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Oklahoma should lead race for early childhood funds

THERE are two schools of thought on a \$5 billion fund created as part of the economic stimulus package to reward and encourage innovation in schools and school districts throughout the country. One is that the newly named "Race to the Top" fund overseen by [Education Secretary Arne Duncan](#) has the makings of a gigantic slush fund. Another is that it's an opportunity for states and schools to advance reform and bolster programs they already know are working.

For [Oklahoma](#), the race to the top should begin, well, at the beginning with a specific effort to boost its already nationally recognized early childhood education programs.

Many details are lacking about the federal education money, and a formal application process isn't yet in place. The biggest chunk of the \$5 billion will be doled out as grants to states that are making progress in maintaining state funding; placing quality and experienced teachers in high-need schools; improving data systems; and improving standards and assessments. But \$650 million will be reserved for school districts, partnerships between nonprofits and schools or a consortium of schools that meet certain criteria and can get matching funds via the private sector.

It's from the latter that we see a rare opportunity to think even more boldly and strategically about improving learning for Oklahoma's young children. Oklahoma has come far in this arena, with the vast majority of the state's 4- and 5-year-olds in pre-kindergarten and full-day kindergarten programs. Such programs are vital for the many children who are starting school already far behind their peers academically and socially.

[Tulsa](#) has found particular support for its Educare center that focuses on helping low-income children from birth to 5 or children with special needs and their families. The center has become an important part of its neighborhood's fabric and was created as a result of public and private groups looking to break the cycle of poverty. Tulsa has plans for a second center with dreams of many more; one is scheduled to open in [Oklahoma City](#) later this year.

Expanding and creating such programs — along with insightful research as to what works best — would be a huge boost for the state's urban centers and need not be limited only to the urban districts. Because Oklahoma's school district boundaries often have little do with established city limits, Oklahoma City and Tulsa aren't the only districts grappling with how to best educate inner-city children. Traditionally suburban districts such as Putnam City and [Midwest City-Del City](#) face similar challenges and have significant populations of low-income students.

[President Obama](#) has been clear that improving and expanding early childhood education is on his agenda. Here's Oklahoma's chance to be at the center of those efforts.