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Schools and the **Stimulus** 

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Ed. Dept. Gears Up for 'Innovation' Grants



U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan reviews his schedule with aide Sandra Abrevaya while traveling in Florida during his “listening and learning” tour on July 28.

—Christopher Powers/Education Week

By [Michele McNeil](#)

Orlando, Fla.

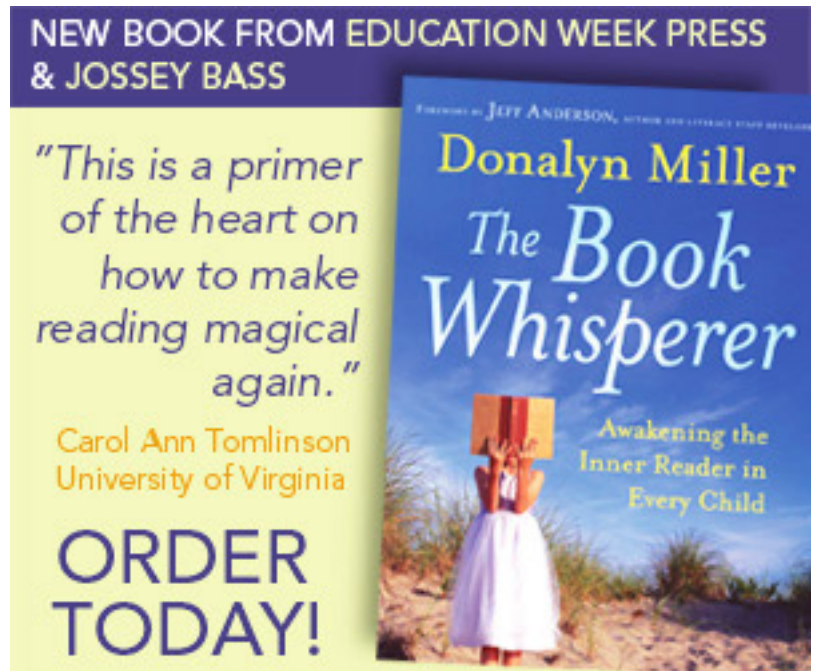


As U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan visited Florida this week to shine a light on innovative education initiatives, his department was preparing to kick-start a \$650 million grant competition for school districts that can best execute his vision of school reform.

Even before the U.S. Department of Education unveils the criteria on which school districts will be judged, federal officials are grappling with several challenges.

First, the department is working to widen eligibility for the innovation grants, because the criteria written into federal law would eliminate hundreds of school districts from the running. The department is also bracing for 2,000 to 3,000 applications from school districts—all of which need to be processed quickly by the department and judged by independent experts.

Within the next few weeks, the department expects to unveil the criteria for school districts to compete for the “Invest in What Works and Innovation” grants, created as part of the larger American Recovery and Reinvestment Act stimulus package passed by Congress in February. Though the \$650 million innovation fund is markedly smaller than the \$4.35 billion Race to the Top fund for grants for states, it’s nonetheless a coveted pot of money that will pit districts against one another in a contest to see which can be most creative with a relatively unrestricted slice of federal stimulus money.



The fact that the competitions for the Race to the Top and Invest in What Works and Innovation grants are all kicking off within weeks of one another is no accident, Mr. Duncan said in an interview.

“We want states and districts to have a thoughtful plan for reform,” he said. “And we want to invest only in those districts that have a comprehensive plan for innovation.”

Eligibility Shift Proposed

Yet Education Department officials say that first, the eligibility criteria in the stimulus law should be loosened, according to James H. Shelton, the assistant deputy secretary for innovation and improvement, who was travelling with Mr. Duncan on July 28.

Currently, the stimulus law requires school districts to have made “adequate yearly progress” under the federal No Child Left Behind Act for two years in a row. If that requirement sticks, Mr. Shelton said, that would mean of the nation’s 200 largest school districts, only 26 would qualify to even compete.

Instead, the department wants to tweak the law so that districts would be eligible if they show “demonstrated success in significantly increasing student academic achievement for all groups of students,” according to the proposed change.

The proposed change was included in the fiscal 2010 budget legislation approved by the full House of Representatives last week as part of an appropriations process that is likely to stretch out for months. But Mr. Shelton said he needs to find a faster-moving legislative vehicle for the proposal, so the policy can be changed by the time the awards go out, as early as this fall.

The proposed amendment also seeks to clarify that nonprofit organizations are eligible for innovation grants, but only if they partner with school districts or consortia of schools.

Who Gets to Judge?

Another big challenge with the innovation grants—and Race to the Top grants for that matter—is finding people to judge them. Mr. Duncan says he will find “disinterested superstars” outside of the department to serve as peer reviewers who will offer recommendations. The department will have the final say on awards to states and districts.

In some ways, Mr. Shelton faces an especially daunting task in finding experts to judge the innovation fund applications, because conflicts get harder to avoid when applications from thousands of school districts are pouring in.

Though all of the nation’s 15,000 or so school districts are all eligible, the department expects between 2,000 and 3,000 to apply.

Mr. Shelton said he doesn’t have a target number of districts for the awards. But his mantra is that less is more.

“You want these grants to be meaningful,” he said in an interview, noting that hundreds of small grants won’t promote the kind of innovation the department wants to see.

A Vision of Innovation

So what does Mr. Duncan's vision of innovation look like?

It looks like the Lake Nona YMCA and NorthLake Community School, an elementary school and neighborhood center hybrid that Mr. Duncan visited in Orlando on July 28 and called a "great model" for reform.

Open seven days a week, the facility is an example of Mr. Duncan's push for community and education partnerships, and for school districts to offer wraparound services and extended learning opportunities for students.

And, innovation looks like what was happening in an Orlando hotel meeting room where the GE Foundation was meeting with leaders from six school districts that have received \$150 million to improve math and science education.

Mr. Duncan hasn't been shy about touting other innovative favorites, such as KIPP Schools for its success in educating disadvantaged students, or school districts such as Cincinnati, which added an extra month of classes for students in the district's failing schools.

In naming names, Mr. Duncan said in a July 28 interview, "I want to show people what's possible."

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