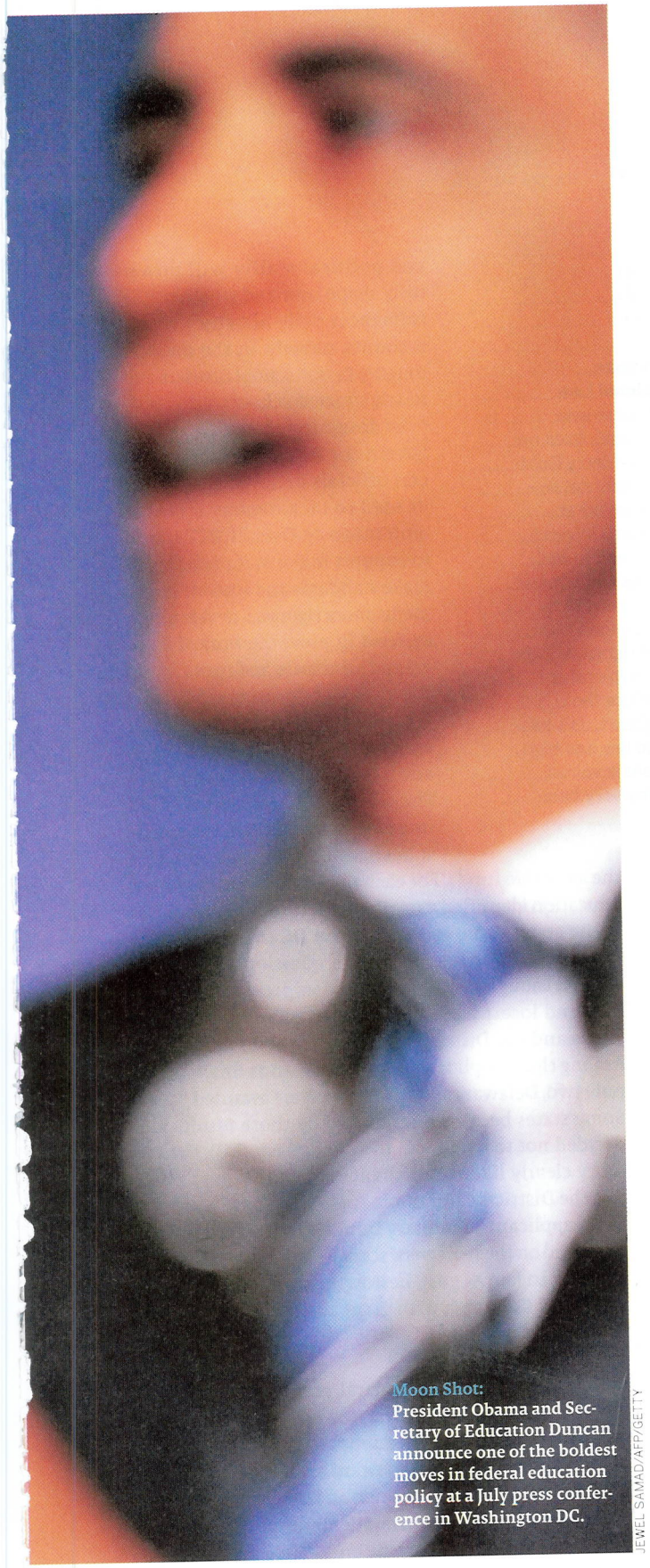
THE THREE Rs OF OBAMA'S RACE TO THE TOP PROGRAM:

REFORM, REWARD AND RESISTANCE



Moon Shot:
President Obama and Secretary of Education Duncan announce one of the boldest moves in federal education policy at a July press conference in Washington DC.

JEWEL SAMAD/AFP/GETTY

EDUCATION

President Obama's effort to award federal education grants to reforming states is a bold effort to spark change and accountability in schools. But will it work?

BY PAUL MANNA

National crises can provide windows of opportunity for leaders to advance their agendas. President Barack Obama's education initiative, known as "Race to the Top" (RTT), is one such example, plunging the federal government even further into the thicket of education reform and policy.

