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What Did Race to the Top Accomplish?

EDUCATION NEXT TALKS WITH JOANNE WEISS AND FREDERICK M. HESS

Race to the Top was the Obama administration's signature education initiative. Initially greeted with bipartisan acclaim, it has figured in debates about issues ranging from the Common Core to teacher evaluation to data privacy. Five years have passed since the U.S. Department of Education announced the winners in the \$4 billion contest. What can the competition and its aftermath teach us about federal efforts to spur changes in schooling? Joanne Weiss, former chief of staff to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and director of the federal Race to the Top program, argues that the initiative spurred comprehensive improvements nationwide and in numerous policy areas, among them standards and assessments, teacher evaluation methods, and public school choice. Frederick M. Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, whose books include *Carrots, Sticks, and the Bully Pulpit: Lessons from a Half-Century of Federal Efforts to Improve America's Schools*, contends that the competition rewarded mainly grant-writing prowess and that policymakers should be wary of top-down efforts to spur innovation.

INNOVATIVE PROGRAM
SPURRED MEANINGFUL
EDUCATION REFORM
BY JOANNE WEISS



Much has been said about the impact of the Race to the Top program—some good, some not so good, some accurate, some less so. Because Race to the Top aimed to drive systems-level change, it's still premature to reach firm conclusions about its impacts on outcomes for students, although that's the verdict that ultimately matters most. Yet enough time has passed for a first take on the policies that Race to the Top helped pioneer. What did it seem to get right? What did it get wrong? And what does this mean for future policies? To those of us who were there, the intent was clear: Race to the Top was designed to identify those states with compelling ideas and viable plans for improving their educational systems,
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LOFTY PROMISES BUT
LITTLE CHANGE FOR
AMERICA'S SCHOOLS
BY FREDERICK M. HESS



In July 2009, it wasn't just about the money. The \$4 billion (to be spent over four years) amounted to less than 1 percent of what K-12 schooling spends *each* year. But Obama administration PR and the allure of free money combined to turn the exercise into catnip for state leaders. Media outlets were infatuated: *Education Week* ran stories with titles like "Racing for an Early Edge," and national newspapers ran op-eds with headlines such as *USA Today's* "Race to the Top Swiftly Changes Education Dynamic" (penned by former Republican Senate majority leader Bill Frist). A news search finds more than 19,000 mentions in 2009-10, dwarfing even the mentions of "single-payer health care" during the midst of the Obamacare debates!
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fund them, learn from them, and share their lessons widely.

A lot has changed in the five years since the program was launched.

Forty-three states and the District of Columbia have new, higher standards pegged to college and career readiness. As states aimed toward these higher targets, many began by ratcheting up their proficiency bars (see “States Raise Proficiency Standards in Math and Reading,” *features*, Summer 2015). Virtually all are replacing their old fill-in-the-bubble tests of basic skills, tests that contributed to both low expectations for student learning and bad teaching practices, with significantly stronger assessments. A January 2013 report from the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing confirms that the majority of questions on tests funded by Race to the Top gauge such higher-order skills as abstract thinking and communications. A good teacher is now recognized as someone whose students learn and grow, with 38 states revising their policies on educator effectiveness to include measures of student growth or achievement as one of multiple factors in teacher evaluations. Finally, charters and other public school-choice policies—strengthened in 35 states—continue to empower parents to seek out the best educational opportunities for their children.

Given that there were only 12 Race to the Top winners (and seven runners-up who got small grants), it’s pretty clear that the program had an impact even in states that did not get grants.

These states, awarded no new funding, could easily have reverted to their previous educational policies. But overwhelmingly, they chose not to (see “Results of President Obama’s Race to the Top,” *research*, Fall 2015).

Race to the Top used a number of innovative strategies to encourage comprehensive reform. First, contrary to the “federal overreach” label, Race to the Top was a large-scale state empowerment program. It packaged reforms that were happening already, albeit slowly and unevenly, in states across the country, and it provided incentives to states to accelerate the pace and reach of these activities. From higher standards and 21st-century assessments, to educator effectiveness and the turnaround of failing schools, Race to the Top’s program elements were anchored firmly in the good work of states and districts. As a result, states were able to tap into existing constituencies’ support for the ideas, enthusiasm for the agenda, and pent-up creativity around the work.

