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To: [Undisclosed recipients:](#)
CC:
Date: Wed, 2/15/2012 11:04:07 AM
Subject: Foundation for Florida's Future, Key Reads: 2/15/12

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NATIONAL NEWS

\$5 Billion in Grants Offered to Revisit Teacher Policies

New York Times

By: Winnie Hu

February 15, 2012

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/15/education/white-house-proposes-5-billion-in-grants-to-overhaul-teaching.html?_r=2&ref=education

The Obama administration will propose a \$5 billion competitive grant program to encourage states to overhaul the teaching profession, federal education officials said Tuesday, using its Race to the Top school improvement competition as a model.

The new program, which needs Congressional approval, is part of [President Obama's](#) budget proposal and expands upon a call in his [State of the Union address](#) last month to give schools more resources "to keep good teachers on the job and reward the best ones."

Federal education officials said the program would seek to bring together state and district officials, union leaders, teachers and other educators to address a range of issues, among them tightening tenure rules, increasing salaries and improving professional development.

The secretary of education, Arne Duncan, will formally unveil the proposal at a meeting with teachers on Wednesday in Washington. He plans to enlist teachers from an Education Department fellowship program to help promote the proposal, called the Respect (Recognizing Educational Success, Professional Excellence and Collaborative Teaching) Project.

"Our goal is to work with teachers in rebuilding their profession and to elevate the teacher voice in federal, state and local education policy," Mr. Duncan said in a statement.

The new program would follow the general format of Race to the Top, with states designing their own proposals for teacher improvement and the federal Education Department selecting the most promising ones for multiyear funding. It would focus only on teaching, though, while the Race to the Top program had a broader agenda for kindergarten to 12th-grade education.

Officials said the new program, which has been in development for a year, was not a response to any current efforts to install teacher evaluation systems in specific states, including New York. They said it was intended to address the needs of experienced teachers and to make the teaching profession more appealing over all — through salary increases, more selective teacher colleges and other measures — to attract a new generation of teachers.

“We need to change society’s views of teaching from the factory model of yesterday to the professional model of tomorrow, where teachers are revered as thinkers, leaders and nation-builders,” Mr. Duncan said. “No other profession carries a greater burden for securing our economic future.”

Dennis Van Roekel, president of the National Education Association, the nation’s largest union of teachers and education professionals with more than three million members, said he supported the Obama administration’s wide-ranging approach to a systemic problem. He said he had long emphasized the need for attracting top-tier teaching candidates, maintaining competitive salaries and promoting professional development.

“It incorporates what we believe is necessary to transform the system,” Mr. Van Roekel said. “We need to do all of these things.”

Timothy Daly, president of the New Teacher Project, a nonprofit group that recruits new teachers for school districts, including New York City, said the use of a competitive grant program would encourage states to come up with innovative ideas.

“Teachers are treated as interchangeable parts — they’re not honored as highly skilled professionals — and this has gone on for decades,” he said. “Everyone knows we have to make teaching better, but they have put their money where their mouth is.”

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Two New England States Hold Off on Waivers, for Now

Education Week

By: Sean Cavanagh

February 14, 2012

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/state_edwatch/2012/02/two_new_england_states_say_no_to_waivers.html

As a second wave of states prepare to submit applications for waivers to the No Child Left Behind Act, a pair of New England states have said no thanks, at least for the time being.

New Hampshire and Maine officials said they won’t be applying for the flexibility being offered by the Obama administration right away, citing the difficulty of putting in place a new accountability system, particularly in rural schools.

In a letter written jointly to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan yesterday, officials from the two states applauded the administration’s goals through the waiver process but said “the current timeline and the waiver guidelines will not work in New Hampshire and Maine, a common reality for numerous rural states.”

The states say they could still jump in the waiver game, after they look at the applications submitted in the first round. See my colleague Michele McNeil’s post at Politics K-12 [for more details](#).

The concerns about the waiver process’ impact on rural schools is one that other holdout states have raised. See my [previous story](#) on their misgivings.

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STATE NEWS

New York Governor Cuomo confident of teacher evaluation deal by deadline

Associated Press

By: Staff

February 14, 2012

<http://online.wsj.com/article/APcfadd840e3dd411a9247de73103897e2.html>

ALBANY, N.Y. — After several straight days of closed-door talks, Gov. Andrew Cuomo said Tuesday he’s confident a deal will be struck to create tougher teacher evaluations that will be a national model for identifying the best teachers and firing the worst.

But Cuomo also said his Thursday deadline for striking a deal on a statewide “template” for teacher evaluations is still in place. After such a framework is created, school districts will have one year to negotiate local union agreements on specific evaluations for their teachers or Cuomo will cut districts’ share of a 4-percent increase in

state school aid for 2012-13.

Nearly \$1 billion in federal and state aid hinges on whether a landmark teacher evaluation system is created statewide.

