



Race to the Top: What Have We Learned from the States So Far?

A State-by-State Evaluation of Race to the Top Performance

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Introduction and summary

The Race to the Top, or RTT, fund might be the Obama administration's most significant education initiative. A \$4.35 billion competitive grant program, RTT aims to kick-start key education reforms in states and districts and create the conditions for greater educational innovation. "America will not succeed in the 21st century unless we do a far better job of educating our sons and daughters," President Barack Obama said when he announced the program in July 2009.¹ "The race starts today."

Part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, or ARRA, Race to the Top promises to help states and districts close achievement gaps and get more students into college by supporting key reform strategies including:

- Adopting more rigorous standards and assessments
- Recruiting, evaluating, and retaining highly effective teachers and principals
- Turning around low-performing schools
- Building data systems that measure student success

States that applied for the grant also had to show momentum around collaboration and reform as well as promise to work in key innovation areas, including expanding support for high-performing charter schools and reinvigorating math and science education.

Forty states and the District of Columbia eventually applied for funding, and the U.S. Department of Education announced the winners of Phase 1—Delaware and Tennessee—in March 2010. The Department of Education released the names of the Phase 2 winners in August 2010, and they included the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, and Rhode Island. (Note: Another seven states received RTT Phase 3 grants in December 2011. This report does not examine their performance.)

The Phase 1 and 2 winners quickly began moving ahead on implementation and many used the dollars to fund major projects. Maryland, for instance, trained a team of teachers and a principal from every school on the Common Core, a set of new and more rigorous academic standards that are internationally benchmarked. But since the first grants were awarded, there have also been some setbacks and delays. In Hawaii, for example, the state's implementation of its grant has been "unsatisfactory," according to the Department of Education, and in late 2010, it placed the state in "high risk" status.

At the same time, the Obama administration has continued to push for new competitive grants. The president had been promoting a second Race to the Top challenge, and in his most recent budget request, he asked for an additional \$1.35 billion for the RTT program. The president's recent budget also put forth another new competitive program called the RESPECT Project, requesting \$5 billion to help schools attract, support, and reward great teachers.

In light of these developments, we wanted to engage in a project that would dig into RTT and get a better sense of what exactly was happening within the states that won the grants. What was going well? What was going wrong? What early lessons could be drawn for future federal education initiatives? To answer these questions, we enlisted a team of researchers to investigate each state's RTT efforts. We spoke to key stakeholders as well as examined research and implementation documents.

We also evaluated the states on their efforts, benchmarking their success against a set of key indicators. The ratings for each state are available on page 15 of this report. While we believe that our evaluations of state performance rely on the best available data and methods, we caution against making firm conclusions about the individual ratings of a state. For one, our evaluation of state RTT performance is not summative. The states are still in the early stages of their work and continue to implement key initiatives as this publication goes to press. Nor is our work exhaustive. The Department of Education has contracted with three top-flight research firms to conduct a full study of RTT, but it will be years until that report will be released.

Still with debates around the effectiveness of RTT growing louder, we believed it was important to take a look at what was happening in the states and gain a better sense of the program's early successes and failures. And despite significant caveats, we believe our evaluations of the states and the District of Columbia are the best available, given existing traditions and knowledge.

Overall, we found that although a lot of work remains to be done, RTT has sparked significant school reform efforts and shows that significant policy changes are possible. Among our specific findings:

