

Carolina Journal Exclusives

Critics Allege Politics Affected Race to the Top Outcome

'Blue' states fared better in funding than scores would indicate

By Jim Stegall

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RALEIGH — Did the Obama administration allow politics to influence the outcome of its signature education reform initiative, the \$4.3 billion Race to the Top grant competition? Several states that had been considered leaders in the kinds of reforms the administration had been pushing did not make the cut, while others sporting less impressive reform credentials did.

The nine winning states plus the District of Columbia barely had been announced when administration critics began to charge that politics had played a decisive role in the selection of some victors.

Jeanne Allen of the Center for Education Reform was quick to see political motivations behind the selections. "It's clear that some of these states were chosen for political reasons, as these states offer little or nothing to fundamentally improve schools and learning for all children," she said.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan dismissed the charges, saying that the winners were chosen by teams of impartial experts who had been vetted fully for any potential conflicts of interest. "We set a high bar and these states met the challenge," he said, adding, "We had many more competitive applications than money to fund them."

The judges were guided by a 500-point scoring rubric which awarded points for meeting specified reform criteria. Within those guidelines, judges could exercise a good bit of latitude. Duncan reserved for himself the responsibility of making the final selection of winners and losers, but he has stated that he did not alter any of the scores arrived at by the judges.

However, some critics believe partisan politics played a role. They point out that at least two states in which incumbent Democratic governors were fighting off strong Republican challengers seem to have gotten higher scores than their applications would merit.

In Maryland, which won a \$250 million grant by coming in sixth place, Democratic Gov. Martin O'Malley was locked in a tight battle with Republican challenger Bob Ehrlich.

Throughout July and August, when Race to the Top judges were assigning final grades to the states' applications and Duncan was reviewing the results, the RealClearPolitics.com average of polls was showing the Republican with a small but consistent edge.

At the same time, Ohio's Democratic Gov. Ted Strickland was trailing Republican challenger John Kasich. Ohio surprised many by winning the last spot in the competition (and \$440 million), edging out New Jersey by only three points.

Neither Maryland nor Ohio had been considered strong contenders by most in the reform community. The Cato Institute's Neal McClusky called Maryland's charter school law "one of the most restrictive ... in the nation."

O'Malley won re-election Nov. 2; Kasich narrowly defeated Strickland.

By contrast, Republican-led New Jersey and Louisiana were thought to be strong contenders, but they failed to make the cut. Louisiana in particular had been cited as a state with a strong reform agenda. Most observers were shocked that it lost out.

But Louisiana's governor is Bobby Jindal, often cited as a rising star in Republican ranks, and sometimes mentioned as a possible challenger to President Obama in 2012.

Republican Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey has garnered national attention as a tough-minded education reformer who successfully has taken on the teacher unions and education bureaucracy. Leaving those states out of the money was seen by some as an attempt by the Obama administration to take the two potential challengers down a peg.

It appeared to some observers that a state's importance in the Electoral College also might have played a role in how its application was treated. South Carolina, conservative and solidly Republican, submitted an application that some experts thought was comparable to that of Florida. Yet the Palmetto State finished well out of the money, while electoral-vote-rich Florida finished fourth, and won \$700 million.

"It's disappointing and surprising," said Jim Rex, South Carolina superintendent of education. "We placed sixth in round one and significantly improved our proposal for round two. National education experts who handicapped the competition ... seemed to think South Carolina was a lock to win."

Journalist Amanda Carey of The Daily Caller suggested that scorers might have had certain key congressional races on their minds as well. She cited Hawaii, which came in third in the competition and won \$75 million, even though the state had not been one of the 16 finalists in round one.

That state featured one of the nation's most watched congressional elections, as incumbent Republican Charles Djou struggled to fend off Democrat Colleen Hanabusa in the 1st District. Hanabusa won the race, one of the few contests this election cycle in which a Democrat defeated an incumbent Republican for the House of Representatives.

Education reformers also have questioned the role that teacher unions played in deciding winners and losers. Teacher unions generally favor Democratic candidates for office, and were big backers the Obama presidential campaign in 2008.

Since taking office, however, many teacher union leaders have been uneasy with the Obama administration's education reform agenda, especially his expressions of support for charter schools, merit pay, and tenure reform. Critics, such as the American Enterprise Institute's Rick Hess, question whether the design of the Race to the Top competition, which gives points for the degree to which teacher unions approve of a state's reform efforts, isn't really an effort to mollify a key disgruntled constituency.

In Colorado, after the legislature adopted a law linking teacher pay to student test scores, only half of the teacher union locals signed on to support the state's. The lack of union support cost the state points it could not make up in other areas, and Colorado finished well out of the money at a disappointing 17th.

In New Jersey, where the teacher union is locked in an increasingly bitter battle with Christie over his reform

plans, only 1 percent of teacher unions were on board. Had New Jersey's teacher unions supported the state's application, the state would have gained 14 points — more than enough to displace Ohio as a winner.

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