

NAVIGATING THE RACE TO THE TOP TRAFFIC JAM

Early last week the U.S. Department of Education announced an unexpected 16 finalists for the first round of RTT funding – a veritable traffic jam in the Race to the Top. The finalists have requested a total of \$6.5 billion in funds, but only \$4.3 billion is up for grabs, and that needs to be spread over two rounds of competition. So this week, as they pitch their proposals in the nation’s capitol, the Department is seeking to narrow considerably the field of contenders.

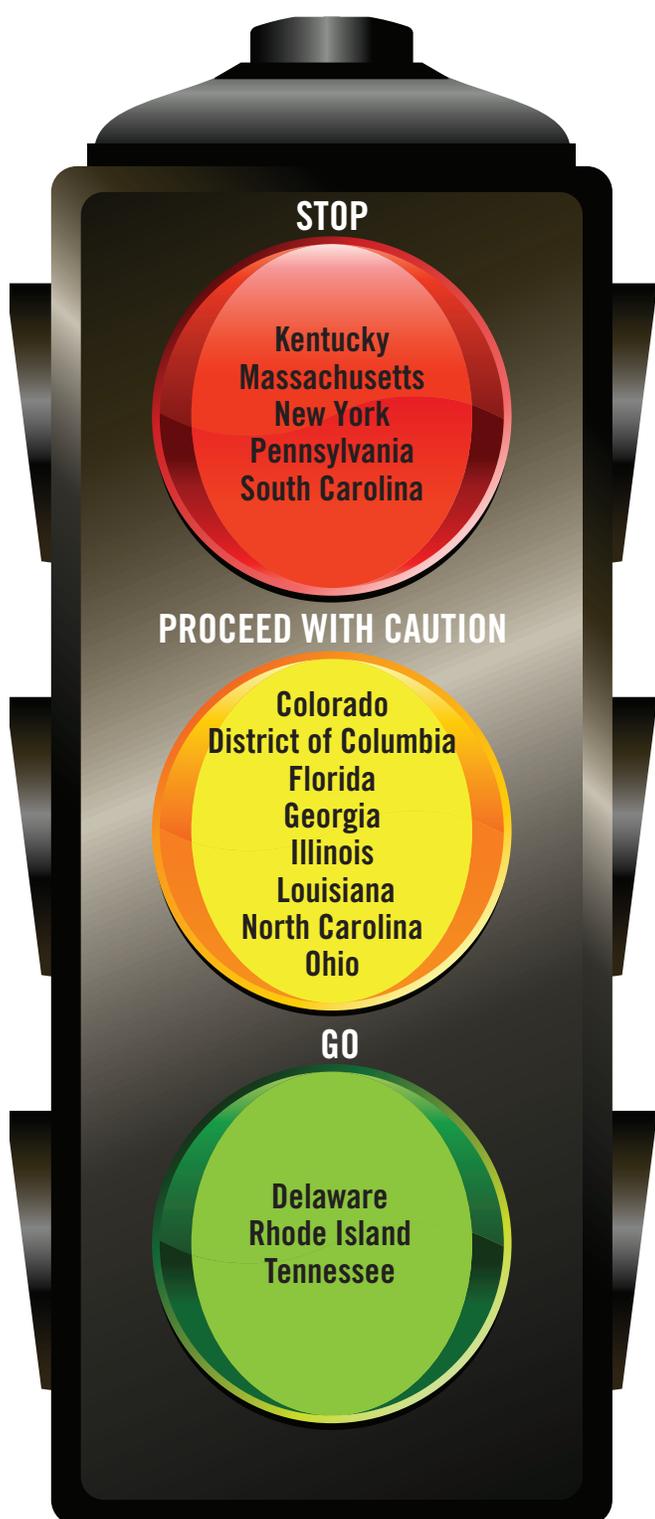
To help navigate the traffic, the National Council on Teacher Quality has reviewed the “Great Teachers and Leaders” section of each finalist application, and we provide here our take on which applications are a “go” (green light), in which instances the Department should proceed with caution (yellow light), and in which cases the Department ought to put on the brakes (red light).

To begin, we have a few observations about general road conditions, looking across the finalists.

With the exception of those few states, such as Delaware and Rhode Island, proposing statewide reforms backed by regulatory changes, most are depending on voluntary agreements with individual districts (memoranda of understanding, or MOUs) promising to implement the state’s RTT plan. While it is true that in many cases—Colorado, Florida, New York and South Carolina, for example—three-quarters or more of the states’ districts have signed on (Kentucky, North Carolina and Tennessee got every district to sign an MOU), it is still hard to tell whether these agreements will ultimately compel participating districts to embrace state goals and respond to state calls to action.