Major sticking points remain after two years of the statewide talks between the New York State United Teachers union and the state Education Department, including how much weight the evaluations will give to student progress, measured in standardized tests.

"I'm optimistic they are going to get it done," Cuomo told reporters.

Cuomo said he would help New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg in stalled negotiations with the United Federation of Teachers on a local evaluation system, but the governor won't impose a local plan. Cuomo said if New York City can't reach an agreement, its schools could miss out on \$300 million in added state school aid.

The New York State United Teachers union leadership has agreed student performance has a role in teacher evaluations, but notes the tests aren't designed to rate teachers' success or failure.

Scores on standardized tests in English and math in fourth and eighth grades will be used, but other tests, including high school Regents exams, could be added. At least 20 percent of a teacher's evaluation would depend on the test scores, although it could be as high as 40 percent, depending on local agreements negotiated between school districts and their unions.

The union has said forces beyond a teacher's control, such as when a student's parents lose their jobs or get divorced or a student deals with depression, can hurt a classroom's overall performance enough to effect a teacher's evaluation, which could lead to dismissal.

Neither side would comment on the sticking points being negotiated in these last tense days.

Some teacher advocates fear that with the pressure to achieve a broad political compromise, provisions will be lost that are needed to protect special education teachers. Other special circumstances affect immigrant children who leave schools for lengthy holidays to visit family overseas, which has become a concern in some New York City schools.

The independent Advocates for Children of New York are trying to insert provisions that recognize the particular challenges of special education teachers, who must help students with emotional and physical disabilities, and others who are teaching immigrant students to learn English along with their lessons.

In a letter earlier this year to the state Board of Regents, eight recent teachers of the year recounted examples of special situations they fear aren't part of the closed-door negotiations. They include a student with learning disabilities who benefits from a challenging science course even though he can't pass the final test, another student diagnosed with depression, another that missed several days of school for school sports competitions, and another who lost a week to go out of state on a family of vacation. Another instance was a teacher who sought the challenge of dealing with at-risk students whose success won't be demonstrated by test scores. Just a few of those situations could diminish classroom performance reflected in test scores.

"A teacher working with a student with disabilities has to contend with overall classroom goals, but also with the individualized goal of students," said Kim Sweet, executive director of Advocates for Children, which is funded by independent foundations and isn't connected to teacher unions. "In addition to content and curriculum, students may be working with social and emotional issues, many may have physical issues and are working at a different level, although the same content, as other classes. A teacher has to differentiate instruction to a whole different level."

The unintended consequence of a general evaluation system that doesn't make allowances for these instances risks the firing of hard-to-keep teachers in special education, more disabled students turned to less rigorous alternative assessments, and a shortage of teachers entering the difficult field, said Gisela Alvarez, senior project manager at the organization that serves low-income students, mostly in New York City.

"These are all locally bargained plans and the school districts' point is you need that level of customization school district by school district," Cuomo said.

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Michigan to release MEAP scores Wednesday

Michigan Live

By: Blake Thorne
February 14, 2012

http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2012/02/state_to_release_meap_scores_w.html

GENESEE COUNTY, Michigan - Scores from this school year's state assessment tests for grades 3-9 will be released tomorrow.

But the results could come as a surprise to many.

New "cut scores" for the Michigan Education Assessment Program mean students will have to answer more questions correctly to be considered proficient.

Under the new standards, students will need to answer roughly 65 percent of questions correctly to be considered proficient, according to the state's education department. Last year, a student could be considered proficient by correctly answering as few as 39 percent of question.

"We have to be honest with ourselves about where we are in preparing our kids for the reality of today's global economy," said State Superintendent Mike Flanagan in a news release last year on the cut scores. "These updated scores, while they may be difficult to accept, will help lead Michigan forward. Just looking good is not better than being good."

The education department said this morning it would make scores available at 10 a.m. tomorrow.

[Follow this link](#) for coverage of last year's MEAP scores in Genesee County Schools.

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Colorado teacher tenure rules await governor's pen

Associated Press

By: Staff

February 14, 2012

<http://www.gazette.com/articles/pen-133485-rules-await.html>

DENVER — New teacher tenure rules in Colorado await the governor's signature before [education](#) officials implement four-tier ratings for teachers.

The state Senate gave final approval to teacher tenure rules on a 35-0 vote Tuesday. Gov. John Hickenlooper had until Wednesday to sign the rules into law.

The tenure rules also set up evaluation standards for school principals.

Statewide tenure rules were hotly contested two years ago, but the state Board of Education approved evaluation rules that were accepted by both teachers and activists calling for more accountability. The final rules had wide bipartisan support.

The new teacher evaluations use test scores and other factors to determine which teachers receive employment protections some call tenure. The evaluations will be tested next school year.

