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Race to the Top Reality Check

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Race to the Top: Reality Check

As your mother always told you, if something seems too good to be true, it probably is. Sadly, as this Reality Check indicates, the Federal government's 'Race to the Top' program fits that bill.

The US Department of Education's announcement of the 'Race to the Top' (R2TT) – a competition offering winning states a share of \$4.35 billion – last summer brought hope to many that a new era of education reform was upon us. Both President Barack Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan traveled across the country talking about how this competition would "drive reform, reward excellence and dramatically improve our nation's schools". We were told that only true reform would be rewarded and that the Administration wasn't afraid to take on entrenched special interests.

Even before the competitors had reached the starting gate, President Obama, Secretary Duncan, and even erstwhile reformers had declared the 'Race' a smashing success, pointing to minor actions by state legislatures that the Administration claimed marked watershed moments for education reform.

But as the 16 finalists were revealed, some reformers grew skeptical of the impact this effort would truly have on education, largely because it seemed the 'Race' had, pardon the pun, been gamed. One state in the final round didn't even have a charter school law and others weren't tying student achievement growth to teacher evaluations, two components of the 'Race' the nation had been told were crucial to succeeding in the competition.

Once the two "winners" were revealed – Tennessee and Delaware – people's worst fears about R2TT were realized. In fact, the result was worse than expected, because far from incentivizing reform, the 'Race to the Top' turned out to be both a fancy essay contest (as we demonstrate in detail here) and a referendum on whether states were able to successfully court the support of teachers unions and reform-wary school districts.

The buy-in from these groups was an important – and, some would argue, determining – factor, as these two states had almost 100 percent support from local education agencies and teachers unions. With so much money at stake, and so much power yielded to unions and bureaucrats, it was clear that true reform had fallen to the wayside.

A read through the state applications and reviewer comments paints a depressing portrait of the reform landscape – and a stark reminder that sometimes, crafty text in applications doesn't reflect reality. For example, there is a clear disconnect between what was written in many applications and what is really going on in the state. Some states used flowery language to mask their lack of reform-minded ideas, others lied about equitable funding or caps on charter schools, and still others created teacher evaluation systems that contained no real policy changes or repercussions for failure.

If the applications themselves lacked a true emphasis on real reform, the reviewers in the 'Race to the Top' competition were another matter altogether. To judge the 41 applicants, 49 reviewers were chosen. None of these individuals was reform-minded and a majority of reviewers came from the ivory towers of academia. When grading state proposals, outside knowledge and fact checking was not allowed, so when a state said they had no charter cap, the reviewer had to believe it. When grading applications, outlying scores weren't eliminated or discussed, causing a state to drop three or four spots because of one reviewer's bias in a given category.

With the next round of applications due June 1 – and a majority of states re-applying – it is important to look back at the first round of 'Race to the Top' and separate the cold, hard truths from the well-written, nicely finessed – but still false – fictions. So, join us in this Reality Check, a Cliffs Notes version of some claims made in Phase 1 finalist applications if you will, as we correct the record.

WARNING—there are some real doozies.

Fact or Fiction?

Delaware

(1st Place Winner, 454.6 points)

Delaware was one of two Phase 1 winners, which many attribute to the comprehensive sign-on of all stakeholders, the teacher evaluation system and support for charters. But, is it really all it's cracked up to be?

From the application:

"Delaware is among the most welcoming states for charter schools. Unlike other states, Delaware has no cap on the total number of charters..."ⁱ

Reality Check:

True, Delaware has no cap. But the application does not make clear that there have been three separate moratoriums on charter applications enacted by the state board of education, the latest in 2008. No new schools opened in 2009 and only three are scheduled to open in 2010 – hardly worthy of a “most welcoming” characterization.

From the application:

"School operators may apply to either the DDOE or the local public school board to gain a charter."ⁱⁱ

Reality Check:

Only one school district, Red Clay, has ever authorized a charter school, and of the 19 in the state, they only sponsor three. Recently, schools sponsored by Red Clay began opting to switch their authorizer to the state as the local district impedes upon their autonomy. So the attempt by the McKinsey consulting firm authors to paint the state's charter law as inviting is misleading at best.

