



State vies for 'Race to the Top' dollars

Delaware one of finalists for stimulus funds to improve schools

By JONATHAN STARKEY • The News Journal • March 5, 2010

Delaware was among 16 finalists named Thursday to stay in the running to receive grants under the first phase of the federal government's \$4 billion stimulus-funded Race to the Top education program.

Fifteen states and the District of Columbia were selected, and will head to Washington later this month to present their proposals to review panels that scored the grant applications.

Forty states and the district applied in January. Delaware requested \$107 million.

"We are really pleased because our being chosen is a statewide effort," said Lillian Lowery, Delaware's education secretary. "If our state constituencies had not come together ... our state would not be as well-positioned. We're really excited that all of our collaborative work has really paid off."

Included with Delaware's 230-page application were support statements from every board of education, superintendent, teachers association, charter school board and charter school leader in the state.

"This is just one more step down a long and very competitive path for Race to the Top funding, but we are pleased to have this opportunity," Gov. Jack Markell said. "Even if there was no Race to the Top competition, we would be working to strengthen our public schools, prepare our children for the future and ensure quality teachers can succeed at their jobs."

States competing for the grants are evaluated on six factors: high-quality assessments and rigorous international standards; data systems to track student achievement; educator evaluation systems; improvement of lowest-performing schools; support of charter schools; and progress closing the

achievement gap.

Race to the Top applicants not receiving first-phase funding can apply in June for a second round of funding, to be awarded in September. No more than half of the money in the program pot is expected to be handed out in the first phase.

Delaware's finalist status "demonstrates that the state has been working hard for a number of years and this administration has worked hard to bring all the right people to the table and put forward a compelling application," said Paul Herdman, president of the Rodel Foundation, a nonprofit working to improve Delaware's public education system. "There's still a lot of work to do."

To make Delaware more competitive for the grant, Markell proposed regulatory changes to how failing schools are restructured and educators are evaluated. The state Board of Education approved the changes in January.

Delaware also has partnered with Boston-based Mass Insight Education and Research Institute, a nonprofit, to identify failing schools and turn them around using such methods as getting rid of the principal and half the staff, or converting a failing school into a charter. Mass Insight's plans call for allowing an outside organization -- or a "lead partner" -- broad authority over operations of failing schools in an attempt to improve performance. The lead partner idea has generated some tension between the state and its largest teachers union, the Delaware State Education

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Association. Mass Insight has said that only states that implement its vision, which includes granting lead partners broad authority, will benefit from millions in private dollars it plans to raise.

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