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## Race to the Top Finalists Announced, Some Reforms Ignored

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The nation's largest state was not among the 15 states and the District of Columbia chosen to advance in the competition for a share of Race to the Top funds, the Obama administration's \$4.35 billion pot of education-stimulus gold. School reformers in California said they were not surprised.

The legislation California passed late in 2009 to compete for Race to the Top funding was a group of "pretty weak laws that sounded good but were, in reality, limited and filled with loopholes," said Lance T. Izumi, director of education studies at the Pacific Research Institute, a San Francisco-based think tank.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) agreed, saying the "reforms we passed did move our state forward, they did not go far enough."

### Surprise at Finalists

While Schwarzenegger may profess not to be surprised California didn't make the first cut, other leaders across the country are scratching their heads trying to figure out why some states were chosen.

"Even [New York mayor] Mike Bloomberg was taken aback to see New York on the list," said Todd Ziebarth, vice president for policy at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

The finalists are Colorado, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

Only five of the 16—DC, Georgia, Colorado, Florida, and Pennsylvania—have strong charter school laws, Ziebarth said.

"While we're encouraged to see the states with relatively good laws and the states that have lifted caps on the list, we're baffled at some of the others," he said.

Four finalists—New York, North Carolina, Ohio, and Rhode Island—have weak charter school laws compared with other states, Ziebarth said. Illinois, Delaware, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Massachusetts all lifted caps on charter schools in response to RTTT guidelines.

### Planned Sequel

Still, no checks have been written and some observers expect only four to six states will actually receive funding when Duncan announces winners in April. June 1 is the deadline for second-round applications.

Bloomberg and New York Gov. David Paterson (D) had pushed state lawmakers to lift the cap on charter schools from 200 to 460. Not doing so, they said, would torpedo the state's chances of securing a \$700 million slice of the RTTT pie.

### No Charters, but Made Cut

Despite the Obama administration's earlier indication that states with limited or no charter schools would be at a distinct disadvantage, Kentucky made the list of finalists even though it remains one of only 10 states without a charter school law.

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John Stossel addresses the District of Columbia's Opportunity Scholarship Program.

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Ben Boychuk III is the new managing editor of *School Reform News*. He's available for research, writing, and speaking engagements on school reform issues from distance learning to vouchers and everything in between.

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After Education Secretary Arne Duncan announced the finalists on March 4, Kentucky Education Commissioner Terry Holliday wrote to state lawmakers claiming the state's Race to the Top application "stood out as a powerful, integrated plan for moving the state's education system to the next level."

However, when trying to win support from school-choice opponents for Kentucky's RTTT authorizing legislation in January, Holliday assured Kentucky's House Education Committee "there really isn't much change in the bill at all."

#### Obama's 'Nasty Frankenstein Monster'

Although Duncan claimed in his March 4 letter to U.S. governors that Race to the Top "eliminated barriers to reform," some reformers say the Obama administration's decision to end the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program undercuts that claim.

Programs like the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program proven academically rigorous and done so with much-greater fiscal efficiency than traditional government-run systems, says Andrew Coulson, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom.

After two years, nearly 2,000 students in the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program read at two grade levels ahead of their public-school peers and achieve that higher level of performance at about "a quarter of the cost," Coulson said.

During the 2008-09 school year, the DC public schools spent \$28,170 per pupil, compared to just \$6,620 for scholarship-program students, he said.

"Instead of just trying real market forces, [Obama's] trying to reinvent the wheel with some kind of hybrid of central planning and market incentives," Coulson said. "It's a nasty Frankenstein monster of an idea."

*Jim Waters (jwaters@freedomkentucky.com) is director of policy and communications at the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions in Kentucky.*

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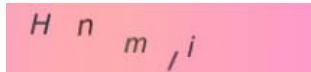
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