



State of Illinois Race to the Top

Application for Phase II Funding: Q and A

Q: How did the U.S. Department of Education generate the four reform initiatives addressed under the Race to the Top program?

A: The four reform areas outlined in Race to the Top were recommended by the Council of Chief State School Officers, which is a group that represents the chief educational officer in all 50 states.

Q: If a school district signs on to the State's application, how much control over implementation of RTTT initiatives will the local district have? Our board is very concerned about loss of local control.

A: Districts that support the State's RTTT application will sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the State, and attached to the MOU is a Preliminary Scope of Work. If the State is awarded a RTTT grant, districts will be required to submit a Final Scope of Work that describes the district's implementation plan in a manner that is consistent with the Preliminary Scope of Work and with the Illinois RTTT application. Districts have considerable flexibility in determining how to accomplish the commitments specified in the MOU – ISBE understands there is not a "one size fits all" solution and that the local context will shape the district's approach to its plan. It is also important to note that the State is in the process of implementing education reforms that align to the State's Race to the Top plan. Therefore, many of these reforms, such as revised Learning Standards and redesigned performance evaluation systems, will be implemented Statewide with or without Race to the Top.

Q: Is there a way for districts that sign on to the RTTT application at this stage to later "opt out" or withdraw from participation?

A: The MOU may be terminated in various ways, including by mutual agreement of the State and the school district. In addition, if a district does not submit a Final Scope of Work, it essentially "opts out" of participation in RTTT. The relevant language in the

MOU can be found in Section II.D. (State Recourse for LEA Non-Performance) which states: “The State will terminate this MOU and the LEA’s status as a Participating LEA, with no further remedy, if the LEA does not submit to the State an LEA Plan meeting the requirements of Section I.C by the date that is 90 days after a grant is awarded to the State.”

Q: If we sign on to support the State’s RTTT application and the State receives funding, what additional reporting requirements would apply to us?

A: Since Race to the Top is part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, we anticipate that reporting requirements will be similar to ARRA and the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund. While we are awaiting more specific guidance from the U.S. Department of Education on reporting, our current understanding is that states have flexibility when structuring their RTTT planning and reporting processes. To the maximum extent possible, ISBE is committed to integrating RTTT planning and reporting with existing processes required of districts, such as integrating RTTT planning with the State's district improvement planning template.

Q: Does the RTTT application include a merit pay provision or requirement?

A: The application does not contain any requirements concerning merit pay. The State may seek non-RTTT federal funds to support districts that seek to institute a merit pay program, but participation will be completely voluntary on the part of districts.

Q: Who will be affected by performance evaluations tied to student growth?

A: In accordance with the Performance Evaluation Reform Act of 2010 (“PERA”), signed into law in January 2010, both teacher and principal evaluations will be required to be tied to student growth.

Q: What tools will be used to measure student growth, who will decide the tools that will be used and when will evaluations be tied to student growth?

A: Individual student growth can be measured using multiple measures that include standardized formative and summative tests, curriculum- and course-based assessments, and individual student work. Under the Participating LEA MOU, at least until new State assessments have been implemented, State assessments cannot be the only measure of student growth in teacher performance evaluations. The decision on student growth measures in teacher evaluations will be made at the local level between school district administration, in good faith cooperation with its collective bargaining agent. School districts that sign on to the State’s Race to the Top application must incorporate student growth for at least 50 percent of teacher and principal evaluations and will implement

them by SY 2012-13, subject to the State providing a number of supports for implementation. Even if Illinois does not receive an RTTT award, under PERA the State will require recipients of federal School Improvement Grants to implement new teacher evaluation systems incorporating student growth by SY 2012-13, with other districts to follow. PERA requires new principal evaluations incorporating student growth statewide by SY 2012-13, with or without RTTT.

Q: If we sign on to support the State's RTTT application, would we be forced to replace our principal?

A: The only districts that must address the issue of principal replacement are those districts with one or more schools in the "Tier I" or "Tier II" categories for the 1003(g) Federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) program. Otherwise, the portions of the MOU relating to intervening in low-performing schools do not apply to the district. Schools that are eligible for and actually receive SIG funds in the "Tier I" or "Tier II" category must implement one of the four federal intervention models, which may include replacement of a principal. It is important to note that, regardless of whether or not Illinois receives Race to the Top funding, the "Tier I" and "Tier II" schools that receive SIG funds would be required by U.S. Department of Education regulations to implement one of these intervention models. Under the SIG program, a principal hired in the last two years as part of a prior intervention may be retained. Also, the SIG program does not prevent the principal from being re-assigned to another position within the district (or even at the same school, as long as the individual no longer serves as the principal).

