

PRESS CONFERENCE CALL
Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge
Aug. 23, 2011
2 p.m. ET

Coordinator: Welcome and thank you for standing by. All participants are in a listen-only mode until the question and answer session. If you would like to ask a question at that time, you may press star then 1 on your Touch-tone telephone. Today's conference is being recorded. If you have any objections, you may disconnect at this time.

I would like to turn the call over to the Assistant Press Secretary at the U.S. Department of Education, (Elizabeth Utrup). Ma'am please begin.

(Elizabeth Utrup): Hi everyone. Thank you so much for joining us today and we apologize for the delay. We had an unexpected earthquake that delayed us for a few moments. But we've got it together and everything's clear and ready to go now.

We have with us today U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and Secretary of Health and Human Services, Kathleen Sebelius. In just a few moments each of the Secretaries are going to give you a brief statement discussing the next stage of our Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge.

Pardon for the background noise. Before we get started, I also want to mention that we have here with us today two very important senior officials with our department: Education Senior Advisor for Early Learning Jacqueline Jones and HHS' Deputy Secretary and Inter Departmental Liaison for Childhood Development Joan Lombardi.

These two ladies have been extremely important in leading the effort to organize the challenge and they will join the Secretaries to address any questions that you have following the remarks.

With that, I'm going to turn it over to our first speaker, Secretary Duncan.

Arne Duncan: Thanks for joining us and again apologize for the delay. This is my first earthquake so it's quite an experience. But everything's fine and this is we think actually a very historic day for children around the country.

Our Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, through an amazingly strong unique partnership, have finalized the criteria and the application for the Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge. I want to thank the staff on both teams for hundreds and hundreds of hours literally of hard work to get to this point. We feel great about where we're at and just appreciate the nights, the weekends, the long hours to get us to this point.

In early July our agencies together published draft criteria for public input and we received over 300 very, very thoughtful comments. And that feedback has been a tremendous resource for us in finalizing the competition. And we want to share with you the framework for the program.

The overarching goal of the challenge is to make sure many, many more children enter kindergarten ready to succeed. To do so we're using this

competition as an opportunity to address some of the core challenges in ensuring high quality across early learning and development programs.

In putting together the program we asked ourselves a couple fundamental questions. How can states ensure that there are consistent standards and metrics for quality across various programs including those funded by the state, Head Start, childcare, Title I and IDEA?

How can states improve program quality? How can they include child outcomes in determining program effectiveness? And how do we build the very best possible early learning workforce?

To address these fundamental challenges we have created a framework around five key levers of change: building successful state systems, defining high quality accountable programs, promoting early learning and development outcomes for children, supporting the great early childhood education workforce and finally, measuring outcomes and progress.

Through these broad areas of reform this \$500 million competition will support states that commit to integrating and aligning resources and policies across all agencies that administer public funds to their early learning and development programs. And it provides incentives to those that engage programs state wide.

As we release this application today, we've also begun identifying qualified peer reviewers who will judge the competition. And the bar will absolutely be high. Winning states will not only have to demonstrate a commitment to improving the early learning and development programs, but they will also need to adopt common standards that'll help both determine what young children should know and define program quality.

In this context, winning states will also implement appropriate assessments that help teachers understand how children progress. It is absolutely critical for the early childhood workforce to be intentional and systematic in the process of understanding young children's cognitive and non-cognitive domains.

We also want to be absolutely clear about the assessment issue. We will never ask 3 year olds to take bubble tests. Of course that would just be ludicrous. But we are asking early childhood educators that they have the observation and the documentation skills they need to evaluate children's progress along with a set of appropriate early learning and developmental standards.

As all of you know, so many great early childhood educators today are already doing this because they know it's an integral part of teaching and because of what children say, what they draw, and how they interact with others constitutes important evidence of early learning and development.

States will also be required to demonstrate commitment to building a workforce that engages with families to implement appropriate instructional strategies and monitor the progress of children's learning and development in order to improve program quality.

Finally, I just want to say how grateful we all are to Congress providing both the resources and the authority to create this game changer, this competition, and how honored we are to work in partnership with HHS on this critically important initiative.

We both understand that successful early learning programs are not just about education but they're about the whole child including physical and emotional health.

And now I want to turn it over to Secretary Sebelius who's just been an amazing partner on this initiative, and so many others, to walk through with you some additional details. Secretary Sebelius.

Kathleen Sebelius: Well thank you so much Secretary Duncan and I want to start by just thanking Arne for his partnership and today's announcement but also the great work we've been able to do together over the last two years to make sure our youngest children get the support they need to succeed.