Some agreements don’t require districts to sign off on all aspects of the plan. The District of Columbia, for example, allows participants to opt out of some plan elements. In other cases, the state has not yet specified what policies it plans to implement – making it hard to pinpoint to what a district is really agreeing. For example, Illinois only commits at this point to having an advisory committee look at teacher tenure, dismissal and compensation reforms. What kind of cooperation might there be when high-stakes employment decisions actually are on the table?

In other states, like New York, many crucial aspects of teacher reform are voluntary or left up to the districts to design. Given that most finalists are depending on the voluntary buy-in of districts rather than making statewide legislative or regulatory changes, much is still to be determined.



In a very real sense, the actual race will begin after the Department announces the RTT winners. In the “Great Teachers and Leaders” section of the applications, all states proposed strengthening their alternate routes, providing incentives and training to fill high-need positions, supporting teachers with professional development and holding teacher preparation programs more accountable. States also came in with some bold proposals around implementing performance-based teacher and principal evaluations with student achievement as the preponderant criterion. Several commit to revamping their tenure systems, and some appear serious about reforming teacher compensation.

But how sustainable are these RTT reforms in the long run, given that many states propose pilots and competitions to spur district-level innovations? There is very limited discussion in the applications about how field tests and district experiments may, in a relatively short time frame, become statewide policy – which must be the goal of a program on the scale of RTT if there is any expectation of success.

As the RTT finalists gather in Washington this week, NCTQ urges Department of Education officials to press states hard on these issues – and a few more. For example: How realistic are state timelines? How well have states anticipated the likely complications of implementing a challenging agenda on a short timeline? And which states have the kinds of track records to justify this unprecedented commitment of resources?

NCTQ’s focus is teacher quality. For our analysis, we did not examine proposed state budgets for RTT, and we did not review the hundreds of pages of appendices states submitted as part of their applications. Nor have we attempted to summarize each state’s entire teacher reform agenda here. We examined the narrative portions of the “Great Teachers and Leaders” section of each finalist’s application only, because it is the place where states were asked to provide their visions for recruiting, preparing, evaluating, retaining and rewarding effective teachers in their states. Accordingly, we highlight what stood out for us as promising features, we raise some red flags, and we provide traffic signals to help navigate the large number of proposals still in the race.

DELAWARE

RTT Request: \$107 million

Status: Green



This is a strong proposal, which is not surprising given the state’s commitment from the start to win an RTT grant. Delaware’s proposal on tenure is topnotch. The state’s major strength is that it has adopted statewide policies and regulations – not depending on MOUs to implement key reforms at the district level. Delaware already has a statewide annual evaluation system in place and is using the regulatory process to ensure that evaluations are performance-based. Delaware’s new regulations require that evaluations must be based on student performance growth for 2011-12 and used for tenure, compensation and promotion. As a matter of statewide policy, teachers cannot be rated effective unless they have met growth targets, and teachers will not be granted tenure if rated “ineffective” more than once.

Delaware also plans to provide one-on-one coaching to administrators implementing the statewide evaluation system, retention bonuses for highly-effective teachers who take positions in high-need schools, model career ladder options for districts and merit-based opportunities for highly effective teachers.

RHODE ISLAND

RTT Request: \$125 million

Status: Green



Of all of the RTT applicants, Rhode Island presents the most aggressive regulatory approach to reform teacher policy. Just to highlight a few strategies:

The state adopted regulations requiring districts to have annual evaluations that are “primarily” (51 percent) based on student growth, and is developing statewide value added and growth measures in 2011-12, with an operational system in place by 2013-14.

New state regulations require superintendents to certify that they have dismissed all teachers rated ineffective before the teachers reach tenure status and call for only teachers rated as effective or highly effective to be considered for school leadership, mentor corps or turnaround schools.

Rhode Island is the only state, out of all 41 RTT applicants, to propose mutual consent. As of July 2010, all teacher placements must be made on the basis of school needs, not seniority.

As of July 2010, Rhode Island will prohibit ineffective teachers from transferring to high-need schools and will send student data linked to ineffective teachers to districts, requiring district leaders to certify that no student is taught by an ineffective teacher for a second year.

Rhode Island also is proposing a rigorous mentoring system for all new teachers in high-needs districts. Mentors must be highly rated teachers, be provided with release time and engage in peer coaching.

