

NEVADA'S PROMISE

excellence,
rigor, and
equity

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Nevada's Promise: Excellence, Rigor, and Equity **Analysis and Next Steps**

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Overview

In the first section of this report, we have attempted to capture the action items that can form the basis for the November 19 report as well as an analysis of the reviews of Nevada's Race to the Top application. We begin with actions going forward in the belief that this should be our focus and that extended discussion of the federal proposal serves best as a backdrop for future action.

While Nevada was not a grant recipient in the federal competition, the Education Reform Blue Ribbon Task Force's efforts in preparing the application sparked a wildfire of interest in and support for moving forward on an education reform agenda for the state. That agenda is now known as *Nevada's Promise: Excellence, Rigor, and Equity*.

In order to move forward, there are a set of legislative actions grounded in the application that should be recommended to the new governor and the incoming legislature. Other actions can be taken by the state board, Nevada Department of Education (NDE) and by the 17 school districts in the state, often through discussions with their respective teacher associations.

It is also clear from the analysis conducted by the federal reviewers that there are additional actions that should be accomplished in the event of another round of Race to the Top funding and, more importantly, to serve as the basis for improving outcomes for Nevada's children, regardless of future federal funding. The link between an improved education system and a state economy that provides employers with the workforce they require is clear and should be a basic communications message to all Nevadans, voters and especially parents.

Nevada's Promise – Actions

Actions that must be taken to fulfill *Nevada's Promise*:

- Formally adopt the Common Core State Standards.
- Create an organizational infrastructure, e.g. Teachers and Leaders Council, to implement *Nevada's Promise*.
- Add additional pathways for alternative teacher and principal certification and provide guidance to school districts on how to use alternative routes, including the induction and retention of highly effective educators.
- Design a uniform state-wide evaluation process for teachers and administrators, in cooperation with associations.
- Review hiring, disciplinary and retention policies in line with the *Nevada's Promise* agenda.
- Negotiate contract provisions that permit differential pay schedules in areas of shortage and critical needs.
- Design and implement new statewide professional development initiatives and strategies based on data.
- Provide mechanisms to assure that effective teachers and principals are equitably distributed among both low and high performing schools, including systems to assure that a strict, last-hired/first-fired system is not in place and used to the detriment of students in low-performing and/or high-poverty schools.
- Create a seamless, on-demand longitudinal data system that incorporates successful practices and fosters district collaboration as well as providing data for classroom instruction and accountability reporting.
- Design specific higher education programs of teacher preparation in areas of critical need, such as the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines, the teaching of English as a second language and special education.
- Remove barriers in the creation of charter schools, especially with respect to conversion of public schools, facilities and sponsorship.
- Establish the Nevada Charter School Institute.
- Create a plan and structure to advance STEM education.

- Create efficiencies within the system that support the unique character of district, school and student needs in Nevada.

Race to the Top, Phase 2 Scoring Analysis

On Tuesday, August 24, the U.S. Department of Education announced the following ten states as winners of the Race to the Top Phase 2 grant competition:

- District of Columbia
- Florida
- Georgia
- Hawaii
- Massachusetts
- Maryland
- New York
- North Carolina
- Ohio
- Rhode Island

As a result, we were provided with further information about how Nevada fared in the overall competition as well as detailed reviewer comments about *Nevada's Promise: Excellence, Rigor, and Equity*.

Summary

Nevada's final score of 381.2 ranks 24 out of the 36 states that applied for Race to the Top Phase 2 funding. Massachusetts scored the highest with 471 points. Among the ten grant recipients, Ohio was last with 440.8 points. Twelve states scored below Nevada.

The following information represents the five individual reviewer scores that were then averaged together to generate Nevada's final score. The final score is not a true average since two of the five reviews awarded the state all 15 points for STEM and three did not. As a result, those 15 points were deducted from the scores of those two reviewers.

- Reviewer 1 – 469
- Reviewer 2 – 369
- Reviewer 3 – 353
- Reviewer 4 – 342
- Reviewer 5 – 403

Nevada Average – 381.2

Attached are charts that show the scores of all applicant states. Some of the highlights are listed below.

