



Foundation for
**Education Reform
 & Accountability**

POLICY POINTS MEMORANDUM

March 18, 2010

**Analysis identifies weak teacher reforms proposed in
 New York’s Race to the Top application**

To bring about real reform and improve the quality of public educational across the state, New York leaders should improve the Race to the Top proposal and resubmit for Round Two.

BY B. JASON BROOKS

Much has been made over the U.S. Department of Education selecting New York as one of the 16 finalists in Round One of the \$4.4 billion federal Race to the Top grant program. On Tuesday, the state’s team – comprised of the State Education Department’s commissioner David Steiner, deputy commissioner John King, assistant commissioners Ira Schwartz and Laura Smith, and Robert Hughes, president of New Visions for Public Schools – made a half-hour presentation to application judges in Washington, D.C. and fielded an hour of their questions on the state’s \$831 million proposal. While there isn’t yet any indication of whether New York’s long-shot application will end up in the money, it appears unlikely when compared to the significant reforms embraced by some competing finalist states.¹

While no details exist about which components of New York’s 908-page application evaluators feel are the strongest or weakest, both inside and outside reformers have rightly been critical of the state’s shortcomings on charter schools (a cap of 200 new schools permitted to open, unequal per-pupil funding and no facilities funding) and a ban on measuring teacher effectiveness using student performance data.² Despite U.S. education secretary Arne Duncan openly criticizing New York’s policies in these areas, teachers union flexed their muscles in opposition to reforms, causing the

legislature to avoid taking any action and making the state’s application less competitive.³

Recently another area of critique appeared. The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) issued a report on Monday entitled *Navigating the Race to the Top Traffic Jam* that analyzed the “Great Teachers and Leaders” section of the 16 Race to the Top finalists’ applications (this section counts for 28 percent of the overall application, the largest of the six sections).⁴ Despite Commissioner Steiner and the Board of the Regents adopting what was

billed as a well-thought-out plan to improve teacher quality, the Washington D.C.-based think tank’s analysis found a couple significant holes that are detrimental to the overall plan and are encouraging the U.S. Department of Education’s application reviewers to “put on the brakes” and gave New York’s proposed teacher

reform plan a “red light.”⁵ In particular, the NCTQ report notes “[o]ur 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.”⁶

NCTQ is critical of New York’s proposal for its lack of specifics on how it intends to reform teacher evaluations and for requiring local districts to drive innovation in this area. Under New

“The analysis found a couple significant holes that are detrimental to the overall plan and are encouraging the U.S. Department of Education’s application reviewers to ‘put on the brakes’ and gave New York’s proposed teacher reform plan a ‘red light.’”

Accountability • Innovation • Choice

York's proposal, school districts interested in participating would develop their own plans for using teacher evaluation results in making decisions for tenure, promotion, compensation and dismissal. Districts would forward their plans to SED for consideration for a grant. NCTQ concludes that this "presumably means that not all 'participating' districts need take part in this experiment."⁷

Additionally, in an attempt to claim a higher percentage of support for their overall application, New York allowed districts to identify individual sections of its Race to the Top plan that they were willing to consider implementing. As a result, 33 percent of the state's school districts refused to consider implementing the proposed reforms for teachers and school leaders, a significant lack of support that may end up further lessening chances of winning.⁸ One can realistically speculate that some school districts aren't interested in implementing significant reforms proposed in these areas and chose to turn down the reforms put forth by Steiner and company.

NCTQ finds these issues detrimental to New York's proposed teacher and school leader reform plan, noting: "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."⁹

Not all states fared as poorly as New York on NCTQ's report. Three states' teacher reform plans (Delaware, Rhode Island, and Tennessee) received a "green light" and eight received a less positive "yellow light" (Colorado, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, North Carolina and Ohio). Along with New York, four other states received the group's lowest rating (Kentucky, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and South Carolina).¹⁰

The report issued this week is a follow-up to NCTQ's *2009 State Teacher Policy Yearbook* issued in late January which shows New York has a lot of work to do in the area of teacher reform.¹¹ The report analyzes "state policies impacting the teaching profession" in an effort to "help focus attention on areas where state policymakers can

make changes that will have a positive impact on teacher quality and student achievement."¹² In it, NCTQ produced grades for each state based on five teacher reform areas.

New York earned an overall grade of a D+, as well as the following lackluster grades in each reform area:¹³

- Delivering Well Prepared Teachers: D+
- Expanding the Teaching Pool: C
- Identifying Effective New Teachers: D-
- Retaining Effective New Teachers: C-
- Exiting Ineffective New Teachers: D

The report also included the following findings:¹⁴

- New York's evaluation and tenure policies do not consider what should count the most about teacher performance: classroom effectiveness. New York does not require any objective measures of student learning in teacher evaluations. It also does not require that districts collect or consider any evidence of teacher effectiveness as part of tenure decisions.
- New York makes it too difficult for districts to attempt to dismiss poor performers by allowing multiple appeals of dismissals.
- Although New York claims to offer an alternative route to certification, its burdensome requirements block talented individuals from entering the profession.
- New York's requirements for the preparation of elementary teachers do not ensure these teachers are well prepared to teach reading or mathematics.
- New York fails to exercise appropriate oversight of its teacher preparation programs. The state allows programs to admit candidates without passing a basic skills test. It also fails to hold programs accountable for the quality of the teachers they produce.
- New York's pay and benefit policies for teachers—including the state-run retirement system—offer inadequate incentives to stay in teaching.

