

FY 2013 Race to the Top – District Competition Review Process December 2013

Building off the success of the 2012 Race to the Top – District competition, in April 2013, the Department announced a \$120 million second round of the program. By October 10, 2013, 244 applicants --representing over 680 districts from 44 States-- submitted applications to the Department of Education to compete in our FY13 Race to the Top-District grant program. Over the past four years, the Secretary of Education has committed to enhancing the Department's grant-making processes to ensure maximum integrity and transparency and as part of this effort, both Race to the Top- District competitions were conducted in a manner that was consistent with the approach undertaken by the Race to the Top State program in 2010, adjusting appropriately for the scale and context of a district level competition.

Here's how the process worked.

As with any Federal program, Congress spells out the overall goals, but the Department establishes regulations and develops guidance. Building from lessons learned from the FY12 competition (for more on the FY12 competition, please visit: <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-district/resources-2012.html>), the Department solicited public input as we developed the FY13 application -- including feedback on draft selection criteria, definitions, priorities and requirements—through a Notice of Proposed Priorities (NPP) that was published on April 16, 2013, in the Federal Register. Based on the comments and ideas from 43 parties, the Department went on to publish the Notice of Final Priorities (NFP) in the Federal Register on August 6, 2013 (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-district/index.html>).

We developed a competition process that was transparent and application materials that were clear for applicants showing exactly what the eligibility requirements were and how many points each applicant could receive for every reform implemented and every commitment made. We held multiple technical assistance opportunities, including such resources as: an overview webinar, webinar for potential consortium applicants; and a call on application submission and details. All webinar presentations and transcripts are posted at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-district/resources.html>.

The Notice Inviting Applications (NIA), also published in the Federal Register on August 6, 2013, included the final requirements, priorities and criteria as well as application submission instructions. The Department required applicants to submit their applications in an electronic format by October 3, 2013¹.

As mentioned in the application and program materials, the purpose of the Race to the Top – District competition is to build on the lessons learned from the State competitions conducted under the Race to the Top program and to support bold, locally directed

¹ The Department extended the deadline for submitting applications for certain LEAs affected by severe flooding in Colorado. For LEAs located in Colorado counties affected by severe storms, flooding, landslides, and mudslides and for which the President issued a major disaster declaration or an emergency declaration, the new deadline was extended to October 10, 2013.

improvements in learning and teaching that will directly improve student achievement and educator effectiveness. Therefore, we kept a high bar for eligibility and were relentless in our enforcement of these requirements.

While a total of 244 applications were received, including duplicate copies, for the FY13 Race to the Top - District competition, 34 applications were not eligible to be read for the following reasons:

- Thirty applications failed to include the applicable signatures (*i.e.*, superintendent or Chief Executive Officer of the LEA, local School Board President, and/or local teachers' union or association president (where applicable));
- Three consortia applications did not include the necessary signature and memoranda of understanding detailing each consortium members' responsibilities; and
- One applicant submitted its application on damaged CDs and was unreadable.

A total of 194 of the applications were eligible to be reviewed against the published criteria.

To help us make these judgments in an impartial and informed way, the Department issued a nationwide call for peer reviewers – professionals with experience in education reform, personalized learning, district- and school-level operations, application review and evaluation, and serving students with high needs. Department staff rigorously reviewed every potential reviewer for experience and expertise.

The Department's legal ethics team eliminated any peer reviewer applicant with existing or potential conflicts of interest, including people currently employed by groups or school districts involved in developing a Race to the Top - District application. In the end, we chose 315 qualified experts to serve as peer reviewers or alternates for the FY13 Race to the Top – District competition. They include current and retired teachers, principals, district and state educational agency staff, college professors and scholars, business leaders and education advocates. Their names and short biographies are available on our web site at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothe-top-district/index.html>.

Two hundred and twenty-two peer reviewers attended a day and a half of webinar training on October 10 and 11, 2013². The training covered—

- Understanding the Race to the Top District program and its components
- Writing comments and scoring applications
- The review schedule and procedures
- Spotting conflicts of interest

Ninety-three returning peer reviewers who participated in the FY12 Race to the Top – District competition and training attended a three-hour webinar training on October 9, 2013.

Similar to previous peer reviewer trainings, the Department discussed not only the process for the review, but reviewer roles and responsibilities including, the purpose of their comments and their scores. The Department indicated that the comments would also be

² As a result of the partial government shutdown, we had to adjust the peer reviewer training format from an in person session to a two-part webinar.

made public at the end of the competition to help unsuccessful applicants improve and refine their proposals. Hopefully, the applications and comments will also engage the public in an important conversation about our nation's goals, aspirations, and pathways to becoming a global education leader.

Of the individuals selected to serve as peer reviewers, 144 were initially assigned to review four applications each. The remaining peer reviewers were identified as alternates who would serve only if a need for an additional peer reviewer arose. Ten reviewers withdrew due to additional conflict of interest or personal reasons.

