The Race to Reform: How Education Reform Advocates are Leveraging Race to the Top

Overview
The high stakes and short timeline for applying for federal Race to the Top grants have created tremendous pressure on states to develop bold plans for school reform. Before the first round of competition rewards the handful of states expected to win funding, it’s worth calling attention to the important victories many states have already seen from this effort.

- The competition spurred dramatic shifts in political will, leading to changes in laws in California, Illinois, Washington, and Tennessee that until recently seemed to be impenetrable legal barriers to education reform.
- It provided a ready vehicle for comprehensive reform efforts underway in states like Delaware, Florida, and Tennessee.
- As the competition heads into a second round, it will provide ongoing opportunities to leverage tougher reforms in states like California, Connecticut, Oklahoma, and Oregon, which did not advance in the first round, and a challenge to states like Washington, one of ten states that didn’t apply in round one.

This monograph, the first in a series of occasional papers from the Policy Innovators in Education Network, looks at the critical role of leading advocates for education reform in leveraging this opportunity. Their efforts remind us of the need for active civic engagement in the policy making process in order to turn bold ideas into workable public policies.

Seven states highlighted in this paper (Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Ohio) were named as finalists for Race to the Top grants. Other states highlighted (including California, Connecticut, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Washington) remind us that the race is still on; that successive rounds of this competition will continue to provide advocates with unique opportunities to advance reform.
The Race to Reform: How Education Reform Advocates are Leveraging Race to the Top

By Richard Lee Colvin and Suzanne Tacheny Kubach

When Gov. Phil Bredesen and leaders of the Tennessee Legislature began crafting a bill last fall to improve the state’s chances of receiving a share of the $4.35 billion in federal “Race to the Top” funds, they did not have to search far for ideas about what to include. An organization called “Tennessee SCORE,” whose 26 organizational partners include the state’s department of education, had already issued specific policy recommendations for teacher compensation reforms, improving school leadership, making it easier to settle tenure disputes and using student outcome data in teacher evaluations. The legislation that eventually passed to bolster the state’s entry into the federal grant competition included six provisions that came out of a reform plan issued by the independent education policy advocacy group. In addition, the state raised its cap on charter schools.

It is not surprising that SCORE, which stands for Tennessee State Collaborative on Reforming Education, was an influential contributor to the state’s efforts. It was formed in February 2009 to help the state’s schools and students meet the requirements of the Tennessee Diploma Project, an initiative of Gov. Phil Bredesen, a Democrat, to ensure that high school students are ready for college or a career. It is chaired by former U.S. Senator William H. Frist, a Republican. In addition to the state education department,

Racing to the Top: A unique opportunity for reform

On March 4th, 2010, the U.S. Department of Education named 16 finalists in the first round of its “Race to the Top” competition, which will deliver $4.35 billion in school reform grants. Selected from a pool of 41 applicants 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. The winners will be chosen April 1st. States that fail to win can reapply by June 1 for a second round of funding.

“These states are an example for the country of what is possible when adults come together to do the right thing for children,” U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said in announcing the finalists.

The grants are designed to reward states that have adopted and will continue implementing innovative reforms to improve student performance. Each of the finalists earned a grade of at least a B on its application, scoring above 400 points on a 500-point grading scale that measured each state’s blueprint for education improvement and, specifically, its commitment to improving teacher effectiveness, data systems, academic standards, and low-performing schools.
SCORE’s partners include business groups, Vanderbilt University, and the Tennessee Education Association teachers union. The group’s steering committee, which counts as members the chairs of the education panels in both houses of the Tennessee Legislature, based its five-year plan on information and insights gathered from more than 70 town hall meetings, 75 interviews with experts, and eight statewide forums with national education reformers. One purpose of the plan was to build on Bredesen’s accomplishments in education and set the agenda for whoever replaces Bredesen in 2011. Four members of the committee that wrote the state’s application also had SCORE connections. It also was not a coincidence that the group’s recommendations were aligned with the policies endorsed in the selection criteria for the grant.

“The ideas that were in our final report were consistent with what the governor believed in and also with what was in the Race to the Top,” said Brad Smith, the group’s Executive Director, who had previously worked in both the education policy and political realms, serving in the White House under George W. Bush. The group’s efforts to build consensus among its organizational partners helped bring that about. “We had the right people on our committee and the fact that they were chosen to be part of the process was really important for us to be able to influence the outcome,” Smith said.

The state’s efforts paid off. Tennessee was one of 16 jurisdictions advanced to the next stage of the process.

**Changing Political Will**

For a new organization, SCORE’s effectiveness in promoting education reforms and gaining support for them is worthy of note. It is but one of a growing number of state education reform advocacy groups across the country that appear to be having an outsized impact on state policy and politics. These groups work in a variety of ways to build the political will needed to consider and in some cases implement new solutions to longstanding educational problems that are unpopular with many education interest groups. They use strategies pro-education reform groups have used in the past, including conducting and commissioning research, highlighting problems, proposing solutions, and building grassroots support. But, depending on the political and policy context of their states, they also are experimenting with activities that are more commonly used by advocates such as the environmental lobby, AARP and national and state teachers unions. They are mobilizing voters to write letters, testifying in legislative hearings, getting media to pay attention to their perspective on issues, and engaging in direct lobbying on behalf of favorable legislation and in opposition to bills they think undermine quality education and harm the interests of parents and students. In some cases, these advocates also have formed separate organizations, or
political action committees, which endorse and support political candidates. The Race to the Top federal grant competition encouraged states to advance reform efforts in four areas:

- Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy.
- Building data systems that measure student growth and success, and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction.
- Recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most.
- Turning around the lowest-achieving schools.

