



## INTERVIEW

# Delaware's Race to the Top: An Interview with Dr. Lillian M. Lowery

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# Delaware's Race to the Top: An Interview with Dr. Lillian M. Lowery

IN MARCH 2010, Delaware became one of two states to win the first round of the Race to the Top (RTT), a \$4.35 billion federally-funded grant program that promotes innovation and reform in U.S. education. Receiving the highest ranking, Delaware was granted \$107 million to use for state education reform over the next four years. The state has made a tremendous effort to follow the Race to the Top guidelines with a plan for all of its districts to improve struggling schools within two years and to create an actionable teacher evaluation system.

Leading this effort in Delaware is Dr. Lillian M. Lowery, Delaware's Secretary of Education. Prior to her appointment, Dr. Lowery served as Superintendent of Christina School District in Wilmington, Delaware. She has also served as Assistant Superintendent of Cluster VII for Fairfax County Public Schools, and as an Area Administrator for Fort Wayne Community Schools in Fort Wayne, Indiana. While serving as Superintendent of Christina School District, Dr. Lowery was a member of The District Management Council.

In this edited interview, DMC's John J-H Kim discusses with Dr. Lowery Delaware's Race to the Top plan and the state's unique approach to alignment and capacity-building in an effort to raise the bar on the state's student achievement.

**Congratulations on winning the first round of the Race to the Top grant program. Currently, there is an unprecedented alignment between the federal government, state government, and the local education agencies. This seems to be an incredible opportunity. In your mind, why did Delaware win this first round of Race to the Top?**

This is an unprecedented opportunity. I have been in education for many years, and this is the most exciting time I have ever experienced because all the stars are aligning. The benefit of having Delaware as part of this national work is that as a state, we have been aligned for some time. When the language for Race to the Top was published, we compared those guidelines with Governor Jack Markell's Blueprint for Education mandate as well

as the school reform priorities of Delawareans. We were aligned to the point that we were able to take the four assurances from Race to the Top—designing rigorous common core standards, monitoring growth in student learning, assessing and promoting effective teachers, and turning around failing schools—and match them to our four major goals for state education and build around this mission.

We aligned these goals down to the district level with the support of our Innovation Action Team (IAT)—an umbrella steering committee for state reform action. The team is comprised of all stakeholders—business leaders, foundation leaders, higher education institutions, and teachers. Everyone is at the table. This ensures that we are maximizing our resources—both human and fiscal. Getting everyone around the table forces a conversation about ▷

priorities and ensures that everyone’s voice is heard. This type of approach has benefited us; we compromised where we had to, and it enabled us to have 100% buy-in from our stakeholders. Before, we were making decisions in silos, but now, we work through the issues. We realize that we can get to the same end through different means, but we are focusing on the end goal. If we have to compromise a little on the means, we are willing to make that concession in the name of something greater.

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**You have spoken about capacity in many of your speeches. As we think about the unprecedented policy alignment that is happening right now, what are the most important capacity-building initiatives to be undertaken?**

We have to focus on support instead of compliance at the state level. Period. Our districts need real support through increased management and leadership capacities. Delaware is no different than most state education agencies (SEAs) in U.S. education. It’s easy to be a compliance-driven organization as we are funded through federal and state dollars that come with the understanding that we will implement certain codes and regulations with fidelity. We have people who are very meticulous around compliance-centered work, but we have to build capacity around providing greater support to the

### **Delaware’s Race to the Top application included the following:**

- Use of a data-based evaluation system
- Removal of teacher tenure (contingent upon teacher-effectiveness)
- Lifting the cap on charter schools
- 100% buy-in from districts and teachers’ unions

districts. As a part of our Race to the Top application, we created three offices to help carry out our plan to increase support-based capacity.

The first is a Teacher Leader Effectiveness unit, which provides data coaches to work with school leaders, and will certify all professional development activities and determine alternative routes for certification. We have never had that kind of support for districts before.

Another office is the Turnaround Office, which partners with Mass Insight Education to work with Delaware’s schools that are in the lowest 5% in terms of achievement. Mass Insight helps us determine whether to close, restart, or turn around these schools, and helps us choose the models and the partners to work with. Mass Insight gives us the capacity we don’t have. It is exciting to help write the rules of this particular model of school reform.

The third office is the Program Management Office, which works across all offices in the Delaware Department of Education. Jim Palmer, who leads this office, always makes the analogy that a trip to San Francisco is not merely driving across the Golden Gate Bridge and saying, “I’m here.” First, you need to map out the trip from Delaware to Pittsburgh, and so on. And, you need to account for the possibility of having a flat tire or running out of gas. The Program Management Office considers the obstacles that might prevent you from meeting your deadline. This office is like someone tapping us on the shoulder saying, “You need to have trained this many people by this date and you’re only halfway there.” It has been phenomenal to have someone focusing on the data points and ensuring that we are tracking the right metrics.



