

# Let's judge based on student outcomes

By Bruce Thompson

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Last year, as states prepared their Race to the Top applications, a report was issued ranking Wisconsin as dead last in being prepared to win a grant. One reaction to this report was to advocate giving up; since Wisconsin was so far behind, there was no point in trying.

To its credit, Wisconsin soldiered on. And when the reviewers' scores were tabulated, Wisconsin had moved from the back of the pack to the middle. While 25 states scored higher than Wisconsin, the others were either lower or did not bother to apply. Wisconsin managed a respectable score of 350 out of 500 possible points. Unfortunately, this was 60 less than the cutoff for finalists and 100 points less than the winners.

In the wake of the announcements of the first-round winners, an impression took hold that wide stakeholder buy-in, particularly from unions, was critical to winning. The near-unanimous union support enjoyed by the two winning states, compared to the almost nonexistent support in Wisconsin, reinforced this impression. Yet an examination of the states closely behind the two winners undermines the notion that such support is needed to win.

The next three states in the rankings all had weak or nonexistent union support. Yet these states led Wisconsin by almost 100 points.

If the lack of union support did not kill us, what did? There are eight sections of Wisconsin's application where reviewers deducted 10 or more points. A common theme emerges from the comments on these sections: Wisconsin did not show that it used student achievement data to inform its decision-making. This theme kept recurring, whether the topic was selecting, retaining and paying teachers and principals, improving teacher preparation programs or analyzing what programs should be selected to improve student outcomes.

In contrast to states that made the finalist list, Wisconsin did not have systems for using student outcome data. And Wisconsin's plans to develop such systems were viewed as tentative and weak.

Other states are in the midst of refining effective systems for using research to drive decision-making. Private organizations such as New Leaders for New Schools and Teach for America track student progress to judge teachers and principals.

Unfortunately, Wisconsin seems to have drawn the wrong conclusion from the first Race to the Top round, sacrificing effective use of student outcomes data on the altar of consensus.

A bill approved in the just-concluded legislative session opened the door a small crack, mentioning the use of "improvement in pupil academic achievement" in teacher and principal evaluations, but only for the lowest-performing 5% of schools. I could find no other mention in the bill of using this data.

The ultimate aim, of course, is not to win Race to the Top funds; it is to improve student outcomes. But unless the Wisconsin educational community overcomes its antipathy to using student achievement data to make better decisions, progress is likely to be limited.

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