President Obama has made increasing educational attainment a key strategy for both ending the current recession and ensuring the nation’s long-term economic health and competitiveness. The destabilization of the economy has made Americans more aware of the need to better educate far more of the nation’s young people. Unlike his efforts to reform health care, Obama’s positions on education are widely embraced by leaders across the political spectrum. Many of the policy ideas that drive the Obama administration’s education agenda are ones that Republicans have promoted for years—more demanding academic and performance standards, more school choice, tying teacher evaluations to student outcomes, and greater accountability for results.

The high stakes and the short timeline of the grants process put tremendous pressure on states to develop new education policies that would increase their chances of getting a grant. The program’s financial enticement of as much as $700 million for any one state was magnified by the strained economies of most states, increasing the pressure on state leaders to secure grants.

Advocates for reform in many states worked to amplify that pressure. Most of the groups discussed in this paper urged their states to begin developing their applications early, even before the federal education department had finalized the selection criteria. All were instrumental in helping leaders in their state size up the competition, helping policy makers understand how their education policies compared to other states competing for these funds, and where necessary, countering information from groups opposed to their ideas. To have a chance of winning a grant, states had to allow an increase in the number of charter schools and eliminate any prohibitions on using student achievement as an element of teacher evaluations. Where state leaders did not understand the significance of these requirements,
advocates brought information. When legislation was involved, advocates prodded policy makers into action, provided research and information, critiqued the legislation and, in some cases, supplied versions of model legislation. Regardless of whether states advanced in the competition, the efforts to move legislation in states like California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Oklahoma and Washington, as well as Tennessee, to launch reforms, or to remove legal barriers are significant in their own right.

At the time of this writing, a list of finalists has been announced, but we don't know the winners of the competition's first round. Regardless, the increase in political will to pursue the reform agenda laid out by the Obama administration has been stunning. It is undeniable that the process of applying has resulted in unmistakable and in some cases unprecedented changes in education policy. In many states, the process also increased the visibility and influence of the advocacy groups.

The awards program offered funding in two rounds of competition. Winners of the first round will be announced on April 1, 2010. Applications for round two are due in June. (See page 2 for a list of finalists.) The influence and the tactics used by the advocates depended, in part, on the willingness of the state's political leadership to pursue bold reforms. The strength and nature of each group's relationship with their state's governor and legislature, their longevity, histories and backers also were critical variables that affected their impact.

Some advocates experienced circumstances such as in Tennessee, where the application process provided a ready vehicle for a reform agenda that was already underway. We'll discuss how groups in Delaware, Florida, Massachusetts and Illinois were all similarly poised for action when the awards competition was announced.

In some states, significant efforts were made and some laws changed, but advocates who helped push these changes through suspected they would not be enough. We'll highlight the work of groups in California, Oklahoma, and Oregon who believed that, for their state, advancing in the competition would be a mixed blessing. While they wanted their states to receive grants, they knew that the applications they submitted were relatively weak. If those plans were rewarded, their ability to press for more rigorous reforms might be eroded.

One group, ConnCAN, was especially bold, challenging its governor and other state leaders to do more to make the state competitive even before the finalists were announced. Had Connecticut advanced in round one, that strategy could have undercut years of work by ConnCAN to build credibility and political capital. As the group predicted, the state's application was rejected and thus ConnCAN was prepared to use that decision to start an aggressive campaign to improve the state's chances in the next round. You'll find that story here too.
We also look at the work of two advocacy groups in Washington State, whose governor decided not even to apply in the first round, recognizing that the state’s application was not competitive. The two groups often work well as a team, sometimes working different sides of the political aisle; one works more with grassroots and one more with grassroots constituencies (highly influential individuals capable of persuading policy makers). Both will work to help advance their state win a grant in the competition’s second round.

For all of these advocates, the awards process created an ongoing challenge to maintaining momentum for reform. Some advocates, like Tim Taylor, Executive Director of Colorado Succeeds, worry that Colorado’s early recognition might dull the state’s appetite for reform. “Colorado still has more work to do in the areas of teacher tenure, improving teacher evaluations, and removing requirements for schools to hire teachers off lists.” Taylor said. “Winning now might mean we are kissing further progress goodbye.”

Mark Real, President and CEO of Kids Ohio, raises a similar concern about the capacity of state agencies to actually implement the plans that are on paper. “We are dramatically increasing the responsibilities of state departments of education in an era of significantly reduced state resources.” Like his colleagues in Washington State, Real often works closely with Terry Ryan, the leading voice for another Ohio-based advocacy group, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. Now that Ohio is a finalist, Real and Ryan share the concerns of their colleague in Colorado. “My worry is that this early recognition will give momentum to defenders of the status quo.” said Ryan.

