

Winning the Race to the Top: What are the best reform strategies for K-12 education?

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As a native of New Orleans, I am not accustomed to my home state performing well when it comes to rankings of health, education, and welfare. Unless the category is food, culture, or top tourist destinations, we tend to dwell near the bottom of the pack. Given this, it is a striking reversal of fortune that Louisiana is frequently mentioned as a front-runner in the US Department of Education's "Race to the Top". How did this come to be? What could we in Georgia learn from this somewhat startling development?

To be sure, the state of public education in New Orleans and Atlanta is quite different. The New Orleans school system is marked by a recovering local economy, a state takeover, and a dramatic reinvention in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The Atlanta school system is characterized by a close partnership between the business community, school board, and superintendent that has led to steady improvement and national accolades.

Yet in spite of these differences, I believe we in Georgia can take at least one lesson from Louisiana when it comes to the Race to the Top. Our state should invest in innovative non-profits that help attract talented people into the field of public education.

This view is undoubtedly shaped by the five years that I spent as a part of Teach For America. Teach For America is the national corps of outstanding recent college graduates of all academic majors and career interests who commit two years to teach in urban and rural public schools across the country.

Programs like Teach For America, New Leaders For New Schools, and the Broad Residency have given the Louisiana an edge in the Race to the Top. The state has turned to these programs to recruit ambitious young people into its classrooms, schools, and district offices. These "talent pipelines" help states win the Race to the Top in two main ways: (1) they recruit teachers and administrators with strong analytical skills; (2) they have a track record of producing exemplary leaders

The Race to the Top is designed to spur education innovation and reform; however, to meet the criteria set forth by the Department of Education, a state must accomplish many quantitative tasks: develop high-quality assessments, build data systems, measure performance, etc. Talent pipelines like Teach For America target individuals who excel in performance management and data-driven instruction.

Winning the Race to the Top also demands exemplary leaders who can turn around struggling schools and make education a statewide priority. In Louisiana, if you look at the leaders behind the state's highest performing schools and most successful non-profits they are often individuals who came to education through programs like Teach For America.

In conclusion, there are many promising reform strategies in education. But as the New Orleans experience has taught us, grand visions are only possible if you have people on the ground to achieve them. By investing in innovative non-profits that attract talented people into public education, Georgia can win the Race to the Top.