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Colorado Pulls Out Stops in Bid for 'Race to Top' Aid

Colorado's aggressive bid for 'Race to the Top' aid sets a fierce pace for rivals.

By [Alyson Klein](#)

Denver

If the competition for a slice of \$4 billion in federal Race to the Top Fund money were a school class, Colorado would be one of the kids sitting up front, furiously taking notes, and leaping up to answer every one of the teacher's questions.

Officials here began plotting their strategy for receiving one of the coveted grants nearly as soon as the Race to the Top program was created in February as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the \$787 billion economic-stimulus package.

Gov. Bill Ritter, a Democrat, immediately tapped Lt. Gov. Barbara O'Brien to lead the state's effort. She, in turn, convened a series of open meetings to discuss the details of the application, reaching out to everyone from state and local teachers' unions to small-town mayors across the far-flung state.

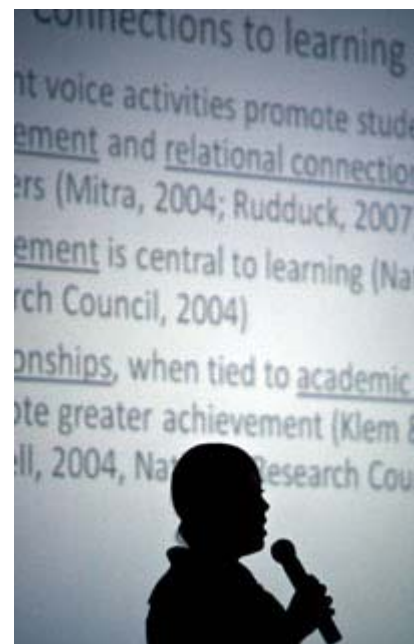
So far, 650 teachers, business leaders, students, and others have taken part in those sessions, their input bolstered by the views of national experts such as Kate Walsh, the president of the National Council on Teacher Quality, a research organization in Washington.

And Ms. O'Brien and other state officials have been crisscrossing the state, letting district officials know how they will benefit if Colorado gets a grant.

The vigorous outreach campaign is partly to gain an advantage in the high-stakes national competition. States' applications will be judged, in part, on the extent to which they have buy-in from various stakeholders for their proposals. Getting groups such as the state teachers' union on board with those efforts is seen as particularly important.

But there is another reason for the emphasis here on feedback

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and communication: Given Colorado's tradition of local control, the state's eventual plan for the federal grant money will have to be married to a culture that prizes local prerogatives.

"It's like you teach your children to be independent, then you all have to decide where to go on vacation together," said Monte Moses, a former superintendent of the Cherry Creek school district, near Denver, who is serving as a co-chairman of a committee aimed at exploring how the state could use Race to the Top money to turn around low-performing schools.

High school student Shelby Parker, 17, speaks during an Oct. 6 presentation in Denver that focused on how Colorado can use grassroots support to advance its campaign to get a federal Race to the Top Fund grant. Student involvement in the process will likely be highlighted in the state's application.

—Nathan W. Armes for Education Week

Colorado is hardly the only state pulling out all the stops for the Race to the Top, a \$4.35 billion grant program created under the recovery act to reward states for making progress on a series of "assurances" oriented to education redesign. (The U.S. Department of Education is earmarking \$350 million of that fund to help states develop assessments as part of a nationwide push for common academic standards.)

Across the country, states are rushing to rework their education laws to be more competitive for a share of the funding.

California recently scrapped a law prohibiting the linking of student and teacher data. A number of states have reshaped their charter school legislation. (U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has said data "firewalls" could put a state out of the running for Race to the Top grants, and a charter school cap could also weigh against a state's application.)

States have also put administrative and political muscle behind the effort. Oklahoma Gov. Brad Henry, a Democrat, named a chief of education strategy and innovation, a position created chiefly to pursue competitive federal grants made available under the stimulus package—particularly the Race to the Top. And Rhode Island has set up a 23-member steering committee on Race to the Top that met for the first time in September. The state is also holding community forums on the program.



