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Schools have mixed reactions about grant

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The federal government is poised to give Ohio school districts up to \$400 million to improve education, but 60 percent of them said no thanks.

The "Race to the Top" grant money is intended to create programs that will help students participate in the global economy, find innovative ways to track student success, reward teachers who are most effective and improve the lowest-achieving schools.

While state officials touted the grant program as positive in all aspects, local school officials had mixed reactions. Grant language is vague, and as a result officials had different interpretations of what it meant.

Fremont City Schools Superintendent Traci McCaudy and Gibsonburg Exempted Village Schools Tom Peiffer were not available for comment Friday. Their districts filed an intent to be a part of the Race to the Top program if money is allocated, according to the Ohio Department of Education.

Andrea Smith, curriculum director at Benton-Carroll-Salem Local School District in Ottawa County, sees the grant program as an opportunity to provide more professional development.

Superintendent Diane Kershaw said she was concerned, however, because the language did not provide enough detail.

"The pieces led us to believe that (the grant allowed for) creative technology and 21st century initiatives," Smith said.

In Richland County, Clear Fork Valley Superintendent Daniel Freund said he'd like to use grant money to find ways to make quarterly assessments of both teacher and student performance. He also supports provisions in the grant that allow expansion of technology in the classroom.

"It's an opportunity for school districts to look at and formally assess our evaluations of student programs and teacher impact," Freund said.

He is adamantly opposed, however, to a compensation model that rewards teachers for student performance. Teaching is a team effort, so any merit benefits should be disbursed building-wide, he said.

Freund said has concerns because the grant's language is vague, but said the district could always opt out later.

For now, "We really want to be part of the conversation," he said.

Other districts applying were also concerned about the unknown implications, but cited the opt-out clause.

Pleasant Local Schools in Marion County filed a notice of intent, superintendent Stephen Larcomb said in an e-mail. Larcomb said they would not be allowed to apply for the grant if they changed their

mind later on, but could always back out.

In Crawford County, the Colonel Crawford Local School District was one of many across Ohio that did not apply.

Superintendent Ted Bruner said the criteria was vague and "packed thoroughly with a political agenda."

He said the issues of rewarding teachers based on merit and evaluating them based on test scores clashed with the district's negotiation agreement.

Timing is the reason Ridgedale Local Schools in Marion County opted against it. Superintendent Robert Britton said there were too many unanswered questions and not enough time to discuss the grant with all interested parties.

Jim Craycraft, interim superintendent of Elgin Local Schools in Marion County, also noted the short time frame.

He said the teachers union also had trepidation, because it could affect collective bargaining.

Despite local union woes over how this may affect contracts, Randy Flora, director of educational policy and coalition relations for the Ohio Education Association expects his organization to back the grant program. However, he agrees the decision to participate should be made on a local level.

"I'm pleased that as many signed on as they did," Flora said. "It gives us the opportunity to make changes in districts, but also respect unions who don't want to participate."

Sue Taylor, president of the Ohio Federation of Teachers, said her organization also backs the grant program.

School officials faced a hurdle in getting grant applications in because of the deadline schedule, which fell over winter break.

Districts getting grant money will be able to devise and implement a new teacher evaluation system that will be more in-depth and up-to-date, Taylor said.

"The grant will allow us to make revisions, look at innovation and do it in a collaborative way," Taylor said. "It sets expectations for an in-depth collaboration for a two-way conversation between teachers and administrators."

Kurt Moore contributed to this report.