In early 2009, the nation's economic crisis led to congressional approval of a $787 billion economic stimulus package. Nearly $100 billion was earmarked for education. Although the bulk of those education funds was aimed at plugging hemorrhaging local budgets to prevent teacher layoffs, a smaller subset—around $4.35 billion—was set aside to create RTT.

The RTT program is unique because it is by far the largest competitive grant program that the federal Department of Education has ever administered. Unlike the vast majority of stimulus dollars, states do not automatically receive RTT grants but are required to compete for them by submitting applications to the department.[1] And while competitive education grants are not uncommon, most federal education aid is distributed using predetermined formulas.

President Obama's education secretary, Arne Duncan, has called RTT "the equivalent of education reform's moon shot."[2] But whether RTT proves to have enduring positive effects will depend on the extent to which it promotes serious reform efforts, whether it reveals insights about how to improve policy across all levels of government, and how well it survives inevitable political challenges.

One such challenge has already been laid down by

the National Education Association (NEA), the largest teachers union in the United States, and a traditional ally of the Democratic Party. In a close decision, union delegates voted "no confidence" in RTT at their 2010 annual meeting. The NEA's vote reflected particular concerns over RTT's support for using student test score gains in teacher evaluations. Given the NEA's influence in state and local venues, and the role of its members as key policy implementers, its critical stance will likely affect the efforts of RTT's advocates to win local supporters that will be needed to adopt and sustain the reforms.

Prior federal education initiatives announced with similar fanfare usually have fallen short of their intended goals. Traditionally, and especially since the 1960s, federal policy has attempted to promote educational equity by improving opportunities for disadvantaged students. In the 1980s, federal policymakers also became increasingly interested in educational excellence, the idea that schools needed to challenge students academically. Achieving both goals simultaneously has been difficult.

The Teacher That Changed My Life
Paul Manna

Jerry Goldman, Constitutional Law
One of my best-ever teachers comes from my college days: Jerry Goldman in the political science department at Northwestern University. Jerry is incredibly well-versed in his subject and manages to run classroom discussions with the kind of rigorous questioning akin to oral argument before the U.S. Supreme Court. His passion for the law and high expectations inspired me to do my very best.

Is All Education Local?

One major reason why so few federal education initiatives have succeeded is that, in the U.S., elementary and secondary education are primarily a state and local responsibility. Washington provides only about 10 percent of the revenues for the nation's schools.

With such weak financial leverage, and a correspondingly weak federal education bureaucracy, Washington has always relied on lower levels of government to implement federal initiatives. That enduring institutional and political reality will powerfully shape how and whether RTT influences daily activities where it counts, namely, in the nation's roughly 14,000 school districts and nearly 100,000 schools.

In designing the guidelines to govern the RTT competition, federal officials believed that states needed to tackle many issues simultaneously. Overall, RTT aimed to support major state reforms to make standards and student assessments more rigorous, develop data systems, improve the work of teachers and principals, and turn around the lowest performing schools.

Independent, nonpartisan peer reviewers were enlisted to judge and score the states' proposals. The selection process was divided into two phases, which meant that states had multiple chances to win the available funds. For each phase, the Department of Education identified a smaller group of states as finalists. Those states came to Washington DC to explain their proposals and answer reviewers' questions.

Even though it was clear that competition would be stiff and losers would vastly outnumber winners, 40 states and the District of Columbia applied to Phase 1. Among those applicants, 16 were named as finalists and only two, Delaware and Tennessee, were awarded grants. Some states became discouraged by those results and decided not to reapply in the next phase. Still, the majority clearly liked their chances of winning; 35 states and the District of Columbia applied to Phase 2. Among those applicants, Secretary Duncan announced 19 finalists based on the reviewers' scores. Phase 2 winners were revealed in late August, bestowing nine states and the District of Columbia with grant awards.

