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## How Did Arkansas Fare in the Race to the Top?

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*In late March, the winners for Round 1 of the federal Race to the Top (RttT) were announced. The competitive grant funded under the American Recovery and Reinvestment (ARRA) was described in more detail in an OEP policy brief posted [here](#). In January, Arkansas joined 40 other states in submitting an application. When the finalists were announced, Arkansas was ranked 17th and just missed the cut! In this policy brief, we provide a brief overview of how the Arkansas application fared and what our state leaders could do to increase our chances for Round Two.*

Over 98 percent of Arkansas' local education authorities, represented by 237 school districts and 15 charter schools, signed on to the Arkansas application in January. Moreover, the Arkansas Education Association signed onto Arkansas the application. Representatives of the Arkansas Department of Education spoke confidently about the state's application due to the reforms that Arkansas already had in place including the data system, equitable system of school funding, tough academic standards, Smart Core Curriculum, and

Smart Accountability program for identifying schools that are struggling academically.

In March, the 16 finalist states with scores over 400 points were announced. Arkansas was ranked 17th and missed the final round by only 6 points with a score of 394.4. Leaders from the 16 finalist states were called to Washington DC for the final first round competition. Delaware and Tennessee were announced winners in the final round on March 29 with 438.4 points and 443.4 points respectively.

As seen in Table 1, Arkansas scored comparably (and in some cases even higher) to the highest performing states in all but three categories: State Success Factors, Great Teachers and Leaders, and the General category. Moreover, the majority of lost points (88 points, 83 percent of lost points) in the Arkansas application were from these three categories. Indeed, had Arkansas scored higher in any of these three categories, our state application would have been selected to participate in the final round. In fact, only 44 points would have been required to be on the same level as the two eventual winning states.

**Table 1: Summary of Arkansas RTTT Score Sheet in Comparison to Finalist States**

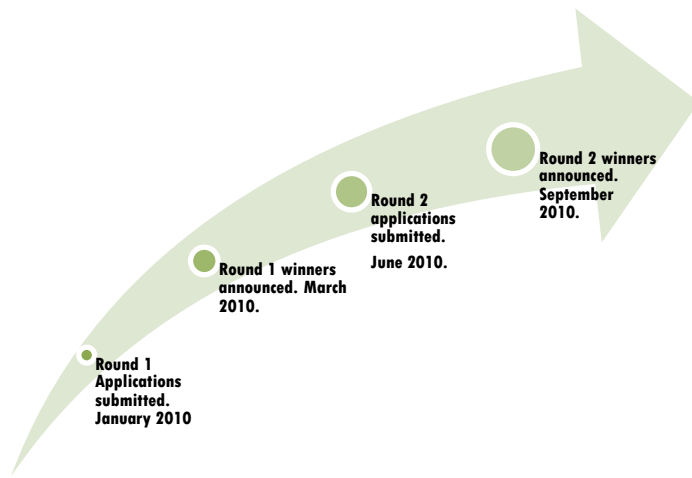
| Category  | Total Possible Points | Arkansas score | Tennessee score | Delaware score | % Points Obtained by Arkansas |
|---|-----------------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------------------------|
| A. State Success Factors                            | 125                   | 101.4          | 112             | 116.4          | 81%                           |
| B. Standards and Assessments                        | 70                    | 68.2           | 67.6            | 68.8           | 97%                           |
| C. Data Systems to Support Instruction              | 47                    | 38.4           | 43.6            | 46.8           | 82%                           |
| D. Great Teachers and Leaders                       | 138                   | 97             | 114             | 110.6          | 70%                           |
| E. Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools      | 50                    | 43             | 48              | 39.6           | 86%                           |
| F. General  | 55                    | 31.4           | 43.2            | 41.2           | 57%                           |
| Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM | 15                    | 15             | 15              | 15             | 100%                          |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>500</b>            | <b>394.4</b>   | <b>443.4</b>    | <b>438.4</b>   | <b>79%</b>                    |

As seen in Table 1, Arkansas obtained 79 percent of the available points--only one percentage point below the 16 finalists' minimum score of 80 percent. Clearly there are areas in which there are major deficiencies -- the General and the Great Teachers and Leaders section stand out in terms of low scores.

Arkansas obtained 100% of available points in the competitive preference priority with an emphasis on STEM, 97% in Standards and Assessments and 86% in Turning around the Lowest Achieving Schools.

