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Connecticut Misses First Cut in Race to the Top

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Written By: Jomaire Crawford

Published In: School Reform News > April 2010

Publication date: 03/15/2010

Publisher: The Heartland Institute

The Connecticut Department of Education and several Nutmeg State school districts failed to qualify for federal Race to the Top funding in the just-completed first round.

School reformers were critical of the state's Race to the Top application even before U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan's March 4 announcement of the first-round finalists for a portion of \$4.35 billion in federal education stimulus funds.

Critics pointed out the state legislature's failure to pass major reforms prescribed by federal guidelines, and they noted several fields on Connecticut's 680-page RTTT application were left blank.

Marc Porter Magee, chief operating officer of the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now (ConnCAN), a charter school advocacy group, said the state's failure in the first round underscored why the state must change its laws in order to be competitive.

"The fact that we weren't one of the 16 finalists reinforces the urgent need for reform," Magee said.

Call for Aggressive Reforms

ConnCAN is convening a series of summits with a bipartisan group of legislators, activists and even representatives from the Connecticut Education Association (CEA), the state's teachers union, to develop a plan for the next round.

Magee says Connecticut officials need to focus on three areas: Creating an alternative route to certification for principals, embracing new methods of measuring teacher effectiveness, and designing a new funding system for charter schools that lets money follow students.

"We must rally the public around these fronts to build the political will necessary to pass these reforms," Magee said.

"We're clearly behind. But if bills are passed by June, we'll have a good shot at being a finalist. The only way we'll get across the finish line is by passing aggressive reforms."

Highly Regulated Charters

Connecticut was vying for \$192 million of the \$4.35 billion Race to the Top pool. Applications for the second round are due in June.

Although states such as Kentucky made the first cut without passing a charter school law as RTTT rules require, Connecticut has a highly regulated charter school program. The Connecticut legislature in 2009 passed bills to create a longitudinal student tracking system and establish Common Core curriculum standards.

But the CEA opposed a bill that would link teacher evaluations to student progress.

'De Facto Federal Control'

Some school reformers question whether Race to the Top is worth the trouble, given the strings attached.

"The most direct threat to state self-determination is RTTT's focus on adopting common standards, which are for all intents and purposes national standards and, when coupled with federal funds, federal standards," said Neal McCluskey,

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associate director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom.

"And when the federal government decides what kids will learn, it rips the heart out of any meaningful state or local control," McCluskey said. "That is de facto federal control."

Jomaire Crawford (jomaire.crawford@yale.edu) writes from New Haven, Connecticut.

See more articles by Jomaire Crawford



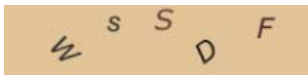
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