**A Growing Network**

The state policy advocates discussed in this monograph all are members of the Policy Innovators in Education (PIE) Network, which was founded in 2007 by four leading national organizations: the Center for American Progress; the Center on Reinventing Public Education; Education Sector; and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. They recognized that the No Child Left Behind law had less impact than hoped because too little attention was paid to the role of the states in achieving education reform. The purpose of the network is to support, inform, and promote the efforts of its members.

The founding partners span the ideological spectrum, but all four are committed to higher standards for learning; closing achievement gaps, increasing accountability for results, improving teacher effectiveness, advancing public school choice, and creating a sense of urgency for education reform. The network now includes 19 advocacy organizations working to change state laws to favor education reform in 15 states.

Each group’s singular focus is education. They are nonpartisan politically and bipartisan in their relationships with policymakers. The groups base
their positions on research, which they conduct themselves or hire out to credible experts. Their boards are made up primarily of business leaders, philanthropists, and civic leaders. To be network members, they all must agree to a set of “common commitments” for reform and work to advance at least some of them each year. All of them recognize that overcoming the status quo to bring about reform requires political action.

“It’s not just announcing what your position is, it’s getting the work done,” said Patricia Levesque, the executive director of the Foundation for Florida’s Future, a PIE Network member from Florida. “You have to get your hands dirty and work your position and call the legislators up and make sure they know what it is. You have to be there late at night and work with staff on amendments and look them eye-to-eye in the committee room and give them talking points.”

The foundation also grades legislators based on their votes and leadership and “gives extra credit for extra effort,” according to the organization’s Web site. “By grading lawmakers on a scale of A to F, just like students, we give parents and the public a clear and comprehensive assessment of who is keeping the promise of a quality education in the Sunshine State – and who is not,” the Web site says.

Teachers unions have operated this way for many years—analyzing bills, educating elected officials on the issues as they see them, attending hearings, testifying in committee hearings on behalf of their positions, and giving money to candidates. Historically, education reform backers have tended to focus most of their energies on promoting ideas for policy change, but have avoided overt political engagement. More and more, advocates are using the same strategies and tactics.

The Role of States in Shaping Education

States adopt academic standards, choose assessments, set up accountability mechanisms, certify teachers, establish school choice rules, set limits on collective bargaining, collect data and adopt other policies that can either hinder or foster reform. Both past reforms and plans for the future in these areas would count when the applications were scored.

Many of the advocates within the PIE Network already were working on addressing those issues. And the spotlight the competition put on state policies within those broad areas gave advocates an opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to improving outcomes for students, one that many seized. The financial stakes raised the political stakes and put pressure on all of the interest groups affected by education policy to work toward compromises so that they wouldn’t be seen as standing in the way of a successful application.

“We haven’t seen the kind of action that we’ve seen in states in the past year since the ‘Nation at Risk’ report...”

Cynthia Brown
Center for American Progress
year since the ‘Nation at Risk’ report that laid out the dangerous weaknesses of the nation’s public schools,” said Cynthia Brown of the Center for American Progress.

She said the Obama administration should be credited with creating conditions and incentives favorable to ambitious reforms. But she also praised state-level advocates for maximizing their effectiveness and said they will continue to be important as monitors of the implementation and outcomes of the Race to the Top grants. “It’s going to take activity at the state level to keep a lot of these legislative changes in place and to make sure they are implemented well and completely and in a transparent fashion,” she said. “You can’t do that from the federal level.”

Chester E. Finn Jr., the president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, agrees with Brown. “It’s easy to think that what goes on in D.C. is the main event, and it’s not,” he said. “If you’re interested in education reform you have to be interested in what’s happening in the states and in trying to influence policy making at the state level.

Neither Friends nor Foes

As independent, non-profit organizations whose mission is to shape public policy, these advocacy groups have to successfully manage a number of tensions and be careful in selecting their strategies and tactics. The state political and educational context is the leading factor in these decisions.

Groups have to decide whether they will be more effective aligning themselves with the governor and state legislative leaders or whether they’d be better off maintaining their distance—the better to critique political leaders and the performance of the system. The reality is that, to be effective, they have to do both. But that balance must shift depending on the results the organization is having and the commitment of leading state officials to be leaders for reform.

Advocates have to anticipate that, if their actions to change state policy threaten established interests, their motivations will be questioned. Policy organizations supported mainly by businesses may be accused of serving corporate, commercial interests. Those that advocate for school choice or the recognition of alternative routes into teacher or school leadership will be accused of trying to privatize public education.

The organizations also have to be careful about how they describe both their efforts and their achievements. It is governors and legislators and chief state school officers who have the power to change policy. The advocates have to make sure they are not seen as exerting or appearing to exert too much influence over the decisions those leaders make. Alex Johnston of ConnCAN, which is short for the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now, said one of his organization’s operating rules is that “we never take credit.”

“We need to be sure that the legislative champions that we rely on get the credit,” he said. “There’s a tension between telling people that they have the power and running an inside legislative strategy that we work through all the time.”
Another guiding principle for ConnCAN and other groups is bipartisanship. “Even though at times one party can do more for you than another, you have to work with both,” he said.