### STRENGTHS

The score sheets revealed that Arkansas was right to boast about several key areas where the state is leading the nation in adopting reforms. Arkansas captured 97% of the points available for Standards and Assessments as well as over 80% in three other categories. Arkansas ranked 9th in the Standards and Assessment and 11th in the Data Systems to Support Instruction.



### WEAKNESSES

Special attention should be given to the areas of weakness as Arkansas has already committed to participating in the second round of competition. With only 44 points between Arkansas and the eventual grant winners, it might be worth our efforts to make necessary adjustments to increase the competitiveness of our grant application. First of all, the Arkansas application earned only 57% of the possible points in the General Category.

There are three subcategories in the General area:

1. Making education funding a priority (Arkansas earned **4 of 6 possible points**).
2. Ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools (Arkansas earned **22 of 40 possible points**).
3. Demonstrating other significant reform conditions (AR earned **3 of 5 possible points**).

Clearly, the biggest area of concern in this area is found under subcategory two -- ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools. The Arkansas application was awarded just over half of the available 40 points in this area.

**Table 2: Breakdown of General Category**

|  | Possible | AR | Diff. |
|--|----------|----|-------|
| <i>General Category</i>  | 55       | 31 | 24    |
| Making education funding a priority  | 10       | 6  | 4     |
| Successful conditions for high-performing charter and other innovative schools | 40       | 22 | 18    |
| Demonstrating other significant reform conditions                              | 5        | 3  | 2     |

The comments of the reviewers (publicly available at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html>) suggest that the following faults were found with the state with regard to charter school policies:

- There is a charter school cap in Arkansas limiting open-enrollment charters to 24; this was viewed by many reviewers as overly restrictive.
- The lack of financial support for facilities for open-enrollment charter schools was often cited as a weakness in reviewer comments.
- The state does not allow districts to operate autonomous innovative public schools. As one reviewer stated, "conditions appear to inhibit charter school development."

It would take an act of legislation to remove the cap on charter schools. This is unlikely to happen by the June 1 deadline as Arkansas Legislation is currently

out-of-session. However, state policymakers may be able to employ clever strategies to enhance facilities funding for public charter schools in Arkansas. For example, in other states, unused public school facilities can be used as buildings for approved charter schools. This efficient use of facilities appears feasible under the law and may aid in our round two Race to the Top application.

The second weakest area in the Arkansas application is in the Great Teachers and Leaders Category; the Arkansas application earned only 70% of the available points in this category. This category is divided into five major subcategories:

1. Providing high quality pathways for aspiring teachers and principals.
2. Improving teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance.
3. Ensuring equitable distribution of effective teachers and principals.
4. Improving the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs.
5. Providing effective support to teachers and principals.

**Table 3: Breakdown of Improving Teacher and Principal Effectiveness Based on Performance**

|   | Possible | AR | Diff. |
|---|----------|----|-------|
| Measuring student growth                  | 5        | 4  | 1     |
| Developing evaluation systems             | 15       | 8  | 7     |
| Conducting annual evaluations             | 10       | 8  | 2     |
| Using evaluations to inform key decisions | 28       | 21 | 7     |

The largest point loss (17 points) occurred under the subcategory of improving teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance. There are four components to this subcategory: measuring student growth, developing evaluation systems, conducting annual evaluations, and using evaluations to inform key decisions.

It was clear in the Reviewer Comments that Arkansas was perceived to be in the process of

developing effective systems for improving teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance. As one reviewer stated, *“the state has a long way to go here but is moving in the right direction”*.

A concern stated by many reviewers (and even by Arkansas officials) is the current system of measurement and the growth model currently used. While growth models, or models which measure student learning gains in one year's time, are certainly valuable, the current model used by Arkansas will need adjustment if it is to be one of the measures used to rate teacher effectiveness and thus hold teachers and schools accountable.

