

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

Hawaii Scrambles to Deliver on Race to Top

Grant promises prove heavy lift

By Michele McNeil

The very promises that helped Hawaii win a coveted federal Race to the Top award—an aggressive improvement timeline and a strong teacher-evaluation plan to be implemented in a single statewide school district—have now become key stumbling blocks as the state seeks to turn its plan for the \$75 million grant into reality.

After missing a few key deadlines—mostly because of a failure to secure a new collective bargaining agreement with the statewide teachers' union—Hawaii could prove to be a test case for the U.S. Department of Education, which has pledged to aggressively hold states to the promises they made in their Race to the Top applications.

Already, education policy experts who are watching progress in Race to the Top states are urging the Education Department to make an example out of Hawaii for its lack of progress—real or perceived—on its teacher-evaluation component.

Kate Walsh, the president of the Washington-based National Center for Teacher Quality, said during a U.S. Chamber of Commerce event in October that if Hawaii doesn't lose its Race to the Top money for teacher-evaluation failures, "some-

thing is wrong." And even though other states are pushing back deadlines, Hawaii's slow start to its teacher-evaluation piece "is the most egregious," said Charles Barone, of the Democrats for Education Reform, a New York-based political action committee, in an interview.

Yet more than a year after winning the grant, Hawaii state officials say they are hitting other milestones that are just as important, even as they make the teacher-evaluation system happen without union approval.

They point out that the state is aggressively implementing common-core academic standards in the classroom after providing intensive teacher training, has adopted tougher graduation requirements for a new college- and career-readiness diploma, and has created a formal induction program in which all first- and second-year teachers will receive mentors and tailor-made professional-growth plans. Hawaii also has rolled out an interactive data dashboard to give teachers and administrators real-time student-achievement data, and placed data coaches and a school success coach in each of its turnaround schools.

"This is a big moment of opportunity for us," said Stephen

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Progress to Date

Status of key milestones Hawaii promised to meet by January as outlined in its "scope of work" for putting the state's \$75 million Race to the Top grant into effect:

DONE

- Adopt college/career-ready diploma pathways.
- Implement online state assessments.
- Roll out a plan for teachers and principals to access a new longitudinal-data-system through an interactive dashboard.
- Implement new teacher-induction standards statewide.
- Begin intensive professional development for teachers to transition to instruction based on the Common Core State Standards.

SOURCES: Hawaii Department of Education, *Education Week*

IN PROGRESS

- Recruit at least 40 additional schools for next year's expansion of a teacher-evaluation pilot.

DELAYED

- Contract with external providers who will train and certify turnaround principals and teachers.

NOT DONE

- Reach supplemental agreement with labor unions for teacher-evaluation pilot in "innovation zone" turnaround schools.
- Develop and use salary incentives to attract high-quality and highly effective teachers and principals to turnaround schools.

Pressure Mounts on Hawaii in Race to Top

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Schatz, the assistant superintendent for strategic reform at the Hawaii education department.

The federal Education Department wouldn't comment specifically on Hawaii. However, spokesman Justin Hamilton said that although officials are pleased with the overall direction of Race to the Top implementation among the winners, "in the end, this is about making sure promises made are promises kept."

And, as department officials have warned before, they're prepared to revoke a grant if commitments are not kept.

Of its \$75 million, four-year award, Hawaii had nearly \$72 million still left to spend as of Dec. 2, according to the latest data available from the federal Education Department.

Dark-Horse Winner

In the second round of last year's Race to the Top competition, Hawaii was one of 10 winners, and the clear dark horse. In fact, Education Department officials were in a "near-panic" when Hawaii won and other favored states, including Colorado and Louisiana, were left out of the winners' circle after outside peer reviewers had scored all the applications, according to a recent book about education reform by journalist Steven Brill. (See *Education Week*, Aug. 31, 2011.)

Two states, Delaware and Tennessee, had won in the first round in the \$4 billion state competition, which was funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The high-profile contest became the Obama administration's signature lever to persuade states to adopt certain education reform ideas, such as merit pay for teachers.

In Hawaii's case, the five peer reviewers who judged its application were particularly persuaded that the single state-run school district would translate into significant statewide results.

But the very structure that makes Hawaii—and another winner, the District of Columbia—unique also presents its own challenges.

"We cannot simply issue guidance or establish policies and leave the real work of implementation to the districts," Mr. Schatz said. "In Hawaii, we must also ensure that the reforms are really getting done at the school and classroom level."

The judges were also impressed with the state's plan for improving teacher and principal effectiveness based on student performance—so impressed that the judges ranked Hawaii's plan first in that category, tied with Georgia's. The state's plan: implement a pilot evaluation program in its turnaround schools, expand the pilot to an additional 40 schools next school year, then take it statewide in 2013-14.

After the plan goes statewide, the

teacher evaluation would become high-stakes—meaning personnel decisions and salaries would be based on the outcomes—in 2014-15. Thirty percent of a teacher's evaluation would be based on student growth, 30 percent on classroom observations, 15 percent on "stakeholder satisfaction," 15 percent on teacher knowledge and skills' growth, and 10 percent on school leadership.

