

Out of the Starting Blocks:

Delaware and Tennessee Begin Their Race to the Top

By June Kronholz, a former reporter and editor at The Wall Street Journal, on behalf of the Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media, which is based at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Tennessee Gov. Phil Bredesen, a health-care entrepreneur before he ran for office, says that getting the Volunteer State's Race to the Top plan up and running "has a different feel" than most government work. "It's more like a product launch in business," he said. It requires a tight strategic plan, insulation from the organization's day-to-day activities, focused managers, and staffers who step up to the job—"everything you'd do to launch a new product line," he said.

Six months after Tennessee and Delaware became the first states to win Race to the Top (RttT) grants, leaders in both states say their greatest success has been holding together the statewide coalitions whose pledges of support for education reform helped secure the grants. School districts in both states also have worked through complicated Scope of Work plans that will guide the first year of their reform efforts.

Those are two clear impressions that emerged from 26 interviews conducted during the summer of 2010 with state education, political, business, and labor leaders in the two states. The purpose of those interviews and this report is to provide the leaders of second-round RttT grant winners an opportunity to learn from the early implementation experiences of Delaware and Tennessee. Details in this report were verified with the people who were interviewed, but the analysis is necessarily impressionistic: It is too early to render any judgment on the results or quality of implementation.

Like any new-product launch, though, RttT hasn't been without challenges, leaders in both states say. The \$4.35 billion competitive-grant program requires winning

states to focus their school reform work in four politically charged and enormously complex areas. They must adopt tougher learning standards and standardized tests. They must build data systems that measure each student's learning gains and that teachers can use to individualize their instruction. They have to figure out how to reward good teachers and weed out ineffective ones, including using student-learning growth as part of each teacher's annual performance assessment. And they must turn around their lowest-performing schools.

As the first out of the gate in this race, Tennessee and Delaware worry about their capacity to handle the work, much of it highly technical and requiring bold thinking. Marvin Schoenhals, chairman of Wilmington's WSFS Bank and a member of the group that presented Delaware's proposal to the U.S. Department of Education, said his "first scary thought" upon learning that Delaware was a winner was that "we don't have the people to do all this."

Both states also worry about communicating the urgency of education reform, both near-term as new tests produce lower scores against much higher academic standards and ineffective teachers are let go, and long-term so that reforms aren't lost in political transitions or smothered by bureaucrats. After all, most governors change every four or eight years; bureaucrats are forever.

For the backbones of their proposals, Tennessee and Delaware drew on existing strengths. Tennessee, which was awarded \$501 million, for years has had a nationally acclaimed data system for tracking students' year-to-year learning growth, but state leaders con-

"Be prepared to be overwhelmed. It's going to feel like drinking out of a fire-hose."

Interviewees

State of Delaware:

Governor Jack Markell
Nina Lou Bunting, Vice Chair, Indian River School Board
Susan Bunting, Superintendent, Indian River School District
Daniel Cruce, Deputy Secretary of education
Paul Herdman, President and CEO, Rodel Foundation of Delaware
Lillian Lowery, Secretary of Education
Marcia Lyles, Superintendent, Christina School District
Jennifer Ranji, Policy Advisor to Governor Markell
David Resler, Vice Chair, Christina School Board
Daniel Rich, Professor, University of Delaware
Marvin Schoenhals, Chairman, WSFS Bank, and Chair, Vision 2015
David Sokola, Chair, Delaware Senate Education Committee
John Taylor, Executive Director, Delaware Public Policy Institute
Howard Weinberg, Executive Director, Delaware State Education Association

State of Tennessee:

Governor Phil Bredesen
Susan Bodary, Education First Consulting
Senator Bill Frist, Chairman, Tennessee SCORE
Margaret Horn, Achieve, Inc.
Al Mance, Executive Director, Tennessee Education Association
Erin O'Hara, Policy Advisor to Governor Bredesen
Colleen Oliver, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
Will Pinkston, Tennessee SCORE
Anand Vaishnav, Education First Consulting
Tim Webb, Education Commissioner
Earl Wiman, Past President, Tennessee Education Association
Jamie Woodson, Speaker Pro Tempore, Tennessee Senate

cede they have never fully used it to evaluate performance. That database is now central to meeting the other three federal goals. Additionally, Tennessee has pledged to promote learning in science, technology, engineering and math—the so-called STEM disciplines—by calling on help from the Battelle Memorial Laboratory, which co-manages the U.S. Department of Energy's Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Oak Ridge, Tenn.

