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[NATIONAL NEWS](#)

Will Early Education Get a Piece of New Race to Top Funding?

Education Week

By: Alyson Klein

December 21, 2011

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2011/12/will_early_education_get_a_pie.html

On the heels of last week's announcement of the [winners](#) of the Race to the Top Early Learning challenge, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has said he isn't sure yet whether there would be a second round of funding for early-childhood programs.

The administration's signature grant competition, Race to the Top, is getting \$550 million in the latest budget [agreement](#). The money can be used for either states or districts. And, in language accompanying the spending bill, lawmakers directed the department to include a "robust early childhood education component" in the next round of Race to the Top.

But they don't say how much money to put toward it, or whether it has to be a separate competition, or just a factor in awarding the grants. That will up to the secretary.

So far, he's demurring. In a conference call with reporters last week, Duncan was directly asked whether he'd use some of the money for early education. And he wouldn't commit.

"We don't know yet," he said. "Stay tuned."

Early childhood advocates say the department shouldn't drop the ball now.

"We absolutely want to see it ... we're going to be screaming for it," said Cornelia Grumman, the executive director of the First Five Years Fund, which champions early-learning programs. She said states put a lot of thought in their applications into improving the quality of their programs for young children. "It would be a shame to lose all that momentum," she said.

The Obama administration is garnering a lot of headlines through the competition. But, despite a big campaign promise of \$10 billion for early childhood, it took a while for the administration to get going on its plan to improve early-learning programs, which caused some to [question](#) its commitment on the issue.

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Education Department Takes Action Against Hawaii for Race to Top Stumbles

Education Week

By: Michele McNeil

December 22, 2011

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2011/12/_this_is_the_departments.html

Hawaii is in danger of losing its \$75 million Race to the Top grant after the U.S. Department of Education notified state officials

yesterday that the state has not made "adequate progress" in fulfilling the promises it made as part of last year's \$4 billion competition.

In a [Dec. 21 letter](#) to state officials, the department said it was placing the state on "high-risk status," limiting access to its remaining grant money, rejecting several requests for significant changes and delays in its Race to the Top plan, and planning an extensive on-site review in early 2012. And, in a more overarching statement that puts the fate of Hawaii's \$75 million grant in question, the department said it is "concerned" that Hawaii can't fulfill the commitments it made to win the grant.

While the department has certainly put states on warning before regarding other grants, those warnings have usually surrounded issues like cash management—not "unsatisfactory performance". Consider this the department's first official warning shot to the 12 Race to the Top winners, which are in the throes of implementing President's Obama signature education-reform initiative. These 11 states, plus the District of Columbia, shared a \$4 billion prize funded by the 2009 congressional economic-stimulus package after pitching what outside judges determined were the boldest plans for improving their respective K-12 systems.

So far, implementation has been slow in a number of states, plagued by delays and plan adjustments. But Hawaii has perhaps experienced the biggest implementation problems, as chronicled in [this recent Education Week](#) story. Hawaii did not secure a crucial collective-bargaining agreement with the state teachers' union to implement its teacher-evaluation pilot program, which set off a chain reaction of other delays. These delays have prompted a couple of education policy experts to [publicly call](#) for the Education Department to revoke Hawaii's grant.

Indeed, according to yesterday's letter, the state has asked to change all projects in its Race to the Top plan—usually by delaying their implementation. From the federal department's perspective, Hawaii has not demonstrated "adequate progress" in implementing its proposals, according to the letter, signed by Ann Whalen, the director of policy and program implementation. "The Department is concerned about the State's ability to fulfill its commitments within the grant period," the letter states. "In addition, the Department has determined that the scope and breadth of the amendments submitted by the state may constitute a significant change in the state's approved plans."

In an interview last night with *Education Week*, Hawaii Superintendent of Education Kathryn Matayoshi acknowledges delays and missed milestones, but also added that within the last few months—as senior staff members at the department have come on board to help implement the state's plan—the trajectory and pace have improved. Within the last month, she said, state officials have begun informal meetings with the teachers' union to begin to hash out Race to the Top issues. She said the state remains committed to its plan.

"We were hopeful that significant progress [within the last few months] would take us off the radar screen, but apparently that was not the case," Matayoshi said. "We know that transformation work is hard. ... We want everyone now to step up to this challenge. We need to run a little faster and push a little harder."

