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Editorial: State can't let money slip away

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Last month, President Barack Obama announced a national competition among the states for \$4.35 billion in Race to the Top grants, the largest pot of money for education reform in U.S. history. Education Secretary Arne Duncan has called the effort the "equivalent of education reform's moon shot."

California, of course, should tap this fund to make big improvements in student achievement. Obama has made it clear that states leading the way in four core areas can win hundreds of millions of dollars, if they can show that they are:

- Setting and enforcing rigorous standards.
- Turning around historically low-performing schools.
- Using data to determine student needs and measure teacher effectiveness.
- Putting outstanding teachers in classrooms, especially in high-poverty schools and in hard-to-staff subjects such as math, science and special education.

On the teacher front, California has one advantage and one major disadvantage in seeking the grants.

States have to show that they have alternative routes to certification for teachers, in addition to the traditional education school degree. Since the 1980s, California has had alternative programs that tap second-career professionals to teach in public schools with the greatest needs.

Over the past six years, nearly 50,000 teachers have come through these programs. In fact, half of the math teachers the state credentialed last year came out of alternative programs.

These mid-career recruits have deep content expertise and life experience. They most often cite a desire to "give back" and to "serve the community" as a reason to switch to teaching – and 80 percent remain in teaching after five years.

Mary Osteen, who teaches at Sacramento's Einstein Middle School, is an example. She worked for 20 years in Sacramento law firms and decided she wanted to "do something profound for society." She went to Project Impact, an alternative certification program, did an intensive summer of classes two nights a week and then hit the classroom with lots of support from seasoned teacher mentors. She said the preparation was

"incomparable for its thoroughness and speed." And for giving her a toolbox of techniques and materials for reaching a diverse student body.

And now the alternative path to teaching ought to grow even stronger as 70-plus alternative programs have created an umbrella organization, the California Teacher Corps, with the goal of recruiting, training and placing 100,000 nontraditional, second-career professionals as teachers by 2020 (www.cateachercorps.org).

California, however, remains weak in a key area: measuring teacher effectiveness. As the president has said, "Success should be judged by results, and data is a powerful tool to determine results. ... That's why any state that makes it unlawful to link student progress to teacher evaluations will have to change its ways if it wants to compete for a grant." California is one of those states.

As this page has said in the past, the Legislature needs to repeal a state law that prohibits using student performance data to evaluate teachers.

States have the opportunity to compete for Race to the Top funds in two rounds. California should do what it takes to be among them.