Influencing the Agenda

The RTT, like other federal grant programs, was aimed at influencing state and local policy agendas to promote educational equity and academic excellence. By offering important resources on the margins, federal grants can provide an indispensable boost, especially during lean economic times, to support new initiatives or expand current ones. They also offer po-

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litical cover to would-be reformers, who can use the opportunity to bolster their own arguments in state and local arenas.

State changes leading up to the RTT selection process suggest that the program did influence policy. Several state leaders have agreed that RTT created a sense of urgency that moved them to act. In Tennessee, for example, which won an RTT grant in Phase 1 of the competition, Governor Phil Bredesen called the legislature into special session in January 2010 to debate several education measures designed to better position the state's application.

A similar dynamic was evident in Colorado. Kelly Hupfeld, an assistant dean at the University of Colorado at Denver, noted in an article in *Education Week* that RTT provided "a chance for us [in Colorado] to really accelerate all of the things that we've been talking about."[3] She added: "We've had a lot of good ideas floating around the state for a long time, but we don't have any money to implement them."

In numerous other states, extra legislative sessions and enhanced conversations appear to have produced the policy changes that federal leaders had hoped would materialize. In one study of the Phase 1 application process that tracked state policy changes in areas relevant to RTT, researchers at Learning Point Associates, a nonprofit education consulting firm, found that 18 states made changes in 2009 and early 2010 to their policies governing teachers, in advance of the application deadline. That compared with only four states making similar changes in 2007 and five in 2008.[5] The rapid nature of these and other state responses led one observer, former George W. Bush Administration education official Andy Smarick, to call them "the greatest achievement of Secretary Duncan's tenure."

Substantively, the states' changes addressed several areas. These included policies to overhaul teacher evaluations, including some that give student achievement data substantial weight in those judgments. Teacher policies governing entry into the profession through traditional or alternative routes also received attention. Those changes were intended to create more options for aspiring teachers, such as those switching careers later in life, whose schedules prevented them from taking traditional teacher preparation programs at universities.

Policies to facilitate the development of public charter schools also passed. Charters, although still public schools, can operate with more flexibility than traditional public schools because they are excused from following certain state regulations. (Those exceptions vary widely by state, but typically do not include allowing charters to opt out of regulations concerning civil rights matters or safety.) In some cases, state changes altered the rules governing how charters are opened or can operate while increasing caps defining the number of charters that can exist.

Other changes created additional options for states wishing to intervene in schools that performed poorly for several consecutive years, including changes that made it easier for states themselves to either take over schools or dictate particular changes in school management.

