

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: January 19, 2010

Updated: January 19, 2010

Schools and the Stimulus

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Obama to Seek \$1.35 Billion Race to Top Expansion



Accompanied by U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, President Barack Obama announces that he will seek an additional \$1.35 billion in next year's budget to expand the Race to the Top competition. Mr. Obama made the announcement on Jan. 19 at Graham Road Elementary School in Falls Church, Va.

—Alex Brandon/AP

By **Michele McNeil**

President Barack Obama will seek \$1.35 billion in next year's budget to expand the Race to the Top competition, paving the way for the popular economic-stimulus grant program to become a permanent part of the administration's education arsenal.

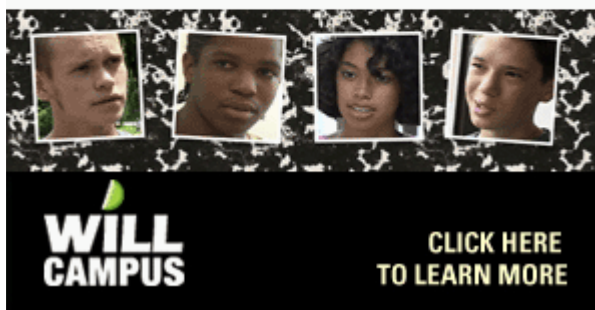
In its fiscal 2011 budget request, the Obama administration also will spell out that it wants to open up Race to the Top—which is now a competition among states—to school districts as well. Districts would have their own grant contest and would not have to compete against states, according to senior administration officials.

Mr. Obama made the announcement at Graham Road Elementary School in Falls Church, Va.,

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today, which is the deadline for the first round of the Race to the Top competition. More than 30 states are expected to apply by the 4:30 p.m. deadline. Second-round applications, which can include those from states that lose in the first round, will be due in June.

The competition has sparked a flurry of legislative activity in states trying to position themselves for a slice of \$4 billion in one-time grants under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, passed by Congress in February.

In his remarks today, Mr. Obama said the \$1.35 billion "will not only reaffirm our commitment to states engaged in serious reform, it will also expand the Race to the Top competition to include local school districts that are also committed to change."

He also took a jab at Texas, where Republican Gov. Rick Perry is refusing to compete for Race to the Top for fear of a "federal takeover" of his schools. Mr. Obama said, "Innovative districts ... in Texas whose reform efforts are being stymied by state decision-makers will soon have the chance to earn funding to help them pursue those reforms."

Details Uncertain

As for the second iteration of Race to the Top, many details are unclear, such as how much of the \$1.35 billion would go for the state competition, and how much for school districts. However, administration officials indicated that such details would be shaped by how many winners and losers emerge from the first two rounds of Race to the Top, and how competitive the applications in those rounds were.

Also unclear is how, if at all, the competition would differ from the way Race to the Top is operating now. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who had wide discretion in creating and implementing the current version of Race to the Top, would likely play a considerable role in shaping any new competitions.

Unanswered questions aside, the administration sees Race to the Top as a successful venture that it wants to expand, according to senior White House officials speaking on a background basis. In a briefing call Monday, they cited as evidence of the program's impact the fact that 11 states have moved to enhance their chances of securing a grant by, for example, lifting charter school caps and strengthening state intervention in turning around low-performing schools. That reaction shows "the importance of continuing the Race to the Top beyond the funding that was provided under the Recovery Act," a senior administration official said.

U.S. Rep. George Miller, a California Democrat and chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, praised the administration's move. "By continuing Race to the Top, the federal government shows it can be a partner in reform and work to uphold the integrity of the program so that these resources are used as intended and help leverage change," he said in the statement.

Part of a Broader Plan

White House officials also indicated that the Race to the Top expansion is one part of a larger education reform agenda President Obama will unveil in the coming weeks. Officials indicated it wants to continue the stimulus program's Investing in Innovation, or "i3," initiative, although funding levels were not specified. That \$650 million grant program is designed for

school districts and their nonprofit partners to try innovative education reform strategies and scale up efforts that already have a successful track record.

Details are sketchy as to how any new grants would be funded, whether President Obama will seek additional money from Congress for the Education Department to fund the continuation of those grants, or if he will fund them by taking away money from other education programs.

Mr. Duncan has made clear that he sees competition as a way for the federal government to help spur change, and that he wants to extend this theme throughout his education agenda.

“What we want to continue to do, way beyond Race to the Top, is reward excellence ... and ultimately, maybe, have Race to the Top 2,” Mr. Duncan said in a Jan. 6 interview with *Education Week*. “But that’s just the theme, to reward excellence. [Race to the Top] is a huge start, but to me it’s just an opening act.”

Vol. 29, Issue 19