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At the Starting Line With Race to the Top

By Ray Suarez

On its face, it seems simple enough: Get states to compete with each other for enhanced funding for education from the federal government by asking them to adhere to some old ideas while coming forward with new ones.

Conservatives have been talking about bringing market-based reforms to education for years, but the most conservative state governors were reluctant to bite when the Department of Education dangled \$4 billion for Race to the Top. They have complained it will give the federal government even more influence in local education than the too much they already have.

With Race to the Top's emphasis on rating teacher performance and designs for performance-based pay, teachers' unions aren't very happy either. They profess their strong commitment to working with parents and administrators to fix what's wrong with America's schools, batting away persistent critiques that insist the teachers themselves are what's wrong with America's schools.

President Obama and Sec. of Education Arne Duncan are consistent, and insistent, that America's economic future is dependent on making public schools better. They educate roughly 9 of every 10 American children, and private, parochial, and home school options are simply not going to scale up in a way that will rival public education. Black and brown families in particular have a lot riding on school reform. Their children's high school and college completion rates are well behind those of Americans as a whole, and nothing less than a future in the middle class, a way out of poverty, is offered by school achievement.

For poor kids, there's Title One. In a country where a lot of educations are funded by real estate taxes, Title One injects federal funds into school systems where the children did not have the

wisdom and foresight to choose to be born to wealthy parents with big, high tax assessment houses. To at least cushion the effects of the luck of the draw determining how well-funded your K-12 education will be, Title One lifts up the schools with the highest concentrations of kids in poverty.

And rich kids... well, they're rich. They have access to private and public schools that provide some of the most exquisite educations available on planet earth. Their parents either pay tuition that rival university costs to send their children to private elementary and secondary schools, or tax themselves to pay for fabulously well-equipped schools.

Latino families have provided America's schools with a challenge they have yet to meet: take kids with a broad range of English language skills, widely varied number of years in the country, and get them the education they need to not only finish the requirements for a high school diploma, but the propel them on to college with the skills necessary to succeed there and stay there.

Schoolchildren of Latin American descent are heavily concentrated in big metropolitan schools districts like New York, Los Angeles Unified, and Chicago. But they are majority populations in small districts in the border regions, and a growing presence in suburban districts. There is no one size fits all response. There is, so far, no "scalable" solution that once succeeding in one part of the country, can be successfully exported to classrooms around the country.

Our recent edition of HITN's Destination Casa Blanca on the Race to the Top program (watch excerpts at www.hitn.tv/dcb) illustrated just how difficult it's going to be to get buy-in from the wide array of influencers and institutions that are going to have their fingerprints on the solution, whatever it is. Maryland Delegate Ana Sol Gutierrez talked of the urgent needs among her state's Latino schoolkids, and how Race to the Top provided necessary incentives for states to try new things.

Lily Eskelsen of the National Education Association pleaded for teachers to be brought along in the process, rather than dictated to be administrators. Neal McClusky of the libertarian think tank The Cato Institute returned again and again to the notion that the federal government already has too much control over American education, and that programs like Race to the Top only stifle innovation and competition, the very values the Obama Administration insists are at the program's heart. And Ronald Blackburn-Moreno of Aspira simply stated that long years of failure called for multiple approaches... after years encouraging Latino youth to finish high school and head to college, Aspira operates a dozen charter schools.

I get a little frustrated by these conversations, because they touch so little on the home and the environment created there. Poor and poorly educated parents can participate in their children's education every bit as much as wealthier and better-school parents can. Parents have to be reminded by the schools that they have their children as many hours as the schools do, and can play a big role in creating an atmosphere at home that values school, exalts achievement, and supports schoolwork.

As a student, and then as a reporter, I've been in urban public schools for more than 40 years. While teachers, administrators, and politicians blame each other for the dismal state of achievement in public schools, the kids are often a disheartening collection: angry, alienated, behind, knowing distressingly early on they are unlikely to go far in school.

It is heartbreaking. But the kids I encountered in high schools in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles and Washington have already lost too much valuable time. We started creating today's dropouts long ago, when they were giggly and fresh-faced seven and eight-year olds and beginning the years of below par achievement that would result for many a hatred of school by the

time they were 15.

For Blackburn-Moreno and Gutierrez, the situation is so bad America's got to try something new. For McClusky and Eskelsen, programs like race to the top carry threat along with promise. If the Obama Administration is in Washington long enough, it may get to see measurable results from these billions spent. If the administration leaves Washington after 2012, a new president may abandon efforts that haven't yet had time to work.

It will already be too late for millions of Latinos who will suffer unemployment, underemployment, low wages they may carry as a long term burden as a result of their years in school.

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