



Race to the Top: Are we there yet?

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In a famous scene from *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice says, “Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?” The Cheshire Cat answered, “It depends on where you want to go.” So Alice said, “I don’t care where.” And the Cat replied, “Then it doesn’t matter which way you go.”

Race to the Top was a strategic national bet in 2010 that it *did matter* where we go as a country with our students. The aims of the federal program were to help raise the bar for student growth and achievement, close the gap between learners, foster innovation, reward success and ensure that every student graduates college- and career-ready.

Dr. Phil, television’s well-known psychologist, often asks the question of

his guests that we need to ask here: “How’s that working for you?” To answer that, let’s start with what happened *before* the first Race to the Top dollars were ever awarded.

If you build it, they will come. In the months between the launch of Race to the Top and the announcement of Phase 1 winners (Tennessee and Delaware), a tidal wave of changes occurred in education across the nation. The U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) noted that 34 states had changed laws or policies to improve education over the course of the Race to the Top competition.

- California’s governor called a special session of the legislature to adopt common core state standards.
- New York passed a law enabling school districts to partner with state-approved organizations to manage their lowest-achieving schools.
- Massachusetts established “innovation

schools.”

● Michigan cleared a series of reforms giving the state new power to close failing schools, remove ineffective teachers and administrators, and measure student growth and achievement.

Legislators were putting in place systemic reforms that would not only support their Race to the Top application, but also offer the promise of greater student achievement at home.

There’s nothing worse than someone who has sight, but no vision. This variation of Helen Keller’s famous line reminds us that 46 states and the District of Columbia actually submitted applications to USDOE for Race to the Top grants in Phases 1 and 2 of the competition. Whether a state won or not, the fact that it completed an application that required a significant amount of time, collaboration and, most importantly,

thinking about what it needed to do has led to improved education goals.

A venture capitalist friend of mine declared recently that “they don’t fund people who ask for money.” My immediate reaction was, “that doesn’t make sense,” because I thought that’s exactly what venture capitalists do. Instead, he added, “they fund people who have a vision.” These new visions adopted by school districts and state education departments as part of the Race to the Top application process were aligned with the national strategies of adopting common assessments, recruiting and rewarding effective educators, turning around low-achieving schools and building data systems that measure student growth and achievement. There was a refueling of ideas and energy everywhere as these pictures of future reality were created within the parameters outlined in Race to the Top. All of this happened *before* any money was awarded.

What’s happened since?

In March 2010, USDOE announced that Tennessee and Delaware would receive \$620 million as part of Phase 1 of Race to the Top to support the reforms and vision outlined in their applications. Later that summer, an additional \$3.4 billion went to nine states and the District of Columbia. And, approximately \$350 million were directed to fund the creation of a new assessment system being developed by a consortium of states. These tests, expected to be rolled out in the 2014-15 school year, will be aligned with common core standards and are designed to better prepare students for success in college and careers.

In May, the Obama administration launched the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge, a new \$500 million state-level grant competition to be jointly administered by USDOE and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The program will award grants of up to \$100 million to states that create comprehensive plans to transform early learning systems. Winners will be announced in December.

Don’t tell me what you believe. Show me what you do, and I’ll tell you what you believe. Where did the money

go? An analysis of the approved Race to the Top budgets by the Government Accountability Office reveals that states collectively plan to use their grant dollars to:

- develop effective teachers and leaders (33%);
- improve the lowest-achieving schools (24%);
- expand student data systems (18%);
- enhance standards and assessments (16%);
- other (10%).

What are state education leaders doing to accomplish these goals with this money? Here are a few examples:

- Delaware plans to spend \$7 million on coaches who will work with groups of teachers to improve instruction using student performance data.
- New York will direct \$2.6 million to develop and adopt a new value-added student growth model.
- Tennessee plans to allocate \$45 million to create a new “achievement school district” for persistently low-achieving schools.
- Maryland has targeted \$5 million to support a three-year project to design, develop and implement a system that links data on students from when they begin in preschool through the time they enter the workforce.
- Georgia is conducting a competition of schools and districts to test new approaches in teacher recruitment.
- Florida is supporting a model called “Lesson Study,” which encourages teachers to collaborate, plan and refine daily instruction.
- Ohio is spending \$8.9 million to build educators’ capacity to use high-quality formative instruction, one of the best research-proven practices to improve student achievement.

We now understand the game. Bets are placed and cards are being dealt.

Action with vision can change the world. It’s hard to remember a time in recent history when there was more action, accountability and real reform associated with student performance. What’s clear is that for a very small investment (\$4.3 billion out of nearly \$800 billion included in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009), the federal government has been

able to leverage a much wider system of reform.

Are these the right reforms?

It’s hard to argue that improving teaching effectiveness, focusing on professional development and finally having the same Algebra I standards in Mississippi as schools have in California doesn’t make sense. It’s hard to argue that leveling the playing field by measuring student growth and creating longitudinal databases that follow students’ progress and achievement over time aren’t worthwhile investments.

Designing strategic compensation plans that are worthy of the teaching profession and advance education improvement goals will be tricky and require much thought, or schools will risk spending more money, demotivating teachers and devaluing collaboration.

We also know that data, systems, plans or curriculum in isolation change very little. The difference between effective and ineffective reform will be in what we do cohesively and, of course, how we do it — whether it’s done collaboratively *with* people or *to* them. Managing change, communicating thoughtfully and implementing strategically really matter.

Will our students rise to the top?

The answer can best be summarized by an often-told conversation between **William F. Buckley Jr.** and the famous school psychologist **Mortimer Adler** on the former’s “Firing Line” television program. Supposedly, Buckley looked at Adler and asked, “Do you really believe all kids can learn?” To which Adler replied, “And why is it that you don’t? I’d rather live with my hope than with your doubt.” □

About the author

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