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Reviewing Wisconsin's Failure in the
Race to the Top Grant Process

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The Federal “Race to the Top” grant application process was launched right here in Wisconsin. On November 4, 2009, President Barack Obama came to Wright Middle School in Madison to announce the new national competition for one-time federal education dollars. These grants, the President announced, would be awarded to the states that showed the most vigorous, innovative approach to education reform.

Expectations for Wisconsin’s chances and our seeming home-court advantage were misplaced, however, as the State finished in the bottom half of the applicants in round one, finishing 26th out of 41 applicants.

At the time, Wisconsin Governor Jim Doyle said that the state would “take to heart” the criticisms Wisconsin’s application received. Doyle focused primarily on the criticisms referencing the inability of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction to take action against individual schools rather than entire districts and the lack of “buy in” by much of the educational establishment, notably the various school districts and teacher unions.

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Yet, despite Governor Doyle’s assurance, and legislative action to address some of initial criticisms, Wisconsin once again failed in second round of the Race to the Top grant program this July. Governor Doyle, who had assured the public that the state would win in this year’s iteration of the competition, blamed the loss on the process by which the applications were judged. Despite two high profile failures, the Governor still expressed confidence in the state’s education programs.

However, the state’s failure to land in even the top fifty percent of applicants becomes less surprising when looking at the state’s application. Though Doyle lauded the state’s 94% buy-in rate from local school districts – 80% amongst local teachers’ unions – the truth is that many Local Educating Authorities (LEAs) failed to consent to RTTT’s more rigorous standards, including tying teacher accountability to the performance of their students. Their commitment to national standards and innovation was wrought with fatal flaws regarding innovation and accountability, lagging behind several other states. In the end, these were the states that advanced through the first round of cuts and are still eligible for the pot of federal money at the end of the RTTT rainbow.

Once a state filled with the promise of sweeping and original reform, Wisconsin has fallen by the wayside when it comes to thinking creatively about education policy. The 801 page RTTT application notes several times how the state is a leader in progressive reform – but often fails to mention Wisconsin’s recent reluctance toward adopting new measures. Wisconsin was once the country’s most progressive state when it came to addressing public education – their private school choice program, charter school laws, and alternative teacher licensing measures were often considered revolutionary

throughout the 1990s. However, today that growth has been stunted, and with RTTT rewarding innovation and sweeping changes in order to create dramatic results, this has become a nationally-recognized shortcoming.

Six major factors played in to Wisconsin repeated swift dismissal from RTTT funding consideration.

- 1) LEA commitment
- 2) Teacher quality and improvement issues
- 3) A weak recent history of meaningful reform
- 4) Standardized testing and student data collection
- 5) Stagnant charter school regulations
- 6) A staggering achievement gap with inconsequential improvement.

On each of these issues, Wisconsin had points deducted from its application in round one. Though Governor Doyle and legislators implemented low-impact reforms to combat some of the highlighted problems in the state’s first attempt to earn RTTT funds, these reforms were often too miniscule or simply lagged behind the innovations advanced by other states in the competition.

Achievement Gap

Of Wisconsin’s continuing problems, the persistent achievement gap between racial and socioeconomic groups within the state is the worst. Wisconsin’s achievement gap is the darkest mark on a report card littered with problems. Often shielded by the state’s relatively high graduation rate and above-average NAEP scores, Wisconsin boasts the country’s second largest graduation rate gap between African American and Caucasian students, despite leading the country in overall graduates in 2008. This is a common trend across the state’s educational metrics.

According to NAEP testing data, the state’s white students boasted above average test scores in mathematics in 2009, while their African American counterparts scored considerably lower, falling short of the average test scores for all black students in the country.

