RACE TO THE TOP—The Initiative, the Pros and the Cons

The Initiative:

“America will not succeed in the 21st century unless we do a far better job of educating our sons and daughters... And the race starts today. I am issuing a challenge to our nation’s governors and school boards, principals and teachers, businesses and non-profits, parents and students: if you set and enforce rigorous and challenging standards and assessments; if you put outstanding teachers at the front of the classroom; if you turn around failing schools – your state can win a Race to the Top grant that will not only help students outcompete workers around the world, but let them fulfill their God-given potential.”  President Barack Obama July 24, 2009

Providing a high-quality education to every young American is vital to the health of our nation’s democracy and the strength of our nation’s economy. In a 21st century world, education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity and success – it is a prerequisite.

The Obama Administration is committed to reforming America’s public schools to provide every child access to a complete and competitive education. President Obama recently presented states with an unprecedented challenge and the opportunity to compete in a “Race to the Top” designed to spur systemic reform and embrace innovative approaches to teaching and learning in America’s schools. Backed by a historic $4.35 billion investment, the reforms contained in the Race to the Top will help prepare America’s students to graduate ready for college and career, and enable them to out-compete any worker, anywhere in the world.

The Race to the Top emphasizes the following reform areas:

- **Designing and implementing rigorous standards and high-quality assessments**, by encouraging states to work jointly toward a system of common academic standards that builds toward college and career readiness, and that includes improved assessments designed to measure critical knowledge and higher-order thinking skills.
- **Attracting and keeping great teachers and leaders in America’s classrooms**, by expanding effective support to teachers and principals; reforming and improving teacher preparation; revising teacher evaluation, compensation, and retention policies to encourage and reward effectiveness; and working to ensure that our most talented teachers are placed in the schools and subjects where they are needed the most.
- **Supporting data systems that inform decisions and improve instruction**, by fully implementing a statewide longitudinal data system, assessing and using data to drive instruction, and making data more accessible to key stakeholders.
- **Using innovation and effective approaches to turn-around struggling schools**, by asking states to prioritize and transform persistently low-performing schools.
- **Demonstrating and sustaining education reform**, by promoting collaborations between business leaders, educators, and other stakeholders to raise student achievement and close achievement gaps, and by expanding support for high-performing public charter schools, reinvigorating math and science education, and promoting other conditions favorable to innovation and reform.
Continue the Race

The Obama administration’s Race to the Top initiative has shown that competitive grant programs can be a powerful spur to innovation in education. Most of the 12 states that were awarded grants this year — and the more than 30 states that changed education policies in hopes of winning grants — would never have attempted reform on this scale without the promise of federal help.

The administration secured $4.35 billion for the program in the stimulus package and has requested $1.35 billion for next year. Congress should find the money.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan made clear that the process would favor bold reform plans from states with proven records of improving student performance. The states were required to create data-driven systems for training and evaluating principals and teachers; encourage the establishment of high-quality charter schools; develop plans for turning around failing schools; and demonstrate a strong political consensus for reform.

Critics predicted that the Education Department would cave, and end up financing mediocre programs, once members of Congress turned up the heat. Mr. Duncan held firm. In last spring’s first round, grants were awarded to only two of 41 applicants — Delaware and Tennessee. The second round ended last week, with 10 states sharing the remaining $3.4 billion in the fund. (The grants were prorated based on population.)

New York, which got nearly $700 million, improved its chances by adopting a new teacher evaluation system that takes student test performance into account and an expedited system for firing ineffective teachers. The District of Columbia received $75 million, based partly on its new performance-based teachers contract, an ambitious school turnaround plan and a novel program under which not-for-profits and others from outside the system will operate some struggling schools.

Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey initially blamed federal grant evaluators for the fact that his state lost out after filing the wrong budget information with its application. (Mr. Christie has fired his education commissioner over the matter.) But there were other equally self-inflicted wounds, including the Christie administration’s failure to build support for the application among unions and local school districts.

Thanks to the application process, even states that did not get grants now have road maps to reform and a better sense of what it will take to build better schools.
CRITIQUE OF RACE TO THE TOP

CIVIL RIGHTS GROUPS CRITICIZE RACE TO THE TOP’S MARKET-BASED, COMPETITIVE IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY AND REQUEST REVISION [July 25 2010: Framework for providing all students an opportunity to learn through reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act]

If education is a civil right, children in "winning" states should not be the only ones who have the opportunity to learn to learn in high quality environments. Such an approach reinstates the antiquated and highly politicized frame for distributing federal support to states that civil rights organizations fought to remove in 1965.

Implementation of Race to the Top’s grant process highlights our concerns about an approach to education funding that relies too heavily on competition. If states with large communities of color such as California, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas are left behind in any competitive grant process, significant numbers of black and brown children who are needed to meet (the administration's goal of becoming a leader in higher education attainment) will be left behind.

Any measure of teacher effectiveness must account for the degree of difficulty of the teaching environment so that high-quality teachers will not be deterred from working in high-need schools.

Good federal policy should mitigate the political inequities that serve as barriers to delivering the ultimate change that is so plainly desired and needed. By emphasizing competitive incentives in this economic climate, the majority of low-income and minority students will be left behind and, as a result, the United States will be left behind as a global leader.