

“Race to the Top” prizes to Tennessee, Delaware

Obama education plan boosts privatization, victimizes teachers

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31 March 2010

The Obama administration on Monday named Tennessee and Delaware as initial winners in its “Race to the Top” education initiative. The two states, which were granted a combined award of \$600 million in federal funds, were those in which local and state union affiliates carried out the greatest collaboration in undermining public education and teachers’ job security.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced the Race to the Top program last year as the centerpiece education program of the new administration, offering up to \$4.5 billion in federal funds to those states that were the most “innovative” in their policies.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned at the time, this had nothing to do with achieving education excellence or improving conditions in the schools, and everything to do with promoting a political agenda of privatization (charter schools) and destruction of wages, jobs and working conditions for teachers and other school workers (“accountability”).

Only 16 of the 50 states were selected as finalists. Tennessee will get \$502 million and Delaware, a much smaller state, \$107 million. Both states have Democratic governors who were better able to make deals with the unions and insure their support for the bid for additional federal funds.

Both states have merit pay plans for teachers, which allow principals to award pay raises based on alleged “performance,” which means, in practice, discriminating against teachers who defend working conditions and job security against management demands.

Tennessee and Delaware officials also enlisted every school board in their state to sign on to the grant

application to the Department of Education, ensuring statewide adoption of all plans. Each state also enlisted the teachers’ unions. In Tennessee, 93 percent of affiliates of the Tennessee Education Association signed on to the grant application.

The top-rated state application came from Delaware, which adopted a new state law that bars teachers from receiving performance ratings as “effective” unless their students improve their scores on standardized tests by required amounts. The law allows teachers rated as “ineffective” for three years running to be removed from the classroom, even if they have tenure.

All schools will use student achievement data to evaluate teachers and principals starting with the next school year. “We got 100 percent sign-on,” Governor Jack Markell, a Democrat, said.

Schools targeted as requiring “turnaround” because of poor performance—generally because of inadequate resources and social problems such as poverty in the areas from which they draw their students—are given only two years to show improvement before penalties are applied.

The second-ranking state, Tennessee, adopted legislation allowing the state government to intervene in “failing” schools by establishing new “Achievement School Districts,” and authorizing school officials to use “value-added assessment” data, collected since 1992, as part of teacher evaluations beginning in the 2011-2012 school year.

Tennessee Governor Phil Bredesen, a conservative Democrat, has a long record of attacks on social services, having in 2008 terminated the state’s health care program for lower-paid workers, TennCare, on the grounds that it cost too much.

He boasted of his role in obtaining the collaboration of the Tennessee Education Association, saying, “I was able to get the TEA to accept some things that probably a Republican wouldn’t have gotten done.”

The education “reform” bill passed both houses of the Republican-controlled state legislature by huge bipartisan margins, 29-3 in the state Senate and 83-9 in the state House. The bipartisan approach continued in the grant application, which was cosigned by all the Democratic and Republican candidates to succeed Bredesen as governor in the November election.

Mike Turner, chairman of the Democratic caucus in the Tennessee legislature, said the TEA’s support was critical to passage of the legislation. “It was definitely a rush job, but we had to act quickly and I think all parties responded the right way,” Turner told the press. “There could have been a veto from any group, the TEA could have vetoed this at any time and they chose not to do that.”

TEA lobbyist Jerry Winters confirmed this account, saying “We very much were a part of the process to get us to this point, and I would hope that this money will help move us forward in education in Tennessee.”

The actual amount of money going into the Tennessee schools under the Race to the Top averages only \$540 per student—a pittance that will not make up for the cuts generated by the economic slump, which slashes property tax revenue, and state budget cuts.

In a conference call with reporters, Duncan said the decision to restrict the initial award to two states was aimed at spurring other states to go further in their policies of “innovation” and “accountability.” Tennessee and Delaware “have demonstrated the courage, capacity and commitment to turn their ideas into practices,” he said, while suggesting that 10 to 15 states could gain funding in the second round of awards this fall.

The decisive role of the teachers’ unions was demonstrated in the states that lost as well as those that won. Florida and Georgia were considered leading finalists, but the largest teachers’ union in Florida opposed the plan, and the Georgia Association of Educators complained that it had been left out.

GAE president Jeff Hubbard said in a statement, “The failure to include the voices of the individuals responsible for improving our schools in Phase 1 hurt Georgia’s application.” Hubbard was not opposed to

the Race to the Top in principle, only insisting that unions should be consulted in the process.

There was also opposition from the right. No school districts in conservative rural and suburban North Georgia supported the Race to the Top application. The state of Texas did not even participate, with Republican Governor Rick Perry—who has hinted at support for secession—declaring that all federal education programs were a violation of “states’ rights.”

At the time Race for the Top was announced, the WSWS wrote: “Obama’s education proposals demonstrate that social inequality in America is so advanced, and the power of the financial aristocracy so immense, that no public service or program, including education, that is not openly based on class privilege and status can long survive.”

This judgment has been confirmed by subsequent events, above all the mass firing of teachers in Central Falls, Rhode Island, the poorest district in that state. Obama hailed this vindictive act, in a speech to the US Chamber of Commerce, and administration apologists have openly compared Obama’s treatment of public school teachers with Reagan’s mass firing of striking PATCO air traffic controllers in 1981.



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