Delaware, which won a \$119 million grant, has been among state leaders in implementing assessment plans for teachers and principals, and in writing new student tests. Among other things, it plans to administer online standardized tests to students up to four times yearly. Well before RttT was announced by the Obama Administration, Delaware civic and political leaders had drafted their own school-reform plan, Vision 2015, that largely mirrors the federal goals. And, like Tennessee, Delaware had won regulatory and legislative authority to make the promised policy changes—including tying student performance to teacher evaluations and firing ineffective teachers—before submitting its application.

This paper is based on interviews with government, education, business and community leaders in Delaware and Tennessee who were involved in drafting their state's RttT proposal, or who have been charged with implementing it. These people were asked to identify successes and challenges, and what they would advise their counterparts in the states that win second-round RttT grants.

The advice was wide-ranging. "Manage expectations," advised Delaware Gov. Jack Markell—because winning RttT won't answer all of the state's education funding needs. "Don't make it the governor's project" or it won't survive a change of administration, said Gov. Bredesen. "Include people who know how life is in the schools all through the process," said Susan Bunting, superintendent of Delaware's Indian River School District. Be prepared to be overwhelmed, said Tennessee State Sen. Jamie Woodson: "It's going to feel like drinking out of a fire-hose."

Other states may face different challenges, of course. Delaware leaders emphasized over and over that their state's small size makes communication easier but attracting talent harder than in big states. Tennessee leaders said their failing schools included some in rural communities; in many states, those failing schools tend to be in big cities, where there has been more experience with turnarounds. In both states, all of the school districts, the legislatures, both political parties and representatives from the higher-education and business communities all signed on to the RttT proposals. Not all RttT winners have such unanimity.

In more detail, here are some areas in which leaders in Delaware and Tennessee urged thought, planning and caution.

Communication: Never too much

"No matter how great the plan is, if people don't understand why you're doing this, it's dead in the water," said Colleen Oliver of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and a member of the Tennessee RttT advisory board.

Race to the Top is intended to jump-start ambitious reforms, so it's almost certain to jangle nerves. In both states, a handful of the lowest-performing schools will be placed in a turnaround district starting in the 2010-11 school year. Teachers face new performance-linked evaluation systems and classroom scrutiny. (Delaware's plan calls for data coaches to sit in on classes and help teachers use student-performance information, which now will be made available to them.) Principals, school board members, union leaders and school district and education department employees may face challenges to their autonomy, increases in their workloads or shake-ups in how they do their jobs.

Creating an effective communications plan is challenging, both because it needs to reach each of those audiences with a distinct message, and because RttT is policy-heavy, with no easy storyline. Delaware leaders thought that the tight timeline—states have only 90 days to submit reform plans for each of their school districts—diverted them from focusing as much

as they'd have liked on developing a communications plan.

Besides, most thinly staffed state education departments do not have the expertise needed to run a campaign aimed at building public support for a set of policies. "This is more internal and external constituencies, not press releases," Delaware's education secretary Lillian Lowery said. By mid-summer, her department had hired a high-level assistant to lead the communications efforts.

Tennessee took a different tack. In addition to ramping up the communications efforts of the education department, the state turned to a business- and foundation-funded group called SCORE—the State Collaborative on Reforming Education—to get its message out. Part of that message tackles head-on one potentially unpopular outcome of the RttT push for higher standards: "Test scores and grades often dip when schools put in higher standards," SCORE warns on its RttT website and in public-service ads. "Understand why high standards are important to your child's future."

