Federal Race to the Top Grant

Minnesota applied for federal Race to the Top grant funds

Race to the Top (RTTT) is a $4 billion competitive education grant program under the federal 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The program is intended to create state education reform. Minnesota, along with 39 other states and the District of Columbia, applied for grants in January 2010. Only Delaware and Tennessee won grants in this first round. States that did not receive a grant in the first round were able to apply in the second round in June. Minnesota did not apply for a grant in the second round.

The U.S. Department of Education issued RTTT guidelines to advise states interested in applying for a grant. The guidelines place states in one of five funding categories, based on states' population of children ages five to 17. Minnesota is in category four, which has a suggested budget range for grants of between $60 million to $175 million.

States must meet federal guidelines in six different areas

The federal guidelines assigned a total of 500 points to the following six selection criteria that each state must address in its application:

- **State success factors** (125 points). These must articulate a state's education reform agenda and school districts' role in implementing that reform in four core areas, build statewide capacity to implement and sustain a state's reform agenda, and demonstrate significant state progress in raising student achievement and closing academic achievement gaps.
- **Standards and assessments** criteria (70 points). These require a state to adopt a common set of core English-language arts and math standards, develop and implement common assessments aligned with the standards, and support the transition to these standards and assessments.
- **Data systems** criteria (47 points). These require a state to fully implement a statewide longitudinal data system, and access and use state data to improve instruction, among other uses.
- **Great teachers and leaders** criteria (138 points). These require a state to provide alternative routes for licensing teachers and principals, use student performance data to improve teacher and principal effectiveness, ensure equitable distribution of effective teachers and principals, improve teacher and principal preparation programs, and provide support to teachers and principals.
- **Turnaround struggling schools** criteria (50 points). These require a state to intervene in and turn around the lowest-achieving schools and districts.
- **General selection criteria** (55 points). These require a state to make education funding a priority, ensure successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools, and demonstrate other significant reform conditions.
- An **optional science, technology, engineering, math (STEM) emphasis**

(15 points) requires a state to have a plan to offer a rigorous STEM course of study, cooperate with community-based STEM partners, and prepare students for STEM advanced study and careers.

A successful state must allocate at least 50 percent of its RTTT grant to districts

Federal reviewers review and rate each state's application. A successful state applicant must allocate at least 50 percent of the grant to local school districts, based on their relative share of federal Title I funding provided to districts for at-risk students living at or near poverty. A district must use the grant funds it receives in a manner that is consistent with the state's RTTT reform plan and any applicable district agreements. The remainder of the state grant must be used to support the state's RTTT reform plan.

Only school districts that sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) are eligible to receive funds. Even districts that do not sign an MOU must comply with some statewide elements of the RTTT plan. For example, all districts must adopt common core standards.

Minnesota's first round application included proposals for a number of policy changes in the K-12 education system

Minnesota's RTTT application, among other things, proposed to:

- adopt a common set of nationwide core K-12 standards in English-language arts and math that build toward college and career readiness and to participate in a consortium working to develop high-quality assessments aligned with these standards;
- have the state Board of Teaching and the state Board of School Administrators amend their rules to support alternative licensure programs consistent with RTTT guidelines and adopt a three-tiered licensure structure;
- implement a teacher and principal evaluation system premised on using student growth data as a "significant" factor in making employment-related decisions;
- implement an enhanced and more uniform Q-Comp plan for districts that would, among other things, include principals, require peer assistance and review, grant tenure to effective teachers based on evaluation outcomes, use individual, class, and school-level student growth data to evaluate teachers, and use school-level student growth data to evaluate teachers and principals;
- use financial and nonfinancial incentives to provide greater flexibility in placing and retaining highly effective teachers and principals in high-need schools and subject areas throughout the state;
- have the state Board of Teaching amend its rules to require that all approved teacher preparation programs with 20 or more program graduates provide the state with student proficiency and growth data and other data related to program graduates; and
- use an Office of Turnaround Schools that is separate from the Minnesota Department of Education and the newly enacted site-governed schools model to intervene in the persistently lowest-achieving schools and in districts in improvement or corrective action status.

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