Second, as Patrick McGuinn pointed out in a 2010

American Enterprise Institute paper, Race to the Top “shifted the focus of federal education policy from the [state] laggards to the leaders.” It moved away from the notion that federal policy is designed chiefly to prevent bad actors from doing harm, and it set its sights on excellence. It urged idea-rich, capable states to define and navigate paths to educational excellence, and in so doing, to blaze trails that could show the way for other states.

Third, Race to the Top treated education as a “system” rather than as a collection of discrete “silos.” Whereas past reform efforts generally targeted one element, Race to the Top asked states to build comprehensive and coherent education agendas across four key pillars or “assurances.” That ambitiousness was risky and bold, and it had downsides (read on). But state systems of education consist of interconnected policies and work streams, and if related elements don’t move forward in tandem, the efforts often fail to have impact.

Fourth, Race to the Top recognized that the politics of education reform are tough. So it rewarded states for enlisting districts and local communities in designing and implement-

In the five years since the program was launched, 38 states have revised their policies on educator effectiveness.



ing the plans; it encouraged states to build political support across key constituencies and across sectors; and it provided political cover for state and local leaders to push forward ideas that could be controversial.

Finally, Race to the Top used transparency to advance knowledge, share ideas, and counter politics. Everything—from states’ proposals to reviewers’ comments to revisions and later to amendments—was posted for states to learn from, researchers to analyze, the media to probe, and the public to watchdog. Further, this commitment to transparency underscored, in both red and blue states, that this competition wasn’t about politics. It was about education, and the best proposals would win.

So, what did Race to the Top get wrong? First, while “comprehensive and coherent” are good goals, Race to the Top expected states to take on a lot, and for many, it was too much, too fast. The result was messy, incoherent implementation in too many places and that understandably frustrated educators

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Some of the enthusiasm was certainly deserved. Race to the Top was fueled by admirable intentions, supervised by talented people, and reflected a great deal

of sensible thinking on school improvement. In theory, it had much to recommend it.

In practice, Race to the Top was mostly a product of executive branch whimsy. The ARRA specified only that the federal government should encourage states to improve data systems, adopt “career-and-college-ready” standards and tests, hire great teachers and principals, and turn around low-performing schools. Beyond that, the Obama administration enjoyed enormous discretion. It could have designed a program that told the states, “Give us *your* best ideas, and we’ll fund the states that are pioneering the most promising approaches.” (Some thoughtful federal officials suggest such an approach isn’t viable—that prescriptive federal requirements are essential for political and practical reasons. That even the brightest minds can’t design a program to spur “innovation” except by relying

to meet program deadlines, states slapped together proposals stuffed with empty promises. States promised to adopt “scalable and sustained strategies for turning around clusters of low-performing schools” and “clear, content-rich, sequenced, spiraled, detailed curricular frameworks.” Applications ran to hundreds of jargon-laden pages, including appendices replete with missing pages, duplicate pages, and everything from Maya Angelou’s poetry to letters of support from anyone who might sign a paper pledge. As one reviewer described it to me, “We knew the states were lying. The trick was figuring out who was lying the least.”

The competition rewarded grant-writing prowess and allegiance to the fads of the moment. Indeed, a number of the dozen winners clearly trailed the pack on the hard-edged reforms that Race to the Top was supposedly seeking to promote. When it came to state data systems, charter school laws, and teacher policy, winning states like Ohio, Hawaii, Maryland, and New York finished well back in the pack on rankings compiled by the Data Quality Campaign, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, and the National Council

on Teacher Quality. When announcing round-one winners Tennessee and Delaware in March 2010, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan took pains to note that the two states had nearly 100 percent sign-offs from their local teachers unions. Reviewers took the hint, and states like Colorado and New Jersey got hammered for not collecting enough unenforceable assurances from their unions.

In the end, the effort suffered for its emphasis on promises rather than accomplishments, ambiguous scoring criteria, and murky process for selecting and training judges. Conservative analyst Chester E. Finn Jr. concluded that the review process didn’t reflect “what’s really going on in these states and the degree of sincerity of their reform convictions.” The reliance of winning states on outside consultants and grant writers also meant that the commitment of key legislators, civic leaders, or education officials to the promised reform agenda could be pretty thin.