**Delaware: Prepared for Opportunity**

When the Obama administration announced the Race to the Top competition in the spring of 2009, the Rodel Foundation of Delaware had already been working for five years on developing a statewide education reform plan, the goal of which was to help students become some of the highest achieving in the nation. Thus, it was no surprise to some to see Delaware on the finalists list. With a broad set of public and private stakeholders, the foundation had studied how Delaware compared to other states. The foundation also had helped develop a plan called Vision 2015 for addressing the state’s shortcomings, supported a network of school districts and charter schools working to implement that plan and had identified funds in the state budget that could be used to pay for it. What remained to be done, said Paul Herdman, the foundation’s president and CEO, was getting the public strongly behind the changes called for in the Vision 2015 document so that its backers could urge lawmakers to make necessary changes.

The Vision 2015 coalition includes the state secretary of education, the statewide teachers union, district superintendents, and Delaware’s leading businesses, in addition to the foundation, which had been started by a successful entrepreneur. The business leaders, in particular, wanted to “push as hard as we could on the Race to the Top effort,” Herdman said.

As much as the Rodel Foundation leads, it also partners with or supports other groups that lend might to the state’s reform effort. One example is Rodel’s recent investment in Education Voters Delaware, a group that helps mobilize voters for excellent public education.

Herdman and his staff began trying in the spring of 2009 to get state education policy makers to focus on the competition. But it was not easy. “There was a sense that this was a traditional federal grant and that Delaware already had everything checked off the list -- that we were already well-positioned,” he said. He said Rodel and others encouraged newly-elected Gov. Jack Markell to “get out ahead of this” and then “had to work really hard to help the administration realize that Race to the Top would be a potential game-changer,” and that the competition would be stiff. “To the administration’s credit, they stepped up.”

To increase the likelihood that the big ideas put forward by the “Race” process were translated into specific policy changes, during the summer of 2009, Rodel hired attorneys to look at the state education code and propose regulatory and statutory language that would increase the state’s chances of winning a grant. Herdman said previous legislative efforts by the foundation did not produce the desired outcomes because they “did not do enough...”
to lay out specific solutions.” And while the foundation was not given an opportunity to review the state’s final application before it was submitted, it worked with other private sector partners to inform the state’s effort to put its application together. For example, experts such as Michael Barber, the former education advisor to British Prime Minister Tony Blair, were brought in to advise the state secretary of education’s new “innovation action teams,” which were formed to address each of the four assurance areas the state was required to address in the “Race” application. Herdman said Rodel was in touch with the governor’s office and the state education department almost weekly regarding the state’s application. The application that resulted included significant contributions from the work underwritten by the foundation, as well as that of the broader set of stakeholders.

Herdman is mindful of the perception of some that the foundation may have had too much influence on the application. He said the governor’s office was getting input from many other sources, including the state teachers union, and was careful to mention that the foundation was not always in sync with where the administration was heading. Yet, it was grateful for the administration’s willingness to engage in the process.

As Rodel’s work on state policy and legislation has expanded, he said, “Those resistant to change have tried to paint us into a corner and say we’re anti-teacher, but they’re overplaying who we are and what we represent. Ironically, some in the reform community believe Vision 2015 has been overly inclusive of those in the system by having district and teacher representation from the start.” Herdman said the reaction to change is to be expected. “The fact that we are getting pushback from both sides assures me that we are in the right place.”

Florida: Leveraging Allies

As in Delaware and Tennessee, Florida had a well-connected education policy advocacy group as well as a reform action plan in place prior to the competition. Florida is also now a finalist in the competition’s first round. The legislative agenda of the Foundation for Florida’s Future includes raising standards, improving teacher effectiveness, making the state more open to online education, preserving its system of accountability, and expanding the state’s private school voucher program. Moreover, the state already had many of the elements called for in Race to the Top—a student-level data system, an accountability system that identified the lowest performing schools, and no limit to prevent an increase beyond the 400 charter schools already operating.

The foundation helped document the reforms already in place and the
results they had produced, which strengthened the state’s application.
But the competition also “really gave us a political reason for trying to do
some of the things that we hadn’t been able to do in the past,” said Patricia
Levesque, the foundation’s executive director.

The Foundation for Florida’s Future was revived in 2006 by former gov-
ernor Jeb Bush, who had championed many of Florida’s education reforms.
Although small, the foundation’s strong support among the
political and business leaders of the state gives it significant
influence.

Eric Smith, Florida’s commissioner of education, said it was
“extremely helpful to have a foundation that has a deep belief in
high expectations and quality education and high performance
that can help drive the agenda.”

A number of the foundation’s recommendations for address-
ing teacher quality issues were included in the application.
Should it receive a grant, the state plans to use some of the
money to provide highly effective teachers with financial incen-
tives to teach in low-performing schools. The state also wants
growth in student achievement to constitute 50% of teachers’
job performance evaluation. Those evaluations are then sup-
posed to guide decisions over tenure and salaries.

