



Ohio urges school districts, teacher unions to sign up for Race to the Top money

By Edith Starzyk, The Plain Dealer

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State Schools Superintendent Deborah Delisle told Cleveland's City Club last week that if Ohio wants to bring home \$400 million from the federal government, more school districts must commit to reform. Gov. Ted Stickland was firmer: those that don't should have to explain why.

CLEVELAND -- If Ohio wants to bring home \$400 million from the federal government, more local school districts are going to have to commit to reform.

That's the message State Superintendent Deborah Delisle brought to a City Club speech in Cleveland on Thursday. Gov. Ted Stickland has taken an even stronger stance, saying districts that don't get with the program owe their taxpayers an explanation.

The pressure is on as Ohio tries to be one of the winners in the Race to the Top competition. U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan is doling out \$4 billion to states with the best plans for shaking up their school systems to boost test scores and graduation rates.

Tennessee and Delaware were the only winners in the first round of the Race, snagging \$500 million and \$100 million, respectively. The scorers ranked Ohio 10th out of 16 finalists.

The requirements

Ohio officials are trying to persuade more school districts to sign on to the state's application for \$400 million in the Race to the Top competition.

Among the commitments that districts and their teacher unions must make in exchange for a slice of the pie:

- Evaluate teachers and principals every year, with students' academic progress as one of the measures.

Now the state is trying to strengthen its application for Round 2, when Duncan will pick another handful of winners to share the rest of the \$4 billion pot.

Ohio is asking for \$400 million, more than half of which would be funneled to local schools that sign on to the application.

But first, Delisle will have to get more districts on board. About two-thirds of the state's charter schools joined up in Round 1 but only 43 percent of Ohio school districts did - a weakness that was noted by scorers.

Part of the reluctance came from local teacher unions wary of committing to new ways of being judged and compensated. Their leaders' signatures are needed, along with superintendents and school board presidents.

"Some of the local unions are gung-ho while others have great big question marks," Delisle said in a Thursday afternoon session at The Plain Dealer.

Many top administrators also have doubts about whether it's worth their while to participate.

Bob Scott, Avon Lake's superintendent, said he was at a meeting of school administrators this week when they were asked who was in for Round 2.

"Several raised their hands right away. Several shook their heads no. And the rest had their hands sort of halfway up . . . maybe, looking into it," he said.

The Avon Lake district signed up for Round 1 even though school leaders knew they probably wouldn't get much.

The formula divvies up the money based on how many poor children a district serves. Cleveland would get at least \$21.6 million, Akron \$6.7 million, Lorain \$1.9 million and East Cleveland \$1.7 million.

But in Round 2, the state is sweetening the pot for others by guaranteeing a minimum of \$100,000 to districts and \$25,000 to charter schools - over four years.

The \$100,000 floor would apply to districts like Bay Village, Beachwood, Chardon, Hudson and North Royalton, as well as Avon Lake.

Those "floor" districts and charters have until May 3 to sign on. The rest have until May 14, just a couple weeks before the state application is due.

Scott said Avon Lake officials are still discussing whether to be part of Round 2. One of his concerns is that the state's application seems to emphasize meeting minimum standards while his district is pushing for higher achievement and preparing students for college.

"We want to make sure it's right for us before moving forward," he said. "But we also want to be supportive of the state and other schools. It's not all about us."

Lakewood - with at least \$767,000 at stake -- is still in the talking stage, too. The district didn't apply in Round 1 because of fears that long-term costs would be more than the district would receive, said

- Use the evaluations in deciding whom to promote and whom to keep if positions are cut.

- Use the evaluations as a "significant input" in deciding who gets a continuing contract (otherwise known as tenure) and who is fired for poor performance.

- Tie the evaluations to pay, for example, by paying teachers more if they take on a leadership role.

- Give bonuses or employ other strategies to place highly effective teachers in schools with many low-income and minority students. Teacher assignments for those schools can't be based solely on seniority.

spokeswoman Christine Gordillo.

Lakewood has earned an excellent ranking from the state "and we did not want to replace or abandon what's working," she added.

The same sort of weighing is going on in Chagrin Falls, which is in line for \$100,000. Superintendent Stephen Thompson said the district didn't apply in Round 1 because it didn't seem to make financial sense.

He'll meet with union leaders on Monday. One likely topic will be the requirement to tie annual evaluations of teachers to things like pay and promotions. That would be a major change from the current system which bases compensation on years of experience and advanced degrees.

"That's a sticking point for everyone," Thompson said. "If you're a large urban district, the amount of money you'd get is so great that you almost have to work through those issues. But if you're a small, high-performing suburban district, it's a much more difficult conversation."

In Ohio's Round 1 application, linking pay to how well teachers do on evaluations was optional. About 75 percent of participating charter schools, which generally don't have unions, said they would do it. But only 40 percent of participating districts agreed.

Cleveland was among those that declined the option. David Quolke, head of the Cleveland Teachers Union, said he's not opposed to better-designed compensation systems but wouldn't support one based only on test scores. He also wonders where the money will come from.

"You've got to have local dollars available to do that . . . unless you're just saying alternative compensation can be done on the cheap," he said.

Tying pay to evaluations isn't optional in the Round 2 application, but districts and their unions would hash out exactly how the evaluations are constructed and used.

The two major unions, Ohio Education Association and Ohio Federation of Teachers, supported the state's original application and probably will do the same for this round. But both say they're telling their locals to take a hard look at what's required and make their own decisions.

"There's not a statewide design being imposed," said OFT President Sue Taylor. "There's a lot of room for locals to find something that works for them."

That's the problem, in the view of some think tanks and advocacy groups that are handicapping the Race.

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute wrote that the state's first application had some bold language but "the plans for improving teacher effectiveness are only promises, and most have no teeth."

Ohio lost the most points of any finalist after state officials were questioned in person by reviewers, a report from three national groups observed.

"This outcome suggests that the state may have oversold its application (in the written phase) by promising more reform than it can deliver," said the issue brief from Democrats for Education Reform, Education Equality Project and Education Reform Now.

Ohio can still push itself into the winner's circle, said Van Schoales, executive director of Education Reform Now. But it's up against competitors like Colorado, where the legislature is debating a strong law that would base teacher evaluations largely on student achievement.

Delisle said Ohio's revised application will add necessary details and clarity, and she expects more local participants now that school leaders have a better idea of what's entailed. If the state is a winner, each district will have 60 days to draw up its own plan for the money - and teachers have to make up half the

team, she noted.

Still, she acknowledges the challenge in a state where local control and collective bargaining are both strong.

"We have to balance protection for teachers with looking to transform our educational system," she said.

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