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Maine Leading Initiative for Multistate Tech Buys

By **Sean Cavanagh**

A group of states has joined forces to arrange the purchase of an unusually comprehensive set of educational-technology devices and services, in a compact that could foreshadow other cooperative efforts by state and local governments attempting to turn the digital-procurement process to their advantage.

The initial partners in the multistate venture are Maine, which has taken the lead, as well as Hawaii and Vermont. But at least five other states have shown a tentative interest in coming on board, and the architects of the project say that other states, as well as individual school districts, could eventually sign up, hoping to obtain financial savings and gain leverage in purchasing.

Leaders of the undertaking, known as the **Multi-State Learning Technology Initiative**, say that a major factor driving the collaboration—and one that could help attract other states—is the development of the Common Core State Standards, an attempt to create uniform academic expectations across states.

Forty-six states—including all three initial participants in the multistate procurement—plus the District of Columbia have agreed to adopt common-core standards, and efforts are under way to craft assessments aligned to the standards. In their invitation to technology companies bidding to provide them with services, the initial state partners said that technology supplied by vendors must meet the guidelines given to states by a pair of consortia for the common-core tests, which will be given online.

"There's a much stronger incentive for states to collaborate than there was in the past," said Douglas Levin, the executive director of the **State Educational Technology Directors Association**, a Glen Burnie, Md.-based organization that backs the multistate venture. "There's a need for technology that people share on the same

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timeline ... without question, it's one way forward, and without question, we'll see more states go down this path."

'Piggyback' Potential

Maine has aggressively promoted the use of technology in its schools for years. A decade ago, the state launched an effort to provide middle school students with their own laptops, often described as a 1-to-1 venture. Today, all Maine public school students in grades 7-8 have their own laptops through the program, and about half of the state's high schools participate in it, according to the Maine education department.

Maine was scheduled to re-bid a contract that it currently has with Apple Inc., which has provided laptops through the program. Rather than putting out a request for proposals on their own, Maine officials worked with officials from other states in crafting a **solicitation**  that would satisfy all their needs. Hawaii and Vermont have helped Maine craft the proposal.

Three companies, who put forward a total of five proposals, were selected: Apple; CTL in Portland, Ore.; and Hewlett-Packard, which like Apple is based in the Silicon Valley. Contracts with those companies have not yet been made final, said Jeff Mao, the learning-technology policy director for Maine's department of education, who has helped coordinate the project.

In an amendment to the multistate solicitation, leaders of the initiative said that in addition to Hawaii, Maine, and Vermont, five states have shown an interest in participating: Massachusetts, Montana, New Jersey, Oklahoma, and South Carolina. But leaders of the initiative say other states have told them they're intrigued by the project, too.

The goal "is to get a lot of states involved who want the same things," Mr. Mao said. "Our hope is that other states can piggyback on top of this."

The multistate proposal is structured to allow individual districts and other government entities, such as charter schools, to participate, with approval from their state procurement officials, said Paul Stembler, the cooperative-development coordinator for the **WSCA/NASPO Cooperative Purchasing Organization**, a subsidiary of the National Association of State Procurement Officials, a Lexington, Ky.-based organization. Mr. Stembler helped state officials with the multistate procurement.

The clearest advantages offered by multistate purchasing agreements are that they give state and local governments the power to negotiate a lower price with vendors and leverage in requiring companies to provide certain products and services, if those companies hope to win contracts, Mr. Stembler said.

Cooperative state purchasing ventures took hold in the 1990s and have grown more widespread over time, Mr. Stembler said. Some of those efforts have included educational products, such as personal computers and servers.

But the Maine multistate proposal is unusual in the scope of the work required of companies, Mr. Stembler noted. The vendors are not only expected to provide devices which include iPads, tablets, and laptops—for teachers and students, but also wireless services, professional development for educators, and the ability to provide continued support and guaranteed, quick repair or replacement of devices.

Keith Krueger, the chief executive officer of the **Consortium for School Networking**, a professional association for district technology leaders, described the multistate arrangement as a common-sense strategy and an alternative to states and districts trying to make technology purchases "one at a time."

But Mr. Krueger also cautioned that even if states and districts know they can "get a great deal," through multistate cooperation, their biggest challenge is making sure the available technology makes sense for them, and that they consider "how are we going to implement it" in ways that help students and schools.

'Holistic' Approach

The project's potential to meet an array of needs was critical to Hawaii's participation, said Stephanie Shipton, a portfolio manager in the state department of education's office of strategic reform. Hawaii is planning to roll out a 1-to-1 computing initiative over the next three years for its 180,000-student school system. It has requested \$29 million from the state legislature over the next two years to accomplish that goal and create a statewide digital curriculum aligned to the common core. The state sees the technology project as part of a broader effort to create improved, more equitable, services across schools, she said.

"The last thing we wanted was to just back up a truck with devices to a school and hope for the best," said Ms. Shipton. "The RFP [was] really a request for a full solution—not just a request for a device."

If states and districts resist joining the multistate venture, it could be because they've already purchased other commercial technology products and are committed to them, Mr. Stembler said. In other cases, state or local officials may simply want to wait to see how the multistate project fares before jumping in, he speculated.

The holistic nature of the multistate request is very different from the requests educational technology vendors are used to seeing, which tend to be very "spec-based and configuration-based," said Mike Mahanay, the general manager of sales and marketing for **CTL**, one of the selected companies. He said he interpreted a **recent**

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RFP released by the 660,000-student Los Angeles Unified School District, which is trying to phase in a 1-to-1 computing program, as very similar to Maine's in requiring relatively broad services.

The amount of business that could come to CTL through the multistate contract would depend on several factors, Mr. Mahanay noted, such as state and local funding for school technology and the size of the technology projects policymakers choose to take on.

Yet if his company finalizes a deal with Maine and the other states, "it certainly would be a very big part of our business," he said. His company sees multi-state contracts as a positive development, one that "could open the door to more 1-to-1 [efforts] around the country."

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