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Local school chiefs eye Race to the Top

By **CATHERINE BAUM**
Staff Writer

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Tuesday, January 12, 2010

School districts throughout the state are scrambling to decide by Wednesday if they want to sign on to the state's application for a piece of the \$4.35 billion in federal Race to the Top funds and accept the strings attached in doing so.

At least half of the \$250 million Massachusetts stands to receive will go to school districts that commit to evaluating teacher and principal effectiveness based on student performance, ensuring effective teachers in every classroom, using data to improve instruction and turning around the lowest-achieving schools.

Area school officials report they are optimistic about receiving federal dollars to improve their schools, but many are wary of signing the agreement, citing its lack of detail, particularly its requirement to use evaluations to inform decisions around teachers' pay.

"This is the largest attempt to reform teaching and learning in the state since the 1993 education reform law," said Farshid Hajir, Amherst Pelham Regional School Committee chairman. "There are questions about what exactly it is we're signing on to. There's a fairly short period of time to process all of that information."

President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan unveiled the Race to the Top initiative in July. It is supported by Recovery Act money.

Meanwhile, the more school districts that sign the agreement, the more points the state's proposal will receive in the final scoring process. And the more points the state gets, the more money it is likely to get. School district superintendents, union presidents and school committee chairmen who do not sign and submit the agreement by Wednesday will not be eligible for Race to the Top funding.

The Amherst Pelham Regional School Committee is expected to decide whether to sign the agreement at its meeting tonight at 7 in the high school library. Superintendent Alberto Rodriguez has made it clear he supports signing on, while the union has not yet decided, according to Hajir.

Meanwhile, Easthampton and Hadley school districts decided to move forward in the Race to the Top, while Northampton and South Hadley school districts are waiting on answers from their union presidents.

The Hampshire Regional School District declined to sign the agreement, citing its concern for program sustainability once the four-year funding period ends.

If awarded, half of the state's \$250 million would flow directly to school districts using the Title I formula, which is based in part on the number of free- and reduced-lunch students. The state would use the other half of the money to develop resources such as new tools and infrastructure, provide services and create targeted grants for school districts, according to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Easthampton Superintendent Deborah Carter said while the city stands to receive more money than wealthier surrounding communities like Northampton and Amherst, it would still get "peanuts" compared to urban school districts like Holyoke and Springfield. Easthampton is poised to receive

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about \$63,000 a year and \$254,000 over four years, according to the state.

Urban school districts with a greater population of Title I students stand to receive more Race to the Top funds than smaller school districts with fewer students and less Title I money. In the first year, Hampshire Regional would get \$2,473, Hatfield would get \$1,531 and Sunderland would get \$3,159 a year, according to figures released by the state.

"Very few of our very small rural districts are going to get much of the additional funding from that pool of money," said Joan Schuman, executive director of Hampshire Educational Collaborative.

Meanwhile, the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education maintains the grant is meant to enable school districts to build capacity for continued change, so that "when the federal dollars are gone, the work it has funded can be sustained and continue to grow," Commissioner Mitchell D. Chester wrote in a letter to school district leaders.

But incomplete information regarding if and how there will be recurring revenue for programs has stopped some school districts from signing.

"We're certainly committed to the basic idea that improving staff performance improves student achievement, but there's a concern that if we implement a new initiative, assessment or data management system, where do we go when the funding stops," said Craig Jurgensen, Hampshire Regional superintendent.

Schuman, of Hampshire Educational Collaborative, said she likes the focus on data in Race to the Top. She said there is need to train teachers to understand how to use data to better hone their instruction skills.

"The emphasis on data is a bright spot," she said. "I think there's an enormous amount of work that needs to be done in helping districts improve their subgroups that are perhaps having some difficulty in meeting the benchmarks that have been established for them."

Meanwhile, the requirement to use evaluations to determine pay hikes is not limited to individual teacher merit pay, but also includes team-, grade- or school-based bonuses, non-monetary incentives, a step-based pay increase system or other forms of compensation. Individual teacher merit pay is not a popular idea for teachers, as indicated by a recent Massachusetts Teachers Association survey in which 97 percent of respondents voted against merit pay.

Flynn suggested there are understandable reasons why teachers object to merit-pay systems.

"You end up having a system where one teacher who has a much needier student population doesn't get merit pay, where another teacher with a less needy student population would," Flynn said.

Moving forward

School leaders in favor of signing onto Race for the Top, despite its dearth of details, say they are doing so because they see the potential benefits for their districts.

"I see this as an opportunity to talk, to brainstorm and maybe we won't get to the place where the department wants us to be, but maybe we'll get some place better," said Northampton Superintendent Isabelina Rodriguez.

"My feeling is you have to stay in the game long enough to find out the details," said Nicholas Young, Hadley schools superintendent. "This will all work out."

For more information on Race to the Top, visit www.doe.mass.edu.

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[So sick of the brainstorming](#)

So sick of the brainstorming and strategic committees and the 'maybe we'll get some place better' babble by Ms. Rodriguez. Does she have ANY kind of a plan for getting Northampton schools back on track? Does she have any idea where it is we SHOULD be headed? Northampton will likely once again get screwed in the allocation of these federal funds, so we'll lose more kids who school choice out of NPS, driving up our charter school payments and reducing our state funding. And around we go again. Very tired of Ms. Rodriguez's lack of leadership. Ask Smith to pay their fair share with at least another \$100k (or more, and pretend it's a real effort), let parents and the public in on the superintendent and teacher review process, and take a good, hard look at why NPS is losing so many kids to other towns and school options. Very sad state of affairs.

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