Every one of the dozen winning states has come up short on its promises. As early as June 2011, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported that the dozen Race to the Top winners had already changed their plans 25 times. That same GAO report noted that officials were beset by challenges that included a “difficulty identifying and hiring qualified staff and complying with state procedures for awarding

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on top-down directives highlights the problematic nature of the enterprise.)

Instead, the administration proposed 19 “priorities” that states seeking Race to the Top funds would be required to address. States could earn points in each category by promising to follow administration dictates, with the most successful states winning the cash. Few of the priorities entailed structural changes. Instead, they mostly emphasized things like professional development, ensuring an “equitable distribution” of good teachers and principals, “building strong statewide capacity,” “making education funding a priority,” and so on. Perhaps most fatefully, states could ace 3 of the 19 priorities by promising to adopt the brand-new Common Core and its federally funded tests.

Race to the Top was driven by a bureaucratic application process. The demands were so onerous that the Gates Foundation offered \$250,000 grants to 16 favored states to help hire consultants to pen their grant applications. Racing

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and parents and undermined some of the good work that was being done. In an ideal world, new standards would have been rolled out together with aligned curricula and professional development. The new instructional practices demanded by the standards would have been reflected and reinforced through teacher observations, with feedback given by trained coaches and principals. And student growth would have been introduced thoughtfully into teacher evaluation systems based on new measures aligned to the new standards. The sequencing of complex new initiatives matters a lot, and Race to the Top didn't do enough to guide states in how to think it all through.

Second, the competition included too many criteria, the result of a desire to support states' varied innovative efforts and to enable stakeholders and advocates to see themselves reflected in the work. The heavily weighted criteria (for example, implementing standards, improving teacher and principal effectiveness, turning around the lowest-achieving schools, supporting high-performing charters) formed a coherent and comprehensive core. Other criteria offered options, but these too often exacerbated implementation challenges and contributed to a sense of a dominant federal perspective.

Third, Race to the Top did not do enough to mitigate competitors' tendencies to overpromise in order to win.

The competition advised applicants to develop plans that were "ambitious yet achievable," and the reviewers were trained in how to evaluate the feasibility and credibility of plans. But these alone were insufficient backstops. And the federal rules that should have added teeth to the process, such as peer review and the withholding of grant funds for nonperformance, were wobbly at best.

It's worth noting two critiques that pundits love, but that I largely reject: that Race to the Top was "too prescriptive" and that it epitomized "federal overreach."

The criticism that the competition was "too prescriptive" is perhaps best summed up by Rick Hess's suggestion in a July 2014 *EdWeek* blog post that rather than offer up its own criteria, "the Obama administration could have told the states, 'Put forward *your* best ideas, and we'll fund the most promising ones.'" It's an attractive-sounding idea. In fact, the administration considered that approach, but rejected it because of the host of unintended negative consequences that let-a-thousand-flowers-bloom grant making would

have had. Reviewers would have had no basis for comparing plans and determining scores, leading to inevitable charges of politicization and favoritism. Further, lacking political cover to implement the tougher reforms, states would likely have proposed weak, politically easy work with little or no impact to show for their efforts or taxpayers' dollars. Finally, lower-capacity educational agencies craved more guidance, not less; they needed an application that, like a template, walked them through design. A total greenfield would have been a barrier for many.

The "federal overreach" critique of Race to the Top typically cites two things: the feds "forced" their hand-picked list of reforms on the country (see also "too prescriptive" above) and the feds "coerced" states to adopt the Common Core.

Any charge of coercion that is lobbed at a voluntary program is dubious on its face. Yes, Race to the Top put significant money on the table when times were tough, but every state got its pro rata share of \$100 billion in Recovery Act funds, distributed by formula with virtually no strings attached. That was the lifeline.

Pundits love to criticize Race to the Top for being "too prescriptive," but let-a-thousand-flowers-bloom grant making would have had a host of unintended negative consequences.



Race to the Top was the hard work states could choose to sign up for or not (and a number of states chose "not").

