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News Release

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“Colorado’s Collaborative Approach To Education Reform”

By Bill Ritter Jr., Barbara O’Brien and Dwight Jones

Colorado has officially joined 40 other states in the federal Race to the Top competition with a bold education-reform proposal that will serve as a blueprint for years to come.

With input from more than 600 people, Colorado’s ambitious application builds on three years of nationally recognized reforms, while charting a new path that will improve the way students learn and the way teachers teach. The plan sets specific goals and deadlines to improve students’ math and reading skills and increase the high school graduation rate.

We are optimistic about Colorado’s chances of securing a Race to the Top grant, because Colorado has been racing to the top for years. Thanks to unprecedented bi-partisan cooperation from educators, policymakers and business and community leaders, we already are transforming Colorado’s education future.

Our \$377 million proposal once again demonstrates that in Colorado we do our best work when we work together. Collaboration is the Colorado way. School districts serving nearly 95 percent of Colorado’s 800,000 public school students signed onto our proposal. Dozens of organizations from every corner of Colorado support the application.

Rather than imposing top-down mandates, our proposal is grounded in the belief that achieving excellence, inspiring innovation, strengthening accountability and implementing fundamental changes happen only when all parts of the education engine move forward together. Our teachers and principals, who will have the responsibility to implement these reforms each and every day, must be our strong partners. We cannot and should not demonize those who are the linchpins of reform.

A cornerstone of our application is the need for great teachers and principals in all schools. Each of the 134 participating school districts must meet clear goals, including use of student growth to evaluate teacher and principal effectiveness and to make high-stakes decisions, such as retention, compensation and dismissal. It also strengthens teacher professional development so all teachers have the opportunity to become great teachers.

The proposal is supported by an executive order that fundamentally changes tenure in Colorado, linking tenure to teacher and student performance. Colorado's application is further bolstered by Senate Bill 10-036, which makes Colorado one of the first states to track teacher performance back to the universities that prepared them. This will allow us to determine which teacher preparation programs are working and which need to be improved.

The Race to the Top application marks a milestone on the road to reform, a road Colorado has been traveling for years. Thanks to Colorado's thoughtful, balanced and collaborative approach, we have produced reform after reform since 2007 without the partisan rancor that has stalled efforts to transform education in previous decades and in other states.

We engaged dozens of stakeholders in a new P-20 Education Council, a panel of education and business experts that recommended numerous policy changes now being implemented quietly, effectively and with bipartisan support.

The legislature overwhelmingly approved the Colorado Achievement Plan for Kids, which is creating a seamless path to educational excellence by aligning classroom content standards and assessment tests from pre-school to college.

We enacted what is believed to be the nation's first statewide five-year dual-enrollment program, allowing students to simultaneously earn a high school diploma and a college associate's degree.

We are sending more children to pre-school and full-day kindergarten programs than ever before. And Colorado's data system and student growth model are so successful that other states have already begun to adopt them. Visit www.schoolview.org to see how your school and district are performing.

We are accomplishing much, and our Race to the Top proposal keeps us on track to achieve our long-term goals of reducing the dropout rate, increasing high school and college graduation rates and closing achievement gaps.

By working together, Colorado already is winning the race to improve student learning.

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Bill Ritter Jr. is the 41st governor of Colorado; Barbara O'Brien is the lieutenant governor of Colorado; Dwight D. Jones is the Colorado Commissioner of Education.

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