were revealed – expressed some concerns.

- Although Colorado decided to apply for round two after all, Governor Ritter found the judging process in round one to be “inscrutable,” likening it to an American Olympic skater with a Soviet judge from the 1980s.
- An April 2010 briefing paper by the Economic Policy Institute (*Let’s Do the Numbers: Department of Education’s “Race to the Top” Program Offers Only a Muddled Path to the Finish Line*) examined in detail the evaluation system that the USDE applied to the applications.
 - This analysis found that, while it is designed to appear objective and scientific because it employs “precise numerical scores,” the judging process was “subjective,” “capricious” and “needlessly complex” and that “the selection of Delaware and Tennessee was subjective and arbitrary, more a matter of bias or chance than a result of these states’ superior compliance with reform policies.”
 - The report recommends that, in the second round, “any states that take reasonable efforts to improve their elementary and secondary education systems should receive awards. Only those patently contemptuous of the reform process should be denied.”
- Observers have also raised questions about states’ relative academic standards. A recent study by researchers at Harvard University (to be reported in the fall issue of *Education Next*) graded as *F* and *C-*, respectively, the academic standards of Tennessee and Delaware, the two successful applicants during round one of the RttT. Tennessee, in fact, was judged to have the lowest standards of all the states, a position it has held since 2003. New Mexico, on the other hand, was one of five states to earn the grade of *A* in this study, and the state ranked fifth nationally for the strength of its math proficiency standards in particular.

Decisions and Actions by Other States

Issues such as these, among other factors, have compelled some states to decline to participate in round two. Of the 41 applicants in round one, nine (excluding Delaware and Tennessee, of course) chose not to apply for round two: Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Minnesota, Oregon, South Dakota, West Virginia, Virginia, and Wyoming.

- Virginia chose not to apply partly because, in the words of Governor Bob McDonnell, the strong push to adopt common standards “is overly prescriptive and disregards individual state initiatives and progress.” In Virginia those initiatives produced the state’s Standards of Learning, which had been in the making for over 15 years.
- Among the reasons that Idaho cited were the short timeline for the application and the Governor’s refusal to “ask Idaho schools and districts to spend their precious time and resources competing for an unrealistic goal that has been set by the federal government, not by the state. . . .”
- Timing was also a factor in South Dakota’s decision not to reapply. “Before making any of these decisions,” Education Secretary Tom Oster said, “we would need to have thoughtful discussions with teachers, administrators, higher education and lawmakers. These are important decisions, and we are not going to rush them.”

In other cases, however, states have redoubled their efforts, sometimes passing legislation intended to increase their chances for success.

- A recent issue of *Education Week* highlights a few examples:

Colorado rewrote its laws on teacher evaluation and tenure so that half of an educator’s rating is based on student performance, and ineffective teachers can be dismissed more easily. Rhode Island’s application is now supported by 30 percent of its local teachers’ unions, up from 5 percent in the first round. Illinois will demand more of its principal-preparation programs, starting by making them all reapply for accreditation.

- In late May *The New York Times* reported that not only Colorado but also Louisiana, Oklahoma, and New York approved bills modifying their teacher tenure and evaluation laws in hopes of enhancing their chances for success in round two.

Finally, six states that did not apply during round one did apply during round two: Maine, Maryland, Mississippi, Montana, Nevada, and Washington. And four other states chose not to apply in either round: Alaska, North Dakota, Texas, and Vermont.

Presenter

As noted earlier, for this presentation Dr. Veronica C. García, Secretary of Public Education, will apprise the committee about the state’s application, its prospects for success, and the anticipated benefits to New Mexico.