High school student Tevin Thompson, 16, leads a discussion at Bruce Randolph School in Denver on how the community can help build support for low-performing schools.

—Nathan W. Armes for Education Week

But Colorado has gone further, setting up four such committees, each concentrating on one of the assurances specified in the stimulus law. They focus on low-performing schools, teacher and principal quality and distribution, state data systems, and standards and assessments.

The panels are led by business and community representatives, as well as staff members from the state education department. But Lt. Gov. O'Brien has been clear that the ultimate authority for the application rests with Gov. Ritter.

"They've been told over and over again that we're looking for the best ideas, and the ideas have to be able to be woven together into an organic whole," she said in a recent interview, calling it a "Darwinian" process in which the best ideas will rise to the top.

Educators and policymakers in Colorado have credited the meetings with helping to accelerate discussions that they say were badly needed to advance reforms to education. They say the agenda they've begun to outline will go forward, with or without the Race to the Top resources—though the federal grant money would offer a big boost.

"We've had a lot of good ideas floating around the state for a long time, but we don't have any money to implement them," said Kelly Hupfeld, who works as an assistant dean at the University of Colorado Denver's school of public affairs, which is lending technical support to the state's effort. "This is a chance for us to really accelerate all of the things that we've been talking about."

The meetings have also provided a forum for considerable state collaboration with a key constituency: the Colorado Education Association. The union is an affiliate of the 3.2 million-member National Education Association, which lambasted the draft regulations for the Race to the Top.

Elsewhere, some teachers' unions, such as the state organization in Montana, have tried to dissuade their states from even applying for the program. But the NEA's nearly 40,000-member Colorado affiliate is sending representatives to each of the working groups to make sure the union's voice is heard.

The state union remains open to some ideas that could become part of the final application, such as providing districts with a new, model teacher-evaluation system, as long as student test scores aren't the only factor used, said Linda Barker, the director of teaching and learning for the CEA.

"It's so important that it doesn't become us against them," Ms. Barker said, referring to the union and the state. "Being part of the solution, part of the decisionmaking process, is better than just reacting to it."

The meetings are only one piece of an ambitious outreach effort aimed at getting broad-based support—and district buy-in—for the state's bid. In coming weeks, Ms. O'Brien, Commissioner of Education Dwight Jones, and others will be taking the Race to the Top show

Aiming to Please

Colorado officials are focusing intently on some of the key criteria the U.S. Department of Education wants states to address when submitting applications for Race to the Top grants. **Examples of the federal priorities include:**

- Developing and adopting common academic standards
- Fully implementing a statewide longitudinal-data system
- Using data to support instruction
- Reporting the effectiveness of teacher- and principal-preparation programs
- Increasing the supply of high-quality charter schools
- Making education funding a priority
- Building strong statewide capacity to implement, scale, and sustain proposed plans

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education

on the road, traveling to remote parts of the state and also selling the program to influential groups in the Denver metropolitan area.

On a recent morning in Denver, Ms. O'Brien addressed a group of mayors from around the state at the offices of the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce. She explained the program to them and the opportunity she said it presents for Colorado.

"The ripple effects of this could be enormous," in helping to educate Colorado students to compete in a global economy, she said.

But the lieutenant governor paired the inspirational rhetoric with tough talk, telling mayors that districts that sign on to the proposal will "have to embrace charter schools." And she said that, as part of its application, the state would have to commit to turning around 88 of its lowest-performing schools.

"If you don't know what it's like to turn around a low-performing school, you don't know how frightened you should be and how frightened your school boards should be," Ms. O'Brien said.

The mayors peppered her with questions, including whether more charters would be necessary and how local leaders could help get the word out to their communities about the Race to the Top program.

"You can be talking to your school boards about being more flexible about these ideas," Ms. O'Brien answered. She said districts sometimes are "insular" in their policies and may need encouragement to embrace the kind of change needed for a successful application.

