

A race to the sidelines

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Dragging our feet again on Oregon's graduation standards isn't a winning strategy



Unknown

Other states are jostling hard to grab some of the \$4.3 billion in competitive grants from the Obama administration's Race to the Top fund. Meanwhile, Oregon hovers near the door like a reluctant kindergartner on the first day of school.

If this keeps up, Oregon is sure to miss out not just on the federal money but also on the jobs and educational progress the money represents.

The federal government wants to reward roughly 15 states that show positive momentum and entrepreneurial spirit in K-12 education. The Department of Education expects to give grants of perhaps \$200 million to \$300 million to these states. The money would go a long way in Oregon, where families crave smaller class sizes, fewer teacher layoffs, more enrichment and better results.

But Oregon may miss out on every penny.

Numerous states, including Illinois, Indiana and Tennessee, have rushed to tweak their state laws or policies to align themselves with federal priorities. California and New York have made headlines lately for trying to change restrictive state laws on teacher evaluations that would otherwise knock them out of the running.

As for Oregon? We make headlines in other ways.

The state Board of Education agreed last week to [delay tougher graduation requirements](#) for high schoolers. This is the board's second backtrack in less than a year, as The Oregonian's Betsy Hammond reported. Oregon had intended to require this fall's incoming sophomores to show proficiency in reading, writing, math and public speaking before getting a diploma.

The board instead has pushed every requirement except reading safely into the future, citing the state's money problems and educators' concerns.

It's the kind of embarrassing detail that Oregon might want to omit from its grant application.

We understand why Oregon educators would be wary of stricter state standards, in light of the state's infamous financial instability and its fair-weather support of schools. We also celebrate educators' good work against the odds: [New test data](#) released this week, for example, suggest big gains in the basic skills of middle schoolers.

Yet let's face it: Leadership at the state level in Oregon remains remarkably tepid when it comes to academic achievement.

Oregon has the potential to regain its educational footing. Several reform-minded lawmakers, an army of parent advocates and a few effective organizations, such as the Chalkboard Project and Stand for Children, can make a world of difference. But Oregon needs more -- more from its governor, its Legislature, its education department, its state Board of Education. Otherwise, Oregon will find itself a national player in only one area:

Making excuses.