



# THE GREAT RACE

*As 'Race to the Top' shows, Charter Schools are key to transforming education*

When it was announced last summer, there was no mistaking the intent of President Obama's 'Race to the Top' education grants—to harness the power of competition to improve public education.

Race to the Top, a \$4.35 billion fund included in last year's federal stimulus bill, sets out to encourage innovation and reform in public education through competitive grants to states. Its key goals are improving student assessments, monitoring student achievement, improving teacher training and recruitment, and turning around the lowest performing schools.

The grants come with an important caveat: to qualify for money, states must meet basic criteria on allowing charter schools and other basic school reform principles.

"This competition will not be based on politics, ideology, or the preferences of a particular interest group," the President said, when announcing the grants. "Instead, it will be based on a simple principle—whether a state is ready to do what works. We will use the best data available to determine whether a state can meet a few key benchmarks for reform, and states that outperform the rest will be rewarded with a grant."

The inclusion of charter schools in Race to the Top shows the federal government recognizes these schools are part of "what works" in turning around the education system, especially in the areas of highest need.

Charter schools—autonomous public schools that compete with local school districts for students—operate in a variety of models. Some are arts-based, while others are career-focused. Some use technology

in innovative ways, others operate year-round. All charters work under the productive pressure brought by open competition. If they don't educate their students, those students can move to other schools.

More often than not, evidence suggests, the competition works. A recent study from Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) found states that place caps on the number of charter schools have "significantly lower academic results" than those states without caps.

Already, this carrot dangled before the states is having the desired effect. Since 'Race to the Top' was announced last year, 14 states have scrambled to lift or soften their charter school caps to qualify for the grants. **Pennsylvania's charter school laws comply with the program's criteria—so the state's 501 school districts stand to gain from as much as \$400 million in federal aid.**

Race to the Top might just be the tip of the iceberg in federal reform legislation. A recently introduced bill in the House of Representatives, the "All-STAR" act, calls for an additional \$500 million to expand and replicate the best charter schools.

By making charters a key element in its efforts to transform education, the government is recognizing that these innovative schools are key to closing the achievement gap and turning around failed schools. The federal government is beginning to recognize what 1.5 million students and their families already know—competition works for schools, and for students.

*This series is brought to you by a consortium of Allegheny County charter schools.*



**Charter Schools.org**