Even though $700 million is at stake, the Florida Education
Association discouraged local education leaders from support-
ing the plan, which would link pay to performance. Levesque
said the foundation reached out to 100 top business leaders in
the state to ask them to put pressure on local school boards and
the local teachers unions to get them on board. States are award-
ed more points in the competition if they can show that local school boards
and unions have endorsed the reform agenda laid out in the application. In
the end, 60 of 67 Florida’s countywide school districts agreed to participate.
But only five union locals agreed to do so.

Teachers unions opposed the applications submitted in a number of
states. But the leaders of education advocacy organizations know that they
have to continue to reach out to union leaders. Levesque said she had gone
to the Florida unions to ask for their input on a major piece of teacher ef-
ectiveness legislation the foundation wanted to propose. But the unions
wanted to wait to see the results of the Race to the Top competition before
offering ideas. Levesque advised that the business leaders the foundation
works with are impatient. “I told them we can work together on this with a
united front or I will go to work with the business leaders and they will want
more,” Levesque said.

One provision of a major piece of pending legislation that the foundation
supports would replace teachers’ tenure, or permanent teaching licenses,
with yearly contracts. “The union had the opportunity to…propose some-
thing else and they wouldn’t do it,” she said.
Massachusetts: Battling Complacency

Few handicapping the odds of states making the finalists list would have bet against Massachusetts, a state that has long been a leader in education reform. The Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE) has played an ongoing role in that success, helping to advance the state’s system of standards, testing and accountability. One of the co-founders of MBAE, which was organized in 1988, was Paul Reville, who is now the state’s Secretary of Education. The organization is part of the education establishment. But, said executive director Linda Noonan, “that didn’t stop us from agitating on the outside” to ensure the state’s application was as strong as possible. Like groups in Tennessee, Delaware, Florida and elsewhere, MBAE had a completed strategic plan it was ready to put into place when the grant competition was announced. Given that average student achievement in the state is the highest in the country according to several measures, some in the education establishment were complacent about its chances of winning a grant. MBAE urged state leaders to move more quickly and hosted two meetings with the state’s education commissioner, Mitchell D. Chester, and business leaders to discuss what they wanted to see in the application. “The feedback from the business leaders was that the state’s proposals had to be bolder and more specific to bring about the transformative change they believe the state needs,” she said.

Like PIE Network members in Oklahoma, Colorado, Washington and elsewhere, MBAE represents the interests of the state’s leading businesses. “We have a constituency to represent,” Noonan said. She said the organization must be vigilant in protecting the state’s accountability system, even as it presses the state to do more. “In some cases Massachusetts has become a little complacent because the status quo here is what some other states are still trying to achieve,” she said.

MBAE supported “bold, transformative change,” Noonan said and was not completely satisfied with what resulted. Despite MBAE’s pressure, the committee that wrote the state’s application assigned the organization five responsibilities for implementing the reform agenda, should the state receive a grant. That speaks to the power of the relationship the group has built with state leaders and their historic credibility. Noonan said, “We feel you can work on the inside without giving up your independence. We are very clear as to where we stand. We are the champions of results-driven reforms.”

MBAE will share private sector expertise applicable to new teacher evaluation and compensation systems, help disseminate new academic standards, develop model curricula, and push to install a rigorous statewide high school curriculum. Noonan said her organization also intends to monitor the implementation of the reforms promised in the state’s federal grant application.
Oklahoma: Prepared for Disappointment

Oklahoma has a business group that is much like MBAE in many ways, but Oklahoma does not have the same reputation as Massachusetts as a leader in reform. Therefore, the Oklahoma Business and Education Coalition (OBEC)’s involvement played out very differently.

In Oklahoma, private foundations sponsored a task force to work on the state’s “Race” application and paid for a consultant to work in the governor’s office to head up the effort. OBEC was one of the groups that participated in the task force. Phyllis Hudecki, the coalition’s executive director, was a member of the committee that worked on academic standards and accountability.

She praised the process and said it will have a lasting positive impact. “A very large net was cast,” she said. “Teachers unions were at the table along with everyone else. All of a sudden we were looking at ourselves through a more objective lens. We weren’t looking at it to be critical or negative. Instead, we were looking at: What do we need to do to put a reform package together?”

The process made legislators aware that Oklahoma was not likely to receive a first-round grant and that legislation would probably be needed to give the state a chance in the second round. The speaker of the Oklahoma house sought advice from OBEC last September on what needed to be done and volunteered to author whatever legislation would be helpful. Hudecki shared results from the gap analysis performed by the consulting firm as the basis for discussion about policy changes.

Because OBEC is a membership organization, Hudecki is careful to ensure that as much as possible, her members are the ones representing OBEC on committees. “They see me all the time, but getting my members into the mix reminds people that when they do see me, I am representing some important constituents in this state.”

Oregon: Repositioning for the Next Round

Another state that is working to gear up after a round one loss is Oregon. As in Oklahoma, a private foundation, the Meyer Memorial Trust, organized and supported the grant writing process in Oregon. The Meyer Trust and five other foundations support an education policy organization called the Chalkboard Project. Chalkboard had developed a 15-point action plan but now puts its main energies into improving teacher effectiveness, in part by helping districts set up pilot programs that link teachers pay to performance. That effort is known as the CLASS (Creative Leadership Achieves Student Success) Project and it is being implemented in three districts, with nine more in the planning stages.