So far, about 95 out of 178 school districts statewide have signed letters of intent signaling that they want to be part of the state's effort. But their participation will be contingent on the state's final plan.

The lieutenant governor and others aren't expecting everyone to jump on board. "It's totally voluntary for them to participate," Ms. O'Brien said. She said she would be "OK with" some districts opting out.

"We want to focus on the ones that want to change" and those that need the most help, she said. "If we end up with 12 or 15 that are really heavily invested in this, we'll be happy."

Wayne Graybeal, the superintendent of the 1,600-student Lamar school district, in the southeastern corner of the state, gives state officials high marks so far for their willingness to communicate. Still, he hasn't yet signed the letter of intent, in part



Jorge Lopez, right, speaks with state Sen. Evie Hudak and state Rep. Michael Merrifield during the meeting about specific reform ideas.

—Nathan W. Armes for Education Week



because he's worried the state's plan could eventually amount to an unfunded mandate.

"If we value local control, we need to be very careful in accepting those carrots [from the federal government], because along with the carrot comes the stick," Mr. Graybeal said.

If the state wins a Race to the Top grant, the money will indeed come with strings attached. Some would have to be allocated to districts based on the formula for distributing Title I aid for disadvantaged students. But it's unclear whether Race to the Top money would flow to all districts that receive Title I aid, or just those that signed on to the state's proposal.

And it isn't clear from the federal guidance just how important it will be to a state's application to get a majority of districts on board.

Colorado would hope to use Race to the Top funding in part to carry out laws passed in recent years that appear to be in line with some of the policies Secretary Duncan is trying to advance through the program.

For instance, the state recently revamped its academic standards. It developed and adopted a "growth model" for gauging achievement to give a better picture of individual student progress. And it has a number of school districts that are using alternative pay plans for teachers.

It also has a new "innovation" law, allowing schools to opt out of certain requirements, including collective bargaining, if a certain percentage of the staff approves. That measure maybe cited in the state's Race to the Top application as a way to help turn around low-performing schools.

If Colorado is tapped for a federal award, officials here say, the state may create a computer-based test that could include a formative component to help teachers get a "real-time picture" of their students' progress toward meeting the new standards. And the state may use some of a grant to improve its data-collection system.

Brian Barhaugh, who works closely with students on leadership development, listens during a discussion at the meeting about turning around struggling schools.
—Nathan W. Armes for Education Week



Colorado Lt. Gov. Barbara O'Brien addresses the Metro Mayors Caucus Oct. 7 about the Race to the Top program.
—Nathan W. Armes for Education Week

Gov. Ritter has already steered some federal stimulus aid toward the state's goals, including \$500,000 to develop its first educator-identification system. That money was augmented by \$400,000 in private funding.

Mr. Ritter also slated an additional \$1.5 million to expand the state's corps of educators from the Teach For America program, a New York City-based nonprofit organization that places new college graduates in teaching jobs in underresourced schools. And he pumped \$2.5 million into an effort to enhance the state's data system to better measure individual student

progress.

And, although few mention it here, some are wondering whether the state's chances of winning a Race to the Top grant may be enhanced by its status as a "purple state," where both the Democratic and Republican parties have proved competitive.

Gov. Ritter himself is facing an expected uphill battle for re-election in 2010, along with a fellow Democrat who is closely identified with education issues, U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet. The governor named Mr. Bennet, then the Denver schools chief, to fill a Senate vacancy this year.

President Barack Obama, who won the Centennial State last year, may need to repeat his victory here in his own re-election bid in 2012. He traveled to Colorado last winter to sign the stimulus legislation into law.

"I'm crossing my fingers," joked Lt. Gov. O'Brien. "I would love to think this process is politicized."

But she said she'd heard Secretary Duncan was making sure those reviewing the Race to the Top applications wouldn't have conflicts of interest.

"We're not leaving it to chance," she said of Colorado's effort to win one of the grants. "We're just going to write the very best proposal we can."

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