SCORE has staged some 95 state-wide and town-hall meetings, published backgrounders, provided briefings to political candidates and funded a poll that showed Tennesseans favor education reform, even if it means lower scores—all aimed at winning and keeping political support for the RttT goals. Much of this activity occurred while the state was preparing its application.

Leaders in both states said there was plenty still to do. Keep legislators informed, they said: Delaware and Tennessee already have passed the education reforms required as part of the RttT application, but they may still need to go back to their statehouses for new authority to carry out elements of their plans.

State education departments may be precluded by law from lobbying those legislators, and may lack the capacity to do so anyway. John Taylor, executive director of the Delaware Public Policy Institute, recommended that departments enlist business and civic groups that

already lobby the legislature to include education reform in their messages. "Somebody has to work on keeping legislators informed and their confidence up," said David Sokola, chair of the Delaware Senate education committee.

That same sort of effort is needed to inform teachers, their unions and school board members, who said they had only a vague idea of the RttT, and felt "strong-armed" into signing on, in some cases. School boards want to be kept in the loop—they "need more communication to keep everyone comfortable," said Dave Resler, vice chairman of the board in Delaware's Christina School District.

Gov. Bredesen said he and former U.S. Sen. Bill Frist, who chairs SCORE, "don't make a move without the union," including taking union leaders to meetings with business and civic groups. The statewide unions in both states have used their websites and newsletters to keep teachers current on RttT, especially as their teacher-evaluation proposals start to take shape. "We use Facebook and even Tweet a little," said Al Mance, executive director of the Tennessee Education Association (TEA). Numerous leaders in both states recommended that, in addition, states should also establish ways to communicate directly with teachers rather than depend on unions to relay and possibly filter information to their members.

Early on, states should think through how to frame ticklish issues. For example, communities whose schools are identified for turn-arounds are likely to be suspicious of RttT and hard to reach as a result. John Taylor recommended identifying "proxies," such as clergymen and local politicians, who can host community meetings to communicate the message that reorganizing or re-staffing a failing school is an opportunity rather than a punishment.

State education departments should also release information on a regular, real-time basis "so people can look in on the process" of school reform, said Susan Bodary of Education First Consulting, which Tennessee hired to help draft and begin implementing its RttT proposal. She recommended regular "information blasts," which give the state

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control of the message rather than ceding it to local media and blogs.

Capacity: A little help from their friends

Delaware and Tennessee committed themselves to huge and technically challenging initiatives in their RttT proposals, but also promised that they would limit hiring. Delaware will hire 10 people and Tennessee just one to strengthen education departments that are strapped, as in most states, by budget cuts due to the recession.

Teachers unions in both states also have taken on additional responsibilities, such as helping design teacher-evaluation systems that increase the stakes for their members. The additional work “challenges the capacity of our organization. It requires more knowledge, more study and research, more demands on staff,” said Howard Weinberg, executive director of the Delaware State Education Association (DSEA). Similarly, RttT requires superintendents and charter directors to draft district-level reform plans that are more heavily reliant on data than ever before, and that can withstand federal scrutiny.

States, unions and districts have addressed—but hardly solved—their capacity problems by turning to consultants, foundations and business and civic partners. McKinsey & Company helped Delaware draft its RttT application and then, once the state won, was hired to prepare the guidelines that districts used to write their Scope of Work plans. Tennessee used a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation grant to hire Seattle-based Education First Consulting to provide general advice and support on implementation. Battelle Memorial Institute is providing \$1 million of staffing and support to plan and manage Tennessee’s science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) program.