What is worth acknowledging is that the administration didn't anticipate that providing incentives to adopt college and career readiness standards drafted by the states would be seen, politically, as a threat to local control. Well before Race to the Top, a broad bipartisan coalition of states had come together under the aegis of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers to design and implement the Common Core State Standards. By May 2009, two months *prior* to the announcement of the preliminary Race to the Top guidelines, 46 governors and chiefs had already signed a memorandum of agreement that encouraged the federal government to "provide key financial support" for the Common Core State Standards "through the Race to the Top Fund" and the development of common assessments. Using Race to the Top dollars to support this state-led effort, at the request of states' governors and chiefs,

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contracts.... Officials in the states we visited—Delaware, New York, Ohio, and Tennessee—said they experienced other challenges that led to months-long delays in implementing

13 of 29 selected RTT projects.” Hawaii’s continued failure to do what it had promised on teacher evaluation earned it “high-risk” status in 2011. By that early date, Florida had already made more than a dozen changes in promised deadlines, including a multiyear delay in teacher evaluation and a one-year delay in training principals for turnaround schools.

In 2012, the Obama-friendly Center for American Progress (CAP) reported, “Every state has delayed some part of their grant implementation.” As they sought to hit federal timelines, states fumbled on everything from the Common Core to teacher evaluation. As CAP researchers said one Florida reporter told them, “Only a handful of districts feel like they’re prepared to do [new teacher evaluations]. Most feel like they’re rushing.”

The Economic Policy Institute observed in 2013, “A review

withheld a nickel from a Race to the Top winner as a result of these violations. (As of April 2015, the U.S. Department of Education was still temporarily withholding a final \$10 million earmarked for Georgia because officials had quibbles with elements of the state’s performance-based compensation system. But by this point, Georgia had already been on Duncan’s naughty list since 2012 without consequence.)

As Drew University political scientist Patrick McGuinn noted in 2010, “It is one thing for RTT to secure promises of state action, another thing for states to deliver promised action, and another thing entirely for their action to result in improvements in educational outcomes.”

So, what lessons can we draw five years on?

First, Do No Harm. The need to pursue proposals like Common Core testing and test-based teacher evaluation on federally determined timetables wound up creating new divisions and supersizing blowback. For instance, the Common Core, which might have been a collaborative effort of 15 or maybe 20 enthusiastic states absent federal “encouragement,” became

a quasi-federal initiative with lots of halfhearted participants. In pushing states to hurriedly adopt new evaluation systems that specifically used test results to gauge teachers, Race to the Top also ensured that many not-ready-for-primetime systems would be hurriedly rolled out and entangled with the Common Core and its associated tests. The most telling example may be in New York, where the simultaneous effort



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of the student-outcome targets set by states...reveals that all are extremely ambitious, but virtually none is achievable in any normal interpretation of that term.”

Despite a mediocre track record of school improvement, Ohio was a winner, partly for its “simple, yet bold, long-term aspirations,” including “a near-100% high school graduation rate from schools teaching at internationally competitive standards,” elimination of achievement gaps, and higher-ed completion rates “that are among the highest in the nation and world.” In spring 2015, the *Columbus Dispatch* observed, “Four years and \$400 million later, Ohio has met one of five goals for the federal Race to the Top grant program. The state... fell short of reducing achievement gaps for minority students, improving reading and math scores as compared with the best-performing states, and increasing college enrollment. Although most goals were not achieved, state education officials focused on the positive in their final Race to the Top report.” Ohio still received its full complement of federal Race to the Top funds.

For all of his threats and bluster, Secretary Duncan has never

to change testing and accountability fueled intense concerns about how the tests would affect teacher job security, engendering fierce backlash and strong teachers union support for the “opt-out” movement.

Build Reliable Infrastructure. It was no fault of the Obama administration, but the infrastructure to do Race to the Top well simply didn’t exist. Criteria for who should judge and how they should do so were made up on the fly. The need to do this in a hurry, along with conflict-of-interest rules, made it hard to assemble a first-rate pool of reviewers. U.S. Department of Education officials also had to combat concerns about the review process appearing too “political.” In the future, clear norms regarding reviewers, criteria, use of evidence, and institutional autonomy should be established before such programs are created.