And as we've already said, we've got two great partners with us on the phone. The great Jacqueline and Joan team from Education and HHS who have really put together what I think is an enormously exciting opportunity for states around the country.

We can't out compete the rest of the world unless we can out educate the rest of the world. And we've got a growing body of evidence that we can't do that unless our children get a head start in life.

Brain science tell us that the early years are when critical cognitive development takes place. Social science tells us that the investments we make in early childhood programs can have a huge payoff down the road.

The Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge will help to ensure that our children get the highest quality care and support possible during these early important years.

Now it does that by empowering states. I know personally I began working on early childhood issues first when I was a state legislator in Kansas and then when I became Governor of Kansas. And at one point during that process we learned that half of our states 5 year olds weren't prepared for kindergarten.

We knew that for the sake of our children and the sake of our state's economy we needed to do better. But there was a limit to what we could do because we didn't have the full and active partnership in the Federal Government.

The Early Learning Challenge grant changes this. It creates a national vision for early childhood education and provides support for states that are leading the way, encourages other states to follow, and gives every state a model for how to better prepare their youngest children.

The Early Learning Challenge also recognizes that it's not enough to just make sure our children start kindergarten with the right academic skills; for children to reach their full potential, they need more than their ABCs.

They also need to be healthy. They need to have the social and emotional skills to listen and work with others. And they need engaged families. So the criteria we're releasing today will encourage states to design programs that meet all of those needs.

Finally, it's important to recognize that early learning is just one of the several steps we're taking to improve the quality of early childhood programs. Over the last two years we've given parents better information to help them choose the best childcare program.

We've revamped our training programs for early learning providers to incorporate the best practices from around the country. And we've issued

proposed rules that for the first time would require low performing programs to compete for continued federal funding.

Our view is simply that if the early learning years are critical to our children's development, then the standards for our early childhood programs should reflect that. After all how can our children compete for the jobs of tomorrow when they're already behind by the time they've started kindergarten?

Our ultimate goal is an early learning system that ensures that every child in every American community gets a healthy start in life so they can enter school ready to learn. If we achieve that, the payoff won't just be higher test scores or even higher graduation rates. It will be stronger families, more secure communities and a more competitive economy. And today's announcement is a big step in the right direction.

Thank you very much. I apologize for the background noise but we're here basically on the sidewalk doing this very interesting press announcement waiting for our buildings to be secured. And we'd be very happy to take some of your questions.

Coordinator: Thank you. If you would like to ask a question, please press star then 1. You'll be prompted to record your first and last name. To withdraw your question from queue, you may press star then 2. Once again, to ask a question, please press star then 1 now.

Our first question is from (Michelle McNeil). Your line is open.

(Michelle McNeil): Hi. Thanks for taking my question. I wondered if - well there was a lot of concern about the testing - the proposed testing rules and I - especially some

questions about whether these tests would then be used to make high stakes decisions about the early educator - the early educator - the teachers.

So is there anything in the rules that talk about whether these tests on these young children whether those, you know, the results can be used at all to make decisions about the teachers. And then secondly, were there any - what were the changes you made I guess based on the feedback that you got?

Jacqueline Jones: So...

Kathleen Sebelius: Arne, I'm going to defer to you or Jacqueline.

Jacqueline Jones: Okay. This is Jacqueline Jones. I just want to make sure that we understand that we're talking about assessment in the broad context. And I think we want to make a distinction between specific tests and an assessment process, which is an ongoing process of collecting information around children's behaviors and growth so that we can make informed judgments.

Our notion of assessment is one in which teachers gather information about children. And so it's very much tied to an understanding of how children are learning, how we can improve programs and how teachers can really develop the skills they need that are basically observation and documentation skills.

So when we talk about these measures, we want to be clear that they're designed to understand how children are learning, they're designed to inform programs so we can engage in continuous program improvement. That's the focus on the assessments that we're using.

And then the second question was about the changes that we made. We received over 300 comments - when we put out the draft criteria. And a lot of

the comments had to do with the notion of having a very comprehensive program and people seemed really pleased with the comprehensive nature of the program.

At the same time people were very concerned that it was really quite frankly too much to do. And so if you look at the new criteria, we really have choice built in. So as you look at the selection criteria, there are choices that states can make in which criteria they select and that choice should really be based on where the states are right now.

We know that states are in very different places and we wanted to give states an opportunity to sort of tailor their applications to meet their needs.

