

A chance for grants, but local schools have to innovate

By Sheila G. Miller / *The Bulletin*

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As school districts around Oregon tighten their belts and prepare for a shortage of funds through the next biennium, the federal government is offering billions of dollars to districts, states and nonprofits that can show they're willing to make big changes to the age-old standard of educating children.

Some education advocates say the state is not well poised to get the competitive funds because it's been slow to adopt innovative new methods of education. But they say there's hope, particularly in several programs taking place around Central Oregon.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 provides more than \$100 billion in federal funding to education around the United States. Most of that money will be handed out using a formula, with all states and districts receiving some funds. About \$5.5 billion of it, however, will be handed out through competitive grants.

There are five funds from which districts, state departments of education and nonprofits can apply for those competitive grants. The largest is Race to the Top, a \$4.35 billion fund that goes to states that are trying to keep K-12 funding at levels similar to 2006, improving assessments and state standards, improving how the state collects data on students and more equally distributing teachers.

Other competitive federal funding includes a teacher incentive fund, state data systems grants, a teacher quality fund and an innovation fund.

The Race to the Top funding could go to just a few states who are being aggressive in the innovations they are trying. States who apply for those funds must send in a draft proposal this month, and a final proposal is due in October. Most of the money will go out to states in spring 2010.

These are the funds that some education advocates worry Oregon won't receive.

Sue Hildick is the executive director of The Chalkboard Project, an Oregon nonprofit focused on school reform.

"Oregon needs to take off the blinders about what is working in education and be willing to explore promising practices that move student achievement," Hildick said. "At the end of the day, we should only be investing in those practices that move student achievement."

Hildick said she worries Oregon is behind in getting those innovative programs off the ground, though she noted there are a few that are in the works that could attract funding grants.

"There are a few that the state should build on, particularly mentoring for new teachers," she said. "Stronger professional development that is high quality, lower class sizes for kindergarten and first grade, reading tutors in early grades. Those

are a good handful.”

According to Hildick, the Chalkboard Project and the Meyer Memorial Trust are working with the state Department of Education to put together the federal grant proposal.

“It’s frustrating when you see states like Colorado, which is actually passing legislation to get themselves in the position to be more competitive (for the funding),” Hildick said. “We’re going the other way, we’re undoing the innovations we have. We’re barely hanging on to something like mentoring that the districts love.”

Chalkboard also plans to apply for federal grant funding through the Teacher Incentive Fund, for the expansion of its Creative Leadership Achieves Student Success project.

“We’re working on really big innovations around compensation. That’s what we’re trying to do privately,” Hildick said.

The program seeks to improve classroom education by changing teachers’ pay structure, expanding their professional development and performance evaluations, and creating more leadership positions for teachers.

The program is being piloted in Sherwood, Tillamook and Forest Grove school districts, and is expected to expand in the coming school year.

Local happenings

Currently, Sisters, Redmond, Bend-La Pine and Crook County school districts, in partnership with the High Desert Education Service District, are applying for a CLASS grant that would bring the program to the region.

“They want to have that conversation about career ladders for teachers, professional development, stronger evaluations and different compensation,” Hildick said. “That’s unique in the state. ... We’re not seeing regional applications. That’s a big deal.”

Bruce Abernethy, the grant writer for Bend-La Pine Schools, is writing the planning grant proposal. He said the proposal offers a variety of ideas, including providing merit pay to teams of teachers who show great improvement in their classrooms, instead of by individual students.

The CLASS program appeals to Redmond Superintendent Vickie Fleming, who said Sherwood administrators described the program as the most transformational thing they’d ever been involved with.

“It allows teachers to discuss the art and science of teaching and learning, and what it is we can design together that helps teachers evolve and get better at their craft,” Fleming said. “What can we do to support that with professional development, with rewards in compensation systems? How can we craft an evaluation of performance that rewards what teachers believe to be a mastery teaching?”

Fleming also said if the regional districts get the grant, they’ll work with the local college and university education programs. That way, Fleming said, they’ll match their education programs to the innovations the K-12 districts are working on.

Another innovation that education advocates believe could be on the short list for federal grants is the credit-by-proficiency model.

Tamra Busch-Johnson heads the Business Education Compact in Beaverton and said the credit-by-proficiency

movement started in 2002, when the Oregon Department of Education passed a regulation allowing schools to award credit to kids who demonstrated proficiency outside the classroom.

“They were demonstrating proficiency outside the classroom walls, for non-seat time,” Busch-Johnson said. “Most credit is awarded like this: You sit in class for certain hours and days, and you receive credit.”

That year, the Business Education Compact partnered with two Oregon school districts to implement the model. These days, the compact calls it proficiency-based teaching and learning, and has applied it from high schools down to the middle and elementary schools.

“It’s all about expectations, that students meet the state standards for whatever grade they’re in,” Busch-Johnson said.

For example, by the end of third grade, students are expected to understand, among other things, what scientific inquiry is, the differences between living and nonliving things, the life cycles of plants and animals, and weather patterns.

“We’re making the standards transparent to the learner,” Busch-Johnson said. “Learning is the constant, and time is the variable. Some students will need more time; some will need less time to demonstrate that they know the standard.”

Removing failure

For instance, traditional classes are based on accumulating points. Earning points could be for labeling papers correctly, participating in class or getting into the classroom on time.

Under the credit-by-proficiency model, students are graded entirely on what they know.

“Failure is not an option,” Busch-Johnson said. “Every student who meets the standards will pass the class. ... It’s impossible for a student to get a D or an F because it may take them longer, but they will meet all the standards.”

If a student meets the standards, they can earn a C; if they master the standards, they’d receive an A.

The compact has conducted workshops with about 90 districts statewide, and nearly 1,000 teachers and administrators since 2005.

At Redmond High School, the credit-by-proficiency model has taken off. Freshmen who miss an assignment or fail a test do not receive a zero or an F; instead, they go to a study hall to complete the missing work or retake the test.

“Nobody knows what an A means anymore,” Fleming said. “Some of those artificial barriers, like putting your name on the paper in the right place, or the presentation of the information, that gets you an A. Instead it’s, ‘Can you demonstrate proficiency?’”

That program will likely move into the middle school, and will be the main focus of the Redmond Proficiency Academy charter school opening in the fall, Fleming said. And the district is also considering changing its report cards to focus on standards.

“Basically, instead of using a traditional report card that really reports on citizenship and those kinds of things, we’d take, for example, the third-grade standards and say, ‘Here’s how your child is meeting — not meeting or exceeding — standards, and here’s where they need extra help,’” she said.

Fleming said that’s just one step her district is taking to be more forward thinking.

The district has also put together a team that trains teachers and administrators in each building to use data from assessments more effectively.

Every elementary and middle school has a team that goes over data to determine what students are picking up and what they're missing. Next year, Fleming said, the schools will use some federal stimulus funding to have an instructional coach at each school who will oversee how teachers are using data to improve their classes.

"Basically, the question is how to get better at knowing students are learning, and we know that because we're creating in class ways of assessing learning that are in addition to and more specific than those state benchmark tests," Fleming said. "That has really changed the way we do business in the district."

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