

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## Race to Top Winners Feel Heat on Teacher Evaluations

**Federal-grant recipients must live up to promises made in winning awards**

By [Sean Cavanagh](#)


Winners of the federal Race to the Top competition are facing difficult questions about how to make good on their ambitious promises to link teacher evaluation with student performance, a task complicated in some cases by resistance from educators and practical questions about how to judge job performance fairly.

For some states, that means wrestling with how to evaluate teachers in subjects for which no statewide test now exists. Others face a tough task of setting specific evaluation requirements based on relatively broad laws that established those systems, which in some cases were designed to boost the states' chances in the competition.

Eleven states and the District of Columbia split \$4 billion in awards through the [Race to the Top grant initiative](#), which was championed by the Obama administration and financed by the 2009 federal economic-stimulus package.

Applicants that vowed to create new evaluation systems for teachers and administrators, turn around struggling schools, support charter school growth, and improve the collection and use of data, among other steps, picked up points in the competition. Hopefuls also were rewarded if their proposals had strong buy-in from teachers' unions.

### Executing Goals

Now states have to execute the goals they put on paper. One of the clearest examples of the challenges in doing so can be seen in New York, which [won \\$700 million](#)  through the competition.

Last year, New York lawmakers, aiming to bolster the state's Race to the Top bid, approved a measure that called for 40 percent of a teacher's evaluation to be tied to students' academic gains. The state's largest teachers' union, the 600,000-member New York State United Teachers, or [NYSUT](#), and state education officials came together in support of the law.

### Crafting the Models

Race to the Top states face diverse challenges in designing models to evaluate teachers based on student achievement and other factors.

## **DELAWARE**

Got an extension on its plans to tie teachers' ratings to student achievement. The U.S. Department of Education said it could withhold up to \$13.8 of the state's \$100 million award if Delaware fails to meet conditions of the extension.

## **HAWAII**

Plans to pilot a new evaluation system in a group of academically struggling schools, designated Zones of School Innovation. The Hawaii State Teachers Association this summer voiced concerns that the state was moving forward with the pilot without negotiating with the union. State officials told *Education Week* that the pilot will follow the parameters of their Race to the Top plan.

## **NEW YORK**


New York State United Teachers sued to block regulations on teacher evaluation created by the state's board of regents. A judge agreed with the union's claims that the regulations ran afoul of a 2010 state law creating outlines for an evaluation system by overemphasizing state tests' role. The state says it will appeal the ruling.

## **RHODE ISLAND**

The state has an approved policy for evaluating teachers and principals. It received an extension on creating a system to tie teachers' right to certification to positive evaluations. Federal officials say they could withhold \$18 million of Rhode Island's \$75 million award if the state does not fulfill its revised plan.

The law stated that 20 percent of the overall evaluation is supposed to be based on state tests or comparable measures, 20 percent on other, locally selected benchmarks, and the remaining 60 percent on classroom observations and other subjective measures.

But NYSUT objected earlier this year when the state board of regents, with the support of Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, approved regulations that allowed districts to use state test results for both portions of the student academic-growth yardstick. The union argued the board was going back on the agreement and overstepping the law.

Last month, Albany County Supreme Court Justice Michael Lynch sided largely with the union, [ruling](#)  that the same measures could not be used for both portions of the student-growth piece of the evaluation. State tests could be used, however, in the 20 percent set aside for local measures if the data were used as a “distinctly different measure of student achievement,” the judge ruled, and developed through collective bargaining.

State officials, in court documents, have argued that if New York does not use evaluation standards on par with those set by the board of regents, the law could allow teachers to receive positive reviews solely on the basis of the 60 percent of the evaluation tied to subjective measures.

Richard C. Iannuzzi, the president of the teachers' union, disputed that claim, saying school administrators would not be inclined to "blindly give high scores" merely to boost teachers' evaluations.

"There's no way a teacher who gets a zero in student achievement would be able to get a nearly perfect score in other measures," Mr. Iannuzzi said, adding that he had "enough faith in principals" to discount that idea.


State Commissioner of Education John King, however, argued the state had an obligation to guard against the possibility, even if rare. He said the state is reviewing which aspects of the court ruling to appeal.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has said he would withhold funding from states that do not live up to their Race to the Top plans. But Mr. King said he believes New York state and its union could avoid that fate.

The regulations "are entirely consistent" with the 2010 state law, he said, adding: "I remain extremely optimistic that we'll find a way forward. Inevitably, there are moments of disagreement, but I'm confident about the long-term direction."


### **Assessments an Issue**

Several Race to the Top winners also face a tough task in developing evaluations of teachers for subjects that aren't tested on state assessments, such as art, foreign languages, and vocational education.

Delaware recently asked for a one-year extension from the U.S. Department of Education to devise its [evaluation system](#) , which ties teacher advancement, including tenure, to positive ratings. The state wants to come up with measures that are demanding, yet consistent and fair across subjects, and it needed more time to do that, said Dan Cruce, the deputy secretary and chief of staff for the Delaware education department.

The federal Education Department granted the request—but said it could withhold \$13.8 million of the state's \$100 million grant if Delaware did not meet the revised timetable. Mr. Cruce said the state welcomes that pressure.

"We're glad they put that in there," he said. "It shows we have skin in the game."

Georgia, a \$400 million Race to the Top winner, was granted a one-year extension in piloting its [new evaluation system](#) , a precursor to fully implementing it the following academic year in its 26 participating districts. The state has worked with districts in crafting evaluations for subjects tested by the state; for non-tested subjects, districts will get flexibility to develop their own evaluations, with state approval.

Some Georgia districts are likely to use portfolio assessments, which typically are based on a collection of student work over time; others could use student learning objectives, usually systems in which teachers set specific goals for learning gains, with the approval of supervisors.

“We’re working with school systems to see what they have in place now, to see what we can scale up across districts,” said Mark E. Pevey, Georgia’s Race to the Top implementation director.

One ambitious approach to devising [measures](#) to evaluate teachers in non-tested subjects is being tried in Florida, the winner of a \$700 million grant. The state invited individual districts to bid on awards to create new assessments in non-tested subjects such as visual arts, physical education, and world languages. The districts doing so include Florida’s Miami-Dade, Hillsborough, and Duval county systems; state officials hope their evaluation models could serve as blueprints for other Race to the Top districts.

### **Teacher Certification**

Rhode Island, which won a \$75 million award, has a teacher-evaluation system in place, but asked federal officials for more time to craft a model for tying teachers’ right to certification to their receiving positive evaluations. Federal officials agreed, but said they would withhold up to \$18 million if the state did not meet its revised obligations.

Tying certification to educators’ receiving positive evaluations “simplifies the entire system” for ensuring a qualified teaching workforce, said Elliot Krieger, a spokesman for the state department of education. “We’re confident we’re on course.”

The process of creating new teacher-evaluation models might be an incremental one, but that’s not a bad thing, said Colorado state Sen. Michael Johnston, a Democrat who sponsored a widely scrutinized 2010 law that tied educators’ reviews to student achievement. ("[Colorado Teacher-Evaluation Bill Enacted](#)," May 19, 2010.) The state board of education is now drafting rules based on that law.

Many hard questions about evaluations—such as how much student academic growth is enough, and how to consider the performance of students, such as those in special education classes, who have more than one teacher—take time to sort out, though “they’re all solvable problems,” Sen. Johnston said.

“It’s not going to be that a light suddenly switches on and that fixes it,” he said. “It’s an improvement process, not a fix-it process. ... The measures that we’re considering are incredibly complex. Most people are concerned about trying to get this right.”