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Washington: Teacher-evaluation bill clears state Senate

Associated Press

By: Donna Gordon Blankinship

February 14, 2012

http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2017508196_bills15.html

The measure, which now goes to the House, says teachers must be evaluated on eight measures, including improvement in student learning.

Washington state Tuesday took another step toward using improvement in student test scores as a factor in hiring, firing and tenure decisions for teachers.

The state Senate approved, on a vote of 46-3, a bipartisan compromise bill that says teachers must be evaluated

on eight measures, including improvement in student learning.

If the bill passes the House and is signed by the governor, those evaluation results would be used as a factor in human-resource decisions starting in the 2015-16 school year.

Senate Bill 5895 also sets some new guidelines for principals, including a requirement to use teacher feedback in principal evaluations.

Many lawmakers called the measure a move in the right direction, but others lamented that change in education is moving too slowly in this state.

"It is a giant step forward to making sure every kid, regardless of where they live in the state of Washington, has an excellent teacher," said Sen. Steve Litzow, R-Mercer Island, one of the lawmakers who worked out a compromise in Gov. Chris Gregoire's office.

Sen. Rodney Tom, D-Bellevue, voted for the bill and said he hoped it would make a difference, but didn't think any of the more progressive states would be impressed by Washington's efforts on education.

He said lawmakers would need to keep a close eye on the process to make sure the evaluation system delivers on its promises.

Tom suggested a more effective way of improving Washington's schools would be to rank all teachers in each district according to their evaluations, then fire the bottom 1 percent each year.

Gov. Chris Gregoire, who went to the Senate to watch the debate, said it was virtually the bill she wanted and commended the negotiators.

"The folks at the table were thoughtful, and I think by the end of the day Washington state comes out as a model for the rest of the country," Gregoire said.

The measure builds on the four-level rating system established two years ago by the Legislature.

But this time, the state will offer evaluation templates that districts can choose from instead of having local teachers and administrators design the system.

Sen. Steve Conway, D-Tacoma, one of three Democrats to vote against the measure, said he opposed it because it would interfere with a process that's already succeeding at the local level.

He blamed the debate over teacher evaluations for Tacoma's 2010 teachers strike.

The proposal goes into great detail about the way a poor evaluation could lead to a teacher being put on probation or losing his or her job.

It also offers specific guidelines concerning how often classroom teachers should be observed.

New teachers and principals in their first three years, as well as those who received a Level 1 or Level 2 rating in the previous year, would get annual comprehensive evaluations.

Others would get less comprehensive yearly evaluations that focused more on specific areas of their work.

Student-growth data — improvement in test scores from one period to the next — would be used in at least three of the eight criteria for both teachers and principals.

The president of the state's largest teachers union Tuesday expressed concerns about the evaluation bill, but was less worried about this bill than about a proposal to revamp teacher health insurance.

"That's a direct attack on our collective bargaining," Mary Lindquist said of the insurance bill.

The teacher-evaluation measure leaves many details up to the local bargaining unit.

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New Mexico Governor hopeful for early reading proposal

Associated Press

By: Barry Massey

February 14, 2012

Republican Gov. Susana Martinez remains optimistic that lawmakers will approve a centerpiece of her school improvement plan before time runs out in the legislative session this week.

The House is expected to debate a proposal Tuesday that will require school districts to hold back third-graders who can't read proficiently, rather than promoting them to the next class.

The focus is on the third grade because educational researchers say students who can't read by then are likely to struggle in later grades and will be at a high risk of dropping out of school.

Under current law, parents can overrule a school that wants to hold back failing students, sending children to the next grade regardless of whether they are academically ready. However, the legislation will eliminate the parental veto when students reach the third grade, ending a practice known as "social promotion."

Martinez contends the legislation is critical to improving student achievement. About 47 percent of New Mexico's third graders were not reading at their grade level last year, according to state testing, and 53 percent of fourth graders weren't proficient in reading.

The legislative session ends Thursday.

If the House approves the governor's proposal, it goes to the Senate, which approved a nearly identical measure Monday along with a competing proposal backed by many Democrats but opposed by Martinez. Both chambers must approve the same bill before it clears the Legislature and heads to the governor for her signature.

"There is still enough time for us to make sure that we get the right reading initiatives pushed forward so that our kids can read in order to succeed," Martinez told reporters Tuesday.

If the legislation is enacted, schools must notify parents if students are struggling with reading in kindergarten through grade three. Starting in 2012-2013, schools also must provide intensive instruction to improve the child's reading skills. There's \$8 million in next year's proposed budget for reading programs and services in early grades.

Opponents of the legislation say the focus should be on programs to help struggling students because some children can be harmed and suffer a loss of self-esteem if they are held back in a grade.

The governor is modeling her education initiative after Florida, which a decade ago implemented a policy of holding back third graders who can't read proficiently.

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