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Race to the Top – Round 2 Issue Briefs

RHODE ISLAND: Why It Lost and What It Can Do To Win in Round 2

To assist policymakers in Round 2 of the Race to the Top planning process, we – Democrats for Education Reform, 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. This memo provides specific analysis for Rhode Island.

OVERVIEW

Rhode Island received a score of 419 total points out of a possible 500, putting the state in a respectable 8th place out of all 41 states that submitted Race to the Top applications. The state fell 25.2 point short of the “cutoff” for winners in Round 1.¹ Rhode Island would seem to be among the front-runners for Round 2, at least within the current landscape.

Rhode Island’s strong showing is due in large part to its high peer review rating on Great Teachers and Leaders; the state earned a score of 121.2 (out of a possible 138), second only to Louisiana among the 16 finalists. This aligns with a growing consensus among policy analysts outside the Race to the Top peer review process that Rhode Island has one of the most ambitious plans for improving teacher and school leader effectiveness in the country. Rhode Island also scored well on Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving schools, ranking 5th.

The state lost the most points (25.2) on State Success Factors; only Illinois, Colorado, and Washington, DC, received lower scores in this area. There is no dancing around the fact that the state lost points due to a lack of union support. There is question, however, whether all of the reviewers understood that many of Rhode Island’s teacher evaluation policies will be implemented state-wide, whether a majority of local union chapters support them or not.

Moreover, one cannot discount the possibility that reviewers were influenced by the national publicity surrounding the Central Falls High School controversy, which is now being mediated and is likely to be decided with more union buy-in by the time of Round 2 reviews. There are already signs that reviewers found the state’s efforts to reach consensus persuasive during the oral presentation stage of the application process.

ROUND 1 SUMMARY

Although the second round clearly will create a whole new scoring context, Round 1 results are the best available means to inform what Rhode Island needs to do to compete successfully in Round 2. Below is a table summarizing reviewer results for Rhode Island.

SELECTION CRITERIA	POSSIBLE POINTS	POINTS GIVEN RI	NET LOSS	BEST IN CLASS
A. State Success Factors	125	99.2	25.8	Delaware (119.4) Kentucky (113.6)
B. Standards and Assessments	70	66.0	4	Ohio (69.4) Florida (69.0)
C. Data Systems	47	31.6	15.4	Delaware (47) Tennessee (43.6)
D. Great Teachers and Leaders	138	121.2	16.8	Louisiana (122.2) Rhode Island (121.2)
E. Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools	50	45.4	4.6	Washington, DC (50.0) Illinois (49.4) Tennessee (48.0)
F. General	55	40.6	14.4	Washington, DC (54.8) Florida (53.8)
G. STEM	15	15	0	Only DC and LA did not receive full points (15) in this category.
Total	500	419	81	

* DE had the highest score, with 454.6 points; TN, the other state to be awarded funds, received 444.2 points.

A low score on Data Systems also hurt the state's chances — its score of 31.6 (out of a possible 47) earned it 14th place among the 16 finalists, ahead of only New York and DC. The main problem in this category is that the state only had 6 of the 12 data elements required under the America COMPETES Act in place. All elements are, however, slated to be in place by September 2011. The reviewers are very constrained in how they award points in this category, so unless Rhode Island can change its implementation timeline, this may not be an area in which it can strengthen its application.

Finally, there is also significant room for improvement in the General category, where Rhode Island came in 13th place, with 40.6 out of a possible 55 points. The first problem here is that the state provided poor documentation of its education budget history and its system for distributing funds to Local Education Authorities (LEAs). This is an area that needs much more careful attention by the state as it prepares its second round application.

Rhode Island took a positive step forward during the Race to the Top process to expand charter schools when it approved the first of a series of Rhode Island Mayoral Academies in June. The first RIMA Academy opened outside Providence in September and currently serves 76 students with plans to expand to 328 in August, across school district lines, from Central Falls, Cumberland, Lincoln, and Pawtucket.

Still, the state suffered in the General category because of the lack of an overall, strong charter law and received only 31.4 of 40 possible points on “ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools.” Since the time of its application, however, the state passed a new charter school expansion law that greatly broadens the scope of the state's charter efforts and should garner it a significantly higher rating in Round 2.

SELECT REVIEWER COMMENTS

Great Teachers and Leaders

The state performed strongly in this area, and the reviewers' comments by and large reflect that.

Reviewer 1: “The development of a value-added growth model is a bold initiative that gets to the heart of [expectations] for successful student learning.”

Reviewer 2: “New BEP [Basic Education Program] regulations require that after July 1, 2010, teacher assignments will not be based solely on seniority and must match highly effective educators with classrooms of students who have significant achievement gaps.”

Reviewer 4: “The state has established some strong principles to govern distribution of teachers that will help create equitable distributions.”

State Success Factors

The state should pay close attention to state-wide impact and make a clear distinction between the number of students affected vis-à-vis union support and LEA buy-in (as Reviewer 3 did). Also, the state may want to note progress in its cooperative efforts with Central Falls and other schools in which it is intervening.

Reviewer 1: Regarding the written application: “[T]he lack of union support in all but 2 LEAs (though they are the largest districts) poses a serious threat to implementation in these districts.”

Regarding the interview: “They highlighted work underway with the AFT to build evaluation systems which they emphasized was how they want that process to work with union support.”

Reviewer 3: “Section III: RI reported that it has 45 LEAs, or 92% of the districts in the state participating in the reform agenda ensuring state-wide impact of the proposed agenda.”

Turning Around Lowest-Achieving Schools

This is an area in which the state has already progressed since its Round 1 application. The Round 2 narrative should be updated accordingly and highlight to these recent developments.

Reviewer 2: “Applicant has developed a plan with five research-based elements for supporting LEAs in turning around the lowest-achieving schools. Applicant acknowledges the need for change that will entail thoughtful investments in capacity building.”

Reviewer 4: “RI has a clearly articulated framework for intervening in low-performing [lowest-achieving] schools....Using an individual school reform planning process the plan aligns leadership, data on performance, and gaps in achievement and training needs of staff and the creation of a cadre of more effective teachers.”

General Factors

The state needs to do a much better job of explaining its education budget and formula for allocating funds to districts. By the time it submits its second round application, it will have a new charter school law in place, which should improve its score significantly in that sub-category.

Reviewer 1: “The state has a limit of 20 charters.”

Reviewer 2: “Applicant’s funding for charters is one of the nation’s fairest funding formulas.”

Reviewer 4: “There are numerical limits on the number of charters, although RI argues this does not effectively limit the number of schools, and the total enrollment (4%) in charters. Combined and individually they are barriers to entry and form a ‘low cap.’”

Reviewer 5: “The state does not provide any evidence in its application to illustrate the relative percentages of the state budget that were devoted to education in FY 2008 and 2009.”

Note: All state applications, scores, and comments can be found here:
www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/index.html

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DEMOCRATS for EDUCATION REFORM

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.
www.dfer.org

EDUCATION EQUALITY PROJECT

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.
www.edequality.org
[www.twitter.com/EdEquality](https://twitter.com/EdEquality)

EDUCATION REFORM NOW

Education Reform Now is a national education policy and advocacy non-profit organization fighting to dramatically improve the quality of public education for America's most disadvantaged children.
www.edreformnow.org