

**Leveraging Change Via Competition: The Promise and Limitations of Race to the Top**  
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**Abstract**

As a result of Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the federal government has been involved with addressing public school inequities in a number of ways. However, it has not yielded the results of equal educational opportunity or outcomes. To remedy these inequities, Race to the Top uses competitive grants to spur innovation and has fostered states to adopt policies to improve both standards and assessments and the capacity of their lowest performing schools. It has also promoted teacher evaluation systems linked with student outcomes. However, Race to The Top is limited given that all states will not receive these funds and teacher evaluation may be hampered by methodological and ethical concerns.

Race to the Top (RTT) is the most recent federal initiative developed by the Obama administration to improve education in the United States by using competitive grants to leverage change in state, district, and local school policies and practices. It continues the legacy of federal involvement with improving the quality among schools in the United States for all with concerns about addressing racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic disparities. RTT is preceded by other federal efforts including No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in an attempt to remedy the disparities in educational experiences with the use of a high-stakes accountability framework to improve schooling. This article's purpose is to examine the tenets of RTT and how it is positioned to create educational innovation. In addition, I discuss the limitations associated with this policy instrument (see McDonnell & Elmore, 1987).

The Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 is a major federal policy effort post *Brown v. Board of Education* that focused on addressing inequalities in student experiences and outcomes with the allocation of fiscal resources. In order to address these educational inequalities over the last 47 years, the ESEA has expanded its scope from providing funds that allow for targeted educational assistance to underperforming, low income students to the recent focus on holding public schools accountable via NCLB for the annual yearly progress (AYP) of student sub-groups. This reflects a shift from promoting educational equity (i.e. equalizing inputs) to a focus on educational excellence (i.e. equalizing outputs) (Wells, 2009). With the policy mandate of NCLB achievement gaps are to be resolved since school districts are expected to have all students achieve 100% academic proficiency by 2014. Although states determine their own academic standards and assessments, NCLB requires that all states and their schools assess students in grades 3-8 and at least one time during high school. In order to monitor educational disparities, NCLB requires that assessment data are disaggregated by race, free and reduced lunch status, language status, and special education status with schools meeting annual yearly progress targets. In addition, NCLB uses the mandate of accountability to foster change within all public schools beyond those receiving Title I (McGuinn, 2005; Vinovskis, 2009).

**Race to the Top: Leveraging Change via Competition for Federal Dollars**

The Obama administration's vision for educational renewal has been promoted by RTT where it lays the foundation for the future direction of federal educational policy including the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. As part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009, RTT infused \$4.35 billion to influence systemic change across states through a

competitive funding process (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Unlike NCLB's top down mandate for change (McGuinn, 2005), RTT leverages monetary incentives to get states and local school districts to align their practices and policies to reflect the Obama administration's vision for education. This includes maintaining a focus on excellence related to learning outputs with the provision of resources to a select group of states to promote innovation by strengthening standards and assessments; developing comprehensive P-16 student data tracking systems; linking student outcomes to teacher evaluation; focusing resources on low performing schools; and increasing teacher and principal quality. Although charter schools were a component of NCLB, RTT encourages their expansion with the removal of limits on the number allowed in a state (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The use of competitive grants to spur innovation aligns with a market-based approach to school improvement at the state level (see Belfield & Levin, 2009). As of January 2012, 21 states and the District of Columbia were recipients of RTT grants over three grant competitions.

RTT promotes the development of enhanced standards that aim to prepare students for college and career by the completion of high school (Schwartz, 2009; U.S. Department of Education 2009, 2010). The Council of Chief State Officers and the National Governor's Association have spearheaded efforts to increase the rigor of academic standards with the creation of Common Core Standards (Cavanagh, 2009; Center on Education Policy, 2011). The adoption of the Common Core standards figures prominently in RTT because all applicants for this funding had to indicate that they were adopting more rigorous standards and assessments with a college and career ready focus. As of December 2011, 45 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core Standards (see Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012).