Delaware’s Lillian Lowery borrowed a Bank of America executive to set up a new performance management system in her department (he found the work so fulfilling that he has stayed on). A local foundation will pay for a job search for the director of Tennessee’s

“Achievement School District,” the cluster of the lowest-performing schools in the state targeted in the RttT effort. The Delaware State Education Association is using an Internet-based tool offered by Hope Street Group, in partnership with the Delaware Department of Education, that enables teachers who are working on evaluation plans in different parts of the state to compare their work, share thoughts and tap into Hope Street’s guidance and other resources.

Perhaps most important to meeting their capacity gaps, both states formed relationships with what they call a “critical friend”—a group that can marshal experts, make introductions, mobilize funders, provide community leadership and offer problem-solving nimbleness.

In Delaware, the Rodel Foundation is facilitating idea-exchanges between RttT implementers in Delaware and Tennessee, as well as among folks on the ground and national best-practice leaders. SCORE, in addition to its communications role, kept RttT a central, but non-partisan issue in the Tennessee gubernatorial race this fall. “There’s someone in every state” who can fill that critical-friend role or who can build an apparatus for the purpose, said Frist.

Both states also turned to the national education nonprofits that have energized the reform discussion—New Leaders for New Schools, New York City Leadership Academy and others—and to local foundations and businesses to fill in capacity gaps. Tennessee asked Education First Consulting to catalog where it needed help and identify who had that expertise, and is using the advice to approach foundations with proposals.

Consultants haven’t completely resolved either state’s capacity issues, though. Union leaders and superintendents in particular said that it has been hard to do their day jobs and still find time to meet their RttT commitments, under tight timelines.

A 15-member committee, including six TEA members, is writing Tennessee’s teacher-

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evaluation plan, for example. But getting a group that size together often enough and long enough to draft a plan is difficult, said Mance. Meanwhile, the state timeline calls for field-testing to begin this fall—Tennessee is asking schools to volunteer for the trials—and for the evaluation system to be operational by July 2011.

Delaware’s education department has asked some 400 teachers to volunteer for committees that will help decide how to evaluate those who teach subjects that aren’t part of the state’s standardized tests—art and physical education, for example. Over the summer, there was concern that some of the committees had not yet met and still needed members. Lowery said that by the end of the summer the teams were meeting and she was confident they could meet the September 2011 implementation deadline.

Union leaders in both states said they also had few experts to consult (just getting on their calendars is problematic, Mance cautioned), even fewer teacher-evaluation models to look at, and that just learning how to use the Hope Street online program took time and training. Earl Wiman, past president of the Tennessee Education Association, said the tight timeline has created tension between the state education department and the union over the evaluation system. There is “a lack of time to work out some kind of compromise” on disputed issues, he said.

The federal government set the timelines, which means that second-round states should be prepared for the same pressures. The timeline “caused people to short-circuit” deliberations, warned DSEA’s Weinberg.

Dependent as they are on consultants, however, leaders in both states cautioned that new RttT winners need an out-of-the-gate protocol for dealing with the vendors and service-providers that they said have swamped them with proposals. “A lot of people would like you to turn into another level of granting authority” to support their missions instead of yours, Gov. Bredesen warned.

States will need some of those providers for expertise. But they should identify their needs and post requests-for-information “quick, fast and in a hurry,” said Lillian Lowery, to avoid losing time on proposals that don’t fit the RttT plan.

Organization: New work, new structure

Delaware and Tennessee proposed reorganizing their education departments in their RttT applications because “you can’t fit new work into an old structure,” Delaware’s education secretary Lowery said.

Delaware is organizing new offices to oversee teacher leadership, turnaround schools and performance management, and is hiring leaders for each. The deputy education secretary will continue to oversee both RttT and day-to-day operations.

In Tennessee, a to-be-hired RttT director will be part of the governor’s office, where he or she will coordinate K-12 reforms with the state’s higher-education authority, budget office and other government agencies, as well as with private partners and participating philanthropies. A deputy director, working out of the education department, will manage RttT implementation and daily functions.