From the application:

"Delaware mandates that an educator cannot be rated effective or better unless they have demonstrated satisfactory levels of growth."ⁱⁱⁱ

"These summative ratings are linked to other significant actions, including providing for additional compensation.....and ultimately providing a statutory basis for termination."^{iv}

Reality Check:

The growth model is alive and well in Delaware, allowing all schools the ability to evaluate teachers based on how much they contribute to a child's learning. If only that data was used to actually pay a teacher based on his or her strength in the classroom. Delaware's model – like many other much praised and so-called performance pay models – allows student growth to be defined beyond test scores, using subjective methods such as observation and self-assessment. The money from 'Race to the Top', however, will be spent on the hiring of coaches and on providing support to teachers, who will eventually be evaluated in part on the growth of their students, though just how the state and districts will measure growth won't be determined or finalized until July 2011.

Tennessee (2nd Place Winner, 444.2 points)

Phase 1's other winner, Tennessee, was also praised for the almost unanimous buy-in from districts and teachers unions. They championed their existing student data tracking system and teacher evaluations, and were praised for the changes they made to the state's charter law.

From the Application:

"Annual evaluations include at least the following components: Objective student achievement data will comprise 50% of the evaluation...35% of the evaluation will be based on student growth...15% of the evaluation shall be based on other measures..."^v

Reality Check:

It's all in the way data is presented. The Volunteer State's application implies that a greater amount of student growth counts towards teacher evaluation than is actually the case. The application says, but does not make clear that student growth is still only 35 percent of that process, not 50 percent. The rest of how they will determine teacher performance is left up to multiple measures, classroom observation and other assessment tools to be decided. The organization of the data into bullets intentionally confuses the reviewer.

From the Application:

"Conversion schools - existing public schools that convert themselves into charter schools...do not count toward the cap."^{vi}

Reality Check:

Tennessee increased the overall cap on the number of charters from 50 to 90. But with other more important restrictions in the law remaining – such as qualifying limitations (cities with enrollment of 14,000 students with at least 3 failing schools) that allow only seven school districts to authorize charters and the continued enrollment bias toward only kids in failing schools – only 23 have been approved to date (not even half way to the state's original cap of 50). Of those "unlimited" conversion schools the state can open? So far, only one has opened. In addition to the cap increase, the state said "it expanded charter school eligibility in qualifying school districts to include all students who are eligible for free and reduced lunch".^{vii} But, that leaves thousands of other students who cannot attend charters because they aren't poor enough, but still may need individualized attention or a different learning environment.

Georgia

(3rd Place, 433.6 points)

From the Application:

"Value-added scores will be calculated on the basis of standardized tests currently available.....Georgia does not plan to create new summative tests in non-core areas. Georgia plans to invest in the development, testing and evaluation of alternative quantitative measures to assess student engagement and student achievement."^{viii}

Reality Check:

Only 30 percent of all teachers will have valued-added scores because the CRCT is only given in main subject areas. Alternative measures usually involve subjective evaluations by other teachers and self-assessment on skills, instruction and student learning. A reviewer sums up the Peach State's teacher evaluation section thusly: *"Georgia didn't clearly articulate how its evaluation system works."*

Florida

(4th Place, 431.4 points)

From the Application:

"We have progressed as far as we can in our quest for an effective teacher in every classroom absent a meaningful measure of teacher and principal effectiveness."^{ix}

Reality Check:

Kudos for being one of the only applications self-reflective enough to admit that **more needs to be done** in evaluating teachers and improving student progress, even if the timeline was a little long – 80 percent of teachers evaluated by new system by 2013-14.

From a Reviewer:

"Only 8% of local collective bargaining leaders endorsed the application."

Reality Check:

Honestly, how does a competition focused on reform allow an incredibly strong application to lose points because reviewers were overly concerned about union buy-in (contrary to what Education Secretary Arne Duncan has been saying)? True reform to the education system will not have union buy-in, as evidenced by Gov. Crist's recent (self-serving) veto of SB 6, which would have been a game changer for teacher evaluations and eliminated tenure.

Illinois (5th Place, 423.8 points)

From the Application:

"The state will develop parameters; will partner with a national evaluator; will adopt the Danielson Framework for Teaching; will include the ratings categories....."^x

Reality Check:

Nothing in Illinois' teacher evaluation section is even written in the **present tense**. Had it not been for the last minute passage of the Performance Evaluation Reform Act of 2010 (signed in January – Hmm, R2TT applications were due January 19...) there would be no new teacher evaluation system. The program will not be implemented in the whole state until 2016 - a long way off.

