

January 16, 2010

New York state laws hurt chance to get Race to the Top money

Sandy Parker
Guest essayist

Different issue, same old problem: New York state being rendered uncompetitive by unnecessary laws.

We stand days away from the deadline to file an application that could win our school districts — particularly Rochester — millions of dollars in federal aid. Yet we already know that we're likely to miss out unless we immediately fix restrictive New York laws.

I'm talking about "Race to the Top," a competitive grant in the federal stimulus that could entitle New York to as much as \$700 million for reform that will turn around underperforming schools.

With the state's fiscal crisis likely to reduce school aid, getting this already allocated funding is essential. Fifty percent would directly benefit participating local districts, and if New York were awarded this grant, the Rochester schools would get a significant allocation.

But laws in New York puts us at a competitive disadvantage to the other states in line for this award — specifically laws that cap the number of charter schools and a law due to sunset in July that limits use of student performance data in teacher evaluations.

Let me explain further. For one thing, the current limits in New York on using student performance data in teacher evaluations directly conflicts with federal requirements on this matter for all applicants.

Secondly, the application awards states points tied to their charter schools, so the 200 school cap in place in New York hurts our eligibility.

The Obama administration has stated clearly that unless New York changes these laws before the Jan. 19 application deadline, our state is unlikely to see any of this funding. Last week, after conversations with federal officials including Education Secretary Arne Duncan, Gov. Paterson put forth a bill specifically to address this problem.

Program Bill 214 would eliminate the cap and change the sunset date on the student performance data law from July 1 to Jan. 15. It would also address two other issues identified as handicapping the state's application by allowing the Dormitory Authority to finance charter school capital funding for approved schools and allow the Regents to appoint a temporary receiver to address chronically underperforming schools.

By its nature, the legislative process is to be thoughtful and deliberative, which can mean taking time. But here is a case where the laws don't make sense, and we clearly don't have time.

We need our state Legislature to act on the governor's bill immediately, or New York will miss out on a tremendous opportunity. I plan to contact my legislators today and tell them that, and I urge you to

do the same.

Parker is president and CEO of the Rochester Business Alliance.