2009 NAEP Scores	Caucasian Students	African-American	Gap (points/percent)
4th Grade Math			
National Average	248	222	26 (10.5%)
<i>Wisconsin Average</i>	250	217	33 (13.2%)
8th Grade Math			
National Average	292	260	32 (11.0%)
<i>Wisconsin Average</i>	294	254	40 (13.6%)

Across the country these gaps are slowly closing; however, they remain a major problem here in Wisconsin. One of RTTT's primary goals is to have all students, regardless of race, testing at a high level. Unfortunately Wisconsin, with a lack of progress in closing their achievement gap, was docked points for this and its failure to resort to dynamic reform in order to remedy this problem.

Highlighted proposals for RTTT monies included additional funding to the state's five largest districts, which compose 80% of the achievement gap problem in Wisconsin. However, flaws in this part of the Round Two Application, including a lack of innovative reform, held the state back and allowed for skeptic criticism regarding their effectiveness. Rather than branch out to new projects and put additional pressure onto the schools themselves, much of Wisconsin's proposed funding was earmarked for community projects with limited scopes of impact.

Instead of looking to other states that have had success in leveling the playing field, Governor Doyle and legislators insisted on advancing efforts that have had modest success at best in Wisconsin. Wisconsin's application relied on a dramatic expansion of the Response to Intervention (RTI) center as well as the Wisconsin Initiative for Neighborhoods and Schools that work for children (WINS) in order to help students across the state catch up. While these programs and others have seen limited success in helping African American and Hispanic students achieve, their expansion beyond Milwaukee has no proven track record and may not lead to success.

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Furthermore, WINS is a non-profit program that will not be fully operational until the fall of 2010. Despite having a very limited history, this program was still earmarked for \$10 million, or four percent of Wisconsin's Race to the Top grant application.

Since Milwaukee is the state's leader in the education gap, wouldn't it make more sense to bring in an outside program with a history of success rather than incorporate a program that is an extension of those that have lacked large-scale victories in the past? Recent achievements in Florida have shown that the gap can be closed, and while RTI and WINS are both solid programs, it is unlikely that the expansion of modest aid was a proficient argument in favor of reform in Wisconsin to eliminate the achievement gap.

Teacher Quality Issues and Lack of Effort to Improve

Early in the state's application, the authors celebrate Wisconsin's recent initiative that allows teachers to be paired to their students' achievement and testing data for observational purposes, a sticking point in RTTT standards. However, it is not until later in the document that the caveat on this new legislation becomes clear – this data gleaned from the student/teacher comparison *cannot* be used in most administrative actions – including compensation, retention, or promotion of educators. As a result, the impact of this connected data is softened considerably – what is the point of tying student

performance to teacher quality when these teachers ultimately share no accountability for their students' performance on the tests by which RTTT will be judged?

The measures of teacher accountability introduced in the application have little lasting impact, and it's tough to imagine these having great influence in improving teacher performance. This is compounded with the state's lag in adopting Common Core of Data testing. The goal laid out here by RTTT is to present a transparent auditing system for teachers that ties them directly to the achievement of their students. However, the impositions placed on the proposed testing plan severely limits the effectiveness of any implemented testing system, regardless of how strenuous it is. While a more transparent system would shed light on the teachers that are underperforming, there would be no way to tie any administrative actions to the data gleaned through adopting Common Core methods.

The connection of entities within the state to allow for greater communication and consistency between districts but is still far behind other states in its progression to unite education on a statewide level. For example, student teachers currently have no statewide assessment program when their tenure is up – leaving certification and placement decisions to their districts. The new RTTT application would put a statewide program in place to help regulate and appraise these emerging teachers, but this system seems to be miles behind.

The application also highlighted the state's nine alternative teaching certification programs, but glossed over the difficulties that many qualified individuals without a teaching degree still have getting a job in the classroom. For example, the state's weak record with Teach for America, one of the country's premiere alternative licensing and placement organizations, may also have helped debunked the idea that Wisconsin's alternative certification program is a strong one. Fewer than 40 teachers from TFA were employed in Milwaukee schools for 2009-2010, while in comparison 301 corps members taught in Philadelphia. This disparity can be traced back to an icy reception from LEAs, as well as limited certification that restricts the access that these TFA members have in schools.

