

Race to the Top 101

How Tennessee Won the National Competition and What Happens Next

Tennessee has forged a series of nationally recognized education-reform policies and programs that positioned the state to compete in the federal Race to the Top competition to spur education innovation. Some of the policies pre-dated Race to the Top. Other changes were made in part to improve the state's chances in the competition. In this essay, we examine the purpose of Race to the Top, the recent history of education reform efforts in Tennessee, and how certain policy changes factored into the state's successful bid in the competition.

Background

Signed into law by President Obama in February 2009, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provided \$4.35 billion for the Race to the Top Fund, a competitive grant program designed to encourage and reward states that are implementing ambitious plans in education reform.¹ (Later, the president asked Congress to approve an additional \$1.35 billion to “expand the Race to the Top competition to include local school districts that are also committed to change.”² As of July 2010, the request for additional funding remained pending in Congress.)

In remarks unveiling the new program in summer 2009, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan set a high bar. “For states, for district leaders, for unions, for business, and for non-profits, the Race to the Top is the equivalent of education reform’s moon shot.”³

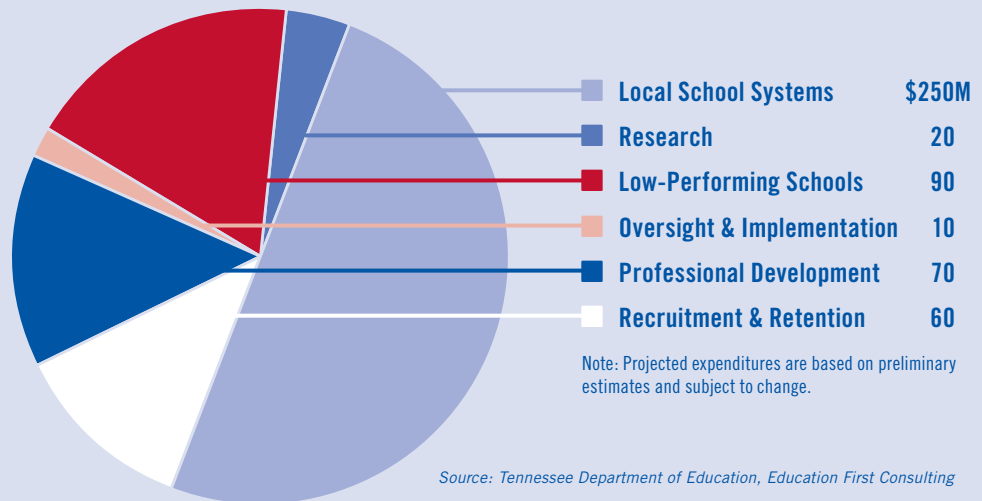
Race to the Top focuses on four core education reform areas:

1. Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy;
2. Building data systems that measure student growth and success, and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction;
3. Recruiting, developing, rewarding, and

Where the Money Goes

Projected Funds Distribution (millions of dollars)

Tennessee Total = \$500 million



retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most; and

4. Turning around the lowest-achieving schools.

Additionally, Race to the Top places a “competitive priority” on developing strategies to promote teaching and learning in science, technology, engineering and mathematics — the so-called STEM disciplines.

Nationally, views differed on Race to the Top — across political and ideological lines. The Economic Policy Institute, a left-of-center think tank whose leadership includes the head of the American Federation of Teachers union, derided Race to the Top’s complex 500-point scoring system as “subjective and arbitrary.”⁴ Education historian Diane Ravitch, who served in former President George H.W. Bush’s administration, worried that Race to the Top’s emphasis on incentives and competition “may well make schools worse, not better.”⁵

Meanwhile, watchers of Congress and legislatures noted the rapid speed in which the competition fueled policy changes at the state levels. Former U.S. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist wrote in USA Today that Race to the Top had, in a matter of months, “engineered the kind of wholesale reform that ordinarily would take a generation to pull off.”⁶ In a joint column for The Wall Street Journal, Democratic Leadership Council Chairman Harold Ford Jr., former IBM Chairman Louis Gerstner and philanthropist Eli Broad opined, “Competition brings out the best performance. That’s true in athletics and in business, and it’s true in education.”⁷