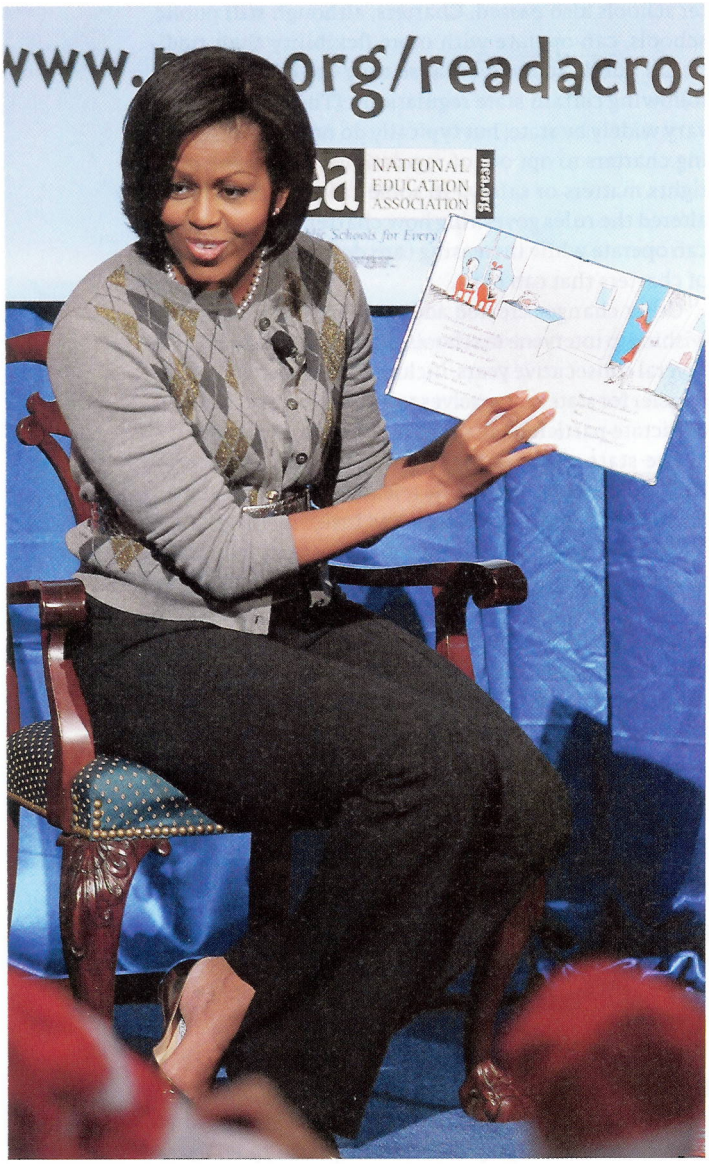
The state changes highlighted the importance of RTT's competitive design. By releasing its scoring rubric for state proposals in advance and insisting that not all states were guaranteed funding, the Department of Education encouraged states to key their policy changes to the specific items in the RTT rubric. State leaders admitted that they did just that. Had RTT been distributed based on predetermined formulas, not state reform commitments, it is unlikely that the pace and depth of policy change would have occurred.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has called Race to the Top "the equivalent of education reform's moon shot." But will it have lasting postive effects?

Was It Really Change?

Two caveats to these successes are worth noting. First, while there may have been widespread efforts to change policies in response to RTT's requirements, it is hard to know whether those changes represented genuine state commitments or legislative gamesmanship designed to better position states to receive federal money.

While many state leaders maintained that their proposals represented initiatives they would pursue regardless of how the competition turned out, others spoke more bluntly about state motives. Phil Berger, the Republican Senate Minority Leader in the South Carolina legislature, explained: "The purpose of this [RTT]



Calling all kids to rise to the top. First Lady Michelle Obama promotes reading at a Library of Congress event.

MARK WILSON/GETTY

is mainly, quite frankly, to draw down federal dollars. Federal money is not just money that falls out of the sky."

Another state legislator from Wisconsin echoed that by observing, "This is basically a race for the money, not a race for the top." Related suspicions emerged in New York, where Democratic Governor David Paterson incorporated into his fiscal year 2011 budget proposal $750 million in funds from RTT, assuming New York would win even before state proposals had been evaluated.[6]

Second, even if state legislative efforts have been sincere, the real test will come when state and local officials begin implementing their plans. Having laws on the books is one thing, but having those laws promote positive change in schools is quite another.

Certainly, RTT supporters were encouraged that much state action seemed to produce changes consistent with the program's ambitions. Still, the reform packages that states passed sometimes were cobbled together rather quickly without much debate or consideration of potential unintended consequences. Some state legislators in Michigan and North Carolina, for example, felt uneasy at the hurried pace with which their states' education reform packages, in response to RTT, were considered.[7]

The political desire to see the policy changes through and leverage them to produce real impact will be crucial. The development of state systems to collect and apply data provides one example. Creating the legal environment and technical capabilities to facilitate using student achievement data to drive teacher evaluations or curriculum development is certainly important and difficult. But as Aimee Guidera of the Data Quality Campaign correctly observed, "The real power comes from the use of data... when states take action" in light of the data they possess.[8]

In short, RTT appears to have moved state policy in directions that its advocates preferred. Still, one should not overstate RTT's influence, especially on the yet-to-be-determined local policy agendas that will be so crucial for achieving the program's goals, such as improving teacher and principal evaluations or turning around the most challenged schools.

