

Race to the Top: Analysis of ECS Strategies to Reach the Four Reform Goals

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With \$4.35 billion in “Race to the Top” funds at stake, Colorado has the opportunity to claim a portion of a substantial funding opportunity. The Race to the Top competition will require active reform efforts and the implementation of new programs around four goals identified by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) in its April 1 letter to governors:

Goal One: *Making progress toward college and career-ready standards and rigorous assessments that will improve both teaching and learning.*

Goal Two: *Gather information to improve student learning, teacher performance, and college and career-readiness through enhanced data systems that track progress.*

Goal Three: *Making improvements in teacher effectiveness and ensuring that all schools have highly qualified teachers.*

Goal Four: *Improving achievement in low-performing schools, by providing intensive support and effective interventions in schools that need them the most.*

This paper summarizes recent guidance from ED and current state strategies that fit with these goals compiled by Education Commission of the States (ECS) (www.ecs.org). States implementing these strategies are identified in the lists provided below. It is important to note that no state is implementing all the recommended strategies; however taken together each list represents a comprehensive set of steps for achieving the Race to the Top goals. Finally, the key issue of creating a system for organizing, planning, coordinating, and evaluating the overall Race to the Top initiative within a given state is not addressed here.

Colorado is rightly recognized by ECS as a leader in working towards ED’s goals. However, Colorado’s current efforts do not address these goals in a comprehensive way and current timelines and implementation strategies may need to be modified. Some options for Colorado’s Race to the Top application are noted at the end of each goal’s section. This is not meant to limit discussion of additional options, but to supply a few examples of ways in which Colorado could think about tailoring its application to DOE goals in the context of current reform initiatives.

Goal One: *Making progress toward college and career-ready standards and rigorous assessments that will improve both teaching and learning.*

ED guidance requires states to report on student performance compared to other states, the extent to which all students are fully included in assessment and accountability systems, and how many college seniors are college and workforce ready. The assessment systems to support this goal, at a minimum, should assess performance in the areas of English, math, science, and social studies and must have

appropriate accommodations and modifications for English language learners and students with disabilities.

Strategies recommended by ECS:

1. Evaluate whether high school curriculum requirements prepare students for college-level work (TX).
2. Develop a definition for postsecondary and work readiness that defines a sufficiently high level of comprehension and skill needed to complete common postsecondary core requirements (IN, CO, TX).
3. Align K-12 standards with skills needed for higher education and employment (including career and technical education) (IN, CO, TX)
4. Create an assessment system for identifying those who have skills needed for higher education (including career and tech) and moving those people into post-secondary education.
 - a. Pilot multiple high school assessment systems (CO)
 - b. Implement a high school course assessment system (IN, TX)
5. Provide technical assistance to districts for implementing new standards (CO, TX)
6. Develop programs for students identified as at risk of dropping out of high school and college (TX)
7. Use information on college readiness as part of admission requirements for higher education and report on district progress in preparing students for post-secondary education (CO)

With CAP4K being an exemplar of best practices in this goal area, Colorado is well-positioned to build on this initiative. The state may wish to identify implementation needs for CAP4K that otherwise would not be adequately funded, and make the case that such assistance is necessary to realize the true potential of the CAP4K framework. Another initiative that would be compatible with this goal would be the implementation of the Colorado Statewide Dropout Initiative. Full implementation of this program would provide a mechanism for school and district utilization of the data systems outlined in Goal Two and would allow districts to have early warning indicators that would allow immediate and targeted interventions for students at risk of dropping out.

Goal Two: *Gather information to improve student learning, teacher performance, and college and career-readiness through enhanced data systems that track progress.*

ED guidance requires states to report on implementation of a system that provides greater clarity to parents about the quality of their child's education. This new data system should track individual student progress from preschool all the way up to postsecondary education. The data system should have the capacity to give real-time information on student assessment and other information on achievement to teachers and administrators.