The state prides itself on stronger recruiting efforts in order to boost their corps, but limits this recruiting strictly to individuals with teaching degrees, thereby cutting out a population of interested and effective teachers. As a result, qualified educators with advanced degrees have few options if they want to apply their knowledge to the state's K-12 students. While alternative certification programs exist, their clunky and under-serving nature are keeping passionate and intelligent individuals out of the classroom and coming up short in their efforts to serve the community through education. An easy fix here would be to adopt reputable national programs such as the American Board for the Certification of Teaching Excellence to ensure that someone with a Ph.D would not be disqualified from teaching high school students thanks to not having a degree in teaching.

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Weak Reform History

Though Wisconsin was one of the most progressive states in America when it came to education, those days have long since past. The 1990s brought sweeping innovation regarding charter school legislation and the adoption of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, but little reform has taken place in the past decade. Rather than stick to the boldness that enhanced educational options for students and showcased a willingness to incorporate new ideas in the classroom, the state's education policy has become stagnant, casting doubt over the scope of the proposed changes detailed in the Race to the Top application.

2009's Act 215, which allows the state superintendent to intervene in the lowest performing schools, was created, in part, to reverse Wisconsin's recent decline, as well as to help close the achievement gap in chronically underperforming areas. However, while it seems like a drastic step at face value, the range of schools that the superintendent is given reign over, as well as the amount of power he has, is severely limited. Control over teachers in these schools is restricted and mainly revolves around additional assessment mechanisms. It has yet to be seen if this new legislation will bring about any meaningful change – and that was likely a detriment to the state's application.

The 1990s brought sweeping innovation regarding charter school legislation and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, but little reform has taken place in the past decade.

The state's data collection and adoption of national testing standards, as previously discussed, is another example of soft reform that harmed Wisconsin's chances to succeed in the Race to the Top competition. Though data collection methods are expanding behind the support of the University of Wisconsin, there is still a considerable gap between what the Race to the Top standards demand and where the state currently lies.

Additionally, the application details how American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds have been used to improve education in the state as a precursor to what RTTT grants could achieve. While this money was spent in several different areas to improve education, much of it was spent directly through pre-existing funding mechanisms such as Title I and Title II concessions.

This example showcased that the state is on board when it comes to using government funding to benefit education, just as long as most of it goes into sources that support the status quo. Though the use of ARRA funds stands as an example of how the state can accept additional funding and government regulation, it did not benefit Wisconsin as it pertained to the RTTT's innovation requirements.

Local Educating Authority (LEA)/District Buy-In

Sweeping reforms are historically a tough sell to local school districts, and despite the application's assurance that over 94% of LEAs signed on with the proposed changes posed by RTTT, this is a statement that fails to hold water upon further inspection. While these local districts are in favor of many of the aspects of Race to the Top, they balk when it comes down to teacher accountability, the most important reform and a key to the nation's education future according to President Obama.

423 of 440 LEAs (96.3%) in Wisconsin have signed Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) in accordance to the state's application, but this fails to cover every aspect of the funding. According to the application, local school districts supported the implementation of new testing modules to connect with the Common Core of Data model presented by the U.S. Department of Education.

However, once the topic of using this data for the actual evaluation of teachers is broached, their commitment wavers. Just 154 of these LEAs (36.4%) agreed to a RTTT stipulation that allows teacher evaluations using these data to affect compensation, retention, or promotion. This idea of teacher accountability and grading teachers based on performances is a major aspect of introducing the new testing module; without commitment across all districts, its implementation loses much of its overall impact and effectiveness.