RTT enlarges the accountability framework with the improvement of testing by expanding the types of assessments used to demonstrate educational progress including formative tests, oral assessments, and computer based tests. The RTT competitive grants have resulted in the creation of two consortia of states collaborating to develop tests that provide several measures of learning and shift the focus from basic skills to higher order thinking (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The first consortium, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), involves 26 states with the goal of developing multiple assessments to be proctored over an academic year where an average of all assessments will be used to estimate student outcomes in English Language Arts and mathematics. The SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), the second consortium, includes 31 states that focuses on the development of computer based assessments that determine questions asked to students that result from prior responses. Optional formative assessments are being developed to prepare for the end of the year assessment. These new assessments from the two consortia will begin at third grade, continue through the middle grades, and end in high school. Initial implementation of these assessments is expected during the 2014-2015 academic year (Tamayo, 2010). In addition to these new assessments, RTT embraces the use of growth models as a means of showing educational progress.

While there are many researchers, policymakers, and practitioners who have argued that the requirement of achieving 100% student proficiency on state assessments by 2014 is unrealistic, RTT does not resolve this issue. However, the availability of waivers for NCLB requirements beginning summer 2011 provide states the option to obtain greater flexibility by seeking exemption from having all students achieve proficiency by 2014. The Obama administration also allows states to seek exemptions that permit flexibility regarding the use of pre-existing sanctions for Title I schools that do not meet AYP (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). In order to receive waivers, applications to the U.S. Department of Education from individual states must demonstrate that it has embraced the core tenets of RTT including the adoption of college and career standards; the creation of an accountability system that allows for schools to have multiple ways to demonstrate progress with access to adequate assistance; and the

commitment to pursue teacher and principal evaluation. Thirty-three states have received waivers regarding NCLB as of September 2012 (U.S. Department of Education, 2012a).

RTT aims to build teacher and principal capacity in order to remedy the inequities in school personnel that plague low performing schools especially those in urban areas (Darling-Hammond, 2005). Teacher and principal quality is addressed in a number of ways including the focus on the development of effective school personnel through professional paths. As a way to improve the quality of school personnel, RTT supports teacher and principal evaluations by linking them to student performance and other criteria of instructional effectiveness. This evaluation system is designed to provide feedback that allows for the development of successful school personnel and will be used to eliminate ineffective staff and inform teacher pay (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, 2010).

Teacher evaluation systems spurred by RTT are in the developmental stages as states are in the process of determining the formulas to assess instructional quality. Teacher evaluation in Tennessee, one of the first two states to receive RTT funds, will base 50% on observations of teacher practice, 35% on student achievement data including valued added measures of student growth, and 15% on other student achievement measures (Heitin, 2011). Early implementation reports about RTT implementation show that several states including Delaware, New York and Tennessee hit roadblocks as they attempt to create a comprehensive teacher evaluation system (U.S. Department of Education, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d). Challenges with developing indicators of student growth measures for teachers who provide instruction in non-tested subjects were confronted in Tennessee and Delaware (U.S. Department of Education, 2012b, 2012d). Teachers and principals in Tennessee reported confronting time challenges related to required observations (Heitin, 2011). Resistance against teacher evaluation was an important issue that factored into the Chicago Teachers' Union strike during September 2012 (Rich, 2012). As a result, the challenges encountered regarding teacher evaluation show the complexity of developing an appraisal system that is a valid and fair assessment of sound instructional practice.

### **Race the Top Limitations**

Some may praise RTT's commitment to innovation with the allocation of additional resources to help reform education among states via competition (McGuinn, 2012). RTT and the Common Core Standards move states into closer alignment by creating common academic goals with common assessments created with two consortia of states. However, a significant limitation of RTT is the fact that this approach to educational improvement is based on competitive grants that creates both winners and losers. While the winning states gain additional resources that assist with educational improvement, losing states are solely responsible to do the tremendous work for change using pre-existing resources. The RTT market-based approach also does not promote equity among states given that only half of 45 states that applied for RTT were selected as of the third round of funding. This approach to the allocation of educational funding for educational improvement is contradictory to aims of improving education for all since students that live in states that did not have competitive RTT applications are essentially penalized.

