

Race to Top Draft Application Lacks Substance, Boldness

Specifics Needed to Address Achievement Gaps, Improve Chances of Winning Grant

Executive Summary

The proposed strategies in Maryland's draft Race to the Top application are neither sufficiently specific nor bold. If the Maryland State Board of Education is serious about closing large and widening achievement gaps, it can deny state licensure to teachers who are not effective. For low-achieving schools, it can offer districts a choice to either improve staffing and services or close or contract the schools to third parties. These changes will make for better policy and a stronger application. Some local districts and unions might not sign off on the final application, but the State Board can and should make these changes anyway, and the State should not be penalized in the grant competition.

Background

The Maryland State Department of Education has released its draft application for the federal Race to the Top grant competition, Maryland can win up to \$250 million. The purpose of the grant is to close achievement gaps, and states are expected to make commitments regardless of whether they win the grant or not. Maryland must submit its final draft by June 1, 2010. Advocates for Children and Youth examined the draft and compared it to the two grant winners announced so far—Delaware and Tennessee.

Analysis of Key Proposals

1. **Implementing a teacher evaluation that includes student growth as 50 percent.** This is a significant step forward, and Maryland promises full implementation of the new evaluation system only one year later than Tennessee and Delaware. However, there are no specific consequences based on evaluations. Local districts will be *encouraged* to test new compensation systems and career ladders, but that does not indicate that anything specific will actually happen. Teachers will need to be rated at least effective to renew their state licenses, but this comes into play only after 8 years of teaching—3 years on an initial certificate and 5 years on the first regular certificate. In Delaware, teachers cannot get tenure if rated ineffective more than once, and tenured teachers are subject to removal if they get two consecutive ineffective evaluations or are less than effective two out of three years. Delaware also has a streamlined removal process for ineffective teachers, with limited appeals.
2. **Professional development for new teachers who work in challenging schools.** Teachers will get 5-year contracts and loan forgiveness. This is a sound idea, but it is not clear how many teachers will benefit or how this is different than Teach for America, which already exists in Maryland.
3. **Expanding New Leaders and New Schools and similar programs, i.e., professional development for new principals.** Another good idea, but it is not clear how many extra schools will benefit.
4. **Provide incentives to attract effective teachers to low-achieving schools.** There are no specifics on the size of any stipends or what other incentives will be offered. The State says it will set parameters and require locals to apply for funding, which is a good idea. However, pursuant to state law, local districts will need to get union agreement to incentives, which is a significant limitation. Delaware's application has specific stipend amounts.
5. **Local districts who participate will agree to assign only effective or highly effective teachers and principals to low-achieving schools.** From the application, it is not clear that districts have the authority to do this, since a teacher with seniority may have a right to certain assignments based on local collective bargaining agreements. Participating districts will also agree to prohibit from low-achieving schools any teacher rated ineffective two years in a row; however, these teachers can presumably go to another school. These changes will have to wait until the new evaluation is in place in 2012-13.



6. **Public reporting on statistics relating to teacher evaluations.** This is helpful, but it is not the same as requiring consequences based on the evaluations.
7. **The lowest achieving schools will receive the benefit of technical assistance from the State,** based on an existing model, called the Breakthrough Center. There is no indication how this approach has worked in the 20 schools involved so far. The application also does not mention what has happened in an additional set of schools that were required to zero-base their staff. The State will help local districts *explore* innovative organizational structures, flexible teacher schedules, changes to length of school day or year and incentive pay. However, the application does not indicate that any of these types of changes are taking place at schools currently working with the Breakthrough Center. It also does not explain how the State will overcome union agreements that may bar or hinder some of these changes. There is no indication that principals in these schools will have additional authority or that the schools will receive additional resources for services to students. In Delaware, the State can force changes or “carve outs” to the local collective bargaining agreements for these schools. In Tennessee, these schools are placed in separate districts that are not subject to the local collective bargaining agreements.

Discussion

Maryland has laudably decided not to rest on its education laurels. It has recognized that too many students are still not doing well and that it is impossible to raise standards for all students without providing all students with access to effective teachers and adequate services. The Race to the Top application forces states to address some of the fundamental causes of achievement gaps. Too many students have ineffective teachers. The solutions are not mysterious. Districts need to encourage talented teachers to come to and stay in classrooms with disadvantaged students. Incompetent teachers need to be removed. Empowered and proven principals are needed to oversee the transformation of failing schools.

While Advocates for Children and Youth cannot predict with certainty the fate of Maryland’s

application if it is submitted as is, the draft seems significantly weaker than those of Delaware and Tennessee. Other states that did not win grants also had stronger proposals and will submit even stronger revised proposals in June based on feedback received and new policies implemented.

Although local districts, school boards and unions are being asked to sign off on the current draft, there seems little point in submitting a proposal that has little chance of winning. It would be better to make revisions and seek support for those revisions, or for the State Board to move ahead with reforms outside of the application process.

Recommendations

To close achievement gaps and improve chances at winning the Race to the Top application, the Maryland State Board of Education can take the following actions:

1. Make a teacher’s receipt of a regular state certificate depend on effective performance during the first three years of teaching, and make the validity of the certificate depend on continued effective performance.
2. Specify how many new teachers in low-achieving schools will receive enhanced professional development to show that this strategy is of sufficient scope to impact a significant number of students.
3. Specify how many new principals in low-achieving schools will receive enhanced support to show this strategy is of sufficient scope to impact a significant number of schools.
4. Require assurances from local districts that teachers and principals in low-achieving schools are highly effective or force the local district to close or contract out the schools. This leverage will likely result in the district implementing sufficient incentives to convince highly effective staff to work in these schools.
5. Require local districts to have school improvement plans for the lowest achieving schools that incorporate necessary changes, including to lengthen the school day or year, or force the district to close or contract out the school. This leverage will likely result in local unions agreeing to reasonable modifications.