Early Returns

In January 2010, 40 states and the District of Columbia submitted education-reform plans to the U.S. Department of Education in pursuit of Race to the Top funds. Fifteen states and Washington, D.C., emerged as finalists. On March 29,

Sec. Duncan announced that Delaware and Tennessee were the winners in Phase One. The agency approved approximately \$500 million in federal funding for Tennessee — nearly the full amount requested by Gov. Phil Bredesen — to be distributed over a period of four years.

Fifty percent of Tennessee's Race to the Top funds will be distributed directly to local school systems that propose reform ideas in keeping with the competition's areas of focus. The other half will be used by the state for various purposes, including: providing professional development for teachers across the state, expanding STEM education programs and pursuing aggressive strategies to turn around persistently failing schools.

Overall, Tennessee won 444 points out of 500 possible. First-place winner Delaware finished with 455 points. Thirty-five states and the District of Columbia submitted applications in the second round of competition.

In his remarks announcing the first-round winners, Sec. Duncan said both Delaware and Tennessee demonstrated "statewide buy-ins for comprehensive plans to reform their schools." In Tennessee, 100 percent of the state's 136 school systems as well as 93 percent of local unions signed on to support the plan.⁸ "This was not about a pilot or a small-scale thing," Duncan said in a conference call with education reporters. "This is trying to reach every single child in those states and doing it in a convincing way."⁹

Underpinning Tennessee's Race to the Top plan is a new state law requiring that 50 percent of teacher and principal evaluations be based on student achievement measures.

Competitive Edge

Almost from the beginning, national education-reform interests — such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, one of the nation's most active education-related grant funders — viewed Tennessee as competitive in Race to the Top as a result of policy changes in recent years.¹⁰ A major shift occurred in 2007 with Gov. Bredesen's public call for, and the State Board of Education's 2008 adoption of, career- and college-ready high school standards through the Tennessee Diploma Project.¹¹

Additional milestones came in 2009. A rewrite of Tennessee's law governing charter schools — championed by Sec. Duncan, who personally called state lawmakers to voice his support — expanded student enrollment eligibility, doubled the charter renewal period from five to 10 years and raised the statewide cap from 50 to 90 schools.¹² Later that year,

Memphis City Schools — Tennessee's largest school system — was awarded a \$90 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to pursue a new teacher effectiveness initiative.¹³ (Editor's note: The State Collaborative on Reforming Education receives financial support from the Gates Foundation.)

Longstanding policies also worked in Tennessee's favor. Most notably, the state had been nationally recognized for having one of the nation's oldest and most robust databases for tracking "student growth," or a child's improvement in the classroom over time.

The Volunteer State's database for tracking student growth, known as the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS), was

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established in 1992 and provides statistical analysis of student test results in the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP). Historically, the student growth data had not played a role in evaluating Tennessee teachers due to a prohibition in state law. Race to the Top would change that.

In a February 2010 analysis for the Manhattan Institute's City Journal, Thomas W. Carroll, who heads New York's nonprofit Foundation for Education Reform & Accountability, noted that TVAAS could give Tennessee "an important advantage, given the importance that Race to the Top places on data."¹⁴

Indeed, TVAAS is presumed to have played a role in Tennessee's win — in part because Race to the Top's emphasis on data permeated multiple aspects of the competition. More than one-third of each state's score would be determined by strategies to better leverage data systems to support instruction and to promote the development of "great teachers and leaders." Race to the Top's rules included a requirement that states implement teacher and principal evaluations consisting of multiple measures that take into account student growth data as "a significant factor."¹⁵

In areas of the competition touching on data systems, and teachers and leaders, Tennessee scored 158 points out of 185 possible.¹⁶

Legislative Action

To strengthen Tennessee's Race to the Top application, Gov. Bredesen — with the backing of legislative leaders including Senate Speaker and Lieutenant Governor Ron Ramsey and House Speaker Kent Williams — called a special session of the 106th General Assembly to make changes in state law. "Sometimes the planets just line up and there is an opportunity that you didn't expect," Bredesen said in his remarks to the legislature. Calling Race to the Top "transformational," he added: "These are the times to seize the moment."¹⁷

Topping the list of proposed statutory changes: A measure that would allow TVAAS's student growth data to be used, for the first time, as a factor in teacher and principal evaluations. Specifically, legislation would require that 50 percent of evaluations be based on student achievement measures — including 35 percent using TVAAS, when possible. Student growth in certain subjects, including arts and physical education, is not measured.