Matayoshi said she also wants more clarification from the department as to why certain proposed changes were rejected, and what exactly the state needs to do to get off "high-risk" status.

Although the federal department [approved more than a dozen delays](#) in Hawaii's plans, it also rejected several requests for changes to new prekindergarten programs, teacher induction and mentoring, and a new leadership program for its turnaround schools. Department officials also let the state know how significant it is that officials there failed to secure a collective bargaining agreement with the Hawaii State Teachers Association. "It is our understanding that without a revised contract, the State cannot fully implement many initiatives in its approved Race to the Top plans," the letter says. From the department's perspective, the state doesn't have the "proper authority"—either in law, regulation, or contract—to even carry out its plan.

As part of being a "high-risk" grantee, Hawaii will now only be able to get its remaining grant funds (just over \$71 million) on a reimbursement basis, essentially having to ask permission first. (This high-risk designation is an official status that can apply to any Education Department grant, and triggers various ramifications.) The department will also conduct a more extensive on-site review, on an unspecified date, in which Hawaii officials will be expected to provide "clear and compelling evidence that it has made substantial progress." And, the state must submit extensive monthly reports about that progress.

The Education Department has promised to hold all Race to the Top winners to their promises while giving them wiggle room to implement significant policy changes in a short, four-year time period. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has said he's prepared to take money away from any state not worthy of its award.

It's unclear whether Hawaii will be able to do enough, and quickly enough, to satisfy the department. This "high risk" designation could eventually lead to a more severe consequence—which could involve the department forcing Hawaii to give its remaining award money back. To that end, the state has not spent most of its award—only \$3.8 million of the \$75 million had been drawn down as of Dec. 16.

It's pretty rare for the department to revoke a grant. But it's been done before, most recently when the department made California [give back a \\$6 million data-systems grant](#). And, there's never been such a high-profile, top-dollar contest like Race to the Top before.

Depending on how far this enforcement action goes, pulling Race to the Top money from the Aloha State could prove politically problematic. One of the state's senators—U.S. Sen. Daniel Inouye, a Democrat—serves as the chairman for the Senate Appropriations Committee, which oversees spending for all federal programs, including Race to the Top. The program has

already faced criticism on Capitol Hill, including from House Republicans, who tried to eliminate it entirely and recently bragged in a press release about [cutting Race to the Top](#) by 20 percent.

If the department pulls a prestigious grant from Inouye's home state, will he continue to fight for Race to the Top's fiscal future? It's an open question.

There are implications for other Race to the Top states as well. If the department is putting Hawaii on notice, could other states also be in trouble? New York, for example, is in a court battle over its teacher-evaluation regulations. And Florida is racking up a long list of sometimes-lengthy delays. Just how much will the department tolerate?

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STATE NEWS

Florida high schools still waiting for grades

St. Petersburg Times

By: Jeff Solochek

December 21, 2011

<http://www.tampabay.com/blogs/gradebook/content/florida-high-schools-still-waiting-grades>

Talk around the state's high schools had been that the Florida Department of Education would release school grades on Thursday.

Not so, it turns out.

"They will not be this week," department spokeswoman Cheryl Etters told the Gradebook. She added that no decision has been made as to a release date yet.

The week of Dec. 26, when all school districts are off for the holidays, remains a possibility, Etters said. The department is trying to figure out how to get the information out in a manner that schools have 30 days to appeal, while preserving the Feb. 1 deadline to determine how school recognition funds will be used.

Elementary and middle schools already have received their grades and gone through their appeals. The high school grades, already delayed compared to last year, come later in the year because they rely on data such as graduation rates that are not formalized until the fall.

Some school [teachers have complained](#) that the recognition funds have yet to be distributed. But the DOE is waiting for the high school grades to be formal before sending out the funds, so every school that earns the money gets the same amount per student. The Legislature set a firm amount for the recognition bonus regardless of the number of schools that qualify.

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Louisiana to push Advanced Placement courses for all

Baton Rouge Advocate

By: Will Sentell

December 22, 2011

<http://theadvocate.com/home/1576791-125/state-to-push-ap-courses.html>

The waivers apply to students who qualify for free and reduced lunches, live in a foster home, receive public assistance or are enrolled in a program for the economically disadvantaged.

