BHEF Issue Brief

Race to the Top

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 set aside approximately $5 billion to be used by the U.S. secretary of education to make incentive grants to states that "have made significant progress" in meeting four objectives: achieving equity in teacher distribution, improving collection and use of data, enhancing standards and assessment, and supporting struggling schools.

The Race to the Top competition was designed to implement the provisions of the ARRA and included several policy priorities that were heavily weighted in selecting winning states, such as articulating the state's reform agenda and securing buy-in from districts and teachers around this agenda, evaluating teachers and principals based on gains in student achievement, developing and adopting common state standards, turning around the lowest-achieving schools, and ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charters and other innovative schools. In addition, states emphasizing the preparation of students for careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, or STEM, were given a competitive preference.

During the first round of competition, only two of the 41 states that applied were awarded grants—Delaware and Tennessee. Later analysis indicated that three factors seemed to have contributed to the winning applications:

1. Linking teaching evaluation to student gains. Both Delaware and Tennessee have strong existing data systems, which they have said they plan to use for teacher evaluations and for key recruitment, compensation, and tenure decisions. For example, Delaware will begin requiring strong evidence of student growth for teachers to be labeled "effective" and to receive tenure.

2. Taking over failing schools. Tennessee committed to intervening in failing schools through a state "Achievement School District" that groups the lowest performing schools.

3. Buy-in from the districts and teachers around the state. Both states had strong buy-in from almost all school districts and teachers unions. The Round One competition revealed the high value placed on union and stakeholder support. While some experts believe several other states, including Florida, Georgia, and Louisiana, all had applications at least as strong, they lacked the nearly unanimous support from local unions and school districts obtained by Delaware and Tennessee.

Round Two applications were due June 1 and 35 states and the District of Columbia applied for a slice of the remaining $3.4 billion in funds. Nine states that applied earlier this year did not resubmit their applications (though reasons vary by state, reports indicate that some did not receive enough support from teacher unions and others were wary of passing reform laws that link student achievement to teacher evaluations and require adoption of common academic standards across states).

Seventeen states were eliminated from competition in the most recent evaluation by judges, leaving the following states still in the running: Arizona, California, Colorado, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and South Carolina. Race to the Top winners will be announced in late August or early September.