The Tennessee Education Association (TEA), the state's National Education Association affiliate, initially signaled reservations about basing such a large percentage of teacher evaluations on TVAAS.¹⁸ In the end, TEA pledged support for Tennessee's Race to the Top plan and agreed to work with the state to try to develop an evaluation system that uses data "effectively and fairly."¹⁹

The legislature's special session began Jan. 12, 2010, to consider the proposed Tennessee First to the Top Act as well as companion legislation known as the Complete College Tennessee Act. The First to the Top Act would make several changes in state law, including:

- Requiring annual evaluations of teachers and principals.
- Lifting the prohibition on using TVAAS data in evaluating teachers and principals and allowing the data to be used in making decisions on teacher tenure.
- Establishing a new teacher and principal evaluation framework requiring that 50 percent of evaluations be based on student achievement measures — including 35 percent on TVAAS, when possible.
- Creating a 15-member Teacher Evaluation Advisory Committee to recommend specific guidelines and criteria for the new evaluation.
- Allowing local school systems to create local salary schedules for teachers and principals, with state approval, versus using a state-mandated schedule.

- Clarifying the authority of the commissioner of the state Department of Education to take over persistently failing schools and creating a new state-run “Achievement School District” in which to group failing schools.

Within days, the state Senate passed the First to the Top Act with a vote of 29-3 and the House of Representatives followed suit 83-10. Bredesen signed the measure into law on January 16 — three days before the state’s Race to the Top application was due in Washington. The college completion bill passed several days later.

“With these new laws in place, we’ve now got a landmark opportunity to move Tennessee public education forward in a dramatic and positive direction,” the governor said in a late-January ceremonial bill signing.²⁰ Two months later, the state prevailed in its Race to the Top bid.

Looking Ahead

Following Tennessee’s Race to the Top win, state and local officials began what promised to be a long process for implementing reforms. Education Commissioner Tim Webb convened

meetings with local school board members, superintendents and teachers from across the state. Each of Tennessee’s 136 school systems drafted plans to spend their share of the federal dollars. The Teacher Evaluation Advisory Committee began considering details of a new evaluation framework. Additionally, the governor appointed 14 Tennesseans to a separate panel, the First to the Top Advisory Council, to provide strategic guidance and direction in overall efforts.²¹

National and international education experts offered support — and warned that the process of implementing reforms would be difficult. Sir Michael Barber, founding director of the Education Delivery Institute and an advisor to former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, spoke at a SCORE Institute gathering in early May, and issued a caution to some 80 key education leaders from across the state.

“It’s easy in politics to think that getting the policy right is 90 percent and implementation is the 10 percent that will be taken care of afterwards,” Barber told the assembled crowd. Not so, he said. “The bigger challenge is the challenge that lies ahead. The part ahead is the harder part.”²²

Tennessee’s Race to the Top — Summing Up

- **\$500 million in federal funds over four years**
- **Half of funds go to local school systems; remaining funds go toward statewide expenses such as teacher professional development**
- **All 136 school systems signed on**
- **Core reform areas:**
 - › **Adopting higher standards**
 - › **Using student data to improve instruction**
 - › **Focusing on effective teachers and principals**
 - › **Turning around lowest-achieving schools**
- **New state law requiring that 50 percent of teacher evaluations must be based on student achievement, including 35 percent using TVAAS**
- **State-run Achievement School District to take over failing schools**

¹ White House fact sheet, “The Race to the Top: Promoting Innovation, Reform, and Excellence in America’s Public Schools,” undated. www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/RTT_factsheet.pdf.

