

Extra Feature Story

Obama Urges School Districts to Pay Teachers More and Open Charter Schools

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School districts across the country are about to get a lot of money under President Barack Obama's "Race to the Top" program, but only if they follow specific rules set out by Education Secretary Arne Duncan.

The Department of Education will distribute \$4.3 billion in grants to pay teachers based on how their students perform and to allow more charter schools, among other reforms.

Money for the program comes from the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, also known as the stimulus bill, which President Obama signed into law shortly after he became president.

"If you set and enforce rigorous and challenging standards and assessments, if you put outstanding teachers at the front of the classroom, if you turn around failing schools, your state can win a 'Race to the Top' grant that will not only help students out-compete workers around the world, but let them fulfill their God-given potential," President Obama said.

Some reforms are controversial

The reforms touted by the Obama administration have supporters and detractors.

California, New York and Wisconsin have laws against tying teacher pay to how their students perform in class. Teacher unions, which are organizations with teacher members that use collective bargaining to get better pay and benefits, are also wary of teacher pay reform.

"The devil really is in the details. On the issues where you have differences, you try to work those out," Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, told the Washington Post.

As head of schools in Chicago, Secretary Duncan started a program that paid some teachers according to how their students performed to see if it worked.

"We believe great teachers matter tremendously. When you're reluctant or scared to make that link, you do a grave disservice to the teaching profession and to our nation's children," Duncan told Education Week.

Schools compete for money

Race to the Top is just a small part of the \$100 billion for education included in the stimulus bill. But the aim of the grant program is to push public schools to make changes in how they educate young people.

Aside from the teacher pay, the program will also encourage school districts to allow more charter schools. Charter schools are more independent than traditional public schools.

Another idea put forward by Duncan is to have states develop universal tests, instead of state-by-state tests. Many states have already signed on to the idea, which is called the common standard movement.

Schools will apply for grants from the program by the end of 2009 and winners will be announced in early 2010.

Duncan promoted the plan during an interview with the NewsHour, pointing out the unprecedented amount of money going towards reform.

"We've never had this level of discretionary dollars, \$4.35 billion, and we want states to lead the country where we need to go," Duncan told the NewsHour's Judy Woodruff.

"This is a race to the top competition. And we can invest hundreds of millions of dollars in states that are willing to challenge the status quo and push to dramatically improve student outcomes."

What happens to states that don't get the money?

Local officials who refuse to make the reforms that President Obama and Duncan want, could lose out on needed money.

Judy Woodruff asked Duncan if he is worried about those students.

"I worry a lot about those children," Duncan said. "But let me tell you: Money is a piece of the answer, but money is never going to be the entire answer in education. I will tell you, quite frankly, far too often adult dysfunction has stood in the way of student achievement and has hindered students' ability to learn."

Republican critics argue that the program costs too much money and that there isn't enough accountability.

"We just took a big, old checkbook and handed it to the secretary and said, 'Write a whole bunch of checks.' I'm uncomfortable that we're doing that," Republican Congressman John Kline of Minnesota told the Washington Post.

-- Compiled by Quinn Bowman for NewsHour Extra

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