The grant writing committee hit upon the project and included it in the state’s “Race” application as a promising practice that would be replicated
statewide if Oregon were to win a grant. Previously, the Oregon Education Association had been neutral on the program.

“It’s a testament to federal leadership and what can be done at the state level,” said Sue Hildick of Chalkboard. As with reform advocates in many states, Hildick believes the process of writing a grant represents progress, because the state’s powerful teachers union and leading business interests were involved and the union’s leaders acknowledged that the CLASS project had gained support among its locals.

After Oregon’s failure to be named a finalist, the Oregonian, the influential newspaper in Portland, reported that Gov. Ted Kulongoski and State Schools Superintendent Susan Castillo had vowed to improve Oregon’s application “to better position us for success in the next phase of this federal program.” Chalkboard will continue its efforts to ensure improved teacher effectiveness is a part of the plan.

**California: Doubling Down**

The announcement of the “Race” finalists is being treated as a wake-up call by leaders of some states that didn’t make the cut. California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger issued a statement saying the state needs to do more: “We need to be more aggressive and bolder in reforming our education system. While the reforms we passed did move our state forward, they did not go far enough because other states were more competitive.”

Schwarzenegger’s staff worked closely with EdVoice, a group formed by the state’s leading education philanthropists to advocate for reform. When the competition was announced, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan effectively used his bully pulpit to point out the critical issue that would prevent the nation’s most populous state from winning. He called attention to California’s legal “firewall” that prevented the use of student achievement data to evaluate teachers. Changing that law was the first step toward making California competitive.

EdVoice drafted legislation to advance the state’s chances of winning a grant. Sen. Gloria Romero, a Democrat who is running for the job of state superintendent of public instruction, took the lead in authoring the bill. EdVoice supported her and the legislation by mobilizing its network of members to testify and write letters and show up at hearings.

EdVoice was started by several of the state’s leading education philanthropists to act as a political counterweight to the California Teachers Association. The CTA is one of the most powerful political forces in Sacramento. The teachers union has a sophisticated, well-funded lobbying operation in Sacramento to monitor and shape legislation and policy. It has a political operation that contributes money to and works on behalf of state and local candidates who share the union’s views on issues.

Any advocacy group that wants to change state education policies must
either make their state teachers unions an ally or find a way to neutralize their power. In this case, EdVoice worked closely with the CTA to lay the groundwork for an eventual bill. “You have to make sure you’ve brought people along with you,” said Rae Belisle, Executive Director of EdVoice, “You need to pay a lot of attention to those groups so they understand what’s going on. You have to constantly keep circling back.”

The legislation that emerged allows school districts to negotiate agreements with their local teachers union under which student achievement data can be used to evaluate teachers and principals. The legislation gives the parents of students attending 1,000 of the state’s lowest performing schools the right to transfer to any other school in the state. It also says that a majority of parents at as many as 75 very low-performing schools can demand a school overhaul. The legislation was signed by Gov. Schwarzenegger in January, just ahead of the deadline for submitting a “Race” application.

Despite those early collaborative efforts, advocates and unions do eventually part company when plans get specific. In this case, the CTA did not support these provisions of the legislation. Belisle said it was significant that CTA could not pull the bill despite that opposition. “It was so public; they couldn’t pull it,” she said. But she says the CTA, whose representatives she meets with regularly, remains as powerful as ever. “The timing was perfect to push something through but it doesn’t mean that things have changed that much,” she said.

In many states, hundreds of groups tried to influence their states’ applications. Many groups, such as those representing charter schools or entrepreneurial “turnaround” specialists, stood to gain. As with many advocates, EdVoice is one of the only voices in the state that does not represent the interests of educators. One of its functions is to educate legislators about the issues. Limits on legislative service mean that legislators do not stay in office long enough to develop deep expertise. So, EdVoice brings legislators together regularly and hosts discussions with experts and researchers. That’s where EdVoice’s work on the federal grant competition began. “We sat them down and went through it so they were well-versed in the issues that were going to come before them in,” Belisle said. That process raised the level of discussion when EdVoice proposed legislation that introduced a measure to make student achievement growth part of the state’s accountability system. That was passed with the support of the CTA and was a key piece of the state’s grant application.

**Connecticut: A Bold Strategy**

When governors are not committed to education reform, advocates must find other ways to make a difference, including mobilizing citizens to support reform legislation and reforms. That was the situation ConnCAN faced in Connecticut.

When the federal competition was announced in the spring of 2009, ConnCAN was working to get three bills through the state legislature as part
of what it called the “Mind the Gaps” campaign. CEO Alex Johnston and his team had identified issues they thought could yield victories, proposed legislative language, devised a pithy name for the campaign, developed a communications strategy, built a Web site, and created a blog to report on progress. The organization also employed a fulltime lobbyist to push the legislation forward. If necessary, ConnCAN also could quickly mobilize thousands of its members who it had identified as those most likely to take action on behalf of education reforms. All three bills—one preserving charter school funding, one giving the public more access to student achievement data, and one making it easier for Teach for America fellows and skilled scientists and mathematicians to become teachers—were passed.

