

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
RACE TO THE TOP - DISTRICT COMPETITION**

**BACKGROUND**

**Please note, this document contains select excerpts from the Race to the Top - District Notice Inviting Applications (NIA), interested applicants are strongly encouraged to use the Executive Summary, the full NIA and FAQs when developing their proposals.**

The purpose of the Race to the Top - District competition is to build on the lessons learned from the State competitions conducted under the Race to the Top program and to support bold, locally directed improvements in learning and teaching that will directly improve student achievement and educator effectiveness.

**Background:**

Race to the Top

The Race to the Top program, authorized under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) (Pub. L. 111-5), is centered on four core educational reform areas:

- (a) Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy;
- (b) Building data systems that measure student growth and success and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction;
- (c) Recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most; and
- (d) Turning around the Nation's lowest-achieving schools.

In 2010, the U.S. Department of Education (Department) conducted Race to the Top State competitions, which provided incentives to States to adopt bold and comprehensive reforms in elementary and secondary education and laid the foundation for unprecedented innovation. A total of 46 States and the District of Columbia put together plans to implement college- and career-ready standards, use data systems to guide teaching and learning, evaluate and support teachers and school leaders, and turn around their lowest-performing schools. The Race to the Top State competitions provided States with incentives to implement large-scale, system-changing reforms designed to improve student achievement, narrow achievement gaps, and increase graduation and college enrollment rates.

Through the Race to the Top Assessment program, also authorized under ARRA, the Department is supporting consortia of States in the development of new and better assessments aligned with high standards.

In 2011, the ARRA was amended by section 1832(b) of the Department of Defense and Full-Year Continuing Appropriations Act, 2011 (Pub. L. 112-10), which added an additional education reform area: strengthening the quality of early learning and development programs and increasing access to high-quality early learning programs for all children, including those with high

needs. As a result, the Department had the authority to use a portion of the FY 2011 appropriation for Race to the Top on the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge program, which is jointly administered by the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services. The Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge supports nine States' efforts to strengthen the quality of their early learning programs.

On May 22, 2012, the Secretary announced the Race to the Top - District competition, which is designed to build on the momentum of other Race to the Top competitions by encouraging bold, innovative reform at the local level. This district-level FY 2012 competition is authorized under sections 14005 and 14006 of the ARRA, as amended by section 1832(b) of the Department of Defense and Full-Year Continuing Appropriations Act, 2011 and the Department of Education Appropriations Act, 2012 (Title III of Division F of Pub. L. 112-74, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2012). Congress appropriated approximately \$550 million for Race to the Top in FY 2012. Of these funds, the Department expects to use approximately \$383 million for this competition, which will fund about 15-25 grants in the range of \$5 to \$40 million. The amount of an award for which an applicant is eligible to apply depends upon the number of students who would be served under the application.

### **Race to the Top - District Competition**

The Race to the Top - District competition is aimed squarely at classrooms and the all-important relationship between educators and students. The competition invites applicants to demonstrate how they can personalize education for all students in their schools.

In that regard, the Race to the Top - District competition will encourage and reward those local educational agencies (LEAs) or consortia of LEAs that have the leadership and vision to implement the strategies, structures, and systems needed to implement personalized, student-focused approaches to learning and teaching that will produce excellence and ensure equity for all students. The priorities, definitions, requirements, and selection criteria in this notice are designed to help LEAs meet these goals.

Under Absolute Priority 1, applicants must design a personalized learning environment that will use collaborative, data-based strategies and 21st century tools such as online learning platforms, computers, mobile devices, and learning algorithms, to deliver instruction and supports tailored to the needs and goals of each student, with the aim of enabling all students to graduate college- and career-ready. Implementation of a personalized learning environment is not achieved through a single solution or product but rather requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses the individual and collective needs of students, educators, and families and that dramatically transforms the learning environment in order to improve student outcomes.

The Secretary believes that teacher and student classroom interaction, supported by strong principals and engaged families, is crucial to educating students. Teacher and student interactions are strengthened when an effective teacher has useful information about students' particular needs, support from his or her principal or leadership team, a quality curriculum aligned with college- and career-ready standards, and the other tools needed to do the job.

