How 'Race to the Top' is rewriting U.S. education

$4.3 billion program spurring 'quiet revolution' in schools

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MEDILL NEWS SERVICE

WASHINGTON — When Education Secretary Arne Duncan inserted a half-page program description into the economic stimulus act last year, few except top Democratic leaders knew that it would create Race to the Top, a multibillion-dollar sweepstakes to overhaul U.S. schools that gave Duncan's department unprecedented power.

With only $4.3 billion — less than 1 percent of federal, state and local education dollars — Race to the Top is one of many small, relatively inexpensive projects that lawmakers plopped into the recovery act. What's striking about the competition, which awards millions to the states that best adopt Duncan-backed policies, is that the secretary arguably got more states to buy his brand of change in 18 months than any other U.S. school chief had in the Cabinet-level Education Department's 29-year history.

Forty-one states applied for the first round. Tennessee and Delaware were declared victors in March, and state education leaders spent the spring badgering their legislatures to pass Race to the Top-friendly laws for round two. Thirty-five states and the District of Columbia submitted applications by the June 1 deadline. Duncan selected 18 finalists in late July and will announce the winners of the latest go-around in September.

Last month, the secretary referred to it as part of a "quiet revolution" in U.S. school systems.

"States were willing to change their policies based on a gamble," said Brenda Welburn, the executive director of the National Association of State Boards of Education. "I didn't think they would invest the level of energy they really did."

It wouldn't always have worked out this way. The biggest teachers' union, the National Education Association, and other critics oppose making federal school dollars — usually controlled by formula — a contest. Lawmakers are loath to give so much control to the White House.

The inclusion of Race to the Top in the stimulus package, however, gave Duncan a unique opportunity: a peaking movement for change, a stimulus package laced with $100 billion in education money and a country of cash-starved states.

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"The talk at the time was about this was going to be Arne Duncan's slush fund," said Grover "Russ" Whitehurst, a former Education Department official who's now with the Brookings Institution, a center-left policy research organization in Washington. "I don't think the administration knew what it was going to be or that Congress knew what it was going to do."

Duncan set aside most of his agency's stimulus money for quick cash injections such as student aid or propping up school budgets. Race to the Top, on the other hand, wasn't an economic stimulus measure but a chance to influence education policy while Congress was preoccupied with jobs bills, regulatory restructuring and a Supreme Court nominee.

When Duncan announced the first winners in March — $100 million to Delaware and $500 million to Tennessee — it became pretty clear what he wanted: The finalists generally had lifted limits on charter schools, found some way to tie teacher ratings to students' test scores and signed on to the Common Core Standards, a national curriculum movement that sets benchmarks in English and math through the 12th grade.

The program springs from a single sentence inserted in the stimulus law. Though it suggests that Duncan account for things such as teacher quality, data use, new standardized tests and school turnaround, it also allows for "criteria as the secretary deems appropriate."

Duncan had championed contests since he was the CEO of Chicago's public schools, where he experimented with competitive pilot projects. The results, by most accounts, were mixed.

Race to the Top was a chance to take the concept national, said Jon Schnur, a former Duncan adviser who's credited with creating the national competition. After repeated talks with Reps. George Miller, D-Calif., the chairman of the House of Representatives Education and Labor Committee, and David Obey, D-Wis., the head of the House Appropriations Committee, Duncan gained custody of just over $4 billion. Schnur conceded that Race to the Top probably would have had few supporters in Congress as a standalone project.

When Sen. Christopher Dodd of Connecticut, the No. 2 Democrat on the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, was asked whether lawmakers grasped the program's scope, he said: "No. I understood it, but that's because I've been following the issues long enough."

Rep. Howard "Buck" McKeon of California, who was then the top GOP member on the House education panel, still pleads ignorance, and called Race to the Top an "administration deal," though he said he didn't press for answers at a small White House education lunch in February 2009. As Rep. Dale Kildee, D-Mich., put it, "You could figure it out if you wanted to."

All three lawmakers said they now generally supported Race to the Top, but none was as effusive as Miller.

"These are my best hopes," he said in May. "You see people doing things that a year ago they said they would never, ever agree to."

North Carolina Republican state lawmakers cited the White House when they tried to lift the state's cap on the number of charter schools in May. A Democratic majority defeated the measure, however.

Colorado Democratic Gov. Bill Ritter signed a teaching overhaul bill weeks before the round two deadline, despite opposition from the state's largest teachers union.

Lawmakers in Louisiana and Minnesota are considering similar measures, and performance statutes have passed in Connecticut, Maryland, Michigan, Tennessee and Washington state.

Opposition to at least some of Duncan's goals remains, however. Most teachers groups charge that it makes scapegoats out of educators; old-school Democrats loathe its reliance on charters; and others think that using a contest is unfair.

"We don't want vital school funding to come with Ed McMahon's picture on it," Lily Eskelsen, the vice president of the National Education Association, said in reference to the late American Family Publishers sweepstakes hawker. "You, too, can be a winner."

Still, the Obama administration has requested $1.3 billion for round three next year, and most on Capitol Hill predict that the program will continue.

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