

RACE TO THE TOP

STATE PREPARES TO TURN THE PAGE

by Timothy K. Webb

Tennessee has long struggled with poor student outcomes and inadequate standards that do not properly prepare students for the demands of college or work after high school. However, under Governor Phil Bredesen's leadership, the state has made fundamental changes — changes that set Tennessee apart on the national stage.

Three years ago, the Tennessee Department of Education implemented the Tennessee Diploma Project, increasing standards and curriculum so students graduate college- and career-ready and, in 2007, the state modernized the K-12 funding formula to infuse more state resources into schools to help those students at-risk.

Last year, Tennessee began putting together its Race to the Top proposal, which includes the ultimate in education reforms and initiatives. In January, we submitted a proposal to the U.S. Department of Education focused on building up education in Tennessee through teacher training, data implementation, curriculum enhancements, and turnaround initiatives. We know now that we were successful in the Race to the Top competition and will be awarded an estimated \$500 million to enact these reforms.

Through the Tennessee Diploma Project, Tennessee already has a head start implementing increased standards and has gained national attention for its speed of implementation. The new standards, which include four years of math and increased graduation requirements, aim to prepare students for a globally competitive future.

The use of Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System data is an asset in the state's Race to the Top proposal. This data system, which has been in place for almost 20 years, is an effective tool for teachers and administrators to increase student learning.

Tennessee's proposal also creates several interventions for low-performing schools. Persistently low-performing schools are eligible to



enter the Achievement School District, created through this year's First to the Top legislation. The Achievement School District is a special school district designed to help improve results at chronically failing schools. These schools could be placed under the control of the Tennessee Department of Education to provide additional resources to increase graduation rates and student performance.

Options are available for the school at this level: complete governance takeover by the state, which could include contracting with a non-profit organization, university, or charter school to transform the school, or requiring that a specific reform plan be implemented without a governance change.

The state has already begun to work with these schools, their leaders, and the communities they serve.

Regardless of any competition, the reforms already in place in Tennessee schools are a win for students, and the opportunities for future innovation have already been established. The road to reform is wide open.

Timothy K. Webb is the commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Education.

In March, Tennessee became one of two states to win the federal government's Race to the Top competition, which will award the state an estimated \$500 million to pursue education reform and innovation.

The fundamental components of the state's application addressed four areas:

- adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to be successful in college and the workplace;
- building data systems that measure student growth and using them effectively;
- recruiting and training teachers; and
- turning around low-performing schools.