Reorganizing a department can be politically delicate because those employees being reshuffled also are charged with implementing RttT, and potentially could work to slow or derail its reforms. Tennessee leaders said they encountered pushback by not including department members on the team that drafted their RttT application—a decision they said was based on the need for speed and discretion, but also to prevent the state bureaucracy from watering down the plan. The department reorganization “resulted in morale problems,” said education commissioner Tim Webb. He eventually revised it by retaining many of the old job titles and the chain-of-command, but also by organizing an RttT operation with its own director.

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Along with organizational challenges, RttT has put new management burdens on the departments and school districts, leaders said. The Gates Foundation’s Colleen Oliver recommended that states have consultants develop rigorous timelines, milestones, performance measures and other management tools while they’re still on board.

Likewise, Gov. Bredesen urged that planners assign distinct tasks to specific workers to prevent what he called “the general diffusion of authority that’s usual for state government.”

To keep an eye on the big picture, meanwhile, Tennessee and Delaware named community-based RttT advisory councils, although they have only just begun meeting. Tennessee’s council includes a county chamber of commerce president, superintendent, school-board member, union leader, foundation representative and mayor, all of whom will offer feedback from their constituencies.

Scopes of Work

The district-level reform plans, called Scopes of Work or SOWs, sit at the nexus of capacity and communication, and leaders in both states say nothing they have done to get RttT off the ground has proven more challenging.

The SOWs are written individually by the districts and charter schools and detail how they will undertake the four reforms promised in its state’s RttT application—that is, toughening standards and exams, using data, assessing teachers and turning around failing schools. With half of a state’s RttT funds going to the districts and charters that have signed on to the plan, this is a huge lever for change at the local level.

Delaware provided its superintendents and charter directors with a SOW template that asked them to set priorities and tell what evidence led them to their choices; describe their capacity to meet those goals and how they will define success; and provide timelines, staffing plans and a budget for each of their goals. “Is the plan ambitious and achievable, describing a

true change from business as usual?” the accompanying instructions ask. The Christina School District SOW runs to 47 pages, including a graph that projects increases in reading and math scores, attendance, teacher retention, SAT scores, college enrollment and more over the next four years.

For all that, many leaders in both states said the SOWs weren’t bold enough. Data-driven planning is a centerpiece of RttT, for example, but some SOWs that proposed holding parents’ nights couldn’t explain how that would impact learning and by how much, Gov. Markell said. Superintendents, for their part, said they needed more direction in how to create their SOWs in the form of workshops, teleconferences and feedback from state education departments.

After winning their grants, Delaware and Tennessee were required to submit to the U.S. Department of Education, within 90 days of learning they had won, a SOW plan for each of their districts and charter schools. (All 19 Delaware districts and 18 charter schools and all 135 districts in Tennessee signed on to the RttT applications and so were required to submit a SOW.)

The deadline might have lent a sense of urgency to the local planning, but it came during the end-of-school rush, superintendents said. The short timeframe also didn’t allow state education departments time to expose their superintendents to best practices and research. Information and expectations about the SOW process weren’t “uniformly distributed,” DSEA’s Howard Weinberg said and, as a result, “some understood it better than others.”

Both states sent SOWs back for rewrites before forwarding them to the federal education department for approval and disbursement of funds. But both states—still not satisfied with the plans they submitted—also asked the federal education department to view the SOWs as one-year works-in-progress rather than the intended three-year roadmaps.

Even with that waiver, superintend-

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ents said they were concerned that federal approval and money to implement the SOWs might have come too late for the 2010-11 school year. However, Indian River’s Susan Bunting said that she had hired the math and curriculum coaches in her plan in time for the start of school just after Labor Day.

RttT leaders in Delaware and Tennessee urged second-round winners to start drafting SOW guidelines immediately, and to begin training teams to help districts write their proposals. Colleen Oliver also suggested identifying standout districts to host regional meetings and become “messengers” for the state education department.

Indeed, Marcia Lyles, superintendent of Delaware’s Christina School District, said a workshop for SOW design teams, hosted by Delaware’s education department in each county last spring, gave districts and charter schools with similar problems the chance to exchange ideas. She said other districts at the meeting gave her the idea to include building-level staffers on her design team.