From the application:

"Purpose of studying the need, if any, for an independent authorizer in Illinois....."^{xi}

Reality Check:

Independent charter school authorizers are needed in all states that want high-quality, accountable charter schools. In the Prairie State, only school boards can authorize charter schools and, outside of Chicago, they have been very resistant to approve them.

From the application:

"Outside of Chicago, the statutory cap has not been a barrier to charter school growth...."^{xii}

Reality Check:

True, but only because school districts outside of Chicago consistently reject applications – not based on a proposal's merit but based on their own fears and biases against charters. Because of R2TT, Illinois raised its overall cap from 60 to 120, granting Chicago a total of 70 charters, with the rest spread throughout the state. Chicago had previously reached its cap and was only permitting existing schools to open additional campuses, but with the new cap extension, new charters are restricted to one campus only.

South Carolina (6th Place, 423.2 points)

From the application:

"Objective D1.5: By the end of the grand period, ADEPT will include student growth as a component of the annual teacher evaluation process."^{xiii}

Reality Check:

This generic sentiment is found in several places throughout their proposal, but nowhere in the Palmetto State's application do they specify what percentage of the evaluation will use student growth data or value-added measurements, and there is **no timeline given**.

From the Application:

"To address concerns about the SCPCSD's funding and despite significant revenue reductions.....added \$700 per weighted pupil unit for the SCPCSD."^{xiv}

Reality Check:

Charter schools authorized by the South Carolina Public Charter School District (a statewide district created because of local district hostility to charters) **do not receive any local funds**, and because of this, are receiving \$3,000-\$4,000 less per-pupil than other charter schools. A law that has added \$700 per pupil to these schools is not going to do much to help close the gap and because of this gap, brick and mortar charters are reluctant to apply to the SCPCSD.

From a Reviewer:

"The state has one of the most flexible, open, and transparent charter school provisions in the nation."

Reality Check:

Wow! Where to begin? South Carolina may promote itself as a beacon for charter schools, and yet CER has given their state law a low C for the last two years in our *Charter School Laws Across the States Rankings and Scorecard*. South Carolina's charter law is hindered by funding and facility inequities, and by a lack of teacher freedom in all types of charters.

Pennsylvania

(7th Place, 420 points)

From a Reviewer:

"All of this sounds excellent, however, no virtual schools currently exist in the state."

Reality Check:

A reviewer who did not read the application thoroughly, obviously. Smack dab on page 158, the application notes that there are currently 11 virtual charter schools operating in the state serving 22,000 students (this in addition to 124 brick-and-mortar charters).

True education reform should be disruptive and exciting... The Keystone State's application put even the R2TT judges to sleep.

Rhode Island

(8th Place, 419 points)

From the Application:

"...the Commissioner and Board of Regents have a deliberate strategy to grow the number of high-performing charters and other innovative schools."^{xv}

Reality Check:

In other words, the Ocean State has a prohibitive cap of allowing 20 charters in the state (they currently have 13) and nothing for the moment will change that. Additionally, there is an enrollment cap in effect, which prohibits charters from educating more than four percent of students statewide. Even with the addition of Mayoral Academies for high quality charter networks, the Ocean State's law has far to go.

From the Application:

"...the future of charter schools in Rhode Island is very promising."^{xvi}

Reality Check:

Unless big changes are made to the state law, charter schools will struggle to open for years to come. Currently, only the Board of Regents can approve charters, after the application has been approved by the local school committee or state commissioner of education (with the exception of Mayoral Academies). The biggest obstacle is a lack of autonomy - charters must apply for waivers, virtual schools aren't allowed and teachers are covered by a district bargaining agreement.

From a Reviewer:

"The lack of union support could seriously dampen efforts in these districts. The lack of union support in all but 2 LEAs poses a serious threat for implementation in these districts. The strategies to gain teacher union support will be critical for successful implementation of this program."

Reality Check:

And Secretary Duncan said that teacher union buy-in wasn't important?