This element of cooperation is a major piece of RTTT requirements – if statewide implementation cannot be achieved, then the project faces major handicaps even before it gets to the students. The modified MOUs presented by the majority of the LEAs in Wisconsin project the idea of compliance, but in reality fail to accept some of the program's most important aspects. This was a major issue in the state's failure in Phase I, and continued to be in the second iteration.

The LEAs' opposition to the RTTT's accountability requirements was detrimental to Wisconsin's chances in the RTTT competition. The most prominent example is the failure of Wisconsin to adopt Common Core testing and its reluctance to use student achievement as one standard by which to evaluate teacher performance. Wisconsin's grant application, if successful would have resulted in a major boost in funding to schools, but would have had little emphasis on lasting, legitimate change in the classroom. Rather than put the pressure on the teachers and their programs, the business-as-usual mentality fails to make teachers and administrators truly accountable for the achievement of their students.

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Standardized Testing and Tracking Progress

RTTT standards demand that states applying for funding must show advancement in achievement since 2003 – both overall and across student subgroups. Results on both the NAEP and WKCE testing show positive trends, however, the state lauds its achievement on the WKCE over much of the application – despite admitting that the test is flawed and fails to meet national standards. The restructuring of the WKCE is targeted even without RTTT legislation, leading to an important question – how valuable is lauding the state’s test scores on the WKCE when the application itself is also based around replacing the test due to its flaws and inability to live up to national standards?

Adopting Common Core of Data standards has been a priority in Wisconsin since April of 2009, which also came into play in the state’s first application. This shift will serve to legitimize the state’s testing results into the future and provide a stronger base of comparison with other states as well as other countries. However, stagnant implementation has hindered the program’s progress and left questions remaining over the state’s ability to catch up with the rest of America.

Charter Schools

Wisconsin’s stance on charter schools was an issue that became problematic in the state’s first RTTT application. In that iteration, the documentation lauded Wisconsin’s charter school law but ignored the cap on online public charter school (virtual school) enrollment that currently is written into Wisconsin statutes. Such a cap is prohibited by RTTT standards. Wisconsin’s second RTTT application attempted to address this problem, and while this is a step ahead, the fact that this arbitrary cap on virtual school enrollment still exists likely negatively affected the state’s application again.

Additionally, Wisconsin’s lack of progress in advancing their charter school laws likely helped eliminate the state from consideration. Antiquated policies that restrict the number of charter school authorizers, limit the amount of students in virtual schools, and hinder the growth of strong charter school programs all counted negatively against the state in its second application.

Much of the application lauds the size, scope, and historic relevance of charter law rather than the effectiveness of these schools and the presence of useful legislation that connects and informs these schools. The increased counts of closed charter schools, coupled with declining numbers of charter school openings is also troublesome – especially when the application fails to address common reasons for charter school closings. Here, the state misses an opportunity to laud its regulation of charter schools and show that they are closing down the bad schools while making sure that the good ones are protected.

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Lessons to be learned

Several elements led to the state's failure to make it out of the first round of Race to the Top for the second time. At face value this application appeared to have all the elements of a winner, yet under the surface lay a minefield of stagnant policy that sunk the state's chances. Though Wisconsin was once an innovator in the field of education reform, the state has rested on its laurels while the rest of the country has caught up – and in many cases, left Wisconsin far behind.

Wisconsin's repeated failure in the Race to the Top should serve as a teachable moment. Without a genuine commitment to innovative and expansive reforms, not just hollow political rhetoric, Wisconsin will continue on the slow trip to the bottom of the national education rankings. Public education in Wisconsin, once full of promise, has now become stagnant as it fades towards mediocrity.

This year, the state's inability to think innovate or even replicate what has worked in other states cost Wisconsin \$250 million in one-time federal education funds. While the short-term loss is measured in dollars and cents, the long-range human costs are far more substantial. Wisconsin's failure to embrace meaningful, proven and innovative education reforms will cost hundreds of thousands of children an opportunity to achieve academic success.

That is one Race we can not afford to lose.



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