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Stimulus money could help reshape Md. schools

State could get federal dollars to revamp curriculum, standards and tests

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Maryland appears likely to compete for a large pot of federal dollars that could require the winner, or a consortium of winning states, to adopt wide-ranging changes to what is taught in the classroom and measured by tests.

The economic stimulus package includes \$5 billion for states that want to raise academic standards, create databases and adopt new assessments. U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan said in a recent teleconference with news media that he wants to "invest in a small number of states that are willing to challenge the status quo."

That came days after he discussed the stimulus package with Gov. Martin O'Malley and the governors of Georgia, Kansas, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Virginia at the National Governors Association conference. The next day, O'Malley urged the Maryland State Board of Education to work toward many of the measures that are being pushed by Duncan.

Giving priority to the governor's request, the board will hold a special meeting on Wednesday to discuss his goals. O'Malley said Maryland has an opportunity to make the state's public school students competitive on an international level. What that might mean in the classroom is unclear, but it could include changes to curriculum, teacher training or the sequence of courses for students.

Maryland, which recently received two first-place rankings for the performance of its schools, would have to draft a proposal and could consider joining with states such as Virginia to apply for the competitive grants. Duncan said he would move quickly to disburse the \$5 billion "race to the top" grants by requesting proposals soon and moving to the selection process by the end of the summer.

The federal dollars are expected to go to states that improve standards, which are written to reflect what should be taught in classrooms. In Maryland, teachers are required to teach to the standards because their students will be tested on that material on the Maryland School Assessments.

National education experts have looked at the wide variations among state standards and have called for greater consistency. With nearly every state giving students a different test, results in

Iowa or Virginia cannot be adequately compared with those in Maryland or Massachusetts. The Fordham Foundation recently issued a report that says that a school considered failing in one state might be doing fine if it were in a different one.

While most states would not endorse a national curriculum imposed by the federal government, as is common in other countries, there has been growing sentiment for a grass-roots approach by the states. The National Governors Association recently adopted a policy that supports states joining "to develop a common core of state standards for English language arts and math that are internationally benchmarked to ensure that students can compete in the global economy."

The nonprofit group Achieve has been working to write what could become the prototype for such standards. Achieve, founded by governors and business leaders, expects to complete standards in math, science, writing and reading by fall. Maryland schools Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick said she supports the work of Achieve and believes that its standards could be a first step.

Those new standards, said Matt Gandal, executive vice president of Achieve, would address what schools should teach to get American students ready for college and careers, as well as to make them competitive internationally. If the High School Assessments that Maryland now requires all seniors to pass to graduate are viewed as the minimum, the new standards would be considered the next step for states to take to ensure that their students are prepared.

Gandal said Duncan has been talking about making sure that American students are taught material that makes them competitive around the globe. The federal stimulus money, he said, could be "a serious lever to change the way we do things in education. ... It could be a great opportunity for governors and others willing to step up and aim high."

But if Maryland were to adopt new standards, it would probably give up the Maryland School Assessments and write new tests, perhaps in collaboration with other states. Such an effort to set common standards and write common assessments would mean that what is being taught in Virginia might be much closer to what is taught in Maryland or Pennsylvania.

Grasmick said the change could be good for students, given the mobility of families in the Mid-Atlantic region.

She has had the state participate for several years in Achieve's efforts. A year ago, O'Malley brought in an expert on international testing to brief lawmakers in Annapolis.

Federal funding could also help pay for a tracking system. Grasmick said Maryland is far behind other states in having a common database that tracks both students and teachers, and she said she hopes to get such a system in place quickly.

"We are working on it in a robust way," Grasmick said. "In this regard, we are not as competitive as other states."

One part of such a system, providing an identifying number that stays with students through

college, has been initiated, but the state does not track teachers in a similar manner. Although a touchy issue for unions, many states can track the success of a teacher's students, or they can see whether the students of teachers who got a particular kind of training did better on tests.