Kentucky (9th Place, 418.8 points)

From the Application:

"The goals of the school-based decision making legislation are the same as the goals in most state charter laws."^{xvii}

Reality Check:

The Bluegrass State is one of the last 11 in the US to not have a charter law. They even managed to successfully convince at least one reviewer that they developed a "charter-like" structure. True education reformers know that couldn't be further from the truth.

From a Reviewer:

"The language is not clear; applicants might expand; more details would be helpful; they made no mention of changing this model."

Reality Check:

Based on reviewer comments, the application lacked details, depth and clarity, and held firm to the status quo - and yet they placed ninth in the competition? That's more than a little concerning.

Ohio (10th Place, 418.6 points)

From the Application:

"As a collective bargaining state, these evaluation systems will be memorialized in negotiated agreements between the participating LEA and the teachers' union."^{xviii}

Reality Check:

The teachers unions won't support any type of reform ties actual student performance to individual teacher pay or retention, so any negotiation entered into will hardly memorialize change.

From the Application:

"Ohio does not cap the number of bricks-and-mortar charter schools."^{xix}

Reality Check:

It's easy to lie in an application when the reviewers aren't allowed to verify data. Ohio does not allow any new start charter schools to open unless they are replicating other academically successful charters. Charters are also only allowed to open in eight large urban districts. Governor Strickland has created an anti-charter school (and overall anti-reform) atmosphere, so it would be almost impossible for real education change to occur in the Buckeye State.

Louisiana

(11th Place, 418.2 points)

From the Application:

"Louisiana has 70 local school boards.....[which] can act as charter authorizers....."^{xx}

Reality Check:

The majority of charter schools are located in New Orleans, and many are run by the state's Recovery School District, and approved by the state department of education. If it weren't for Hurricane Katrina, there would be hardly any charters in the state. The majority of charters are sponsored by the state, and outside of the Big Easy, districts sponsor only a handful of charters, and some schools have been battling for years with their district to get equal funding (or even to open). The cap on charters was eliminated this past year, but with charters in RSD exempt anyway, **removing the cap was largely symbolic.**

Note on Scoring:

Outlying scores were not thrown out or assessed when tallying final scores for applications. One reviewer gave the Bayou State a 349, about 70 points below the second lowest score and 108 points from the highest. Because all 16 finalists scored 400 or higher on a 500 point scale, this outlier caused Louisiana to drop significantly. Maybe like the old scoring system of figure skating, the highest and lowest scores should be dropped to remove any biases.

North Carolina

(12th Place, 414 points)

From the Application:

"NC also has additional schools that are intended to function as 'charter-like schools without charters'....."^{xxi}

Reality Check:

Hardly a public school choice friendly state, let alone charter friendly, North Carolina should focus its words on improving their charter school law that local districts and the state board of education manage to keep fixed in place, with high regulation and cap of 100 schools which was reached years ago. On top of that, charter schools are deprived of equitable dollars embroiling them in costly lawsuits for their fair share. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district **owes charter schools millions of dollars** in local funding that they never received.

From a Reviewer:

"The state presents a clear, compelling and internally consistent agenda for education reform that addresses all of the parameters of the notice."

Reality Check:

Except for the fact that the teacher evaluation system is extremely vague, there is no discussion of how data will be used to evaluate teachers and the alternative certification routes don't seem very alternative. North Carolina has been consistent with charter schools, though - consistently unsupportive.

Massachusetts

(13th Place, 411.4 points)

From the Application:

"Massachusetts has not revised its educator evaluation regulations since 1995, and the regulations currently do not include any measures of effectiveness based on student performance."^{xxii}

Reality Check:

No kidding. But, the Bay State has no intention of revisiting these regulations until 2013 when they will talk about these issues with ten LEAs in a pilot program. Then they'll talk in regional network meetings. And then they'll talk with more districts until, finally, **something might happen**. (Or will it?)

From the Application:

"Massachusetts is one of only two states in the nation with a single authorizer...."^{xxiii}

Reality Check:

While its Department of Education has functioned well in the past as a strong authorizer, having only one so heavily regulated in nature is not something to be proud of. Conversion schools must be approved by the local district and the union prior to final approval. While the state is a very selective authorizer and approves strong schools, giving applicants other options would only improve the quality of charters in the state.

From a Reviewer:

"The LEAs have not promised to implement; only 2/3 of the state's LEAs are participating...."

