



# Race to the Top and Teacher Preparation

Analyzing State Strategies for Ensuring Real Accountability and  
Fostering Program Innovation

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Edward Crowe March 2011

# Introduction and summary

While there are many factors critical to improving America’s primary and secondary schools, strengthening teacher education is an essential part of any strategy likely to make a difference.

When the Obama administration created the Race to the Top or RTT Fund—“to encourage and reward States that are creating the conditions for education innovation and reform”—and provided \$4.35 billion through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act toward these goals, a key focus was teacher preparation. A crucial aim of the RTT initiative is supporting funded states to implement plans for “recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most.”

As suggested by its prominence as a priority in the RTT funding solicitation, improving teacher quality is one of the most pressing issues in education reform and school improvement. Increasing the number of effective teachers in specific subject areas and in high-need schools are goals that cannot be met without significant enhancement to the capacity of teacher preparation programs to produce and support effective teachers for the nation’s schools.

Improving the quality of teacher education is a vital focus of education reform, but it is also an enormous challenge with few obvious successes from a host of redesign and reform initiatives over the past three or more decades.<sup>1</sup> The difficulty of obtaining significant and widespread change in the overall quality of teacher education in the United States is behind efforts to combine a carrot-and-stick approach—offering incentives to programs that embark on serious reform efforts as well as stronger accountability mechanisms to push the same programs in the right direction.<sup>2</sup>

In two rounds of competitive proposals, the U.S. Secretary of Education awarded RTT funds to 11 states and the District of Columbia. (For ease of reference, all 12 awardees are referred to as states throughout the paper.) This paper describes

and analyzes one component of the RTT proposals in these 11 states and D.C.—namely, state plans to promote improvements in teacher quality through enhanced accountability for teacher preparation programs in the state.

The teacher education components of Race to the Top ask states to adopt more vigorous accountability mechanisms and to establish or expand preparation programs “that are successful at producing effective teachers.” Thus RTT requires the funded states to:

- Link student achievement and student growth data to the teachers of these students
- Tie this information to the in-state programs that prepare teachers
- Publicly report the data on program effectiveness for each preparation program in the state
- Expand teacher education programs and teacher credentialing options that are successful at producing graduates who are effective teachers

It is also relevant to note that the RTT funding solicitation included specific definitions of three important terms: “effective teachers,” “student growth,” and “student achievement.” Precise definitions for these terms are building blocks in RTT’s efforts to produce high-quality teachers and report publicly on every preparation program in a state. Because they establish the “rules of the game” for the state teacher quality initiatives, these are worth quoting at length and should be used as markers in evaluating commitments from the 12 funded states.

“Effective teachers” are defined for the Race to the Top as those “whose students achieve acceptable rates (at least one grade level in an academic year) of student growth.”<sup>3</sup> To make clear the goal of federal policy through these grants to states, the solicitation defines “student growth” as “the change in student achievement for an individual student between two or more points in time.” It defines “student achievement” as, in part, “a student’s score on the State’s assessments under the ESEA [Elementary and Secondary Education Act]; and, as appropriate ... other measures of student learning ... provided they are rigorous and comparable across classrooms.”<sup>4</sup>

Through RTT, therefore, states were asked to define effective teaching in terms of student achievement outcomes, aggregate teacher effectiveness data to the preparation program level, and make regular public reports of their findings.

A recent paper published by the Center for American Progress, “Measuring What Matters,” calls for a radical redesign of teacher education program accountability in the United States. It describes the components of an effective accountability system for preparation programs and showed how current policies in all 50 states and the District of Columbia have failed to provide meaningful or relevant accountability for teacher preparation programs.<sup>5</sup>

“Measuring What Matters” urged every state to adopt five key indicators of program and graduate performance, applied “equally to all programs in a state, whether the program is ‘traditional’ or ‘alternative,’ and no matter which organization is responsible for the preparation program.”<sup>6</sup>

The five recommended accountability measures are:<sup>7</sup>

- A teacher effectiveness measure that reports on whether program graduates help their K-12 students to learn
- Measures of classroom teaching performance of program graduates built on reliable and valid classroom observation instruments
- Persistence rates in teaching for all program graduates, disclosed to the public for up to five years post-completion
- Feedback surveys from program graduates and from their employers
- A new system of teacher licensure testing, with the number of current tests cut by more than 90 percent, and with every state adopting the same tests and the same pass rate policies

Race to the Top puts the emphasis on the first “Measuring What Matters” indicator: requiring states to measure and disclose program effectiveness results to the public. Funded states must treat all preparation programs the same, using specific definitions of student achievement and student academic growth to determine both individual teacher effectiveness and overall preparation program effectiveness.

A careful review of the 12 RTT state proposals as well as the reviewer notes made available through the U.S. Department of Education shows the range of commitments and actions that will be taken by the funded states.

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## Student achievement as a program outcome

Every state promised to use student achievement as an outcome indicator for teacher education programs. They all committed to public disclosure of preparation program teacher effectiveness findings through a reporting system for performance results. Yet only five states say they will use the teacher effectiveness of program graduates as an accountability measure, publicly reporting the results and using them to hold programs accountable.

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## Other program outcomes

Some states go beyond the minimum requirement of tying student achievement to teachers and to teacher education programs. Those efforts include reporting the persistence in teaching of program graduates, employer feedback survey results, job placement rates, and schools where program graduates teach and remain in the profession.

Several RTT states propose changes to their teacher certification examinations. Speaking to that issue, “Measuring What Matters” recommends a whole new system of teacher licensure tests, significant reductions to the number of tests used by each state, adoption of the same tests in all states, and the use of the same passing rate policies in every state. While no RTT state goes this far, three of them plan to revamp pieces of their current testing efforts.

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## Public disclosure of program performance

A key theme of Race to the Top’s selection criteria is information about education outcomes for key stakeholders in the states. RTT expects each state to “publicly report” data on the effectiveness of graduates from each in-state preparation program. All 12 RTT states made commitments to develop or improve reporting systems for public disclosure of these results.

Still, the length of time it will take for these systems to be accessible to the general public varies considerably. To meet these disclosure targets, data systems in most states will have to be upgraded. In addition, states will have to settle on and “test drive” a methodology for measuring student achievement gains and connecting them to individual teachers.

Five of the 12 funded states make clear commitments to use evidence of teacher effectiveness for program accountability. They also propose steps to close weak programs unable or unwilling to improve. This is a welcome development in state accountability for teacher education. The efforts of these five states clearly point the way to moving us beyond today's toothless state accountability policies, but they bear close scrutiny because states have no history of real accountability when it comes to the preparation of teachers.

A fair summary of these state commitments to preparation program accountability through RTT is that some states have stronger commitments than others, and some proposed state action steps are likely to strengthen state oversight. Specifics of these strengths and weaknesses are discussed in detail in this paper.

The good news is at this point we can predict progress on real accountability for teacher education if the states funded in these two rounds of proposal reviews do three things:

- Make good on all of their RTT proposal commitments
- Take the logical step of using enhanced capacity to replace ineffectual accountability systems with rigorous measures
- Assert their authority to impose serious consequences on weak and ineffective programs

Policy recommendations drawn from the analysis of the 12 funded Race to the Top initiatives in this paper are intended to maximize the potential for change through RTT:

- Develop high-quality state and data reporting systems
- Pilot stronger measures of preparation program accountability
- Foster innovative strategies to promote teacher and program quality
- Find ways to support good work by states not funded through RTT
- Monitor state performance

By asking states for new initiatives to build or expand high-quality teacher preparation pathways, it is clear that Race to the Top can be a powerful lever to improve teacher quality in the United States.



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