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Del. joins education reform effort

Multi-state commission seeks more stimulus funding

By JENNIFER PRICE
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In an effort to be more competitive in winning federal stimulus funds, Delaware on Tuesday joined a multi-state consortium aimed at bettering the nation's public school system.

The New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce's mission is to help states pilot education reform efforts, such as offering teachers bonuses for working with at-risk students or helping students make significant academic gains. The consortium also aims to help states share with one another what works. By banding together, the states involved also hope to have a better chance to win national stimulus funding.

"It's always been a challenge for Delaware to get national funding around reform efforts because we are such a small state. When we are compared to other states with urban locations, like Los Angeles, Philadelphia and New York City, we are automatically out of the running because their problems are so profound," Delaware Education Secretary Lillian Lowery said.

"We've never been able to play in that arena before. Being a part of a consortium allows us opportunities we otherwise wouldn't find," Lowery said.

Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Utah were the first states to join the group last year. Arizona and New Mexico also became partners Tuesday.

Delaware joined the commission, an offshoot of the National Center on Education and the Economy, on the same day President Barack Obama outlined his education agenda, saying to be competitive in a global economy, America must overhaul its education system by investing in early childhood education, instituting better academic standards and assessments, rewarding good teachers and promoting innovation in schools.

The president's plan should sound familiar to Delawareans: It promotes the same ideas as Vision 2015 -- the plan state education, business and community leaders have been working on for the past two years to revamp Delaware's school system into a world leader by 2015. Vision 2015 advocates reforms such as a better statewide assessment system, linking teacher pay to student performance, recruiting and retaining more highly qualified teachers, and a greater investment in preschool education.

The Vision 2015 plan also tracks closely with the broader consortium's reform agenda. Delaware leaders hope the shared ideas and collaborative strength gained by joining the consortium will put the First State in a better position to apply for extra education funding that was given to the U.S. Department of Education through the federal stimulus package.

The \$4.35 billion "Race to the Top" fund is designed to help states with innovative plans to improve student achievement. An additional \$650 million has been set aside to assist school districts and nonprofit organizations that have strong track records of improving student achievement.

Delaware will focus on implementing the reform efforts announced last week in Gov. Jack Markell's education agenda, such as a computer-adaptive growth-model assessment, extra pay to teachers who work in at-risk buildings, bonuses for those whose students make great improvements and giving school leaders more flexibility in how they may spend state education dollars.

"No single person has all the answers to the critical questions facing our [schools'] future. By joining this consortium, we will gain greater access to outside experts committed to making the most of public education," Markell said in a news release. "We can leverage what has worked around the country to make the most of our

own reform."

Next month, the Markell administration will draft legislation for his plan and propose it to the state General Assembly.

"Joining the commission is going to accelerate Delaware's ability to implement Gov. Markell's education agenda," said Paul Herdman, president of the Rodel Foundation of Delaware, an educational nonprofit that helped develop the Vision 2015 plan. "The hope is that Delaware is at the tip of the sphere of the national reform efforts going on."

The commission -- which is funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Lumina Foundation for Education -- will provide technical assistance and support to Delaware as it implements Markell's plan. Vision 2015, which has received some private support but no significant public funding yet, will fund any remaining costs associated with Delaware working with the commission.