Execution Should Be the Measure. The right measure for a program like Race to the Top is not how many states promise to undertake an action, but how many do it well. This is especially important when the goals are admirable but ambiguous,

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seemed like a wise use of funds at a key moment of need.

Nonetheless, the reasons that the administration failed to anticipate the backlash do not counteract the fact that a backlash has occurred. In the end, will Race to the Top have contributed to the undoing of the Common Core? Or will it simply be a footnote in the complex narrative of how the U.S. aligned its expectations for students with the demands of college and the workplace? I would place money on the latter. More than 40 states have maintained their commitment to high standards, arguing compellingly and openly for them. In addition, Race to the Top helped fund a new generation of high-quality, online assessments designed by states and educators to evaluate students' progress toward college and career readiness. And it helped states fund strong new curricula, instructional materials, and professional development resources tied to these new standards, all now freely available to educators across the country.

Finally, I roundly reject the suggestion, as stated by Rick Hess, that "Race to the Top may have done as much to retard as to advance its laudable goals." Detractors quote one another and cite oversight reports' minor findings out of context, but offer no evidence that Race to the Top slowed adoption or implementation, much less retarded student achievement. And while it's premature to reach any conclusions about Race to the

Top's impact on student outcomes, ambitious Race to the Top adopters, such as Tennessee and the District of Columbia, are posting encouraging student gains.

On balance and despite its imperfections, Race to the Top spurred important work that had a significant impact, both in states that won Race to the Top and in states that did not. All 46 state applicants and D.C. developed comprehensive education agendas to which their stakeholders were committed. States changed laws and regulations in an attempt to create policy environments that were more conducive to innovation and improvement. Many state agencies modernized, reorganizing around the work of helping districts and students succeed rather than around the work of passing funds down and compliance reports up. Access to technology increased, new materials were developed, and an ethos of collective learning and improvement started to emerge.

Governors and commissioners are leading their states through some of the biggest education changes since desegregation, spurred in part by Race to the Top. Neither the states nor the federal government got everything right. This is hard work; it's disruptive, messy, and sometimes uncomfortable; and states and districts struggle to build the capacity needed for implementation. But I am hopeful that, on the other side of this hard work, states will find that they've changed the trajectory of learning for their students for the better. That will be the true indicator of success. ■

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like improving professional development, educator preparation, or turnaround efforts. Whether states change these things matters much less than how they do so.

That caution was too often ignored at the time, and has been too overlooked in the aftermath.

Seek to Eliminate Impediments. Race to the Top's emphasis on expansive promises forced reviewers to try to divine the hearts and minds of state officials. A simpler, more fruitful course is to emphasize observable actions, particularly those that remove obsolete impediments or regulations. Such a course reflects a more humble vision of the federal role—one that believes Uncle Sam is better at helping states extricate themselves from yesterday than at telling them how to succeed tomorrow. In the case of Race to the Top, while much attention was paid to accomplishments like lifting charter caps or removing data firewalls, such measures accounted for well under one-quarter of Race to the Top's points.

Reward Pioneers. While its marketing suggested otherwise, in practice Race to the Top used funds and public pressure to induce states to promise to adopt a slate of prescriptions. In many places, this led to a rushed adoption and ensured that

many policies were executed poorly, undermining public confidence and support. That is a poor strategy for prompting innovation or improvement.

Beware of Opportunity Costs. The Obama administration dangled \$4 billion in federal funds at the height of the Great Recession and linked them to states demonstrating that they'd "prioritize" education spending. At a time when states could have been using the crisis to focus on finally doing something about underfunded pensions or much-needed belt-tightening, they were preoccupied with dreaming up new spending proposals. Opportunity costs don't just come in policies pursued and tabled, but also in the debates that policymakers should and don't have.

The public imagination is often captured by the *fact of a federal program*, but what matters in a realm as complex as schooling is how programs *actually work*. In 2009 and 2010, proponents embraced Race to the Top as a singular triumph—enthralled by the symbolic statement that reformers had stormed the nation's capital. Yet, five years on, even a well-wisher can conclude that Race to the Top may have done as much to retard as to advance its laudable goals. The admonition that "it's not how you start, it's how you finish" may never be more relevant than when Washington has bold ideas about how to improve America's schools. ■