

Error on 'Race to the Top' application costs N.J. \$400M in federal funds

Published: Tuesday, August 24, 2010, 9:38 PM Updated: Wednesday, August 25, 2010, 5:10 AM



Caption: Robert Sciarrino/The Star-Ledger
Gov. Chris Christie, left, and Education Commissioner Bret Schundler speak at the E. Raymond Appleby Elementary School in Spotswood in this file photo.

TRENTON — After making a high-profile bid for hundreds of millions of dollars in federal education reform money, New Jersey fell three points short of receiving "Race to the Top" funding, in part because of an error by the Christie administration in the state's application, records obtained by The Star-Ledger show.

One five-point question on the application asked for budget information comparing the 2008 and 2009 school years. However, the state submitted information comparing the current year to 2011.

That mistake cost the state 4.8 points. The state lost points in other areas as well, the records show.

In the end, New Jersey received 437.8 out of a possible 500 points, placing it 11th in the competition, just behind Ohio, which received \$400 million and was the last state to receive funding. The winners of the \$4.35 billion competition were announced today in Washington, D.C.

"New Jersey did not supply the 2008-2009 data as required and therefore forfeits the points," said the report from one of the federal reviewers scoring the competition.

According to the program's rules, there is no appeal process.

Gov. Chris Christie signed off on the application, which stressed tenure reform, merit pay and school choice, on June 1.

MISSING THE MARK

A mistake in New Jersey's application for the competitive Race to the Top grant program may have cost the state up to \$400 million in federal education reform dollars. The state's application received 437.8 points in the 500-point competition and fell just three points behind 10th place winner Ohio.

GRANTEE	MONEY AWARDED	PHASE 1 SCORE	PHASE 2 SCORE	CHANGE
1. Massachusetts	\$250,000,000	411.4	471.0	59.6
2. New York	\$700,000,000	408.6	464.8	56.2
3. Hawaii	\$75,000,000	364.6	462.4	97.8
4. Florida	\$700,000,000	431.4	452.4	21
5. Rhode Island	\$75,000,000	419.0	451.2	32.2
6. District of Columbia	\$75,000,000	402.4	450.0	47.6
7. Maryland	\$250,000,000	n/a	450.0	n/a
8. Georgia	\$400,000,000	433.6	446.4	12.8
9. North Carolina	\$400,000,000	414.0	441.6	27.6
10. Ohio	\$400,000,000	418.6	440.8	22.2
11. New Jersey	—	387.0	437.8	50.8

Source: U.S. Department of Education

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Maria Comella, a spokeswoman for Christie, confirmed today that an "error" was made on the application but did not say who was responsible. Education Commissioner Bret Schundler and other officials from his department learned of the error when they made an in-person presentation in Washington two weeks ago, she said.

"Obviously we were disappointed not to receive the funding," Comella said. "But at the end of the day, we stand behind these reforms and we need to move forward on them quickly."

Derek Roseman, spokesman for Senate President Stephen Sweeney (D-Gloucester), compared it to losing easy points on a standardized test.

"These points should have been a gimme," he said. "This is like losing 200 points on the SAT because you didn't write your name on the top sheet."

Assembly Speaker Sheila Oliver (D-Essex) called the error a "stunning \$400 million mistake."

"It's astonishing that the administration's failure to proofread their own homework would lead to losing out on this funding that could have gone such a long way toward improving our educational system," she said.

U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan said his department received "many more competitive applications than money to fund them," and said he hopes to create a third phase of Race to the Top funding next year. The department has requested \$1.35 billion to fund it.

"There were many great applications we would have loved to have funded," he said. " We simply didn't have the dollars to do it."

The 10 winners announced today were: the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Ohio and Rhode Island. The grants vary, from \$700 million for New York and Florida, to \$75 million for smaller states such as Hawaii, Rhode Island and the District of Columbia.

By Jeanette Rundquist and Jessica Calefati/The Star-Ledger

Staff writer Lisa Fleisher contributed to this report.

This article was excerpted.

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