Louisiana education leaders have launched a five-year plan to reach the national average for high school students who earn college credit.

The courses, called Advanced Placement, can enhance college success and even make students more likely to attend college, officials said.

But only 4 percent of Louisiana students passed at least one AP exam in 2009, which is 49th in the nation and ahead of only Mississippi.

The national average is 16.9 percent, which state officials said is reachable by 2017.

Debbie Schum, executive director of college and career readiness for the state Department of Education, said it is significant that the goal won overwhelming support from a key advisory panel of local school superintendents.

"The buy-in at the district level is there," Schum said. "I think that is a key to moving this package."

Earlier this year only 33 of Louisiana's 70 school districts offered at least one AP course.

However, the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted in June to require that all districts offer at least one AP course for college credit.

Other steps to improve AP participation are also under way.

Ken Bradford, director of the Louisiana Virtual School, said efforts are under way to provide financial aid for low-income students to take the exams.

Scores range from 1 to a high of 5. Students typically have to score at least a 3 to earn college credit.

The AP exam costs \$87.

"All of the stakeholders think it is a doable goal," Bradford said of reaching the national average.

Schum said studies show that students who take an AP course and score a 2 on the exam, while not enough for college credit, still have a higher college completion rate than others.

She said the new state requirement that all districts offer at least one AP class is aimed at growing to at least four per district eventually.

The state is also trying to increase the number of students who take the ACT, which is a test of college readiness.

In 2011, 75 percent of high school graduates took the exam, up from 71 percent and 70 percent in the two previous years, according to department figures.

But Schum said there are still lots of students who enter college without taking the ACT, which then requires an assessment on which entry-level classes they can take.

"One of the things that we would like to do is to make sure that when a student exits high school that we have done everything to try to take the ACT," she said.

In a presentation to Louisiana's top school board earlier this month, department officials said one avenue is to improve awareness that certain students can land waivers to offset the cost of the test, which is \$34.

Students who qualify can take the test twice and have the results sent to eight colleges.

The waivers apply to students who qualify for free and reduced lunches, live in a foster home, receive public assistance or are enrolled in a program for the economically disadvantaged.

The state's ACT average is 20.2, which is 41st in the nation.

Scores range from zero to 36.

Jessica Tucker, a policy adviser in the department, said a recent study showed that ACT scores rose in Colorado and Illinois when they went to a statewide testing system, even with the inclusion of lots of students who do not plan to attend college.

Tucker said the review also showed that a significant number of students who had not planned to attend college did so after taking the ACT.

Colorado and Illinois are among five states in the nation where the ACT is given to all public high school students.

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Opinion: Michigan on the ground floor of online learning choices

Detroit News

By: Ingrid Jacques

December 22, 2011

<http://www.detroitnews.com/article/20111222/OPINION01/112220333/1026/schools/Commentary-Michigan-ground-floor-online-learning-choices>

When Destiny Pittman goes to school each day, she doesn't have to travel from her Detroit home. The 18-year-old just turns on her computer. Pittman began her journey into online learning a year ago, after falling behind at her public school. Now, through the Widening Advancements for Youth — or WAY — Program, she is steadily working toward graduation on her own terms.

"I have to motivate myself," Pittman says.

Virtual learning isn't going to be for all students. But it's worked well for Pittman. And it's working for thousands of other young people in Michigan and around the country. Online learning comes in myriad forms and names, but at its heart, it is about providing students and parents with more choices. Those who could benefit from the individualized approach should have that

option.

Technology has reshaped our lives, from how we connect with friends to how we conduct business. It makes sense that it would transform education as well.

Yet some in the education establishment see the move to virtual instruction as a threat.

Those who have embraced it speak glowingly of the additional opportunities online learning has brought their students. Eleven years ago, Michigan became one of the first states to open a statewide virtual school. This year, the Michigan Virtual School facilitated around 18,000 course enrollments to middle and high school students, giving more children access to advanced and specialized courses.

The state additionally offers several multidistrict and numerous single-district virtual programs, according to a report on virtual learning by Michael Van Beek, education policy director at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

And starting in 2010, Michigan opened two full-time virtual charter schools — a result of legislation passed in late 2009 to bolster the state's chances of winning money from the federal Education Department's Race to the Top program.