(Michelle McNeil): Thank you.

Coordinator: As a reminder, if you would like to ask a question, please press star then 1. Our next question comes from Amanda Paulson. Your line is open.

Amanda Paulson: Hi. I'm calling with the Christian Science Monitor. Wondering if you can talk a little bit about the logistics of how this is going to work in the coming months when states submit their applications. First of all, about how many states you anticipate giving grants to.

But also given as you just mentioned states are in very different places with regard to their early learning systems, you know, how are you going to be grading these and making the decisions when some states might be more sophisticated already? You know, some might opt for certain criteria and not others. Just wondering if you can talk a little more about that.

Jacqueline Jones: Sure. Over the next few months, states will have about eight weeks to complete their application.

Amanda Paulson: Who is this speaking?

Jacqueline Jones: This is Jacqueline Jones.

Amanda Paulson: Okay. Thanks.

Jacqueline Jones: States will have about eight weeks to complete their applications. We are intending to have on September 1 a Webinar to guide folks - potential applicants through the application. And then on September 13 both departments are getting together to plan a TA session that will probably be all day to be able to really answer questions that states have about the real nuts and bolts of putting this together.

We are as we speak right now in the process of pulling together a group of peer reviewers. We are looking for folks who have expertise in early childhood, who understand this field, and they will be engaged in a process of evaluating the proposals and making sure that we have the very best and thoughtful proposals.

And so that peer review process will go on. As I said, states have about eight weeks. And so the middle of October applications will be due and then we intend to obligate funds the end of December.

Amanda Paulson: Sorry. The things I was wondering about were first of all how many states you anticipate making grants to but then also how you're going to make some of these decisions given how - what different places states are in with regard to where their programs are.

Jacqueline Jones: Joan, did you...

Joan Lombardi: Yes. You know, I - we have a set of selection criteria that has been outlined in the application. There are selection criteria and competitive criteria. There's a set of points assigned to all of those. We'll have outside reviewers that will be reviewing the proposals and there'll be - there's a range of grant sizes that's listed in the application anywhere from \$50-100 million depending on the size of the state.

And what we've seen is tremendous enthusiasm from the states around this application. So, you know, we feel confident that this will be a successful process.

Jacqueline Jones: This is Jacqueline again. We anticipate a handful of awards. We have a scoring rubric and certainly the peer reviewers will use that rubric to evaluate where states are right now and the high quality plans that we expect them to produce as to where they want to go.

Coordinator: The next question is from (Maureen Kelleher). Your line is open.

(Maureen Kelleher): Thank you. How are you choosing the peer reviewers and what happens if the reviewers come up with decisions with which you disagree?

Joan Lombardi: We're reaching out to a broad range of experts many of whom have been, you know, peer reviewers in the past. We want to make sure that we have a range of expertise that reflects the criteria that's in the application. And, you know, they will score the applications and then - and prioritize the...

(Maureen Kelleher): I'm sorry. This is Joan speaking?

Joan Lombardi: Joan Lombardi.

(Maureen Kelleher): Yes. Okay. Just wanted to make sure. Sorry. Go on. Okay.

Joan Lombardi: Jacqueline, you want to pick it up there?

Arne Duncan: So I'll -- this is Arne Duncan -- just quickly add that we always retain the authority and the ability to go out of order if we need to. But I just have tremendous confidence and faith in the peer review process. And we're going to recruit extraordinary people again as Joan and Jacqueline have definitely said, there's so much interest in this work. And we think there'll be great people out there. And I've a lot of confidence in them making very good decisions.

And this will be, as you know, a highly competitive process. We think whether the states win the money or don't win the money, just going through the process is going to be extraordinarily beneficial for them just as it was for states in the previous Rate the Top competition.

So (Maureen), we always retain that authority but in the past haven't felt a need to exercise it.

(Maureen Kelleher): Thank you Arne.

Arne Duncan: Next question operator.

Coordinator: Our next question comes from Max Levy. Your line is open. Excuse me. Mr. Levy, can you check your mute button?

Max Levy: Oh, sorry. Thank you. Max Levy from Cronkite News Service. I had two questions. The first was just a clarification. Does being awarded any of the Race to the Top awards from Phase 1 or Phase 2 preclude you from these awards?

Arne Duncan: Absolutely not.

Max Levy: Okay. And then the second question is one...

Arne Duncan: Everybody - we encourage everybody to apply.