Too often, however, these supportive conditions have not existed in our schools or districts, and the results are painfully predictable: students fall behind or drop out, achievement gaps remain or widen, teachers get frustrated and leave the field, and stakeholders become polarized and divided under pressure to perform.

That is why--for more than three years--the Department has supported bold reforms at the State and local levels that have reduced barriers to good teaching and helped create better conditions for learning.

There is no single approach or boutique solution to implementation of personalized learning environments. An LEA or consortia of LEAs receiving an award under this competition will build on the lessons learned from and the progress of States and districts in implementing reforms in the four core educational assurance areas (as defined in this notice) through Race to the Top and other key programs. A successful applicant will provide teachers the information, tools, and supports that enable them to meet the needs of each student and substantially accelerate and deepen each student's learning. These LEAs will have the policies, systems, infrastructure, capacity, and culture to enable teachers, teacher teams, and school leaders to continuously focus on improving individual student achievement and closing achievement gaps. These LEAs will also make equity and access a priority and aim to prepare each student to master the content and skills required for college- and career-readiness, provide each student the opportunity to pursue a rigorous course of study, and accelerate and deepen students' learning through attention to their individual needs. As important, they will create opportunities for students to identify and pursue areas of personal academic interest--all while ensuring that each student masters critical areas identified in college- and career-ready standards or college- and career-ready high school graduation requirements.

Educators want a way to inspire and challenge those students who are furthest ahead, provide targeted help and assistance to those furthest behind, and engage fully and effectively with the students in the middle. To accomplish this objective, educators across the country have created personalized learning environments and used strategies that involve such elements as technology, virtual and blended learning, individual and group tasks, partnering with parents, and aligning non-school hours with the educational needs of students.

Personalized learning environments allow students to: understand their individual learning goals and needs; access deep learning experiences that include individual and group tasks; and develop such skills and traits as goal setting, teamwork, perseverance, critical thinking, communications, creativity, and problem solving across multiple academic domains. If students are to do this successfully, both students and educators need opportunities to build their individual and collective capacity to support the implementation of personalized learning environments and strategies.

The Race to the Top - District competition does not create new stand-alone programs, or support niche programs or interventions. Neither is it a vehicle for maintenance of the status quo. Rather, the Race to the Top - District competition will support LEAs that demonstrate their commitment to identifying teachers, principals, and schools who have a vision and the expertise to personalize education and extend their reach to all of their students. LEAs successfully implementing an approach to learning and teaching that includes personalized learning environments will lay a foundation for raising student achievement, decreasing the achievement gap across student groups, and increasing the rates at which students graduate from high school prepared for college and careers.

Through Race to the Top - District, the Department plans to support high-quality proposals from applicants across a varied set of LEAs to create diverse models of personalized learning environments for use by LEAs across the Nation. For this reason, in addition to an absolute priority on personalized learning environments, the Department is establishing four additional absolute

priorities in this notice; each applicant will meet one of Absolute Priorities 2 through 5. These absolute priorities will support efforts to expand the types of reform efforts being implemented in LEAs in States that have received a Race to the Top award and to LEAs in other States. Moreover, these absolute priorities will help ensure that LEAs of varying sizes, both rural and non-rural, and with different local contexts are able to implement innovative personalized learning environments for their students that can serve as models for other LEAs and help improve student achievement widely.

The competitive preference priority we are establishing will reward applicants that propose to extend their reforms beyond the classroom and partner with public or private entities in order to address the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students, particularly students who attend a high-need school.

### **The Process for Developing this Competition**

Given the tight timeline for obligating funds and in order to provide districts maximum time to prepare their applications for this competition, the Department is waiving notice-and-comment rulemaking for this competition. Specifically, we are waiving rulemaking for the priorities, requirements, definitions, and selection criteria for this new competition under section 437(d) (1) of the General Education Provisions Act (GEPA).

However, we solicited public participation as we developed our approach to this competition. From May 22 to June 8, 2012, we posted on the Department's Web site and blog a draft Executive Summary of the competition, which included draft competition priorities, requirements, definitions, and selection criteria, and we invited public input on each. We received approximately 475 responses reflecting the viewpoints of a variety of individuals and organizations, which we considered in our development of this notice. That Executive Summary and the comments we received are posted at [www.ed.gov/race-top/district-competition](http://www.ed.gov/race-top/district-competition).