**Race to the Top needs charter schools**

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By Earl Simms

In mid-January Missouri applied for nearly $750 million of the U.S. Department of Education's $4.35 billion Race to the Top program. The competitive grant program, which was announced last July by President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, aims to bolster states which are seeking education-reform initiatives that improve student achievement.

While there is no question that Missouri's commissioner of education, Dr. Chris Nicastro, and her staff worked hard to complete the application since announcing their intention to seek such funding, that application can only be described as incomplete without a push for expanding charter schools in Missouri.

Currently, Missouri has a geographical cap on charters that only allows them to operate in, and accept students from, the St. Louis and Kansas City public school districts. This policy is in direct conflict with Secretary Duncan's strong statement last June that "states that do not have public charter laws or put artificial caps on the growth of charter schools will jeopardize their applications under the Race to the Top fund."

To not include this vital reform in Missouri's Race to the Top application defies logic, especially in the wake of Gov. Jay Nixon's announcement during his State of the State speech that his proposed budget falls short of fully funding the state's education formula by $87 million. Governor Nixon, along with Dr. Nicastro and the State Board of Education, all signed off on the application before it was submitted.

The state also essentially was given a warning shot on its current education policies by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation when Missouri was rejected for a $250,000 grant to help with its Race to the Top application. In all, 25 states received Gates Foundation help with their applications, states that now are perceived as early front-runners to receive the first round of much-needed dollars.

Missouri's application, relevant to charters, focused only on increasing accountability for both schools and sponsors. This is a good step to ensure that only quality charter schools are operating in Missouri. No one wants unregulated or unaccountable charter schools operating in the state.

However, this still falls short of reforms that need to be made in order to seriously compete for this unprecedented pot of money. At least four states -- California, Massachusetts, Nevada and Tennessee -- have held special legislative sessions or made their first legislative priority the passing of reforms in order to become more competitive in this race.

Despite the fact that charter expansion was not pushed in Missouri's Race to the Top application, it should remain a top goal of education reformers during the 2010 state legislative session. Thankfully, the winners of round one are scheduled to be announced in April, giving Missouri's legislature time to pass serious reforms before the end of its current session should the state not receive funding from the first round of the program.

Missouri's education leaders still have time to analyze and react to the U.S. Department of Education's feedback before round two applications are due in June. Without reform efforts that almost have been labeled by Secretary Duncan as preconditions for winning funding, Missouri's Race to the Top could be over shortly after beginning.

*Earl Simms is state director of the Children's Education Council of Missouri, a not-for-profit organization that supports individualized learning opportunities for all children.* [*www.cec-mo.org*](http://www.cec-mo.org)*.*

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