Reality Check:

It looks like if states didn't have 100 percent of LEA and union buy-in, they were passed over pretty quickly.

Colorado

(14th Place, 409.6 points)

From the Application:

"The Governor's Council was created through executive order for the purpose of making recommendations to ensure that every educator in Colorado is: (1) Evaluated using multiple, fair, transparent, timely, rigorous and valid methods...."^{xxiv}

Reality Check:

Colorado was the frontrunner in the beginning of this competition, but watered down their application tremendously due to union opposition. The application spends a lot of time talking about the Council's plans to figure out how to create a new teacher evaluation system using student data, and indicates no intention of implementing until 2013.

**Note: It was not until after the January 2010 application was filed that Colorado enacted a new law mandating a Delaware-like approach to teacher evaluations, which should help them in this next go around, but at Round 1 was just rhetoric.*

From the Application:

"Evaluations will be used for 'dismissing ineffective teachers and principals after they have had ample opportunities to improve (no later than SY 2013-2014).'"^{xxv}

Reality Check:

Do you think the unions were involved here? Originally, Colorado wanted to revamp the entire tenure and teacher evaluation process, making it easier to fire teachers that weren't meeting certain standards.

New York

(15th Place, 408.6 points)

The Empire State submitted a 908-page application that *doesn't address the key issues of reform* for R2TT - tying student growth and achievement data to teacher evaluations, modifying or eliminating tenure, and removing or raising a restrictive charter school cap.

From the Application:

"We are requiring participating LEAs to commit to implementing numerous synchronized reforms endorsed by the Regents....."^{xxvi}

Reality Check:

With constant opposition by teachers unions in New York, good luck getting any districts to support these education reforms, much less agree to implement them.

From a Reviewer:

"A limit of 200 start-up charters in a state with over 4,500 schools, coupled with the lack of a convincing rationale for such a cap is a significant cause for further deduction."

Reality Check:

At least the wool wasn't pulled over every reviewer's eyes. The independent authorizer, SUNY, has only a handful of charters left to give out to worthy applicants, and it is expected they will use them all up this year. This reality is only darkened by the fact that New York City and the State Board of Regents are unable to approve any more charters. There have been numerous attempts to raise the cap to at least 460 (if not eliminate it all together), but the strong opposition from the teachers unions and loud politicians has made this difficult, if not impossible.

Washington, DC
(16th Place, 402.4 points)

From the Application:

"DCPS has completed Phase I of IMPACT: the herculean task of launching the system."^{xxvii}

Reality Check:

An application that already has an evaluation tool collecting data to link teachers to student growth? How novel! Reviewers seemed to have little faith in DC's ability to develop the system comprehensively and in such a quick timeframe, though.

From a Reviewer:

...show mixed results and continuing and sizeable achievement gaps.

Reality Check:

Even with consistent improvement on test scores, particularly on NAEP math and reading, reviewers just don't seem to want to believe that what was known as one of the worst school districts in the country could actually be **improving under a new system**.

The Washington Teachers Union refused to sign the application, giving DC a union support percentage of zero, which caused their application to receive low points in some categories.

ⁱ Delaware Application, F-8

ⁱⁱ Ibid, F-10

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, D-9

^{iv} Ibid, D-10

^v Tennessee Application, p. 85

^{vi} Ibid, p. 138

^{vii} Ibid, p. 136

^{viii} Georgia Application, p. 98

^{ix} Florida Application, p. 123

^x Illinois Application, pp. 96-98

^{xi} Ibid, p. 158

^{xii} Ibid

^{xiii} South Carolina Application, p. 109

^{xiv} Ibid, p. 198

^{xv} Rhode Island Application, p. 167

^{xvi} Ibid, p. 168

^{xvii} Kentucky Application, p. 211

^{xviii} Ohio Application, D2-1

^{xix} Ibid, F2-1

^{xx} Louisiana Application, p. 173

^{xxi} North Carolina Application, p. 164

^{xxii} Massachusetts Application, p. 86

^{xxiii} Ibid, p. 150

^{xxiv} Colorado Application, p. 73

^{xxv} Ibid, p. 75

^{xxvi} New York Application, p. 125

^{xxvii} Washington, DC Application, p. 97