**We understand you will be documenting your implementation of Delaware’s Race to the Top plans, which we think will provide a lot of great lessons. People focus on what works, but we think it’s also important to know what doesn’t work.**

Delaware has been tasked to document the implementation of our work with regard to the Race to the Top grant money. The Project Management Office at the Delaware Department of Education will be working with the local education agencies monthly for feedback. If we are going to be a national model, we need to share broadly. If someone is looking at our model, they need to know what worked, and what to expect along the way—both successes and failures. When people really need to reform, knowing what didn’t go well can take away the surprise and frustration. We want to convey the message that if you encounter bumps along the road, you need to readjust and keep moving forward. This whole implementation process is a learning opportunity. It’s easy to be cynical and jaded and say, “Oh, here we go again with another silver bullet.” But, if they hear about where things didn’t work, they might listen to us.

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**In addition to building support through these offices, what are you going to do to build capacity at the district level?**

Let me give you an example. We had a conversation recently with a possible partner regarding data coaches. We were very clear that we will only have data coaches in the state for two years to train our teaching staff. I requested that this partner include instructional coaches, mentor teachers, and administrators so that we could broaden the skill sets of our staff. The only way to ensure that all this good work won’t stop after two years and be a casualty of the funding cliff is to build capacity among all state education employees. We have bright, smart people in this state who can get the work done, and we have to train them and prepare them. Every conversation we are having with >

anyone who is coming in with expertise includes showing us how you are going to make sure that when the money is gone we will have staff in the state that can carry on with this work.

**In education, so much of the work is focused on year-to-year budgets and on compliance. The initiatives you are now working on cannot happen in months or even in a few years. Do you think the four-year time period of Race to the Top has given people the ability to dream and strive a little bit longer?**

I think the timeframe of Race to the Top is just masterful. When we first started talking about this grant, they planned to have states spend the money over two years. But, state leaders didn't feel that we could accomplish something thought-provoking in such a short amount of time. It would have been about just spending the money. I thought it was great that Secretary Duncan spread the grant across four years. Additionally, after the fourth year, if some of the funds are already encumbered, we can go into a fifth year.

**With the serious funding issues that states and districts are facing, it becomes a question of how to do more with less. DMC defines innovation in this way: doing the same or even better with fewer resources. We are always trying to help districts figure out how to shift dollars into the classroom. How have you made innovation a priority in Delaware?**

This has been a huge focus for Delaware Governor Jack Markell. He has three goals for his first term: jobs, a smaller and more efficient government, and education. All three of those things are intertwined. At the state level, he has downsized departments by 1000 state employees in his first year. Our governor has asked us at the state and district level to look at operation costs, see how we can streamline them, and capture those dollars to put them back into the classroom. So much of the Department of

Education was built around programs that ended, but now we have the opportunity to redirect resources to higher value areas.

**In education, you work so much within your own boundaries that it often becomes the norm. You think you need a certain number of people to do the work because you have always done it that way. DMC is building a national database on how different departments operate, for example, special education. When you group like-districts by size and poverty level, the variability of operations management is apparent. How has your department coped with operational efficiency?**

We looked at state data, and found that at one point, we had almost tripled the number of folks in the Delaware Department of Education because we had the money to run in a fiscally solvent way. However, now we are getting back to our core beliefs in order to streamline our staff. Our public is calling for a smaller, more efficient government, a responsibility that we accept. Now that people are losing their homes and jobs, it becomes a matter of what makes sense in this environment. Out of the uncertainty comes something good; it has forced us to be leaner and more efficient.

**Interesting. As you know, we started DMC with the idea that there is much intersection between districts—regardless of size, location, and type. We work with large, urban districts right down to small, suburban ones. Bottom line: everybody is looking for resources. How do you encourage your districts to work together?**

Our school districts have to match the state's scope of work. As part of Delaware's Race to the Top submission, we had our districts sign a Memorandum of Understanding to guarantee their participation in the program. In designing this plan, we encouraged similar districts in close proximity to share the cost of their programs. Scale makes a difference; you can spread your dollars further.