In addition, if Illinois receives RTTT Phase II funding, the State will set aside certain RTTT funds to be used for districts without Tier I or Tier II schools that (i) previously agreed to become Super LEAs as part of the State's application for RTTT initial funding, and (ii) elect to remain Super LEAs for the Phase 2 application. These districts will be obligated to apply Super LEA commitments to their Illinois Priority Schools, and will thus be required to implement one of the four school intervention models identified by the U.S. Department of Education—turnaround model, restart model, school closure, or transformation model – in Illinois Priority Schools located in the district. It is recommended that districts that fall into this category speak with ISBE regarding the nature of interventions that will be required.

Q: Who at the State level will oversee these reform initiatives? What checks and balances will be in place to ensure quality?

A: Ultimately, the State Superintendent of Education will oversee RTTT initiatives. The same checks and balances that apply to any federal program would apply to Race to the Top.

Q: How would diverse types of districts, such as small, rural or wealthy suburban districts, benefit if the state receives Race to the Top funding? What would a high-performing district have to gain from signing on to Illinois' RTTT application?

A: All districts will benefit if the State receives a RTTT grant because RTTT will advance the implementation of initiatives such as K-12 aligned summative assessment, formative assessments, curriculum frameworks, implementation of student growth models, teachers' real-time access to student performance data, professional development for teachers in the use of student growth data, assistance for teachers as they implement Response to Intervention by more efficiently customizing instruction, tools for educators to measure student growth and inform instruction and interventions, and development of a shared statewide technology infrastructure that will drive down local district IT costs.

In addition to the funding that will go directly to Participating LEAs, the State will use its portion of the funding for a number of competitive and non-competitive grant programs that will be available only to Participating LEAs. Specifically, the State is using its portion of RTTT funding for kindergarten readiness assessments and related PreK – 3 professional development, implementation of the third WorkKeys assessment, induction and mentoring support, professional development for STEM-related programs, and training on use of new data tools and systems. If districts do not sign on to the MOU, they will not be eligible for any of these new RTTT-funded programs.

Q: Does the RTTT application include any mandatory school district consolidation component?

A: No, the application does not include any mandatory school district consolidation component. It seems that this question may have arisen from an initial DRAFT briefing book that was presented to the Illinois State Board of Education back in August 2009, which referenced the possibility of consolidation legislation; however, no such consolidation was pursued. The only language regarding reorganization in the MOU applies solely to school districts with a "Tier I" or "Tier II" school and states that: "If [the] LEA is identified by ISBE as a candidate for reorganization using metrics that include, but are not limited to, low student achievement outcomes, the LEA will agree to undertake a reorganization study funded by the State."

Q: Why is ISBE applying for a RTTT grant, which will provide relatively few dollars per student, at a time when districts are making massive cuts and struggling to balance the budget?

A: If the State receives a RTTT grant, the funds will accelerate educational reform that is underway in Illinois and will provide wide-ranging benefits to all school districts in the state, as detailed above.

Q: Where will future funding for educational reform in Illinois come from? How can we start long-term reform with short-term money?

A: While Race to the Top is only a four-year grant program, the priorities the agency will set forth in its plan are the overall priorities for the State's education reform agenda. Therefore, ISBE will advocate for continued funding to support the programs and initiatives that are included in the Race to the Top application.

Q: If the State is awarded a RTTT grant, can RTTT funds be used to fill budget holes in the same way stimulus money was used? Can it supplant existing local funds that are used for similar programs?

A: Within certain limitations, discussed below, the State will be flexible regarding how local districts spend the grant money that is allocated directly to them through RTTT, as long as districts use the funds in general furtherance of their MOU commitments. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act prohibits the use of RTTT funds for (i) payment of maintenance costs; (ii) stadiums or other facilities used primarily for athletic events or other events where admission is charged to the general public; (iii) purchase or upgrade of vehicles; (iv) improvement of stand-alone facilities that are not dedicated to the education of children, including office and operations support facilities; (v) school modernization, renovation, or repair that is inconsistent with State law; (vi) provision of financial assistance for students to attend private schools, except to provide special education services as authorized by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act; and (vii) expenses related to casinos, aquariums, zoos, golf courses, or swimming pools.

There do not appear to be any supplanting restrictions placed on RTTT funds, and Department of Education guidance materials state that RTTT contains no "supplement, not supplant" requirements. Therefore, RTTT funds can be used to support programs a district already has in place that are in general furtherance of their MOU commitments.

Q: Can you please clarify what type of a plan a district (LEA) must submit since we are not a district required to submit a District Improvement Plan? We are a high performing district (only two schools) and we do have a School Improvement Plan but it is not for purposes of not making AYP. We are unclear as to what these "plans" must look like and want to make sure that it is not going to require a lot of extra paperwork especially since we are not going to be recipients of any funds.

A: ISBE has not yet developed the specific plan required for Race to the Top. However, the intent is to integrate the Race to the Top plan with other planning documents required by the State and federal government for district improvement as well as for technology plans and other funding streams. For districts not required to submit an improvement plan, ISBE will seek to minimize the burden that the RTTT planning process requires.