If we have to complain about something, we'd say that Rhode Island's timeline for evaluation implementation (2013-14) and development of a compensation model (2015) is long, and the compensation reform proposed is just a small pilot. But this reform proposal is as bold as it gets.

TENNESSEE

RTT Request: \$502 million

Status: Green

Tennessee has a head start on performance-based teacher assessment with a long history of value-added student achievement data keyed to individual teachers. So this state is out in front with growth models already in place. Now Tennessee is proposing to adopt a statewide evaluation system for 2011-12, 50 percent of which will be based on student achievement results, as mandated by new state law.

But while all districts signed on to the state's MOU, NCTQ was disappointed that Tennessee seemed not as aggressive as it could have been on pursuing statewide policies regarding consequences based on performance-based evaluations. Tennessee plans to provide grant funds to encourage high-stakes reform, and the state allows districts some options—including the freedom to adopt alternative salary schedules to pursue compensation reform. But Tennessee probably could have proposed stronger consequences to stand alongside their strong statewide evaluation proposal. That said, this one is still a good bet.

COLORADO

RTT Request: \$377 million

Status: Yellow

Colorado's application shows real commitment to taking teacher evaluations seriously. By the end of 2010, Colorado pledges to have developed a statewide definition of teacher effectiveness, along with rubrics and guidelines for participating districts to choose/design performance-based evaluations. The state also proposes that, beginning in 2012-13, 50 percent of teacher and principal evaluation ratings in all participating districts will be based on student growth. Colorado reports commitment from 134 out of the state's 180 districts, representing 95 percent of students and 90 percent of schools. By 2013-14, Colorado is promising that all participating districts will use evaluation data from performance-based evaluations to inform compensation, promotion and retention decisions, and provide merit-based opportunities for effective teachers.

But we wager that implementation within the state's notoriously decentralized system could be challenging. The burden is on participating districts to design new evaluations and propose plans for how districts will revamp compensation, promotion and retention.

The big weakness in this proposal is that it makes no commitment to statewide changes to compensation, tenure and dismissal policies. Colorado promises recommendations from the Governor's Council by September 2011. But recommendations down the road are not the same as adopting policies now.



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

RTT Request: \$112 million

Status: Yellow



It certainly works in the District of Columbia's favor that the DC Public Schools (DCPS) have been no stranger to bold action under Chancellor Michelle Rhee. But there is still a question about whether the District can deliver "statewide" what it promises in its RTT application. The District's memorandum of agreement, as described in the teacher section of the application, is an expression of "willingness" to participate and implement "20 of 24" reform agenda items included in the RTT application, which could allow for some significant implementation wiggle room.

That said, DC's plan is ambitious. DC has a leg up on other applicants, having already put in place a promising evaluation system. IMPACT, DCPS's new performance evaluation appraisal system, promises growth measures to be determined in 2010 and teacher evaluations where 50 percent of teacher ratings are based on student growth the following year. The District proposes using RTT for large retention bonuses (pending contract negotiations with the union) for highly effective teachers and merit-based opportunities. DC also put special emphasis on teacher preparation, promising to publish a preparation program scorecard for both traditional programs and alternate routes by Fall 2012 and revoking accreditation for programs producing ineffective teachers.

Again, the question for the District is, can it deliver? The timelines are tight. Without regulatory changes at the district/state level, is this, in effect, an experiment with a set of willing partner charter schools with no guarantee of implementation or evidence of sustainability?

FLORIDA

RTT Request: \$1.1 billion

Status: Yellow



Florida's RTT application is obviously well informed by a track record of reform and important lessons learned to date. There may not be a state among the finalists that knows better the challenges ahead should it win an RTT grant – because Florida has already taken on some of the changes in teacher policy that other states are just beginning to think about. State statute in Florida already requires that teacher evaluations must be "primarily based" on student performance, and Florida is already ahead of many states in having growth measures in place.

But the evaluation process is decentralized—teacher evaluations in Florida are locally developed—and by Florida's own admission, evaluation measures and efforts across the state are very uneven. To that end, Florida is proposing to use RTT to set statewide standards for performance evaluation and provide more intensive support for districts in the design and adoption of high-quality evaluation instruments. Florida also smartly proposes using RTT funds to help districts develop more effective growth measures for courses outside the standardized state assessment for 2010-11.