- **Race to the Top has advanced the reform agenda, particularly around the Common Core and next-generation teacher evaluations.** RTT has done a lot to move forward the implementation of the Common Core, helping states develop robust professional development opportunities around the new standards. States have also used their RTT dollars to create new teacher- and principal-evaluation systems that include student learning as a component, and our research found that all of the states have either piloted or implemented new teacher-evaluation systems.
- **Many states are largely on track with their RTT commitments.** For the most part, states are making strong progress and have met many of their early Race to the Top commitments. And under our evaluation rubric, most of the states appear to be meeting expectations. A few states have been struggling, however, and due to a variety of reasons from political missteps to poor communications efforts, some states like Florida and Hawaii have had a hard time maintaining momentum.
- **In some states, there's been little collaboration between key stakeholders, and states could do more to communicate reforms.** In New York more than 1,000 principals have signed a petition protesting the new teacher-evaluation system, and a number of districts in the state, including New York City, have not yet been able to reach agreements with their teacher's union on the details of the new teacher evaluations. In other states, teacher's unions and other groups have also taken issue with some of the program's priorities, with teacher evaluation almost always being the most contentious issue. States could do more to communicate reforms, and we found that only five states post information from their monthly check-in calls with the Department of Education online. In other states it can take numerous calls to get basic information about a state's work under the grant.
- **Every state has delayed some part of their grant implementation, and some observers worry about a lack of capacity.** The delays vary widely. Massachusetts has postponed the development of a teacher-career ladder, while North Carolina has delayed its "instructional improvement system," an initiative that aims to help teachers improve classroom practice. Given that it's still early in the four-year grant, all the states still have the opportunity to recover and meet their goals. Still, some observers worry about the lack of capacity to execute complicated reform initiatives given tight deadlines. Or as one Florida reporter said:

“Only a handful of districts feel like they’re prepared to do [new teacher evaluations]. Most feel like they’re rushing.”

- **Some states will most likely not accomplish all of the goals outlined in their grants.** The goals that many of the states outlined in their applications are very high. Hawaii aims to erase the achievement gap by 2018, while Tennessee promises to have 100 percent of its students proficient in math and reading by 2014. States and districts very rarely, if ever, have reached such high achievement benchmarks, and it’s almost certain that some of the states will not meet their goals.
- **The U.S. Department of Education has played an important role in the program’s success.** The Department of Education has been holding states accountable for their performance. It has rejected amendments as well as made it clear that some states are not doing enough to execute their promises. This approach is new. Historically, the Department of Education has not had either the tools or the political will to push states in this way. The Department of Education has also done a lot to help states with implementation. State officials in Tennessee, for instance, have praised the Department of Education’s efforts to support their work.

In light of our findings, we recommend:

- **States should build capacity for reform.** States promised a great deal in their Race to the Top grants. If states plan to achieve these lofty goals they will need to do far more to improve capacity at the state and local levels to deliver on their promises. This means investing in both the people and the technology needed to produce results. It also means creating better management structures so that educators have the autonomy to innovate.
- **States must do far more to improve communications with stakeholders.** Many states don’t appear to have reliable ways to get information out to key stakeholders, and when they do make the attempt, they often produce glossy, overly optimistic documents that do little to build trust. This needs to change.
- **Collaboration among key interest groups—administrators, unions, and parents—will be key to the success of Race to the Top and states and districts must do more to create buy-in.** In some states, the voices of key stakeholders have not been heard, and so we recommend that states and districts do more to build a big tent when it comes to RTT implementation.

- **Competitive programs have impact.** This recommendation may seem familiar, but it only underscores its importance, and we hope that this report demonstrates the case for additional competitive programs based on the results of the early success of RTT. Congress should support the Obama administration's efforts to create additional competitive programs as well as fund another RTT program.
- **The Department of Education should continue to play a strong role in monitoring and supporting state performance.** The Department of Education has been closely following state RTT performance and shown a clear willingness to hold states accountable. The Department of Education should not waver in this regard since it appears that such support and monitoring has improved the effectiveness of the program.

We suffer under no illusion that a single competitive grant program will sustain a total revamping of the nation's education system. Nor do we believe that a program like RTT will be implemented exactly as it was imagined—one of the goals of the program was to figure out what works when it comes to education reform. Yet two things have become abundantly clear. There's a lot that still needs to be done when it comes to Race to the Top, and many states still have some of the hardest work in front of them. But it's also clear that a program like Race to the Top holds a great deal of promise and can spark school reform efforts and show that important substantive changes to our education system can be successful.

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