Now in their second year of operation, these two schools have long waiting lists. Each school must cap enrollment at 1,000 students, and they face other enrollment restrictions. Legislation in the House would lift the cap on the number of virtual schools and enrollment. The bill has already passed the Senate.

A new report called "Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning," by the Evergreen Education Group, shows digital learning is growing in Michigan and beyond. Forty states now have virtual schools or state-led online learning programs. Last school year, virtual schools had 536,000 course enrollments. And in 30 states and Washington, D.C., 250,000 students attended full-time online schools.

On a recent Wednesday, Pittman drove from Detroit to Ypsilanti to meet with some of her instructors and fellow students in the WAY Program, operated in conjunction with the Washtenaw Intermediate School District. Most students in the program meet twice a week at a learning lab.

The nonprofit WAY, based in Belleville and directed by Beth Baker and Glen Taylor, works through 10 intermediate school districts, serving around 100 districts and 1,500 students, many of whom are at-risk or dropouts. With a 90 percent retention rate, WAY brings highly qualified teachers and students together in an environment that gives a lot of autonomy to the students. Students, called researchers, must meet state standards and pass standardized tests, but they can reach these benchmarks in a more flexible way.

Logging on for opportunity

Soft-spoken with a shy demeanor, Pittman is confident when she says WAY has helped her engage in learning. "I can work at my own pace," she says. She also prefers working independently and doesn't miss the drama that comes with being in classrooms full of teenagers. She likes the interactions she has with her teachers online and the ability to tailor her assignments to her interests. Once she graduates, Pittman would like to go to college and study psychology.

Single-district programs are expanding, too. Drew Hulbert, director of Oxford Virtual Academy through Oxford Community Schools, says the academy works with 300 students in a variety of ways. Students from surrounding counties can also participate and can choose to enroll full-time in the online school or create a blended model of virtual and traditional instruction.

Demand for the two full-time online schools is growing. Heidi Kevelin, of Madison Heights, is an outspoken advocate of virtual learning. She and her husband are board members of the Michigan chapter of the National Coalition for Public School Options. They also are parents of two children enrolled in the Michigan Virtual Charter Academy.

The academy is run by K12 Inc., a national for-profit virtual charter management organization; Michigan Connections Academy is run by Connections Academy — a similar company.

The online school fits the needs of the Kevelins' children. Geno, 13, is self-motivated and a quick learner, so he likes getting his work done early and finds this school more challenging than the traditional school he attended. On the other hand, Gwyneth, 11, has dyslexia and requires additional attention, which she receives through the virtual academy. Heidi Kevelin says she appreciates the flexibility and safety the virtual academy provides. And she likes knowing her children are in the hands of qualified teachers.

Staying competitive

Tom Watkins, former state superintendent of public instruction, is a proponent of school choice in Michigan, including the expansion of online learning. He's not alone. Jaryn Emhof, spokeswoman for former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush's Foundation for Excellence in Education, says Bush supports more virtual learning. But online learning should enter each classroom for the most impact. In the future, Emhof says a blended model of online and traditional learning is going to be the best use of technology. If teachers can harness the power of technology to help them track each child in their classes, they have the ability to personalize learning in a powerful way.

"The role of the teacher is still integral," Emhof said.

Robert Floden, co-director of the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University, agrees that a blended model of learning has significant potential but that teachers must be trained to use new programs and tools in the classroom. Programs in California and Texas are in the forefront of this model.

For Michigan to stay competitive in the online learning world, it should remove some barriers. States like Florida and Minnesota have surpassed it in virtual options, Van Beek says.

"We were a leader," he said. "Now we're struggling to keep up."

Van Beek recommends the Legislature remove seat-time requirements and instead reward schools based on student mastery of a subject. Currently, unless a district receives a waiver, it loses money for students who are enrolled in more than two online courses. While it's fairly easy for schools to attain seat-time waivers, accounting for those students later during enrollment audits is a painstaking process.

Finally, given the demand for the virtual charter schools, lawmakers should remove the cap.

Gary Miron, a professor in the college of education at Western Michigan University, has studied online schools in other states and warns that accountability mechanisms for counting students aren't ironed out yet. Legislators should address these concerns, while protecting this alternative for families.

As Kevelin says, "Everyone should have a choice."

Ingrid Jacques is a Detroit News editorial writer.

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