Florida is supporting districts in the adoption of differential pay based on teacher performance evaluation results rather than years of experience or degrees earned. The question is, to what extent can districts pull this off? Florida notes that it "seeks to change the decision-making process through this grant not by starting with state level regulatory change, but by first providing incentives and support to districts in making these changes." But we think there would be some big advantages to making regulatory changes rather than depending on volunteers when asking for a \$1.1 billion commitment from the Department of Education.

GEORGIA

RTT Request: \$462 million

Status: Yellow

Georgia's RTT teacher proposal has several strong features of note. The state proposes that, for participating districts, performance evaluations for teachers will include 50 percent value-added measures and 10 percent measures of closing achievement gaps. The state has the elements needed for growth measures and promises them by summer 2011. And in a smart move, Georgia plans to use peer evaluators (not just administrators) to help implement the new evaluation system.

Participating districts will, according to Georgia's proposal, tie step increases and raises to performance-based evaluations. And Georgia actually included in its application a new statewide salary schedule that differentiates teacher pay based on evaluation ratings – teachers in participating districts can opt in for 2013-14, and legislation is pending for statewide adoption of the salary schedule for 2015-16. The state is also proposing merit-based opportunities for highly-effective teachers.

One important disadvantage for the state – just 23 districts are slated to participate, which is only about 13 percent of the districts in Georgia. So the evaluation and compensation portion of the RTT proposal, promising as it is, is essentially a pilot. On the up side, there is at least a discussion of statewide adoption of the reforms. But that is tentative, and even still, not proposed until 2015-16.



But some of the state's timelines are long. For example, Illinois won't have growth measures developed until 2012-13. In the meantime, the state is requiring individual districts to come up with their own. Illinois' "yellow" status is also earned because the state is non-committal on how evaluations will be used for employment decisions, saying that an advisory committee will examine these issues down the road.

LOUISIANA

RTT Request: \$314 million

Status: Yellow

Louisiana has a promising RTT proposal on teacher performance evaluation, with some strong options for compensation reform, but its "to be determined" approach regarding consequences earns it a "yellow" status.

Louisiana proposes that the state's value-added growth model will account for 50 percent of teacher evaluations. But the state won't be piloting the value-added evaluations until 2012. Louisiana also plans to provide incentives for high-performing teachers to teach in low-performing schools for three years.

However, Louisiana's commitment to using performance-based evaluations to make high-stakes decisions sounds a bit tentative.

On a positive note, Louisiana is one of just a few finalists that already has a value-added accountability system for teacher preparation programs – and they intend to expand and strengthen that system under RTT.



ILLINOIS

RTT Request: \$510 million

Status: Yellow

Illinois made a big commitment to change this year by passing the Performance Evaluation Reform Act requiring that student growth is a significant (minimum of 50 percent) determinant of teacher evaluations. All participating districts (42 percent of total districts) are expected to implement new evaluations in 2012-13, and importantly, all Illinois districts are eventually required to implement performance-based evaluations (although not until 2016-17). Illinois promises to hire peer evaluators to conduct teacher evaluations, and 12 (what the state is calling) "super LEAs" have agreed to waive collective bargaining agreements as needed to implement reforms.



NORTH CAROLINA

RTT Request: \$470 million

Status: Yellow



North Carolina has a strong track record among RTT finalists, but its application also has some weaknesses, which earned the state a “yellow” status. The state already has growth measures and promises that growth will be incorporated into evaluations for 2012-13. North Carolina is also proposing, promisingly, a statewide definition of effective teachers. The state also has plans for streamlined removal and dismissal guidelines and plans to incorporate evaluation results into the state’s credentialing system.

However, North Carolina’s teacher proposal has some important holes. First, it is unclear how much the state intends to weight growth measures in its new evaluation system. And while the state notes that it already provides incentive bonuses to teachers who meet growth expectations, this isn’t necessarily measured in terms of student learning. Further, the state seems not to have decided how compensation will be tied to evaluation. These are issues the Department would need to pin North Carolina down on before giving the state a green light to move forward.

OHIO

RTT Request: \$410 million

Status: Yellow



Ohio has a great number of promising initiatives included in its RTT proposal. The state adopted a new licensure system in 2009, which it promises will be calibrated with its performance-based evaluation system. Ohio also extended tenure from three years to seven years and plans to revamp its guidelines to districts regarding how tenure decisions are made. Ohio also says that it intends its new four-step licensing system to provide the foundation for new teacher compensation statewide.

Ohio proposes a “co-teacher” program beginning in 2012 in participating districts, in which coaches team up with new teachers in low-performing schools. The state also is proposing a four year residency program beginning Fall 2011 for all beginning teachers that includes mentoring.