Another critique about NCLB is that it does not address pre-existing resource inequities within and between states. In fact, RTT contributes to the exacerbation of pre-existing interstate educational funding disparities (see Liu, 2008) because not all states have received these grants. There should be concern that those states with the greatest capacity for engaging in state-wide reform were the recipients of RTT with states possessing limited state department capacity and funds were placed at a disadvantage in the RTT competition. However, these challenges regarding capacity also emerge with the 2012 RTT competition for individual school districts, since smaller and rural districts may lack the capacity to manage grants that can range from five to 20 million dollars. Since a maximum of 20 districts will get the RTT funds, this leaves the majority of the 14,000 districts in the country without these additional funds. Large cities, such

as New York City, are well positioned to obtain RTT funds because they engage in the large scale educational reform efforts championed by current policy and have a pre-existing infrastructure and staff (Klein & Samuels, 2012; McGuinn, 2012). Yet, it is unclear how the capacity to innovate as constructed by RTT can be transferred to state and districts without these means.

A second set of limitations regarding RTT are related to teacher evaluation. The implementation of improvements regarding assessments and the measurement of AYP presents a number of challenges. The first issue is whether locally determined and state assessments are valid measures to make decisions regarding teacher evaluation. That is, are student assessments an accurate indicator of good instruction? This is an important issue since Herman and Baker (2009) suggest that we cannot assume that assessments used for accountability and aligned with state standards are instructionally sensitive because

First, current test development and scaling procedures continue to be based on normal distribution assumptions similar to those on which yesterday's intelligence testing was based, tests designed to detect presumed innate and immutable differences in student ability (and therefore immune to change). This underlying methodology thus gives rise to continuing questions about whether there may be a disjunction between items that are psychometrically effective in defining a scale of accomplishment and those most sensitive to instruction. (p. 185)

Koretz (2005) cautions that student test scores should not be used for teacher evaluation unless there have been specific studies to examine whether state-level assessments are instructionally sensitive among state and local assessments.

At the same time, we must be concerned about whether there may be unintended consequences with the use of teacher evaluation in the context of accountability. There is the potential that contradictory instructional practices may emerge in low performing schools when they are under tremendous pressure to improve student outcomes. Depending on the nature of the teacher evaluation system and the sanctions and rewards associated with it, there is the potential for practices of exclusion to emerge. If student performance plays a significant role in teacher evaluation, then there may be incentives to omit low performing students from the testing pool or resources may be targeted to those students who are most likely to help improve student outcomes for teachers (see Booher-Jennings, 2005; Booher-Jennings & Beveridge, 2008; Haney, 2008; Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008). Prior studies examining the impact of high stakes testing on low performing urban schools provide evidence about how schools may attempt to game the system when required to show academic progress (Koretz, 2008). A number of studies examining high stakes testing in Texas show that many low performing students who were African American and Latino were excluded from the testing pool by being retained in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. This practice rendered these low performing students ineligible to take the high stakes assessment at 10<sup>th</sup> grade. As result, the reports of test scores for 10<sup>th</sup> graders were inflated. However, this evidence has been used to indicate that high stakes testing had a positive impact on student outcomes in Texas (see Booher-Jennings & Beveridge, 2008; Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008). As teacher evaluation systems unfold, attention must be paid regarding practices that may exclude large sub-groups of students (i.e. students of color, English Language Learners, low income, or special education) from testing especially the students RTT attempts to help.

## **Conclusion**

The promise of RTT is that it attempts to foster changes at the state level by offering resources to allow for progress toward the improvement of standards and assessment and the development of a robust cadre of quality teachers and principals. The Obama administration's strategy for change is a shift from NCLB

often considered by many as an unfunded mandate (Mathis, 2005). However, RTT is not providing these additional resources to all states even though the tenets of this policy vision will likely inform the reauthorization of the ESEA (Klein, 2010). The dilemma with the use of competitive grants is that those states and districts with the least capacity will not receive these funds. It is not clear how these states will gain the capacity as envisioned by RTT. Future policy efforts must focus on policy instruments that allow for state and district level capacity building (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987) in order to foster the innovation expected with RTT. As states grapple with the creation of teacher evaluation, we must ensure that the student assessment measures used to inform instructional effectiveness are valid indicators of teacher quality. We must also be concerned that the stakes of teacher evaluation associated with teacher tenure, dismissal, and compensation will not create adverse incentives that will result in sub-groups of low performing students being marginalized in schools. This marginalization will have adverse consequences for African American, Latino, low income, English Language Learners, and special education students.

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