Despite the organization’s effectiveness in that campaign, ConnCAN had little influence over the state’s Race to the Top application. The effort to develop it was led by the state education commissioner, who focused on gaining the support of superintendents and school boards in the state. “But he did not focus on changing the reform conditions in the state,” Johnston said. “Connecticut’s Gov. Rell has to date not gone on record about Race to the Top one way or another. In states where we saw aggressive policy changes ahead of the application deadline… it was led by the governor.”

One example of where the state falls short is not having an accountability system that meets the federal grant’s requirements. “Connecticut had to leave entire parts of the application blank,” he said. ConCAN even issued a press release revealing the application contained 120 blanks, with Johnston comparing the state to “a high school student applying to college with a transcript full of incompletes.”

Johnston said before the finalists were announced that he did not expect Connecticut to be selected in the first round. But his organization is mounting a new campaign—called “Our Race to the Top”—to try to improve the state’s chances when a second round of grants is given out. The campaign calls for a data system that makes it possible to monitor the achievement gains of individual students and link that information to their teachers and principals and also to the programs where the educators received their training. It also calls on Connecticut to adopt career- and college-ready standards, create new pathways to becoming a principal, and to change its education finance system so that money follows children according to their needs, whether they go to a traditional public school or a charter school.

“We’ll be doing public events all over the state, encouraging people to get involved, we’ll be working directly with policy makers, and keeping track of what other states are doing,” Johnston said. “This is not crazy stuff. We believe what we’re talking about is sound public policy.”

“Our hope is that we will have an opportunity to debate these ideas in vigorous ways,” he said. Even if debate is all that occurs, it will represent
progress in a state that sued the federal government to block enforcement of the No Child Left Behind Act and that has resisted major changes to a public school system that provides the well-off with a quality education even as it neglects the poor. “The reality is we’re having a discussion now that wasn’t even possible a few years ago. There’s a real urgency in Connecticut now to make progress.”

**Washington State: Race to the Starting Gate**

Washington was one of ten states that did not even submit an application. Two PIE network member organizations operate in Washington State and often work as a team, as they did in the federal grant competition. The Partnership for Learning is an independent organization backed by business interests that over the past 17 years has worked to uphold the state’s standards and testing program, which is known as the Washington Assessment of Student Learning. Now, the group’s focus is on “ensuring that every student graduate from high school prepared to succeed in college and in a career,” said Maureen Tranatham, the organization’s communications manager.

The League of Education Voters started as a group of parents that wanted to make it easier for communities to pass tax levies to fund education. In recent years the league, which now represents voters rather than just parents, has shifted its emphasis. “Now we say that results are important but how we use resources is equally important, if not more so,” said Chris Korsmo, the league’s executive director. Both organizations now participate in what is called the Excellent Schools Now coalition.

The partnership was given a grant by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to hire a consultant to analyze the state’s education policies. That analysis found that, unless policies were changed, the state would only be eligible to receive about a third of the maximum number of points that a state could be awarded.

But, as in Connecticut, the political environment in Washington makes it difficult for reformers to make a difference. Washington is one of only 11 states that do not have laws permitting charter schools. Student achievement data cannot be linked to teachers’ evaluations or compensation. The state cannot intervene in low performing schools. The Washington Education Association teachers union, which is widely regarded as the most powerful political force in the state, has opposed changes to those laws.

Nonetheless, many educators and political leaders were sanguine about the heavily Democratic state’s chances. But Gov. Chris Gregoire realized the state did not have a chance to win and so withdrew the state’s application from the first round of the competition. Legislation meant to enable the state to submit a credible application in the second round of the competition had passed the state Senate and was pending as of the middle of March.
But the Excellent Schools coalition believes the law will not make the state more competitive. It does not allow charter schools. Nor does it tie student achievement to teacher evaluations or salary decisions. Trantham doesn’t see any hope that charter schools might be amended into the bill. Nor does she expect the evaluations of teachers and principals might be tied more closely to student achievement.

“The union doesn’t want it and the governor won’t buck them,” she said. “It’s a down and dirty floor amendment strategy now. We’re still trying to get student growth to be the most significant factor in teacher evaluations.”

But, she said, that will be very difficult. It’s an election year in Washington and the teachers union will spend heavily to make sure Democrats retain their large majority in the legislature, she said.

“So many things will pass,” she said, “but whether it moves the needle on Race to the Top remains to be seen.”

Should the state continue to seek funds from the grant program, the partnership will have another important role to play. Gov. Gregoire has asked the organization to help him convene a steering committee made up of representatives of the governor, the state board of education, the superintendent of public instruction, the teachers union and others to develop the state’s actual federal grant application. “That’s exciting for us,” Trantham said. “It will give us leverage and allow us to push to enact policies that will make us more competitive. It will give us a voice that will be coordinated and sustained.”

The league also hasn’t given up on making the law stronger. “We’re using every tool at our disposal as well as a few we make up on the way to influence this outcome,” said Korsmo. “It’s too important to leave anything off the table. This is a full court press.”

The organization has brought busloads of parents to the state Capitol in Olympia and has made a special effort to involve representatives of communities of color. “It’s on, as they say.”