**Now that you have gone from being a district superintendent to working at the state level, what advice can you give DMC readers? Our readership, leaders of districts of varying sizes, look at state agencies from a compliance-oriented perspective. You obviously want to give support and cover. What advice do you want to give them? How can they take advantage of your offerings in a better way?**

I believe that school leaders should push back and demand what they need from their state superintendents and education departments. Coming from working in a district to now leading a state education agency has opened my eyes to the importance of policy. I used to grumble about policy, working to get it out of the way. I wanted to go do the real work. Now, I realize how much policy matters. Somebody—the state education agency—has to constantly review and be proactive in education policy work. If the policy is in place, the work will get done. District leaders should provide feedback to their state education agencies: are the policies too restrictive or burdensome? Are they irrelevant? Secretary Arne Duncan was so masterful with the Race to the Top because he didn't give out a penny before he had changed the world. I am sure there were states and districts that wanted to make changes a long time ago, but never had the political cover like they have today. State education agencies should embrace this moment and make sure they are always working in the best interest of their schools and within the context of their state.

**You have said state education agencies tend to be compliance-focused, but now you are switching your style. Can you expand on the role of the Delaware Department of Education?**

Four years ago, we asked someone from Research and Development from the University of Delaware to conduct focus groups with superintendents and directors of our charter schools. A loud and clear message came from the focus groups that these leaders needed the state to find support for them.

For example, they want to be able to come to the Department of Education for help with issues such as special education resources. They needed someone to help them write Individualized Education Programs and to live through those accommodations with students and their families. These leaders wanted the state to find the experts that will support their needs. They don't need us to say, "You didn't dot that 'i' or cross that 't.'" Superintendents want us to be a resource. Our Teacher Leadership Effectiveness Office now locates the external partners to help the districts. That's the power of getting feedback from the people who matter instead of wondering what they might need. We have to give districts cover when they need it so that they can focus on their work. We have become a sort of Research and Development resource for them. For example, we have Memoranda of Understanding with all institutes of higher education and can work with them to facilitate training and professional development as needed.

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**Several DMC members have become state secretaries or commissioners of education such as Eric Smith (Florida) and Bill Harrison (North Carolina). Perhaps with such programs as Race to the Top, this job has more appeal. Would you agree?**

With this kind of exciting work, it is definitely a desirable position. I appreciate that Secretary Duncan has empowered the state education agencies >

to take charge of initiatives like Race to the Top. He was considering placing this work at the district level, but I believe he realized he could get more scale and impact with the state education agencies from a policy standpoint. This decision has really energized our work.

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**You are clearly thinking about having a long-term impact.**

Our legislators asked the Department of Education to present a long-term spending plan. Part of our work was figuring out that it will cost \$8.5 million annually to sustain this plan after the Race to the Top money goes away. We had to have a cohesive, cogent explanation of how this plan of capacity-building and structure-implementation will make a difference to Delaware schools. At the end of the day, \$8.5 million out of a \$3.5 billion budget is doable. Spelling it out for the legislature empowered them to hold us accountable. I loved doing this work because it forced us to think critically about how we would fund and implement our plan and stay focused on long-term objectives.

**Oftentimes, a school leader has a goal, but doesn't know exactly how it will be reached. What advice can you offer school leaders as they set their strategies for the coming school year?**

This is a time for us to embrace change. The good news is that we are not doing it in isolation anymore. This is a national movement. We can have broad

discussions with people across the country because we are all trying to figure this out. Much of the work we are talking about doing has never been done before, so we get to be the pacesetters and lead us all to the new frontier. I hope all school leaders come on board and embrace it.

**DMC likes to address the “midnight concerns” or rather the most pressing challenges for superintendents. What are your “midnight concerns” as secretary of education?**

What keeps me up at night is worrying about being able to show results. And my other concern is wanting to make sure we explain *how* we achieve those results. We are journaling about our activities, which keeps us focused and will help us explain the process. In Delaware, people acknowledge the hard work we have ahead of us with the implementation of our Race to the Top plan. I encourage them to look at the incredible opportunity we have to be innovative—to write a new page of education policy. The Race to the Top grant gives us the chance to think as broadly and creatively as we can. Who would pass that up? The federal government is putting its faith in us, and putting their money where their mouth is. And now, I want to make sure we can show them results. I keep thinking that if we don't pull it together with Race to the Top, public education will probably never be funded to this level again.

Things change rapidly in the education world. Four years ago, I was part of a large district-level administration. Two years later, I became the superintendent, and now I am in charge of state education. We make decisions based on our frame of reference, which gets outdated very quickly. I believe in giving district leaders the support or the “cover” that they need to innovate in their space. Everyone is thrilled that we won the Race to the Top funds, but it's not excess money. We have allocated the entire \$100 million award in support of district leaders. And now it's time to get working. □



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