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Why Illinois lost the race

Not enough local support for federal education reform

BY RACHEL WELLS



After waiting to sign on to Illinois' application for federal Race to the Top funding until after the state lost out in round one, in part due to inadequate local district and teacher union support, the Springfield Education Association says it's disappointed the state once again didn't make the grade.

The SEA's eventual support meant Springfield School District 186 could have become one of the state's 13 "super LEAs" (Local Education Authorities) that would lead the way on education reform. As such, the district would have had a share of \$20 million of the would-be Race to the Top grant, in exchange for the district and union waiving certain collective bargaining restrictions. Lanphier High School, listed among the state's worst performing schools, would have been one of 75 priority schools, about two-thirds of which would have been in Chicago, and would have been subject to the earliest and most intensive reforms.

Ford says the SEA didn't know enough about Race to the Top until after the state submitted its first application in mid-January, following a November 2009 announcement of the program, and once members learned more about the program they felt more comfortable supporting it. Still, Ford says he would have preferred to see additional funding offered without

the federal control associated with Race to the Top. "We are at a time where the government is demanding more and more of our public schools and providing less and less money to get that done," Ford says. "We certainly would have liked to see it come through as money on the foundation level for each student, so we could actually use that money as our professionals see fit for each student. We were given no choice. ... It [Race to the Top] is the only place where the funds were available."

William Phillips, a school finance consultant and an educational leadership professor at the University of Illinois Springfield, says that wariness of too much federal control echoed across the state. "The reason most districts weren't on board ... number one, there are so many strings attached to federal money and no promise to actually get the money," Phillips says. "The concept of the federal government intruding into the actual management of schools is a relatively new concept," he adds, citing President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind initiative, which has met much criticism, as another major example of federal control.

Lack of local support among the state's 870 school districts was a major sticking point for those who reviewed Illinois' first application. The Illinois State Board of Education responded through outreach efforts including public hearings and online seminars. In direct conversations with some superintendents and union leaders, ISBE encountered some skepticism of the federal nature of the program as it sought additional buy-in from districts and local unions, ISBE spokeswoman Mary Fergus says. But the state agency responded by pointing to reforms already being pushed by the state. Earlier this year, the state lifted a cap on charter schools and passed a law linking student growth to teacher evaluations.

By the time Illinois submitted its second Race to the Top application, about 150 additional district superintendents, for a total of 520, had signed on in support. Those 520 districts host about 81 percent of Illinois students but only represent about 60 percent of Illinois' locally controlled school districts. In the end, the total number of local teachers' unions supporting the state's proposal more than doubled, but still only climbed to about 250, or less than 50 percent.

Although the state had improved the local support aspect of its application, it still lost more ground (12.2 points) under that category than under any other single aspect of the application. And round two reviewers docked slightly more points under local support than did reviewers in round one. Fergus says that could be a result of the Race to the Top review process. Illinois had a different review team in round two than it did in round one and each team only studied one state's application during each phase, she says. "Obviously there was some inconsistency in scoring," Fergus says. "That is concerning."

Illinois slipped from a 5th place ranking after round one to a 15th place ranking in round two. Only gaining about 5 points for a total of 427 out of 500, Illinois came in about 14 points behind the lowest ranking grant recipient.

Although ISBE is disappointed in losing out on the grant funding, Fergus says, the state can still use its application as a blueprint for education reform and continue to implement several reforms it's already moving forward, including a data system that can more adequately track student progress.

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