

Gov. Rick Scott: Let's compete for \$100 million Race to Top grant for young kids

But lawmakers must accept other federal money before qualifying for Race to the Top grant

By [Leslie Postal](#), Orlando Sentinel

9:10 PM EDT, August 25, 2011

Florida plans to compete for \$100 million in the federal government's latest Race to the Top program, assuming the Florida Legislature is willing to accept other federal money it had previously rejected.

To apply for the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge, which is designed to improve the care and education of young children, states must be taking part in a federal home-visiting program meant to prevent child abuse.

The Florida Legislature had rejected that home-visiting grant money because it is now part of President Barack Obama's health-care overhaul law, which the state's Republican leaders view as unconstitutional and are challenging in court.

Lawmakers turned down, gave back or refused to apply for more than \$50 million in federal grants tied to the law.

Scott, however, has decided to ask them to reconsider the home-visiting grant, said spokesman Amy Graham.

"We do plan to apply for the Race to the Top Grant," Graham said in an email. "We are hopeful that the Legislature will grant the spending authority" for the home-visiting grant.

The governor must sign the Race to the Top application, which is due in Washington, D.C., by Oct. 19.

Because the home-visiting grant, which Florida had accepted previously, was "not for implementation of Obamacare," Scott was never opposed to it, Graham said, referring to the Affordable Care Act.

In fact, she added, Scott asked for the budget authority to get the grant money during the legislative session this spring, and lawmakers denied that.

Scott wants the Legislative Budget Commission to consider the new request for the home-visiting grant at its next meeting Sept. 7, Graham said.

"We're presently evaluating the budget amendment submitted by the Governor's Office, but we have not received any notification from the Governor's Office of a formal intent to apply for this new phase of the Race to the Top grant," said Erin Rock, a spokesman for the Florida House of Representatives.

A spokesman for Senate President Mike Haridopolos could not be reached for comment.

Early-childhood advocates would be delighted if Florida applied for the new Race to the Top competition. They see it as a way for Florida to boost existing programs, better train early-childhood teachers and coordinate the often-fractured systems that work with babies and young children.

The grant "gives Florida unprecedented possibilities for investing in an infrastructure that can produce a generation that is happier, healthier and smarter than any that came before. We are thrilled to have this opportunity!" said Mimi Graham, director of Florida State University's Center for Prevention and Early Intervention Policy, in an email.

Graham said investing in early-childhood programs is sound fiscal policy, "critical to Florida's future workforce" and much needed in a state where "ranking in child health and well-being remains dismal."

Florida won \$700 million in the first Race to the Top competition, a federal effort to push states to reform public education.

The new competition focuses on young children before they start formal schooling, with a particular emphasis on "promoting school readiness for children with high needs."

The U.S. Department of Education plans to announce winners in December. It has \$500 million to divvy up and has said awards will range from \$50 million to \$100 million, depending on state population and plans. Florida is eligible for the largest award.

Thirty-six other states and the District of Columbia had said previously that they planned to compete for the money.

"These funds would allow Florida to further improve the quality of school readiness programs, the state's Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten program, the Head Start program and school-aged (or after school) programs," said Scott's office in an email. "While it makes sense for Florida to join all of the other eligible states in taking advantage of these funds, it is important that everyone understands these are not recurring funds and should not be relied on to create new government programs/positions."

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