

Race to the Top initiative spurs U.S. education policy reform, study finds

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Five years have passed since the Obama administration announced the winners of the \$4 billion Race to the Top contest, a major federal initiative designed to stimulate education reform among the states. While supporters and critics have argued whether the program has encouraged meaningful reform, UChicago scholar William Howell finds that the program had a substantial impact on education policy across the United States.

"The evidence suggests that by strategically deploying funds to cash-strapped states and massively increasing the public profile of a controversial set of [education](#) policies, the president managed to stimulate reforms that had stalled in state legislatures, stood no chance of enactment in Congress and could not be accomplished via unilateral action," writes Howell, the Sydney Stein Professor of American Politics at Chicago Harris, in the fall 2015 issue of [Education Next](#).

Race to the Top was designed to encourage higher state standards, create new data systems, improve teacher effectiveness, increase college readiness, stimulate charter-school expansion and strengthen low-performing schools. In applications for federal funding, states were asked to describe their current policies and outline their goals to meet the initiative's criteria. Across the three phases of the program, 18 states and the District of Columbia won awards that ranged from \$17 million to \$700 million.

In order to see whether Race to the Top stimulated the adoption of

education reforms, Howell and a team of researchers examined whether a statewide governing body had actually enacted (not just proposed) upwards of 33 qualifying policies each year between 2001 and 2014. They found that states enacted reform policies at a much higher rate in the aftermath of Race to the Top.

Howell clarifies that the study "does not assess the efficacy of the particular policies promoted by the initiative, nor does it investigate how Race to the Top altered practices within schools or districts. Rather, the focus is the education policymaking process itself; the adoption of education policies is the outcome of interest."

Between 2001 and 2008, the year before Race to the Top was authorized, states, on average, enacted about 10 percent of proposed school reform policies. Between 2009 and 2014, however, they enacted 68 percent of them. Between 2001 and 2008, states that won an award, those that applied but did not win, and those that never applied were nearly indistinguishable from one another. But by 2014, winning states had adopted 88 percent of the recommended reform policies on average. States that applied but did not win had adopted 68 percent of them, and even states that never applied had adopted 56 percent of these policies.

Howell and his team conclude that the process of applying to the competitions by itself, plus the increased media attention given to Race to the Top policies, generated momentum behind policy reform.

Howell also found that winning states were more likely to raise their proficiency standards after Race to the Top was authorized, suggesting that its influence carried over into the implementation stage of education policymaking. Race to the Top did not accelerate previous trends in charter school enrollments. The growth in charter school enrollments in winning states, however, continued to climb at a higher rate than charter growth rates in other [states](#).

"The surge of post-2009 policy activity constitutes a major accomplishment for the Obama administration," Howell concludes.

"With a relatively small amount of money, little formal constitutional authority in education, and without the power to unilaterally impose his will upon state governments, President Obama managed to jump-start [policy](#) processes that had languished for years in state governments around the country."

Provided by University of Chicago

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