Max Levy: Okay. Great. And the second question is just wanted - I'm also working in Washington, DC. It's gotten chaotic in the newsroom and this is also my first earthquake. So we just wanted to - how has it been going - is this your first press conference from the sidewalk and what's it been like during this chaos?

Joan Lombardi: Well, I know for...

Arne Duncan: Kathleen...

Joan Lombardi: ...we're very focused here.

Max Levy: Okay. Well thank you.

Coordinator: Once again, if anyone would like to ask a question, please press star then 1. Our next question comes from Laura Bornfreund. Your line is open.

Laura Bornfreund: Hi. I was just want to try to get a few more details about how applicants will be scored. Will peer reviewers be specifically asked to look at states

differently based on whether they write about what they're already doing in a given area versus what they plan to do?

Jacqueline Jones: So we really...

Joan Lombardi: We structured this so - sorry Jacqueline.

Jacqueline Jones: Go ahead Joan if you want.

Joan Lombardi: So we've structured this so that, you know, they do both. They build upon what they've already been doing and develop high quality plans that will go the next step in addressing the criteria.

Jacqueline Jones: So we're looking at - this is Jacqueline. We're looking at where they are as well as the high quality plan they have to move forward.

Arne Duncan: And the capacity and their ability to deliver on that plan.

Laura Bornfreund: Okay. Will there be any weight given to say states that are doing something in a given area as opposed to a state in that same area that is proposing a plan?

Jacqueline Jones: Yes. We're really looking at a plan and then how far states have come along in the implementation of that work.

Laura Bornfreund: Okay. Thank you.

Joan Lombardi: And, you know, I guess I would add that, you know, states are, you know, in an array of places. They're in a variety of places on the different criteria. Some may be stronger in one area than another. So we're looking at the whole plan across all the criteria.

Laura Bornfreund: Okay. Thank you.

Coordinator: The next question is from Lisa Guernsey. Your line is open.

Lisa Guernsey: Hi. Yes. This is Lisa from Early Ed Watch and Laura who you just spoke with also from Early Ed Watch. Thank you for taking our calls.

I have a question about the - there's two sections in the scoring rubric on understanding the status of children at kindergarten entry. And I was just wondering if you might be able to clarify if there are some differences between the two.

One is a competitive priority around understanding the status of children at kindergarten entry and another is under what's called a focused investment area. Is there something in particular that you'll be looking for under one or the other that's different?

Jacqueline Jones: So Lisa, we're really looking at states and the ability that they have to implement a way of understanding children status across a broad range of domains at kindergarten entry. And so you're quite right in saying that there are - that that is in two places.

And so a selection criteria is in the document that speaks to developing kindergarten entry assessment. There is also a priority, a competitive priority. So states may decide to go for that competitive priority in which they implement this measure.

So it is in two places. We think it's important enough to have it as something that we choose under this focused investment area but also to have it as a

competitive priority where it really is important and states are moving forward to build this in a way that will allow them to really understand where children are.

Joan Lombardi: I think it underscores the importance that we put on really understanding how children are fairing as they enter kindergarten. And as you know, Lisa, this is information that we too often haven't had.

Lisa Guernsey: Yes.

Joan Lombardi: And so rather than waiting until years later to see how children are doing, you know, we think we need to start gathering that information earlier.

Jacqueline Jones: So Lisa, I want to be clear for the competitive priority you get extra points. I think it's ten extra points to write to that competitive priority.

Lisa Guernsey: Great. And if I could just ask one last thing and that is, there are kindergarten teachers that would be administering those assessments in the kindergarten entry assessment category or is it open ended as to who is administering the assessment?

Jacqueline Jones: We've not at all indicated that. The states are going to come to us with their best ideas about how to make this work so that it will be able to give - the assessment will give information to teachers and be useful for program improvement. So the states are going to come to us with their ideas about how this should work in a way that is developmentally appropriate.

Joan Lombardi: And we just want to emphasize the importance of looking broadly across development at the essential domains of development so that they're not structured in a narrow way.

Jacqueline Jones: Yes. I think Joan is quite right with that Lisa. It has to be both looking at cognitive and non-cognitive domains. And if you look at the definitions, you will see that these essential domains really cover a broad range of cognitive and non-cognitive domains. So that's important.

Lisa Guernsey: Thank you. Great.

Coordinator: Once again, if you would like to ask a question, please press star then 1 now. We do have a follow up question from (Maureen Kelleher). Your line is open.

