

'Race to the Top' Finalists Prioritize Early Education

On March 29, 2010, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced the winners of phase one of the Race to the Top competition. The top two states, Delaware and Tennessee, were awarded \$100 million and \$500 million respectively to help fund their comprehensive education reform agendas.¹ Massachusetts ranked 13th of 40 participating states and the District of Columbia, but promises to strengthen its application for phase two of the competition.² High-quality early education systems are clear priorities in several of the states that outranked Massachusetts (*see below*). Race to the Top applications provide evidence that states are advancing this critical policy issue and integrating early learning into their larger education reform plans as a key strategy for improving student achievement and creating lasting change.

Innovations for improving early learning outcomes³

The Race to the Top competition includes "Innovations for Improving Early Learning Outcomes" as one of four invitational priorities that is not scored or counted toward the overall success of a state's application. This priority reflects the Obama administration's belief in the importance of early childhood education and the need to align the K-12 system with children's educational experiences beginning at birth.⁴ Most of the Race to the Top finalists offered strategies for improving children's early education and care, including the following:

- **Longitudinal data systems** – Most states, including Massachusetts, lack the data infrastructure needed to determine what services children receive prior to K-12 and link those early experiences to future child outcomes. In their Race to the Top applications, Ohio (#10), Pennsylvania (#7), and Kentucky (#9) all highlight their efforts to build statewide data systems. In Kentucky, this system includes public school pre-kindergarten, Head Start, Early Intervention and licensed child care. Child outcome data aligns with the state's early learning standards. The state plans to use this longitudinal data to inform instructional supports in the early elementary grades.
- **Quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS)** – Operating in 19 states and the District of Columbia, QRIS policies are used to assess, improve and communicate the level of quality of states' early education and care programs. For example, Delaware (#1) has operated a voluntary QRIS since 2006. More than one-third of Delaware's early education programs, reaching 10,600 children, participate in the rating system. The state has set a goal of having 75% of center-based programs participate in QRIS by 2015. Delaware also collects and reports data showing program rating increases over time.
- **Birth-5 standards** – Acknowledging the importance of high-quality programs for their youngest children, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Georgia (#3) and Tennessee (#2) have established standards for state-funded early education programs serving infants and toddlers. In Tennessee, these standards are tied to professional development via an online training module that 2,859 early educators have completed.
- **Professional development for early educators** – Georgia uses the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) to measure teacher-child interactions and then target professional development to specific needs. An evaluation is planned to measure participants' improvement in CLASS scores over time.
- **Program evaluation** – A number of states have evaluated their state-funded pre-k programs to document benefits for children. In Delaware, a longitudinal study of the impact of pre-k on child outcomes in grades K-5 showed at-risk children who attended pre-k outperformed comparison groups by 21% in reading and math.

Priority 3: Invitational Priority – Innovations for Improving Early Learning Outcomes (*not scored*)

Secretary Duncan is particularly interested in applications that include practices, strategies, or programs to improve educational outcomes for high-need students who are young children (prekindergarten through third grade) by enhancing the quality of preschool programs. Of particular interest are proposals that support practices that (i) improve school readiness (including social, emotional, and cognitive); and (ii) improve the transition between preschool and kindergarten. Source: Race to the Top, final application

- **Kindergarten readiness assessments** – Pennsylvania plans to introduce a norm-referenced standardized assessment for a sample of kindergarten children. This will complement formative assessments used by individual teachers to chart student progress over time. Illinois (#5) and Ohio also include this goal in their applications.
- **PK-3 alignment** – Recognizing the barriers that often divide early childhood and K-12 practitioners, South Carolina (#6) is planning annual conferences to bring school district personnel and early childhood community leaders together to focus on school transitions and the needs of young children.

Strategies for Children Inc. continues to monitor federal initiatives that impact early education and care, while advocating for a high-quality early education system here in Massachusetts. Policy initiatives such as QRIS, PK-3 collaboration, workforce development for early educators, and longitudinal data systems will help ensure that all Massachusetts children have access to high-quality early education and are well poised for success in the early grades of schooling.

Race to the Top finalists, Phase 1

<i>State</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Final Score</i>
Delaware	1	454.6
Tennessee	2	444.2
Georgia	3	433.6
Florida	4	431.4
Illinois	5	423.8
South Carolina	6	423.2
Pennsylvania	7	420.0
Rhode Island	8	419.0
Kentucky	9	418.8
Ohio	10	418.6
Louisiana	11	418.2
North Carolina	12	414.0
Massachusetts	13	411.4
Colorado	14	409.6
New York	15	408.6
District Of Columbia	16	402.4

Source: U.S. Department of Education⁵

¹ U.S. Department of Education. (2010, March 29). Delaware and Tennessee win first Race to the Top grants. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2010/03/03292010.html>

² Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2010, March 29). Massachusetts to continue pursuit for Race to the Top education funds. Retrieved from <http://www.doe.mass.edu/news/news.aspx?id=5439>

³ Specific state examples are taken from each state's response to "Invitational Priority 3 – Innovations for Improving Early Learning Outcomes" in its Race to the Top application, available at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/index.html>

⁴ See for example, the education page of WhiteHouse.gov, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education> and remarks by Jacqueline Jones, senior advisor to the secretary for early learning at the U.S. Department of Education, http://earlyed.newamerica.net/blogposts/2010/a_webcast_of_yesterdays_next_social_contract_presentation-30011

⁵ U.S. Department of Education. (2010, March 29). Race to the Top: Phase 1 Final Results. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/score-summary.pdf>