Hawaii's overall Race to the Top application included a very limited letter of support from the Hawaii State Teachers' Association on the teacher-evaluation piece. The May 10, 2010, letter from HSTA President Wil Okabe said, about the teacher-evaluation component, "We agree to further discuss facilitating reforms needed in the targeted schools on a small scale."

Although the state committed to securing a collective bargaining agreement with the HSTA to accomplish its teacher-evaluation pilot, negotiations broke down, and that agreement never happened. That means the state missed a key "deliverable" in its "scope of work" for its Race to the Top plan. The scope of work for each Race to the Top state is a list of key milestones, along with deadlines, that must be hit to fully implement a plan.

"It's not ideal. We're all concerned," Mr. Schatz acknowledged. "We had a game plan. We had to make some adjustments in order to be able to get where we wanted

to go. We're still implementing all the components."

The HSTA, an affiliate of the National Education Association, did not respond to several requests for comment.

According to Hawaii department officials, the teacher-evaluation project is still on track. For example, in the state's 18 "zone of innovation" schools, which are Hawaii's lowest-performing schools and serve as the evaluation pilot, administrators and teacher-leaders have been trained in new observation protocols, and principals and vice principals all have iPads to input observation data.

By the end of January, principals and teachers will be provided their student-growth data for the past year. And in February, all students (or "stakeholders") in those schools will have taken a survey gauging their perceptions of their teachers, which is modeled after a survey developed by the Seattle-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and its work on teacher effectiveness.

What's taking longer are details of how teachers of nontested subjects will be evaluated, which should be in place next school year.

The state is also close to hitting another key milestone by its January deadline: expanding that evaluation pilot program. State officials said they've gotten strong indications from at least 47 schools that they will participate next school year.

"From our perspective, the flak they've received is a little unfair. They've gotten off to a slow start, but Hawaii has focused so much on buy-in and context and collaboration," said Scott Joftus, the president of the Cross and Joftus consulting firm, based in Bethesda, Md., which was recently hired by main contractor UPD Consulting of Baltimore to help Hawaii implement its teacher-evaluation system. "The bottom line is Hawaii is going to be implementing a teacher evaluation statewide in 2013-14."

Stalled Components

But whether that progress will be good enough for federal officials remains to be seen, especially since the “great teachers and leaders” part of a state’s Race to the Top application was worth the most points in the competition.

Hawaii’s lack of union agreement has delayed other changes as well. A plan to give incentive pay to highly effective teachers and principals to teach in turnaround schools was supposed to be in place during the 2010-11 school year, but hasn’t happened. The state is also behind in pursuing the new evaluation system’s compensation options, as recommendations and financial modeling were also supposed to be completed this year.

The state will also miss its January deadline for contracting with outside organizations to train and certify turnaround principals and teachers, though that should be in place by the beginning of next school year.

And the state is only partway

there in developing agreements with higher education officials to implement changes in teacher-preparation programs, which carried a January 2011 deadline.

Hawaii isn’t alone in its struggles. Take Florida. It was just approved for several shifts in strategy and deadlines for its Race to the Top plan, which netted the state \$700 million. For example, the majority of new employees implementing the state’s plan now will be contractors, not state employees. More than a dozen timeline shifts were approved, including a nearly two-year delay in a new program to evaluate teacher professional-development programs and a one-year delay in efforts to use outside organizations to help develop successful principals for turnaround schools.

All states have gotten approval by the Education Department to push back timelines, including Hawaii, which has additional requests pending.

Soft Underpinnings

However, Hawaii’s problem is more fundamental, and threatens a core part of its Race to the Top plan. While other states have laws or regulations on the books that spell out the details of their teacher-evaluation plans, Hawaii’s only exists in its Race to the Top plan.

“Even with the benefit of being a unitary [school] system, their plan hasn’t been shored up. Their teacher-evaluation plan hasn’t been turned into lasting policy,” said Sandi Jacobs, the vice president of the NCTQ, which published a report in November updating the status of teacher-evaluation changes nationwide. Hawaii, in particular, drew the most criticism among Race to the Top winners in that report for a teacher-evaluation plan that “hasn’t materialized in any significant way.”

Hawaii officials point out that state law now gives them authority to conduct teacher and principal evaluations, and make certain personnel decisions based on them.

But to take the plan statewide, and especially to tie compensation to the evaluations, will require a union agreement.

Part of Hawaii’s problem is its aggressive timeline, which state officials themselves agreed to. The state’s scope of work shows that most of the heavy-lifting for implementing its four-year plan was supposed to have taken place in 2011.

Hawaii officials acknowledge missteps, and that communication about its progress—especially in the teacher-evaluation realm—could be clearer and more frequent. What’s more, like most winning states, the department struggled within its own offices to get key staff in place to implement the ambitious plan.

“To reframe a whole industry is really disruptive. That’s why it’s such a challenge,” said Chris Patting, the vice president for strategic planning and implementation for Kamehameha Schools, a group of private schools that focuses on educating native Hawaiian students. He worked on the state’s Race to the Top application. “Things are coming along. And I would go to the mat with anyone who could tell me that it can be done quicker.”