The league also is trying to get out the message that, even if the state does not win a Race to the Top grant, the same rules are likely to govern distribution of hundreds of millions of federal Title I dollars. “For those who are naysayers and haven’t gotten on the bus yet, this is coming,” Korsmo said. “And that’s good news.”

All of this activity leaves both advocacy organizations stronger than they had been before, she said. “This validates what we’ve been saying and gives those of us involved in advancing reform a whole lot of leverage.”

**Illinois: Evidence and Relationships Prevail**

Illinois had two major hurdles that it needed to leap to become eligible for grant funds. The state capped the number of charter schools allowed at 60 and, as in California, state law provided that student achievement data could not be considered when evaluating the performance of educators.

Like Tennessee SCORE, Advance Illinois is also a new advocacy group that was poised for action when the grant competition was announced.
Formed by Gov. Jim Edgar and former U.S. Secretary of Commerce William Daley, leading foundations and others late in 2008, Advance Illinois published its initial policy aims in early 2009. Not surprisingly, those goals aligned closely to the Race to the Top priorities. Advance Illinois leaders focused on influencing Illinois’s policy-making process directly, by working with legislators, the governor’s office and key agency leaders. One of the most powerful weapons in the group’s arsenal was its ability to bring objective data and the public’s voice to education policy debates, and the relationships needed to ensure they got heard.

Advance Illinois’ official launch was marked by the release of a comprehensive analysis of Illinois’ educational performance. Its title, “We Can Do Better,” provided the focus for its work with the media early on and Arne Duncan, who was Chicago’s superintendent of schools before becoming education secretary, spoke at the group’s first event to underscore the challenges in Illinois. Next, the organization joined an effort to create a longitudinal data system that would make it possible to link student achievement to individual teachers as well as a push to double the number of charter schools allowed in the state. Both bills passed in June, with Advance Illinois and others effectively using the promise and directives of Race to the Top to help bridge sticking points, including making it possible for student data to be used in teacher evaluations.

The following January, in a remarkable show of collaboration and during a brief two-day session, the General Assembly passed two bills. The first requires student growth to be used in teacher and principal evaluations. More specifically, the law requires districts to negotiate with their unions as to how to factor student growth into the evaluations. If districts are unable to reach agreement, the law requires they use a state-developed “model evaluation” in which student growth constitutes fifty percent of the evaluation.

The second bill permits alternative teacher preparation programs such as Teach for America and the privately funded Chicago Teaching Fellows to certify their own teachers, permitting them to become independently accredited as a certificate-granting program if they choose, although not associated with an institution of higher education.

Robin Steans, the executive director of Advance Illinois, said the organization worked in a variety of ways on those bills as well as on the state’s actual application, with significant success, but not without some frustration. She and others from the organization met with legislators in September and October to make sure they were aware of Race to the Top (none were), and that they understood what should be done for the state to have a competitive application—going so far as to develop a checklist in collaboration with the Illinois State Board of Education for what various elected officials and

“Race to the Top allowed Advance Illinois and the state to partner in a number of encouraging ways, and make progress that would otherwise have been unthinkable.”

Robin Steans
Advance Illinois
agencies might do to strengthen the state’s chances. As the only group to do such work, the group’s analysis played a key role in shaping the state’s priorities for actions.

The group also tried to build public awareness of the process to generate pressure on the state to be ambitious in its application. ”We were less successful in that,” Steans said.

The organization also saw Race to the Top as an opportunity to begin connecting philanthropy to state-level work. Advance Illinois co-hosted meetings with philanthropists and foundations that helped raise money to hire consultants to help write the applications. The group also worked to encourage foundations and businesses (historically focused on Chicago-based reform) to invest in the reform efforts outlined in the state’s grant application.

While pleased with their ability to inform the process and raise awareness, Steans said they did not have much impact on the actual writing of the application. But, she said, the process helped galvanize attention on education policy reforms in a way that would have been impossible without the presence of such a sizable carrot. “You work with what you’ve got,” she said. “We have good leadership and pockets of energy in Illinois. Race to the Top allowed Advance Illinois and the state to partner in a number of encouraging ways, and make progress that would otherwise have been unthinkable.”

**The Race Goes On**

The recent announcement of finalists in the first round of competition is but one of many stages of action and reaction in the evolution of policy change. For some states, status as a finalist rewards hard work and commitment to bold plans. For some, it raises concerns that early praise might stall further commitment to still-needed reforms. For others, disappointment in the first round provides another point of leverage to push for bolder strategies in successive rounds of the competition.

The stories of the reform advocates profiled here illustrate the dynamic nature of political change. These advocacy organizations and their leadership intend to remain a constant in their state’s political process, fighting first on offense to advance reform, then on defense to protect gains made. In the noisy chambers of politics and lawmaking, theirs remains a voice at the microphone arguing that evidence matters, that crossing ideological lines to solve common challenges is critical, and that there is so much more policy makers can and should do to ensure that all children really do learn.

*Richard Lee Colvin is the director of the Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media, Teachers College, Columbia University. Suzanne Tacheny Kubach is the executive director of the Policy Innovators in Education Network.*

---

**PIE Network**

*WWW.PIE-NETWORK.ORG*