

## **Race to the Top – District Competition Review Process December 2012**

By November 7<sup>th</sup>, 372 applicants, representing over 1200 districts from 42 states and the District of Columbia submitted applications to the Department of Education to compete in our 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, the Race to the Top- District competition was 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. The Department solicited public input as we developed our approach to this competition. From May 22 to June 8, 2012, we posted on the Department's Web site and blog a draft Executive Summary of the competition, which included draft competition priorities, requirements, definitions, and selection criteria, and we invited public input on each. We received approximately 475 responses reflecting the viewpoints of a variety of individuals and organizations, which we considered in developing the final requirements. That Executive Summary and the comments we received are posted at <http://www.ed.gov/race-top/district-competition?page=3>. 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.

The Notice Inviting Applications (NIA), published in the Federal Register on August 16, 2012, 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 30, 2012. In addition to preventing many applicants from submitting their applications by October 30, Hurricane Sandy resulted in the closure of Federal Government offices in Washington, D.C., on October 29 and 30, 2012. The Department, therefore, could not receive applications on those days. As a result, the Department reopened the competition. For applicants located in States affected by Hurricane Sandy and for which the President had issued a major disaster declaration or an emergency declaration, the deadline was extended to November 7, 2012. For applicants in unaffected States, the deadline was extended to November 2, 2012.

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 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 372 applications were received for the Race to the Top - District competition, twenty-five applications were not eligible to be read for the following reasons:

- Seven applications requested a budget amount outside of the applicable award range;
- Eleven applications failed to include the required 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));
- Four consortia applications did not include memoranda of understanding detailing each consortium members' responsibilities;
- Two consortia applications included entities that were not eligible applicants; and
- One applicant did not submit its application by the required deadline.

Therefore, a total of 347 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 also 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 308 qualified experts to serve as peer reviewers or alternates for the 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/racetothetop-district/index.html>.

Two hundred and ninety-six reviewers attended a day and a half of training in Washington, DC on October 22 and 23, 2012. Twelve of the selected reviewers could not attend the in-person training, but participated in a training conference call conducted by program staff that covered the same material. 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

Similar to previous peer reviewer trainings, the Department talked at length with the reviewers about the purpose of their comments and the need to support and provide rationales for their scores. The Department indicated that the comments would also be made public at the end of the competition to help unsuccessful applicants improve and refine their proposals. Hopefully, the 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 308 individuals selected to serve as peer reviewers, 291 were initially assigned to review three to four applications each. The remaining seventeen reviewers were identified as alternates who would serve only if a need for an additional reviewer arose

Applications were assigned to reviewers randomly, except that no individual reviewed an application for which he or she had an indirect conflict<sup>1</sup> 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 November 5-November 19<sup>th</sup>, reviewers independently read and score the applications assigned to them. During the week of November 19, 2012, members of each panel held a conference call to discuss the applications assigned to them, focusing their discussion on areas of the applications with the greatest variation in scoring to ensure that reviewers had a similar understanding of the priorities and selection criteria, as well as the content of the applications. Then, the panels reading the sixty-one highest scoring applications, those with a mean score of 178 or higher after the initial review<sup>2</sup>, came to Washington, DC during the week of November 26, 2012 for an on-site review of those applications. Because not all applications were discussed during the onsite review, only 135 reviewers were invited to that review. At the onsite review, reviewers from the highest- scoring applications held in-person panel discussions and finalized their scores and comments.

The 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 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

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<sup>1</sup> Indirect conflicts included situations in which reviewers had been employed by an LEA or SEA within the past two year, but were not currently employed by those entities. No individual with an identified direct conflict was allowed to serve as a reviewer.

<sup>2</sup> 178 represented a natural break in the rank order of scores.

achievement and deepen student learning by meeting the academic needs of each 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 significant technical support and assistance to the peer reviewers during the review process. Fifty-five 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 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 panel monitors throughout the competition.

For Fiscal Year 2012, the total funding available under the Race to the Top Fund is \$549 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 \$133 million for the Race to the Top Early Learning competition. The Department will use the remaining funds for Race to the Top -- District grants to LEAs. 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 16 highest-scoring 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 top 16 applications is reflected by their scores, which range from mean scores of 208.33 to 196.33, as well as the positive written comments of the reviewers. While the Department could consider high-ranking applications across the absolute priorities, we nonetheless elected to fund straight down the slate in order to ensure a high bar that was always considered as the paramount criterion for funding. 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 districts across the Nation, and including a good rural representation among the districts potentially served by the grants. Of the 16 applicants proposed for funding, six meet Absolute Priority 2 (non-rural LEAs in a Race to the Top State), one meets Absolute Priority 3 (rural LEAs in a Race to the Top State), and nine meet Absolute Priority 4 (non-rural LEAs in a non-Race to the Top State). None of the 16 applicants meets Absolute Priority 5 (rural LEAs in a non-Race to the Top State). While only one rural grant is proposed for funding, it represents 24 of the 55 LEAs (44 percent) across the 16 grantees that would benefit from the program.

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 finalist applications, and concluding with the appendices of winning and finalist applications. The narratives for the winning applications will be posted by early January.

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.