



Memorandum

To: The Honorable Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education

Fm: Marci Young, Project Director, Pre-K Now
Pew Center on the States

Kathy Patterson, Senior Officer for Government Relations
Pew Center on the States

Re: Race to the Top Fund
Docket # ED-2009-OESE-0006

Date: August 19, 2009

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on behalf of Pre-K Now, a campaign of the Pew Center on the States, on the “priorities, requirements definitions, and selection criteria” published in the Federal Register for the Race to the Top Fund. Our comments and recommendations are in the context of the commitment made by President Obama and Secretary Duncan to secure high-quality pre-kindergarten as an opportunity for all American children to improve the quality of their lives and bring a guaranteed return on public investments. Research has shown that children who complete quality pre-k programs are more likely to graduate, have greater lifetime earnings, pay more tax dollars back to state and local governments and are more likely to lead healthy lifestyles. High-quality pre-k is the most rigorously researched option for school reform, and we believe the Race to the Top Fund can better achieve its goals by incorporating a greater emphasis on this proven education strategy.

We recommend:

- That “P-20 Coordination and Vertical Alignment” be made a **competitive preference priority**, rather than an invitational priority as published;
- That an additional competitive preference priority be added as follows: “the extent to which a state has demonstrated its commitment to high-quality pre-k for low-income children, including a current program and a plan to increase the percentage of low-income three and four year olds in high-quality pre-k over the period of the RTT grant;” and
- That pre-kindergarten be incorporated into the RTT Fund Reform Plan Criteria, reflecting the importance of high-quality pre-k as a school reform strategy, consistent with the Administration’s proposal for an Early Learning Challenge Fund, and consistent also with the

recommendations in the joint filing by the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and The Pew Charitable Trusts. We provide specific language to this end below.

Pre-K and K-12 Reform

New and ongoing research effectively and emphatically connects high-quality pre-kindergarten with success in school, including improved graduation rates and a narrowing of the achievement gap for low-income and minority students. Ongoing studies of children in state-funded pre-k in Tulsa, Oklahoma, by Georgetown University researchers found significant improvements in reading and math scores by low-income and minority students, with achievement gains that are particularly impressive among Hispanic children. The poorest students saw a 56 percent gain in word identification, a 31 percent gain in spelling and 28 percent gain in applied problems. Hispanic students saw a 79 percent gain in word identification, 39 percent in spelling and 54 percent in applied problems.

In New Jersey's lowest income communities a court-mandated effort to provide high-quality pre-k has seen reduced elementary grade retention and improved second grade test scores. In nearby Montgomery County, Maryland, full-day pre-k has resulted in significant narrowing of the achievement gap between low-income minority students and other students. The recently-published study found that students in the county's Head Start full-day classes made significantly larger gains in reading and math skills than peers in the district's half-day classes.

Montgomery County Superintendent Jerry Weast comments on the link between pre-k and high school graduation rates: "What we found was that there wasn't enough time....We needed to go back into preschool and certain things had to be addressed before children hit the schoolhouse door. If they weren't, you were going to have an opportunity gap which by third grade would be an achievement gap....You're going to have to go right back to the preschool; you're going to have to get a new set of expectations, new systems of monitoring. If you do, they'll be ready for the K-2 program, the 3-8 program, and get them into the advanced math program and score on AP & IB exams."

As 13 members of the House of Representatives said in their June 26, 2009, letter to you concerning the Race to the Top Fund, "high quality early learning programs, particularly for disadvantaged children age birth to five, are a central piece of education reform and contribute significantly to achieving the President's national education goals." Their request: "to include quality early childhood education as a clear priority."

Recommended language for the “Proposed Evidence and Performance Measures” to incorporate pre-k into the Race to the Top Fund criteria, with new language provided in italics.

(A)(1) Developing and adopting common standards.

New section (iii), *For all applications, the extent to which the state has demonstrated a commitment to high-quality early education standards grounded in child development principles and aligned with K-12 standards.*

(A)(2) Developing and implementing common, high-quality assessments

New section (ii): *Whether the state has demonstrated a commitment to developmentally appropriate program monitoring and assessments of children in pre-k aligned to standards for kindergarten readiness.*

(B)(1) Fully implementing a statewide longitudinal data system.

New language in renumbered section (i): *... to include collecting data starting with pre-kindergarten and with a design that can eventually incorporate collection of data at younger ages and allow linkage with K-12 data.*

New section (ii): *The extent to which the state has demonstrated an interest in building a data collection and improvement system, such as a quality rating and improvement system, that can support program improvement and accountability purposes from pre-k through third grade.*

(C)(1) Providing alternative pathways for aspiring teachers and principals

New section (ii): *The extent to which a state has indicated a commitment to developing a pre-k to third grade teaching credential to facilitate the alignment of standards and instructional strategies.*

A new (D)(2), with current provisions renumbered, *Increasing the availability of high-quality pre-kindergarten, and*

new (D)(2) (i) *The extent to which the state has a statewide pre-k program serving low-income children and*

(D)(2) (ii) *The extent to which the state has committed to increasing the percentage of low-income three and four year olds attending high-quality pre-kindergarten.*

(E)(2) Making education funding a priority

A new section (ii): *The extent to which the state provides stable financial support for pre-kindergarten, including the incorporation of pre-k into its state funding formula.*

(E)(3) Enlisting statewide support and commitment

New language in section (ii) *including early education and care and higher education leaders.*

We thank you for your consideration of these comments and recommendations and look forward to working with you to make the president’s commitments to the nation’s youngest learners a reality.