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## Gregoire hopes to 'Race to the Top' with teachers unions pushing, not dragging

**PETER CALLAGHAN; THE NEWS TRIBUNE**

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It's called "Race to the Top," but it's a race that is timed using a calendar, not a stopwatch.

Maybe even the Mayan calendar.

Still, the prize is significant enough to have attracted a lot of competitors, Washington state among them.

President Barack Obama created it as part of last year's federal stimulus package. While all states received money to head off layoffs and program cuts in public schools, another pot of money is being used for a different reason. To get a cut of that \$4.5 billion, states must show how they are reforming their education systems.

Do something about your lowest-performing schools. Make sure each classroom has a competent and trained teacher. Collect and apply data that measure what is working and what isn't. And create assessments that measure whether kids and schools are meeting standards.

Show that you are doing these things and you might get a prize – several hundred million dollars in Washington's case. Fail, and you not only get no money, you get to wear the label of slacker.

That a Democratic president is proposing this is important because many of the goals run contrary to the positions taken by a significant Democratic constituency group – teachers unions.

Despite years of trying and lots of rhetoric, Washington state has not done much to reform education. Even more than most states, Washington's school establishment is change-averse.

In fact, state politicians decided to skip the first round of "Race to the Top" applications because they knew they wouldn't have a very good story to tell. There's a second round this summer.

But the competition already has forced some changes in Washington state. Passage of last year's House Bill 2261, which began a slow process of change, wouldn't have happened without the "Race" incentive. Being competitive for the money caused Democratic Gov. Chris Gregoire and Democratic leaders in the Legislature to run over the largest education union, the Washington Education Association.

Mary Jean Ryan, the chairwoman of the state Board of Education, said the application process is difficult, "but it is work we must do to get better, and we owe it to the kids to get it done."

Providing some political cover to legislators is recent polling showing that a majority of voters and teachers support standards and testing, better pay for the best teachers, and fixing the worst schools.

On Monday in Olympia, Gregoire gathered a sampling of education leaders to help unveil her "Race" package. The biggest part is the school accountability proposal crafted by the state board. If passed this year, the plan would force the lowest-performing 5 percent of state schools to accept restructuring plans. The state wouldn't take over failing schools, but it could withhold federal money from schools and from districts that refuse to improve.

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Another measure would change how teachers and principals are evaluated. For the first time, the state would allow the use of data – including test scores and student improvement measurements – to evaluate teachers.

Performance pay would not be part of this plan, at least not yet. But rewarding the best teachers is a criteria of “Race to the Top,” and HB 2261 set the stage for changes to compensation that could lead to that.

Significantly, WEA President Mary Lindquist was standing behind Gregoire on Monday. As the 2009 legislative session ended, Lindquist lashed out at the supporters of HB 2261, including Democrats and even the PTA.

Gregoire decided that education changes ultimately would not be successful if the union was in opposition. So she spent the summer and fall trying to bring the union into the conversation, to get the leadership to help craft changes.

That Lindquist endorsed the use of data to evaluate teachers is a big deal. So is support for a more logical but more stringent teacher evaluation system. Whether the union will continue to support other proposals – especially some form of merit pay – isn’t clear.

But Gregoire is gambling that having the union inside the school reform tent is better than having it outside.

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