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Race to the Top — Round 2 Issue Briefs

Dear Education Reformer —

On March 29, the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) took the bold step of naming only two states — Delaware and Tennessee — as Race to the Top (RTTT) Round 1 winners. The process was highly selective, as these two states were chosen from a group of 16 finalists from an initial pool of 41 applicants. The first round awards to these two states were well-earned and highly deserved.

Simultaneous with the announcement of the winners, the USDOE published the peer reviewers' ratings and comments for all 41 applications. While the second round clearly will create a new scoring context, analyzing these initial ratings and comments can provide the remaining four states and the District of Columbia with the critical information they need as they prepare for Round 2.

To assist policymakers in the Round 2 planning process, we — [Democrats for Education Reform](#), the [Education Equality Project](#), and [Education Reform Now](#) — are publishing a series of “Race Smarter” briefs, based on analysis of Round 1 applications, with the goal of informing states' efforts to compete successfully for the remaining \$3.4 billion in Race to the Top funds.

We hope that these issue briefs will help state and local policymakers make the changes needed to enact education reforms that meet the very high standards set by President Obama and the aspirations and hopes we have for all of our nation's teachers and students.

The deadline for Round 2 is June 1, 2010. Given that the U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, has announced that as many as “10–15 states could be winners in Round 2” and that the USDOE has clearly set a very high bar for success, we expect to enter a period of debate and action as lively as that preceding the first deadline.

We look forward to working with our colleagues over the coming months to enact these necessary and overdue reforms.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM ROUND 1

A close review of the evaluators' scores in Round 1 can inform the ways that states can improve their reform policies and applications, as well as ways that the USDOE can improve the peer review process in Round 2.

Some Key Takeaways

Great teachers and leaders are key. It is more or less impossible to have a winning application without an ambitious and comprehensive plan to rigorously evaluate teachers and principals, improve teacher and school leader effectiveness, and equalize the distribution of qualified and effective teachers.

The **Great Teachers and Leaders** category accounts for 28% (138 out of 500) of all points. No state in the top 16 scored below 101.4 (73.4%) in that category. In contrast, the percentage of points awarded the bottom 10 states of all 41 applicants averaged 47.3%.

Rater inflation and differentiation. While we think the awards to Delaware and Tennessee were deserved, there were signs of rater inflation and/or limited rater differentiation of state applications in several areas, despite widely divergent approaches to school reform among the states.

In some places, raters actually ignored the instructions given by the USDOE. For example, some raters awarded points in Data Systems according to a different set of criteria than the 12 specified, as required under the American Recovery & Reinvestment Act (ARRA) per the America COMPETES Act. In the next round, USDOE will need to provide explicit instructions to reviewers and do more to ensure that those instructions are followed.

Under-emphasis on Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools. One area in which we find the “glass floor” for state RTTT scores and the lack of differentiation particularly troubling is Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools.

No state of the final 16 received less than 86% in this category. Given the difficulty all states have had in turning around their lowest-achieving schools, we find it hard to believe that high scores in this category reflect uniformly credible and ambitious approaches to school intervention (particularly since the floor for Great Teachers and Leaders, a key component of school turnarounds, among the top 16 was more than 10 percentage points *lower*).

We are also concerned about inconsistencies in the processes for awarding the \$4.35 billion in RTTT funds and the \$3.5 billion in School Improvement Grants, both approved under ARRA. Although these two grant programs are making determinations and awards simultaneously, the School Improvement Grant process is being implemented with far less public oversight and visibility than RTTT.

Three of the 14 states that were recently awarded School Improvement Grants (Maryland, Texas, and Washington) did not apply for RTTT Round 1. These states may or may not have worthy and credible school improvement proposals, but the fact that such policies are being funded and pursued in states without comprehensive reform plans should at least raise questions about their likelihood of success.

The scores for the School Improvement Grants awarded to the other 11 states vary widely, at least based on their RTTT Round 1 scores for “Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools” —

- AZ — 49%
- DC — 100%
- GA — 95%
- IA — 77%
- IN — 78%
- MN — 77%
- NC — 90%
- NJ — 87%
- NM — 63%
- OH — 86%
- WV — 54%

At the very least, there is a disconnect between the evaluation of state comprehensive reform plans under RTTT and the School Improvement Grants program. We think the integrity of both grant award processes needs to be reviewed closely and carefully, and overhauled if necessary, before the next round of awards are made, particularly given the importance of school turnarounds in the broader education reform landscape and the enormous and unprecedented amount of federal funds on the table.

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) can really make or break an application. STEM is an “all or nothing” category. Two states in the top 15 received zero points; if one of those states, Louisiana, had received the 15 points, it would have placed in a virtual tie for 3rd, rather than in 11th place. Conversely, had Pennsylvania, which received zeros from two of its five raters, received a 0 rather than a 15, it would have ranked 13th rather than 8th. This is an area to which states must pay very careful and close attention.

Stakeholder support, state-wide impact, and boldness. In the immediate days following the announcement of Round 1 winners, some observers claimed that stakeholder buy-in, in general, and union endorsement, in particular, were the decisive factors in the relative success or failure of state applications. Upon closer scrutiny, however, that conclusion seems to have been premature; the picture that has emerged is far more complex.

Winners Delaware and Tennessee did have 100% and 93% union support, respectively. But Rhode Island, with the lowest union support (4%) of any of the final 16 — except Washington, DC, (0%) — scored higher than three states that had 100% union support (KY, OH, and MA) and one that had 99% union support (NC). Florida, which only had 8% union support, came in 4th; Illinois, with 31% union support, came in 5th.

In short, support matters, but it is not necessarily decisive, and other factors play at least as important a role in both scoring and the actual impact of a state’s plan.

In Round 2, we urge both states and the USDOE, and by extension its peer reviewers, to carefully and equally weigh stakeholder support, state-wide impact, and the possibility for game-changing reforms in the evaluation of comprehensive reform proposals submitted under RTTT.

Buy-in is important. And states such as Delaware and Tennessee have demonstrated that boldness and consensus are not necessarily mutually exclusive. But whether or not all the adults are “happy” with what a state has proposed should not trump what ultimately best propels improvements in the quality of education provided to students and the choices afforded parents, especially if a state can demonstrate that its plan can be carried out and result in real and demonstrable change.

We hope the following RTTT issue briefs are helpful as policymakers work on the all-important and once-in-a-lifetime opportunities afforded by RTTT Round 2. We look forward to working with our colleagues across the country to continue the success that RTTT has had in catalyzing reforms at the federal, state, and local levels. Ultimately the goal of this work is to demonstrably improve education for *all* students.

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Recommended and Additional Resources

The New Teacher Project: [“The Real Race Begins”](#) (April 2010)

PIE Network: [Game Changers Newsletter](#) (April 2010)

USDOE: [States’ Applications, Scores, and Comments](#) (April 2010)

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Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) is a political action committee whose mission is to encourage a more productive dialogue within the Democratic Party on the need to fundamentally reform American public education. DFER operates on all levels of government to educate elected officials and support reform-minded candidates for public office.
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The Education Equality Project (EEP) is leading a civil rights movement to eliminate the racial and ethnic achievement gap in public education. EEP is a national, bipartisan advocacy group of elected officials, civil rights leaders, and education reformers working to bring equity to our public education system.
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