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Ohio falters in school-funds race

Shot at \$4 billion rests partly on fixing \$851.5 million hole

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Ohio appears well-positioned to win a share of \$4 billion in federal education money, but the state's budget problems and limits on charter schools could prove costly.

Although education officials believe Ohio can meet the requirements for funding, the most creative proposals will win out. "We have to think innovatively," said Scott Blake, spokesman for the Ohio Department of Education.

Blake's department is preparing the state's application for the federal aid. Called "Race to the Top," the money was set aside to create rigorous academic standards, data systems for measuring student success, tougher teacher evaluations, and to turn around low-performing schools. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is paying for private firms to help Ohio and 15 other states prepare their grant applications.

U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan has said the Obama administration wants to reward states willing to commit to significant education initiatives, including tax-funded, privately operated charter schools that have been controversial in Ohio and elsewhere.

"I think, based on outside evaluations that have been done by the Gates Foundation and others, Ohio is fairly well positioned for Race to the Top dollars," said Terry Ryan, vice president for Ohio programs and policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute in Dayton.

"But that doesn't mean there isn't more we need to do to encourage quality charter schools, merit pay" and other reforms.

Amanda Wurst, spokeswoman for Gov. Ted Strickland, said Ohio's chances of winning aid may be jeopardized if the state doesn't fill an

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\$851.5 million deficit in the education budget. The shortfall was created when the Ohio Supreme Court ruled that a plan to place thousands of slot machines at racetracks was subject to a referendum vote that can't occur before November 2010.

Without the money, the state will not meet federal spending requirements and risk losing more than \$1 billion in federal aid all states receive along with Race to the Top funds, Wurst said.

"The first step to ensuring Ohio is competitive for Race to the Top dollars is to address the \$851 million hole in the education budget," she said.

Last week, Strickland proposed suspending a 4.2 percent income-tax cut that took effect Jan. 1 to raise an estimated \$844 million. The plan must be approved by the General Assembly. Legislators also could cut areas other than the education budget and shift the money to schools.

Otherwise, Wurst said, the "evidence-based" education model adopted in the state budget this year includes several initiatives that should please federal regulators, such as new teacher-training requirements and curriculum guidelines.

Sen. Jon Husted, R-Kettering, said Ohio also should remove "artificial roadblocks" for charter schools.

He introduced legislation last week, Senate Bill 180, to allow student performance to be linked to teacher evaluations, permit operators of high-performing charter schools to open new schools and remove the moratorium on new Internet or computer-based charter schools. The restrictions are no longer necessary as Ohio law now requires charter schools to close if their students fail to show improvement for three years, he said.

"Those are the things the secretary of education said were important. We should do our best to put ourselves in the best position for this money," Husted said.

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