**Table 4: Top 5 Areas of Point Loss**

|   | Possible | AR | Diff. |
|---|----------|----|-------|
| Successful conditions for high-performing charter and other innovative schools        | 40       | 22 | 18    |
| Improving teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance                    | 58       | 41 | 17    |
| Articulating State's education reform agenda and LEA's participation in it            | 65       | 54 | 11    |
| Building strong statewide capacity to implement, scale up, and sustain proposed plans | 30       | 22 | 8     |
| Improving the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs             | 14       | 6  | 8     |

Another area under the Great Teachers and Leaders category which cost Arkansas points was improving the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs. Again, Arkansas is making progress in this area, but we are only in the infancy stage of this work. One consistent suggestion is that the state should utilize its capacity to link teachers (and their performance) to the programs where they were trained. While the state has this capacity, the application did not indicate a plan to publicly report the data for each credentialing program in the state. Furthermore, Arkansas did not address the expansion of successful preparation programs for teachers and principals. In other sections of the application, several reviewers stated concern that there were no alternative routes to licensure for principals.

## CONCLUSION

Arkansas policymakers should be praised for submitting an application that was only six points from the finalist group and only 40 points from the scores of the eventual winning states. Our state scored very well in several areas, and the reviewers stated clearly that Arkansas is headed in the right direction in many critical areas. As our leaders prepare our round two application to be submitted in June, they can look to the first round score sheet for strategies to improve the competitiveness of the Arkansas application, implement some targeted changes, and win substantial resources for school children across the state.

For more information about this policy brief, contact [oe@uark.edu](mailto:oe@uark.edu).

**Appendix Table: Arkansas Race to the Top Score Sheet by Category**

| Arkansas Score Sheet  | Total      | AR         | Arkansas Score Sheet  | Total      | AR         |
|---|------------|------------|---|------------|------------|
| <b>A. State Success Factors</b>   | <b>125</b> | <b>101</b> | Improving teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance                              | 58         | 41         |
| Articulating State's education reform agenda and LEA's participation in it            | 65         | 54         | Measuring student growth  | 5          | 4          |
| Articulating comprehensive, coherent reform agenda                                    | 5          | 3          | Developing evaluation systems   | 15         | 8          |
| Securing LEA commitment   | 45         | 42         | Conducting annual evaluations   | 10         | 8          |
| Translating LEA participation into statewide impact                                   | 15         | 9          | Using evaluations to inform key decisions   | 28         | 21         |
| Building strong statewide capacity to implement, scale up, and sustain proposed plans | 30         | 22         | Ensuring equitable distribution of effective teachers and principals                            | 25         | 20         |
| Ensuring the capacity to implement  | 20         | 16         | Ensuring equitable distribution in high-poverty or high-minority schools                        | 15         | 12         |
| Using broad stakeholder support   | 10         | 6          | Ensuring equitable distribution in hard-to-staff subjects and specialty areas                   | 10         | 7          |
| Demonstrating significant progress in raising achievement and closing gaps            | 30         | 25         | Improving the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs                       | 14         | 6          |
| Making progress in each reform area   | 5          | 4          | Providing effective support to teachers and principals  | 20         | 15         |
| Improving student outcomes  | 25         | 21         | <b>E. Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools</b>   | <b>50</b>  | <b>43</b>  |
| <b>B. Standards and Assessments</b>   | <b>70</b>  | <b>68</b>  | Intervening in the lowest-achieving schools and LEAs  | 10         | 10         |
| Developing and adopting common standards  | 40         | 39         | Turning around the lowest-achieving schools   | 40         | 33         |
| Participating in consortium developing high-quality standards                         | 20         | 20         | Identifying the persistently lowest-achieving schools   | 5          | 5          |
| Adopting standards  | 20         | 19         | Turning around the persistently lowest-achieving schools  | 35         | 28         |
| Developing and implementing common, high-quality assessments                          | 10         | 10         | <b>F. General</b>   | <b>55</b>  | <b>31</b>  |
| Supporting the transition to enhanced standards and high-quality assessments          | 20         | 19         | Making education funding a priority   | 10         | 6          |
| <b>C. Data Systems to Support Instruction</b>   | <b>47</b>  | <b>38</b>  | Ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools | 40         | 22         |
| Fully implementing a statewide longitudinal data system                               | 24         | 22         | Demonstrating other significant reform conditions   | 5          | 3          |
| Accessing and using State data  | 5          | 5          | <b>Competitive Preference Priority 2: STEM</b>  | <b>15</b>  | <b>15</b>  |
| Using data to improve instruction   | 18         | 12         | <b>Total</b>  | <b>500</b> | <b>394</b> |
| <b>D. Great Teachers and Leaders</b>  | <b>138</b> | <b>97</b>  |   |            |            |
| Providing high-quality pathways for aspiring teachers and principals                  | 21         | 15         |   |            |            |