Applications were assigned to reviewers randomly, except that no individual reviewed an application for which he or she had an indirect conflict and no individual reviewed an application from his or her State of residence. The number of pages a peer reviewer would be required to read was also considered when assigning applications. Despite the extensive vetting that occurred prior to the selection of the reviewers, we recognized that in the process of reading an application, a reviewer may have spotted a potential conflict that had not been considered. When such conflicts occurred, applications were reassigned to other reviewers.

Reviewers received on average three to four applications and every application was reviewed by three different people. From October 15-November 6, reviewers independently read and score the applications assigned to them.

Reviewers participated in two conference calls to discuss the applications assigned to them, focusing their discussion on areas of the applications with the greatest variation in scoring to ensure that peer reviewers had a similar understanding of the priorities and selection criteria, as well as the content of the applications (Note: reviewers were not required to reach consensus). The panels with the 31 highest scoring applications, those with a mean score of 178 or higher after the initial review³, came to Washington, DC during the week of November 18, 2013 for an on-site review of those applications. Because not all applications were discussed during the onsite review, only 79 peer reviewers were invited to that review. At the onsite review, peer reviewers from the 31 finalist applications held in-person panel discussions to discuss at length their scores and rationale. All peers finalized their scores and comments by November 22, 2013.

The peer reviewers evaluated and scored each application based on the published selection criteria. An application could receive a score of 200 points based on the review criteria. In addition, an application addressing the competitive preference priority could receive an additional 10 points, for a total maximum score of 210 points. Further, in order to be considered for funding, an application had to meet Absolute Priority 1. To meet Absolute Priority 1, a majority of the panel members (i.e., at least two out of three) had to have determined that an applicant had coherently and comprehensively addressed how it would build on the core educational assurance areas to create learning environments that were designed to significantly improve learning and teaching through the personalization of strategies, tools, and supports for students and educators that were aligned with college- and career-ready standards or college- and career-ready graduation requirements; accelerate student achievement and deepen student learning by meeting the academic needs of each

³ 178 represented a natural break in the rank order of scores.

student; increase the effectiveness of educators; expand student access to the most effective educators; decrease achievement gaps across student groups; and increase the rates at which students graduate from high school prepared for college and careers.

The Department provided technical support and assistance to the peers during the review process. Thirty-seven career staff members from across the Department served as panel monitors and assisted in the review process by assessing preliminary scores and comments submitted by peer reviewers, facilitating panel discussions, and reviewing and signing final technical review forms. Two staff members from the Implementation and Support Unit served as competition managers. They were assisted by a Competition Support Team that responded to questions and supported monitors throughout the competition.

For FY2013, the total funding available under the Race to the Top Fund is \$520 million. Of that amount, the Department is reserving funds to pay the costs of the peer review process (up to 1 percent is allowed) and to provide technical assistance to grantees (up to 5 percent). The Department used approximately \$386 million for the Race to the Top - Early Learning competition. The Department will use the remaining funds, approximately \$120 million, for FY13 Race to the Top - District grants. Grants will be for a period of four years. Grantees will receive the full amount of their award from this appropriation. Providing multi-year funding from a single appropriation will ensure that grantees have sufficient resources and the time necessary to implement the comprehensive education reforms proposed in the application.

In the end, the five applicants, based on the high quality of these applications and the amount of funding available to make these awards, will be awarded grants. The high quality of the five applications is reflected by their scores, which range from mean scores of 205.33 to 188.33, as well as the positive written comments of the reviewers. The Department has always said that a goal of the Race to the Top - District program was to support projects across rural and non-rural settings. By selecting the highest scoring applicants in the rural and non-rural priorities, we believe this will help to ensure quality implementation while also ensuring a good mix between applicants in Race to the Top and Non-Race to the Top States, creating diverse models of personalized learning for use by LEAs across the Nation, and including a good rural representation among the LEAs potentially served by the grants. Therefore, two rural grants are proposed for funding, representing 19 of the 25 LEAs (75 percent) that would benefit from the program. In addition, a third grant proposed for funding includes three rural LEAs as part of the applicant's consortium. As a result, the total representation of rural LEAs is 22 of the 25 LEAs (88 percent).

As for the applications themselves, many districts have already posted them online. Before we publish applications, privacy laws require the Department to redact any personal information that may have been included, such as names, private phone numbers, addresses or birth-dates. With an estimated hundreds of thousands of pages to review, that process could take some time. We have a team in place working to complete it as soon as possible, starting with the narrative responses of the winning applications, then the appendices of winning applications. The narratives for the winning applications will be posted by early next calendar year.

With each year, we will strengthen the criteria to accelerate the pace of reform and refine the process to bolster the core principles of integrity and transparency. We deeply

appreciate the efforts of everyone involved and we look forward to the positive impact this program will have in classrooms across America.