Next Round of Race to the Top Focuses on Early Childhood Education

Dept. of Education Officially Establishes the $500 Million Early Learning Challenge

The U.S. Department of Education recently announced another round of the Race to the Top competitive program, with the focus this time on early childhood education. Only states will be eligible to apply for the competitive grants. The Department of Education and Department of Health and Human Services (“Departments”) will jointly administer the $500 million “Early Learning Challenge.” The Departments must obligate all of the funding to winning state grantees by Dec. 31, 2011. The Departments released a draft summary of selection criteria, eligibility requirements, and award information at www.ed.gov/sites/default/files/rtt-elc-draft-execsumm-070111.pdf.

The Departments will reward states for comprehensive plans that promise to:

★ Increase access to quality programs for low-income and disadvantaged children;
★ Design integrated and transparent systems that align early care and K-12 education program;
★ Establish robust evaluation systems to document and share effective programs and successful programs;
★ Increase professional development for their early learning workforce; and
★ Help parents make informed decisions about early learning programs.

According to a recent press release, Education Secretary Arne Duncan and Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius challenge states to increase collaboration between the early childhood learning community and foundations, businesses, nonprofit organizations, researchers, and other various stakeholders to help boost the quality and access of programs and close the achievement gap.

State applicants must meet the following requirements to apply for the competitive funding:

1) Memorandums of understanding from all participating agencies describing their level of participation including, at a minimum, their assurances to implement certain policies and practices, including statewide early learning and development standards; and
2) Have an operational State Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care as required by the federal Head Start Act.

The Departments will use the following four budget categories for state applicants based on the state’s share of the national population of children ages birth through five years old from low-income families.

Category 1 – up to $100M: California, Florida, New York, Texas
Category 2 – up to $70M: Arizona, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania
Category 3 – up to $60M: Alabama, Colorado, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Puerto Rico, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, Washington, Wisconsin
Category 4 – up to $50M: Alaska, Arkansas, Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, West Virginia, Wyoming

State applications must be signed by the governor and an authorized representative from each participating state agency. The Departments indicate they may provide special consideration to high-quality applications from rural states, frontier states, and states with high-poverty populations in rural areas.

Priorities

The Departments list five priorities for the competition: two absolute priorities, one competitive priority, and two invitational priorities.

★ Absolute priorities: The two absolute priorities are 1) using early learning and development standards and kindergarten entry assessment to promote school readiness and 2) using tiered quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) to promote school readiness.

Concerning the first absolute priority, state applicants must demonstrate how their early learning and development standards inform their curricula, assessment systems, and professional development programs. State applicants must also outline their plans for administering a kindergarten entry assessment aligned to such standards by the start of the 2014-2015 school year. The Departments’ intent is for states to show efforts to close the achievement gap at kindergarten entry and inform instruction and services in the early elementary school grades.

The Departments’ intent for the second absolute priority is for states to implement a tiered QRIS to increase the number of high-need children in high-quality early learning and development systems and to expand the QRIS to all other state-licensed early learning and development programs.

★ Competitive priority: The single competitive priority is for states to demonstrate they have licensing and inspection systems that cover all programs operating within their boundaries or will have such a system in place by June 30, 2013. Also, states will have to demonstrate that all licensed or state-regulated early learning and development programs participate in their QRIS or have a high-quality plan to implement such a system by June 30, 2013. State applicants earn additional points for meeting this competitive priority.

★ Invitational priorities: the Departments are interested in states demonstrating how they will 1) sustain and build upon improved early learning outcomes throughout the early learning grades and 2) foster support from the private sector. States meeting the invitational priorities do not earn additional points and are not given special preference.

Selection Criteria

The Departments provide the following criteria for the selection of awardees: successful state systems; promoting early learning and development outcomes for children; high-quality, accountable programs; and great early childhood education workforce.

Within the successful state systems criterion, states are required to demonstrate how they will repurpose or reallocate funding from various sources, including federal and state sources, to align, support, and sustain activities in their proposed plans.

Other Program Requirements

The Departments outline several other requirements for the competition. States are required to participate in grantee technical assistance activities. States must have longitudinal data systems that include all 12 elements pursuant to the America COMPETES Act. Also, states have to participate in evaluations of their proposed reforms.

The Departments are expected to finalize and issue a notice inviting applications later this summer.

For more information, go to www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-earlylearningchallenge/index.html.