Scores by Section:

- **Section A: State Success Factors** – Nevada had 87% of the points; the average was 77%. No winning state had fewer than 89%.
- **Section B: Standards and Assessments** – Nevada earned 95% of the points; the average was 92%. All of the winning states were at 97% or higher.
- **Section C: Data Systems to Improve Instruction** – Nevada had 81% of the points, the average was 80%. Only the District of Columbia and Ohio were below 80%, whereas all others were above 86%.
- **Section D: Great Teachers and Leaders** – Nevada had 61% of the points; the average was 71%. All of the winners were above 84%.
- **Section E: Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools** – Nevada had 90%; the average was 85%. The lowest winning score had 90% of the points.
- **Section F: General Selection Criteria** – Nevada had 70%, the average was 72%. Maryland and North Carolina were below 80%, whereas the others were above 82%.
- **Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM** – Nevada had zero points, 75% of states had all 15 points. All winning states had all 15 points.

The total for Nevada was 76% of all points while the average was 78%. Among the grant recipients, it was 90.4%.

Participation in Phase 1 provided a significant competitive advantage for consideration in Phase 2. Eighteen of the 19 states that were chosen as finalists in Phase 2 had the advantage of having submitted applications in Phase 1. Fourteen of those 18 finalists were also finalists in Phase 1. Of the ten winning states in Phase 2, only Maryland was not a Phase 1 applicant. Between Phase 1 and Phase 2, the gains among the winners ranged from 13 (Georgia) to 78 (Hawaii) points. While Arizona was not a grant recipient, its score improved by 190 points.

The scores and comments varied considerably, thus the following represents what elements of *Nevada's Promise* were compelling, what facets received mixed reviews and what components require further attention and/or clarification.

***Nevada's Promise* – Strengths**

- The 100% LEA participation as well as wide support and deep commitments, were regularly heralded as a good sign that *Nevada's*

Promise would translate into broad statewide impact, allowing the state the potential to reach its ambitious yet achievable goals.

- Reviewers were convinced of the sustainability of *Nevada's Promise*, even after the end of the grant period. The comments cite sound grants management procedures to monitor expenditures and ensure timely draw downs of funds; the level of transparency in the fiscal and program reporting; and the clear budget indicating one-time investments in building its infrastructure and capacity to support long-term reforms, with only 10% of the proposed budget used to support salaries and fringe benefits.
- **Section A: State Success Factors** received praise for being “a comprehensive and coherent agenda,” “clearly articulated,” “reasonable,” “clear and credible,” “powerful in its simplicity,” “a new vision for transforming education,” “a smart approach to situate education reform in the broader context of economic and workforce development,” “clear and compelling” and “a high quality plan.”
- **Section B: Standards and Assessments** outperformed any other section of *Nevada's Promise*. Nevada's consortium-signing commitment was well received by the reviewers and consistent with the Race to the Top reform goals. Furthermore, the semantics discussion surrounding the adoption of the Common Core State Standards never came to fruition because this section received the highest marks.
- **Section E: Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools** received consistently high marks and praise from each reviewer, prompting one reviewer to write: “the state seems to have a high-quality plan for identifying its lowest-achieving school and its dropout factories.” While not flawless, Section E performed very well across the board and received the fewest amount of constructive remarks.

***Nevada's Promise* – Mixed Reviews**

- Overall, *Nevada's Promise*, as indicated by the comments for Section A listed above, were positive, but certain reviewers actually criticized the broad consensus because it came at the expense of bold, meaningful reform. Reviews asserted that this was reflected throughout the evaluation by way of the state's lack of ambitious yet achievable performance measures and/or high-quality implementation plans. Furthermore, the credibility of the proposal was criticized on account of the lack of honest self-reflection and self-awareness, as evidenced by the fact that *Nevada's Promise* fails to clearly articulate why it has done a poor job educating students, graduating students and enrolling students in college. That is, the state did not incorporate past lessons, which could then be used to determine to what extent the state demonstrates an understanding as to what led to its previous reform shortcomings and ultimately how past reforms inform present and future reform goals.

- The proposed management/organizational structure to implement *Nevada's Promise* received mixed reviews because, while some viewed it as a strong, stabilizing implementation infrastructure that sufficiently cross-walks to ensure strong communication both internally and externally, others interpreted the seeming overreliance on the to-be-created five councils as a punt, and thus not a high-quality plan. The role of the five councils as well as the accountability task force, while applauded by some, appeared unwieldy to others since their role is to develop guidelines and policy recommendations rather than provide comment and feedback to the NDE.
- **Section C: Data Systems to Support Instruction** received mixed reviews, but the common critique was that the section and descriptions lacked cohesiveness, clarity and specificity, particularly regarding how the various systems will operate and interface with one another. The most critical comments highlighted that the data plan is basic and limited in scope.