² Remarks by the President on Race to the Top at Graham Road Elementary School, Falls Church, Va., Jan. 19, 2010. www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-race-top-graham-road-elementary-school.

³ “The Race to the Top Begins — Remarks by Secretary Arne Duncan,” July 24, 2009. www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2009/07/07242009.html.

⁴ Valerie Strauss, The Washington Post’s Answer Sheet blog, “Race to the Top winners chosen arbitrarily – new report,” April 21, 2010. voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/race-to-the-top/race-to-top-winners-chosen-arb.html.

⁵ Diane Ravitch, Los Angeles Times, “The Big Idea—it’s bad education policy,” March 14, 2010. articles.latimes.com/2010/mar/14/opinion/la-oe-ravitch14-2010mar14.

⁶ Former Sen. Bill Frist, “Race to the Top swiftly changes education dynamic,” USA Today, March 31, 2010. www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/2010-03-31-column31_ST1_N.htm.

⁷ Harold E. Ford Jr., Louis V. Gerstner, Eli Broad, The Wall Street Journal, “Race to the Top in Education: We can get real reform if the president resists pressure to dilute standards,” Nov. 24, 2009. online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704500604574483473296731550.html.

⁸ Tennessee Race to the Top Application for Initial Funding, pages 17-18, Jan. 19, 2010. www.tn.gov/education/doc/TN_RTTP_Application_2010_01_18.pdf.

⁹ Federal transcript, “Secretary Duncan’s Press Conference Call on Race to the Top Phase 1 Winners,” March 29, 2010. www2.ed.gov/news/av/audio/2010/03/03292010.doc.

¹⁰ Michelle McNeil, Education Week’s Politics K-12 Blog, “Gates Gives 15 States an Edge in Race to the Top,” Aug. 12 2009. blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2009/08/gates_gives_15_states_an_edge.html.

¹¹ Tennessee Diploma Project Web site, www.tennessee.gov/education/TDP/index.shtml.

¹² The Tennessee Journal, “Assembly closes with action on charter schools, ethics merger,” June 19, 2009.

¹³ Jane Roberts, The Commercial Appeal, “Memphis City Schools accepts \$90 million Gates Foundation grant,” Nov. 18, 2009. www.commercialappeal.com/news/2009/nov/18/memphis-city-schools-formally-accepts-90-million-g/?print=1.

¹⁴ Thomas W. Carroll, Manhattan Institute City Journal, “Who’s Winning the Race to the Top?” Feb. 26, 2010. www.city-journal.org/2010/eon0226tc.html.

¹⁵ U.S. Department of Education, “Race to the Top Program Executive Summary,” page 9, November 2009. www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/executive-summary.pdf.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Education, “States’ Applications, Scores and Comments for Phase 1,” undated. www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/phase1-applications/index.html.

¹⁷ Gov. Phil Bredesen, “Address to the General Assembly—Special Session on Education,” Jan. 12, 2010. www.tennesseeanytime.org/governor/viewArticleContent.do?id=1448

¹⁸ The Tennessee Journal, “Bredesen will give legislators a week to pass education reform,” Dec. 18, 2009.

¹⁹ Tennessee Education Association letter of support, Tennessee Race to the Top Application for Initial Funding, Appendix A, page A-27, Jan. 19, 2010. www.tn.gov/education/doc/TN_RTTP_Appendix_A.pdf.

²⁰ Tom Humphrey, Knoxville News Sentinel’s Humphrey on the Hill blog, “Governor Holds Education Bill Signing Ceremony,” Jan. 26, 2010. blogs.knoxnews.com/humphrey/2010/01/governor-holds-education-bill.html.

²¹ Governor’s Office news release, “Bredesen Appoints Tennessee First to the Top Advisory Council,” June 21, 2010. www.tennesseeanytime.org/governor/viewArticleContent.do?id=1512.

²² Video, SCORE Institute kickoff, May 11, 2010. www.tnscore.org.