(Maureen Kelleher): Thank you. Hi. This is (Maureen Kelleher). Arne mentioned that the - you're going to try to judge capacity of states to deliver on these plans. I'm curious how you intend to measure that particularly in this tough economy.

Jacqueline Jones: This is Jacqueline. I think, you know, as we look at the scoring criteria, you'll see that we are asking states to give us ambitious yet achievable plans but also plans that are credible and possible.

And so part of the work of this competition is to think about ways in which they can leverage existing resources across the various learning and development programs but to also think about ways in which these initiatives can be sustainable.

And so that's part of what we're looking at. The ways in which the plans that are presented really are plans that are ambitious, achievable, credible, and can really be sustained. And that requires that states look across these various funding streams and see the ways in which they can leverage them most effectively.

((Crosstalk))

Jacqueline Jones: ...really leveraging...

(Maureen Kelleher): ...one.

Jacqueline Jones: Sorry. Say that again.

(Maureen Kelleher): I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Jacqueline Jones: No, I just want to reinforce the importance of leveraging other resources of the agencies working together. All of those things I think are indicators of a state's capacity to deliver results.

(Maureen Kelleher): And can you guys help in terms of Title I and helping states and local districts access and use Title I in their pre-kindergarten?

Jacqueline Jones: Well right now states - local school districts have the ability to use Title I funds for pre-school and it's defined as birth on up. So we don't have to do anything. They have that ability right now.

(Maureen Kelleher): I don't know. I think I've heard from administrators that there's some - perhaps there's confusion. But I think they feel like they need a little more clarity.

Arne Duncan: We're happy to provide that clarity. But just to be real clear that we're looking for places that are doing things in a more creative way. Many places are using Title I money in interesting ways. Other folks maybe haven't exercised that flexibility. But this is again a real opportunity for folks to challenge the status

quo, behave in different ways. And there's a tremendous amount of flexibility there if states choose to use it.

(Elizabeth Utrup): Operator, this is (Liz Utrup) with the Education Press Office. We're going to take - we have time for one more question.

Coordinator: Thank you. The last question is from (Joy Resmovich). Your line's open.

(Joy Resmovich): Hi. Thanks so much for taking the time and for taking my question. I think this is more for Jacqueline or Secretary Duncan. Since the first regular Race to the Top question, winning states have filed amendments to move up their deadlines. What have you learned from the first process in general and from specifically the way things have changed after the money has been awarded?

Arne Duncan: Well I think it has - we've learned lots of valuable lessons. I think the most important thing is that this is really tough work. This is work that we're trying to get folks to do in very different ways than they have for maybe the past two or three or four decades. And that's not easy to do.

And so we're much more interested in getting this right than in, you know, rushing through something that perpetuates the status quo. And again, our - we're very, very hopeful here, very ambitious frankly. We hope that the impact in the early childhood space here is as transformative as it was in the K to 12 reform work.

And so we're looking for folks to do some things very, very differently. And then we want to be good partners with them to make sure that difficult work happens and that we change things now for the next two, three, four decades.

(Joy Resmovich): And quick follow up. As a result of those lessons is there anything you've changed on a procedural level about how this is going to work?

Arne Duncan: I don't know if we've changed anything on a procedural level. I think what - you know, obviously with the current Race to the Top winning states what we're trying to do from a functional standpoint is to have our department be a much better partner and not be compliant driven, to really engage and actively support states.

You know, I'd encourage you to ask states whether they think we're being a good partner or not and what we're doing to help them be successful. But our goal is not to just sort of be the checkbox bureaucracy. Our goal is to help these states that are doing very courageous, very difficult work. We want to do everything we can to help them get where they're trying to go.

Joan Lombardi: And I would just add - this is Joan Lombardi. That, you know, I think this is a vision for where states can go to improve the quality of the programs and to really promote children's readiness for success. And we can tell already that there's tremendous interest in the states in the criteria in working together and bringing the agencies together. And so, you know, I think that that's going to have payoff even across the states.

(Joy Resmovich): Great. Thank you so much.

(Elizabeth Utrup): Thank you everybody. This is Elizabeth Utrup again with the Department of Education. I just want to say thank you especially to those of you in D.C. who found a safe haven to join our call today and to HHS especially who had to work remotely to make this happen.

Kathleen Sebelius: Yes. We're still on the street here. Thank you everybody.

(Elizabeth Utrup): So yes, thank you again for joining the call. And feel free to reach the Education Department's Press Office with any follow up questions as well as HHS. We'd be happy to take any additional questions that you might have. Have a good afternoon everyone.

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