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Refusal of federal money for education affects Texas schoolchildren

By **David Stein and Marshall Doig**

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Gov. Rick Perry's decision not to compete for up to \$700 million in federal money for education may be a move that will make Texas schoolchildren suffer, a university professor said.

James Riddlesperger, a political science professor, said Perry's decision will only put funding for Texas education further behind.

"That money will be spent," Riddlesperger said. "It's already been appropriated. It's going to be spent somewhere, and what that means in terms of Texas is it puts Texas even farther behind in the competition than they would be."

According to a New York Times article, Texas officials spent more than 700 hours preparing the application for the grant, known as Race to the Top. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funded more than \$250,000 to hire consultants to assist the state in the process, according to the article. Perry's decision came just six days before the Jan. 19 application deadline.

According to the Department of Education's Web site, the competition will award \$4 billion to encourage states to improve teachers, overhaul schools and adopt common academic standards. Texas was one of four states eligible in Category 1, which meant the state was eligible for the grant's largest award, between \$350 million and \$700 million. New York, California and Florida were also eligible for Category 1 funding. Texas was the only Category 1 state not to apply.

In a Jan. 13 press release from Perry's office, he wrote that the money should be available to states with no strings attached. It would cost Texas taxpayers \$3 billion or more to realign the education system with a standard national curriculum, according to the press release.

Brooke Terry, senior policy analyst for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, said that although it is not specifically clear that states would have to adhere to a national curriculum if they accepted Race to the Top funds, the possibility of being held to national standards prompted Perry's decision to not apply for them.

"I think there's a real fear, since we don't really know what the national curriculum looks like, that it will be lower quality than what we currently have," Terry said.

Melody Johnson, superintendent of the Fort Worth Independent School District, said that she was disappointed in the governor's decision, adding that her district needs the funds, especially because of a state funding formula for public schools "fraught with problems."

She said that although the FWISD and the Austin Independent School District have the same demographics, Austin receives \$99 million more from the state because it is classified as a property-wealthy district while Fort Worth is a property-poor one.

Because of a freeze on school systems' income by the Texas Legislature at the 2005-2006 fiscal year levels, Johnson said the only way to get more money for the FWISD is to raise property taxes, which it is unlikely to do because of the current economic situation.

Johnson said the grant money could have been used by the district to create mentoring programs, open a school for boys and extend the school day and year for schools that need improvement.

Terry said that the money would not have made much of a difference because the amount distributed would be equal to spending \$75 per student, a tiny sum compared to the over \$11,000 per student per year she said the state spends.

Terry also said school districts could cut costs to make more funds available for other purposes.

"My question (to the districts) is, 'Have you really looked at how efficient you can be?'" Terry said.

About 85 percent of a district's total costs are for personnel, and districts that pay teachers extra for just having a master's degree could save \$124.5 million by not paying that extra salary, Terry said.

"There's a lot of things they can do (to cut costs)," she said. "If you can make a difference on your employee/staffing ratios and where you decide to put people as far as what your priorities are, that can make a big difference in your budget."

The four areas states are being asked to focus on with Race to the Top funds:

- Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy
- Building data systems that measure student growth and success and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction
- Recruiting, developing, rewarding and retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most
- Turning around the country's lowest-achieving schools

Source: U.S. Department of Education, [www.ed.gov](#)

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