Why then, a “yellow” status? We don’t think Ohio is far off from a go-ahead green light. But we noticed that Ohio’s timeline for linking student outcomes to teacher preparation programs is longer than other states’. Ohio doesn’t commit until almost the end of the grant period (2014) and, as noted with other finalists, it is tentative regarding high-stakes consequences for teacher evaluations. Ohio proposes that participating districts can “opt to pursue” compensation reform based on teacher effectiveness measures.

All in all, though, the promising features dominate, and Ohio’s commitment to teacher reform appears strong in this application.

KENTUCKY

RTT Request: \$200 million

Status: Red



Compared to the other finalists, it is hard to pinpoint what exactly Kentucky’s big vision for RTT is. The state proposes a new growth model in 2011-12, which will account for 30-50 percent of teacher evaluations. But Kentucky shows no strong statewide commitment regarding the use of performance-based teacher evaluations to make employment decisions. The state is proposing a competition for districts to implement pilot incentive programs – which seems like a weaker than necessary approach given that all of the state’s districts signed on to Kentucky’s MOU.

It isn’t the case that Kentucky’s teacher proposal has no merit. It is a state with a long record of reform. But, among this group of finalists, we just don’t see it as a contender.

MASSACHUSETTS

RTT Request: \$287 million

Status: Red

If the Department wants to fund a pilot project, Massachusetts may be a fine choice. The state's RTT application is thoughtful and has promising features. Over the course of the grant, Massachusetts intends to develop and implement performance-based evaluations.

But the state is ultimately proposing a relatively small experiment involving 10 districts, with no obvious statewide commitment to policy change. During the grant, the state pledges to undertake a statewide "conversation" about attaching consequences to evaluations and plans to pilot compensation and dismissal policy reform with a subset of the 10 participating districts.

This teacher proposal earns a "red" from NCTQ largely because of the measured and tentative pilot approach to reform, which simply doesn't strike us as consistent with the bold and "once in a lifetime opportunity" vision of RTT.



NEW YORK

RTT Request: \$831 million

Status: Red

Our main concern about New York is that it is a very expensive proposal with little commitment to making statewide changes in policy or regulations to support RTT reforms around teacher evaluation, tenure and compensation over the long haul.

There is no dearth of "participating" districts in New York – 550 of the state's 837 have signed on to the state's plan – but what exactly does it mean to participate? New York plans to pilot performance-based evaluations in 2011-12 with growth measures to account for 30-40 percent of evaluations. But the state plans to ask districts to apply to pilot the evaluations as part of a competition – which presumably means that not all "participating" districts need take part in this experiment.



New York also plans to hold a competition for districts to prepare proposals for how results of evaluations will be used for tenure, promotion, compensation and dismissal. All in all, New York's proposal seems to kick the can down the road on reform commitments and puts most of the burden of innovation on individual districts, the specifics to be determined later.

PENNSYLVANIA

RTT Request: \$400 million

Status: Red

Pennsylvania's application is full of promises, but it is hard to tell what the state can deliver since there is little in the way of regulation or legislation in place to set the groundwork.

Pennsylvania proposes a state model for teacher evaluation by Fall 2011 and a model compensation plan at some point in the future, although the plans for that are unclear. Pennsylvania also promises an accountability system for teacher preparation by 2013. In general, however, the details in this application are sketchy. No specifics are provided, for example, on any aspects of the model evaluation, including how much growth will be weighted.

While the state is planning to propose legislation for a new alternate route in 2010, Pennsylvania currently does not allow alternate routes that are independent of institutions of higher education.

Finally, only about a quarter of the state's districts are signed on to the state's plan.



SOUTH CAROLINA

RTT Request: \$300 million

Status: Red



South Carolina is already piloting value-added teacher evaluations, which is a step in the right direction for RTT, and almost all districts have signed on to the state's RTT plan. That said, NCTQ notes some red flags in South Carolina's plan to expand the state's evaluation system to use growth measures for all students. The system is promised "by the end of the grant period," a long timeline compared to other finalists in the running.

Furthermore, the state does not commit specifically to how and how much growth will be factored into performance evaluations. South Carolina says it plans to set standards for annual performance evaluations, include teacher effectiveness ratings in certification advancement and develop model salary incentives, but the details could be fleshed out in a bit more concrete detail. As a result, despite promising features, this proposal is weaker than many of the other finalists.



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