***Nevada's Promise* – Deficiencies**

- **Section D: Great Teachers and Leaders** was consistently penalized and critiqued for the following sections, and largely because the Race to the Top criterion specifically addresses the legal, statutory or regulatory provision currently in place:

Providing high-quality pathways for aspiring teachers and principals

- D(1)(i)-allowing alternative routes to certification
- D(1)(ii)-using alternative routes to certification

Since Nevada only meets three of the five elements of the definition of alternate routes to certification under Race to the Top, and because only institutions of higher education can currently operate alternative routes to licensure, high points were not awarded. Reviewers cited that it is imperative that the legislature continue showing strong support for education reform by codifying the proposed new routes to licensure.

Improving teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance

- D(2)(iv)-using evaluations to inform key decision

Once again, the proposed collaboration with the Teachers and Leaders council signaled a punt, and thus a fairly ambiguous plan, lacking in specifics and compelling direction. Furthermore, the timelines for development and implementation of the new evaluation systems are reasonable but not aggressive enough or achievable during the life of the grant. Reviewers recommended that state laws be amended to allow tenure and removal decisions based on evaluations.

Ensuring equitable distribution of effective teachers and principals

- D(3)(i)-ensuring equitable distribution in high-poverty or high-minority schools
- D(3)(ii)-ensuring equitable distribution in hard-to-staff subjects and specialty areas

Comments cited that these sections represent a mediocre hodgepodge of activities not supported by measurable timelines. Nevada also consistently had points deducted for failing to address teaching in language instruction education programs, especially given Nevada's large English language learner population.

Improving the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs

- D(4)(i)-linking student data to credentialing programs and reporting publicly
- D(4)(ii)-expanding effective programs

Nevada provided an underdeveloped plan on how it intends to link student achievement and growth data to the students' teachers and principals, then link it back to the programs in which the educators were prepared.

Providing effective support to teachers and principals

- D(5)(ii)-continuously improving the effectiveness of the support

- **Section F: General Selection Criteria** received consistently low marks in the following sections because of statutory barriers regarding charter schools:

Ensuring successful condition for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools

- F(2)(ii)-authorizing and holding charters accountable for outcomes
- F(2)(iv)-providing charter schools with equitable access to facilities

While Nevada does have a charter school law that does not prohibit the number of charter schools that can operate, quality notwithstanding, it was equally clear to the reviewers that the state's prohibition on converting public schools, even failing ones, to charter schools is a barrier. Furthermore, the state provides no assistance for charter schools in terms of funding for facilities, facilities acquisition or the ability to share in bonds.

- **Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM** only received two scores of the full 15 points, whereas the other reviewers cited the lack of quality and coordinated plan as a reason for not receiving points. While several STEM-related activities are individually listed, they do not collectively reflect a broad comprehensive STEM agenda. In addition, reviewers cited the failure to define or elaborate on the underrepresented populations in STEM education and/or careers, such as women and girls,

as another reason for not awarding points. Given that a majority of the five reviewers were not convinced about our emphasis on STEM, zero points were awarded. Had this portion been more compelling, Nevada's total score would have been 390.2 for a 21st place finish.

Conclusion

Nevada's 24th place finish does not tell the whole story. Once contextualized, Nevada performed extremely well against all odds, but more importantly against states with the competitive advantage of applying for and receiving detailed feedback from Phase I. While the scores of the top performers, and eventual grant recipients, were significantly higher than Nevada's score, finalists were also afforded the opportunity during the oral presentations to enhance their original, Tier 1 scores.

After comparing Tier 1 scores only, Nevada's 381.2 was not as uncompetitive as 24th place suggests. When matched against the Tier 1 scores from the 19 finalists, Nevada's final score of 381.2 was only 22.2 points behind New Jersey's Tier 1 score of 403.4, which was enough for New Jersey to qualify in 19th place and occupy the last finalist spot.

Nevada's deficiencies are largely attributable to the absence of certain historical components within the educational system that have long been the challenge. The silver lining is that the detailed critiques serve to strengthen *Nevada's Promise* for the 2011 Nevada legislative session as well as a possible reapplication for Phase 3 of the Race to the Top funding. The constructive and comprehensive feedback both validates the well-received and compelling proposals as well as substantiates the claims to rectify the deficiencies through legislative action.

While the comments highlight where Nevada could have gained additional points to enhance its competitiveness nationally, the real value of the reviewers' scores and comments underscores the significant role that addressing specific statutory language could play in elevating both educational reform and student outcome, particularly with regard to efforts related to Section D. Assemblywoman Smith said it best: "It appears that it's the road we've been on and not the road we're headed down that killed us. Our aspirations just couldn't overcome our lack of action in the past."