Strategies recommended by ECS:

1. Establish the intended use for the data (FL)
2. Require coordination in system development between state departments with authority over higher education, K-12 and preschool education (UT)
 - a. Include preschool data in the system (CO)
3. Develop strategies and systems to improve data quality and timeliness (FL)

4. Establish a data warehouse (FL)
5. Create data- based strategic plans and implementation metrics at the state, institution (for higher education), district, and school level (FL, MD)
 - a. Use the data system to provide feedback on progress toward goals and implementation metrics
 - b. Use these plans as mechanisms for working with districts and schools that are not making appropriate student progress
 - c. Plans include goals, objectives and strategies for the performance of specified subgroups, especially English language learners and students with disabilities
6. Create professional development for educators on use of data to improve instruction (CA, OR)

Colorado has made great strides in developing its longitudinal data system, and this provides a solid base for requesting funds to build the state's data system into a structure that accomplishes many of the exemplar practices described in ECS' brief. In addition, using the Department of Education's student achievement growth model, the state will be able to assess what reform strategies are working for students and how much those effective strategies cost.

Goal Three: *Making improvements in teacher effectiveness and ensuring that all schools have highly qualified teachers*

Requirements for Goal 3 are dependent on the data systems that fall under Goal 2. The U.S Department of Education requested that states report on student access to qualified and effective teachers, and whether the teachers are evaluated based on student performance.

Strategies recommended by ECS:

1. Create a teacher data system that links teachers with (IN, LA, NY):
 - a. Courses
 - b. Links to students and their achievement levels
 - c. Teacher attendance
 - d. Teacher preparation programs and/or certification
2. Use data from teacher data system to evaluate teacher preparation (IN, LA, NY)
3. Require districts to equitably distribute qualified (and effective) teachers (FL):
 - a. Allow use of tools such as salary to incentivize teacher movement to highly impacted schools
4. Create programs to recruit teachers from shortage areas, such as
 - a. Loan forgiveness programs (CA)
 - b. Recruitment and preparation programs (i.e. Middle School Teacher Corps) (VA)
5. Reform teacher preparation programs, such as teaching residence programs (OH)

Implementation of these strategies would require Colorado to implement the teacher identifier legislation (should it pass). An additional approach could be to build off Colorado's significant innovation in alternative teacher compensation plans and the innovative (but unfunded) Alternative Teacher Compensation Grant Program. A complementary strategy is requiring districts and the state to create of data- informed strategic staffing plans that use all the tools available to ensure the equitable

distribution of teachers: preparation, recruitment, professional development, and retention activities. Given the emphasis on the use of data, this work fits well within Goal 3.

Goal Four: *Improving achievement in low-performing schools, by providing intensive support and effective interventions in schools that need them the most.*

ED guidance requires states to identify schools most in need of academic intervention and report the progress of those schools so that reforms can be implemented aiming to improve student academic achievement.

ECS identified multiple strategies for assisting low-performing schools. These strategies take very different approaches to school reform; some increase school autonomy, while others decrease autonomy and increase state oversight of low-performing schools. That does not mean Colorado cannot employ both strategies. But, Colorado should specify when each strategy is appropriate and attempt to learn from the efforts as it moves ahead.

1. Approve and implement a school improvement plan for every school (FL)
 - a. Each plan must include data-based analysis of student achievement and other school performance data and use of that data to determine the effectiveness of instructional strategies
2. Develop resources to help school improvement
 - a. Recruit and train turnaround specialists to provide training and coaching to schools and principals (VA, TN)
 - b. Establish toolkits and/or resources to help local school staff make better decisions
3. Increase school autonomy for low-performing schools
 - a. Transform low- performing schools into charter schools (CO)
 - b. Increase autonomy for staffing, curriculum and assessment with higher accountability for performance (MA)
 - c. Allow districts to renegotiate labor agreements in low- performing schools (CA)
4. Develop reform models/interventions and provide training/materials on implementation of these models:
 - a. Based on instruction, administrative and fiscal practices/policies in high performing schools within the state (NC)
 - b. Research-based instructional interventions (VA)
5. Create a statewide district authority to that assumes jurisdiction over low-performing schools (LA)
6. Evaluate these programs (FL)

This goal offers an opportunity to greatly strengthen the technical assistance services that CDE provides to districts through its regional offices, and to fund the development of a state bank of materials that teachers and school leaders can draw on to improve instruction. All of these efforts could be tied back to CAP4K. Colorado could also tie this goal to the recently passed Innovation Schools Act, by granting automatic Innovation School status to schools that are meeting performance goals.