Delaware’s governor and education secretary plan to host workshops to introduce teachers and superintendents to national experts on school reform as they prepare their next round of SOWs. Foundations and critical friends could underwrite those meetings and recruit speakers from their own national networks, many leaders suggested.

Sustainability

Education reform has been stymied before by public disenchantment, bureaucratic resistance and just plain exhaustion from the hard work involved. Add to that: Two-thirds of the nation’s governorships and thousands of seats in state legislatures and on school boards are up for election in 2010. Most of those new office-holders won’t have been part of their state’s RttT application and may even be wary of it.

Leaders in Delaware and in Tennessee, where Bredesen is leaving office in January 2011, urged states to begin thinking about the

sustainability of their plans. That ultimately involves a change in culture—everyone has to expect good schools, just as they expect safe water. But education and community leaders can create the momentum needed for that culture change to occur.

Bredesen and Frist, wanting to avoid any interruption in reform efforts during a gubernatorial transition, began early in 2010 to discuss the issues with the education advisors of all seven candidates. In January, during a special legislative session focused on bills related to the RttT reforms, SCORE hosted a televised candidates’ debate on education. The same week, Bredesen got all of the candidates to sign a pledge of support for the state’s RttT commitments.

Education advisors to the two nominees who emerged from primary elections are now included in senior-level RttT meetings and will help hire the state’s RttT director. (This may complicate the job search and delay hiring if applicants aren’t convinced they have some job security, Tennessee leaders conceded.) The effect is that education has become a non-partisan issue, Tennessee leaders said. A new governor still could repudiate RttT, but it will be harder to do so if he or she is on record as supporting it.

Commissioner Webb, who also will leave office in January 2011, said he has approached civic and business groups and asked them to help sustain the RttT work. “We told them, ‘Don’t let us back down. Keep the pressure on.’”

Delaware’s Gov. Markell has another two years before facing voters and, unlike Gov. Bredesen, isn’t yet term-limited. Still, his current term will end half-way through the RttT grant that he has championed. DSEA’s Howard Weinberg, despite praising Gov. Markell’s education leadership, warned that supporting RttT may not be a winning campaign strategy in two years. RttT requirements may not “align” with a candidate’s “being able to get elected,” he said.

State leaders stressed over and over that education reform can’t be identified with

one party or one governor, or it risks being jettisoned when office-holders change. It also can't be seen as an effort that ends when the RttT grant runs out.

The TEA's Al Mance called Tennessee's RttT advisory council "our best bet" for sustaining the reforms. The council "will be pushing on anybody that tries to stop [RttT] or change its intent," said Mance, who is a member of the group. Similarly, key legislative players in passing education reform will be returning to office—for this term, at least.

Delaware's advisory council is more informal; DSEA's Weinberg said he is counting instead on a "culture" of collaboration among the union, legislature and governor to sustain reform. That's not something that bigger states with more contentious stakeholders can count on, of course. And even in Delaware, "the story and definition of success have yet to be written around sustainability," Weinberg admitted.

What's First?

Which of these challenges should second-round winners tackle first? That's hard to know, leaders in Delaware and Tennessee said. Districts need guidance and technical assistance to write and implement good reform plans. Education departments need bulked-up capacity to provide either. Parents, teachers and taxpayers need to know what RttT is before they support it. Education reform can't take hold without public support.

What's first? The answer, like the task, is daunting, they said: All of it.

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The Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media was established in 1996 at Teachers College, Columbia University to serve, primarily, as a provider of professional development and training to journalists who specialize in covering education. With founding support from Lumina

Foundation on Education, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Foundation for Child Development and the Joyce Foundation, the Institute is now publishing *The Hechinger Report*, which provides in-depth coverage of education to local, regional and national news outlets. *The Hechinger Report's* work also appears at www.hechingerreport.org.

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