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Texas starts school funding Race to the Top

By [Lindsay Kastner](#) - Express-News

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan fired the starting pistol Friday on Race to the Top, a nationwide competition for education reform with a cash prize for the victors.

Texas will be competing for its share of a \$4.35 billion pot. The money will be divvied up among states that demonstrate innovative efforts at school improvement, Duncan said in a conference call with reporters. He stressed that winning states would help the nation's students become more globally competitive.

“A low-income, middle-class student in San Antonio should not be held to a lower standard in algebra than a student in Shaker Heights or a student in Shanghai,” Duncan said.

Texas' relatively sophisticated system for tracking student data could be an asset. States will be judged in four core areas, including their ability to use data to measure student success and help educators improve.

But some other states have already taken steps to get a head start, lifting caps on the number of charter schools they allow, for instance. Duncan has said such an effort would be looked upon kindly in the Race to the Top, but Texas lawmakers rejected an attempt to lift the state's charter cap during the most recent legislative session.

Texas is also one of just four states to sit out a voluntary project to create a set of common, national standards.

“We will reward states that come together and adopt a common set of standards and assessments,” President Barack Obama said Friday, saying he wanted the 46 states already involved to finish the effort. “I urge the other four to get on board.”

In an e-mail, Andrew Coulson, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, called the race — which already has states clamoring to meet federal priorities — “obedience training writ large.”

But Obama said the competition “will not be based on politics or ideology.”

He said too many states “are low-balling expectations for students” and states that want to be considered for Race to the Top funds should be working with teachers to find solutions and should be willing to challenge the status quo.

“Everyone has a role,” he said, applauding the UTeach teacher-training program at the University of Texas at Austin.

DeEtta Culbertson, a spokeswoman for the Texas Education Agency, said the state is planning to apply for

the money.

“We believe that we are well-positioned,” she said.

Friday, the state's request for federal stabilization funds for education was approved, a prerequisite to applying for Race to the Top money.

States must also show they have no legal barrier to “linking data on student achievement ... to teachers and principals for the purpose of teacher and principal evaluation.” Texas has no such barrier and in fact already links data this way, Culbertson said.

Applicants should also demonstrate they can:

- Turn around struggling schools.
- Adopt internationally benchmarked standards and tests.
- Recruit and retain top-notch teachers and principals.

States will have two chances to apply for the funds, beginning late this year, and states that are rejected in the first round will be permitted to revise their applications and try again.

“This is going to be stiff competition, but I think Texas can do it,” said U.S. Rep. Charlie Gonzalez, D-San Antonio.

The more than \$4 billion kitty is just a tiny fraction of what the federal government spends on education, but it is being touted as an unprecedented amount of money for an education secretary to single-handedly control.

“Finally, for the first time in history we have the resources at the federal level to drive reform,” Duncan said.

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