- Despite these findings, New York has some bright spots, including its support of differential pay for teachers in high-needs schools and shortage subjects.

Given the numerous shortcomings of New York teaching-related policies and the uphill battle it faces with powerful teachers unions to bring reform to these areas, the likelihood of dramatic change any time soon is minimal. Additionally, given the clear holes in New York's Race to the Top application, its unlikely New York will be awarded one cent in Round One. If New York does end up getting an award despite these obvious shortcomings, it will be clear that politics, as predicted, played more of a role than merit.¹⁵

New York's selection as a finalist in Round One should encourage state leaders to go back and improve the application and resubmit for Round Two. Letting the ban on using student performance results to make teacher tenure decisions expire, lifting the charter school cap, and provide funding parity to charter school also would help greatly. Then, not only would New York be in a much better position for a significant federal financial boost, but it would be on track to bring about real reform and improve the quality of public educational across the state.

B. Jason Brooks is director of research at the Foundation for Education Reform & Accountability.

Notes

¹ Thomas W. Carroll, "Evaluating the Race to the Top Finalists," *Education Next*, March 4, 2010, <http://educationnext.org/evaluating-the-rtt-finalists/>.

² Joe Williams, "New York Belches in Race to the Top Competition," *Democrats for Education Reform*, January 19, 2010, www.dfer.org/2010/01/new_york_belche.php; Michael Bloomberg, *Mayor Bloomberg Challenges Albany to Lift Seven Roadblocks Preventing New York from Winning the Obama Administration's 'Race to the Top' Education Reform Competition*, Office of the Mayor of the City of New York, November 25, 2009, www.nyc.gov/cgi-bin/misc/pf

The Foundation for Education Reform & Accountability (FERA) is an independent, nonprofit organization that is dedicated to improving education in New York State by promoting accountability, stimulating innovation, and supporting school-choice efforts across the state.

The Foundation for Education Reform & Accountability is classified as a Section 501(c)(3) organization under the Internal Revenue Code of 1954. Nothing in this document should be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill or measure on the ballot or pending before the State Legislature or U.S. Congress.

[printer.cgi?action=print&sitename=OM&p=1268932041000](http://www.ed.gov/printer.cgi?action=print&sitename=OM&p=1268932041000).

³ Arne Duncan, *Robust Data Gives Us The Roadmap to Reform: Secretary Arne Duncan Addresses the Fourth Annual IES Research Conference*, U.S. Department of Education, June 8, 2009, www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2009/06/06082009.pdf; Marc Humbert, "NYS Pressured to Lift Charter School Cap," *On Board Online*, New York State School Boards Association, June 29, 2009; and Charles Upton Sahn, "New York Races to the Bottom," *City Journal*, January 22, 2010, www.city-journal.org/2010/eon0122cs.html.

⁴ National Council on Teacher Quality, *Navigating the Race to the Top Traffic Jam*, March 15, 2010; *Federal Register*, November 18, 2010 (Vol. 74, No. 221), p. 59851, <http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2009/pdf/E9-27427.pdf>.

⁵ New York State Education Department, *Regents Prepare to Transform Teacher Preparation and Recruit Skilled Teachers to High Needs Schools*, November 16, 2009, www.oms.nysed.gov/press/TeacherPreparationSkilledTeachers.html; "Start Grading the Teachers: Adopt Rigorous Ratings for Classroom Effectiveness" [editorial], *New York Daily News*, November 17, 2009.

⁶ National Council on Teacher Quality, *Navigating the Race to the Top Traffic Jam*, p. 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ New York State Education Department, *Detailed Tables on Participating LEAs*, January 19, 2010, <http://usny.nysed.gov/rttt/docs/sub1.html>.

⁹ *Navigating the Race to the Top Traffic Jam*, p. 7.

¹⁰ *Navigating the Race to the Top Traffic Jam*, p. 1.

¹¹ National Council on Teacher Quality, *2009 State Teacher Policy Yearbook: New York*, January 28, 2010, www.nctq.org/stpy09/reports/stpy_newyork.pdf.

¹² National Council on Teacher Quality, *2009 State Teacher Policy Yearbook: New York*, p. 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ National Council on Teacher Quality, "Report Gives New York a Grade of 'D+' for Policies that Impact Quality of Teachers" [press release], January 28, 2010 www.nctq.org/stpy09/pressreleases/stpy_newyork.doc.

¹⁵ Thomas W. Carroll, "Schumer's Role in 'Race to the Top': Is the Fix In?," *Huffington Post*, November 13, 2009, www.huffingtonpost.com//schumers-role-in-race-to_b_355075.html.