Policy Learning

A major assumption of RTT's designers was that grant competitions could unearth potentially new and innovative practices that others would emulate. The basic theory of action is that applicants think more carefully and creatively when trying to win a competition rather than knowing that some funding support is inevitable, as in formula grant programs contained in other major federal education laws such as the No Child Left Behind Act. RTT's overseers believed that winners would serve as models for improving future state and federal policy. Looking ahead, it will take several months or even years to determine whether RTT sparks such policy learning. The answers to at least three questions will be critical in evaluating those future results.

First, how feasible will it be to transfer ideas from the winning RTT designs to other states, in particular those that fared poorly in the competition? Even if states want to learn from others, one should not assume that it will be relatively easy to transfer ideas from the victorious states to those that lost out. And here is the big paradox of RTT and competitive grant programs in general. In theory, the winners receive money because they are best positioned to realize the ambitions of RTT. If that is true, then simply gathering up the winners' ideas and sharing them will not necessarily tell the losers how to get into the starting blocks from which the winners began.

Second, will the focus of the competition unnecessarily limit the range of useful lessons that states might learn? In focusing RTT on a handful of key areas and requiring or strongly suggesting certain approaches, there is a chance that other promising avenues may be missed.

For example, a state earned more points on its RTT application if it showed it was collaborating with a majority of the states to develop student exams. Yet, in practice, no such consortium of that size has ever produced and implemented common exams.[9] RTT may have encouraged a model of exam development that will be difficult to produce success in practice.

Third, to what extent will RTT spark the development and adoption of effective practices where it really counts, namely in local schools and classrooms? Here it is important to recognize that RTT's theory of action is premised on the idea that states can be the most effective change agents for producing widespread reform. Bridging the gap between state systems and local practice will be one of the major challenges confronting federal and state reformers who are committed to RTT's success.

Looking Ahead

President Obama and Secretary Duncan are counting on RTT to serve as a springboard for advancing the administration's education agenda. Duncan has already indicated RTT is only a first step that will inform other initiatives, including the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind—overdue since 2007. The president has announced that he would like to see RTT continue in subsequent years, and as part of his fiscal year 2011 budget has proposed $1.35 billion to do just that.

Extending the program will not be easy. Other than the state policy changes noted earlier, there will be few concrete results available to demonstrate the program's success before the next budget debate heats up.

Further, the president faces some additional political challenges that may complicate his plans. As noted earlier, the NEA's lack of confidence in RTT means that a traditionally strong Democratic supporter has come out as a critic of a Democratic president's signature education initiative.

Even though the union's vote of no confidence was sharply divided, it still suggested that Obama cannot count on the NEA's enthusiasm to help him extend RTT.

Finally, one should remember that RTT will continue to unfold against the backdrop of an economic crisis that has stressed state and local education budgets as tax revenues have slowed to a trickle. If the economy continues to stagnate, leaders at those levels will face increasing challenges to muster the financial resources required to support their RTT plans and other education initiatives. Absent such commitment, it is likely that the Obama administration's education moon shot will fizzle on the launching pad.

Ultimately, RTT's future, like essentially all education initiatives in countries that have fragmented control of education, will depend on the efforts, adaptations and creativity of officials in subnational levels of government. Would-be reformers in national capitals across the Americas should attend carefully to such state and local realities as they design their own reform programs. In general, national policies that require the adoption of particular courses of action are likely to bump up against state and local priorities, including those of key leaders in teachers unions and the business community.

National officials must weigh carefully the extent to which such collisions, on balance, will energize needed reforms and not cause unnecessary bureaucratic red tape. Otherwise, it may be wiser for national officials to consider setting broad goals and then unleashing state and local governments to achieve them. That path, of course, assumes that states and localities possess the capacity to identify and then implement policies that will improve their schools.[9]

No matter what strategy or combination of strategies national policymakers choose, racing to the educational top in any country ultimately will require on-the-ground effort in schools and classrooms. Engineering federal policy to support those efforts is the challenge confronting all governments as they attempt to provide young people with access to equitable and academically rigorous educational experiences.

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Poor, Ignorant AND Violent

Can Education Solve the Region's Crime Problem?

BY LUCÍA DAMMERT