

Del.'s "Race to The Top" can't forget the bottom

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Delaware is one of 16 finalists for education grants under the federal government's \$4 billion stimulus-funded Race to the Top education competition.

The Obama administration wants states to reform standards and assessments to prepare students to succeed in college, the workplace and compete in the global economy; build data systems to measure student growth and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction; recruit, develop, reward, and retain effective teachers and principals; and turn around our lowest-achieving schools.

These are laudable goals. However, one question is, will this effort reach students at the bottom?

During his campaign, President Obama spoke emphatically about "crumbling schools that are stealing the future of black children and white children" and "shuttered mills and homes for sale that once belonged to Americans from all walks of life."

In Delaware, one problem with public education is the high dropout rate. According to state records, Delaware's high school dropout rate is 20 percent higher than a decade ago. The rate rose at the same time public school enrollment was rising. Moreover, an increased percentage of the dropout population is leaving school with only a ninth-grade education.

During the last decade, Delaware has had hundreds more dropouts than in the 1990s. In the 1994-95 school year, the rate was 4.63 percent, based on an enrollment of 29,994 students. This meant 1,389 youths left school without graduating.

In 2007, the rate was up to 5.44 percent, but with an enrollment of 37,258, more than 2,026 students left school that year, representing a 46 percent increase in the number of dropouts.

But Delaware's dropout problem is not a minority issue. In 2007, 46 percent of Delaware's dropout population was white, 41 percent black and 11 percent Hispanic.

Another problem is "high poverty" schools. Those serving a large percentage of children from low-income families have significantly lower student test scores. They also have high student mobility, absenteeism, and disciplinary problems, of which Delaware has a number.

The state has made remarkable progress in improving public schools. It must ensure that its Race to the Top participation includes those at the bottom.

Harvard University professor and author William Julius Wilson will address this and other questions involving race and class April 6 at the University of Delaware. His most recent work is "More than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City."

The free lecture is open to the public. Advance registration is appreciated at www.udconnection.com/cepp or call (302) 831-3169.

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