Race to the Top, year one, is celebrated at middle school

By Jacqueline Reis TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF
jreis@telegram.com

MARLBORO — Sixth-grade students at 1st Lt. Charles W. Whitcomb Middle School took a break from doing an earth science assignment on laptop computers yesterday to talk to Gov. Deval L. Patrick about their work, which stems from the Race to the Top federal grant received a year ago.

"It's actually pretty good," 11-year-old David S. Lima said of Marlboro's STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) Early College High School initiative, which kicked off this fall with approximately 120 sixth-graders and 80 ninth-graders. The program will expand a grade a year into Grades 6-12 and will allow 11th-graders to take classes at Framingham State University. The initiative is one of six starting statewide; two of the others are in the Quaboag district and Worcester’s North High School.

The governor, state Secretary of Education S. Paul Reville, Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education Mitchell D. Chester and other state officials visited Marlboro to mark the one-year anniversary of the four-year, $250 million grant the state received from the federal Department of Education’s Race to the Top program. In Massachusetts, Race to the Top funding will reach more than 675,000 students in 258 districts, Mr. Chester said.

"I think of Race to the Top as something you can really complicate, but it boils down to a couple touchstones for me," Mr. Chester said. Those are ensuring students are prepared for life after high school, making sure teachers are rigorously evaluated and supported and turning around the lowest performing schools who can’t seem to improve without intervention.

Half of the $250 million will go to the 258 districts in the state who agreed to Race to the Top goals, such as using student performance as one factor in teacher evaluations. The state spent $5 million of its share in the fiscal year that ended June 30, according to a spokesman for the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The state learned it had won the $250 million grant in August 2010.

The money will help local school districts adopt the Common Core curriculum that it will share with 44 other states and which the state will fully implement in the 2013-2014 school year; plan and implement six STEM early college high schools; plan innovation schools, which give charter-school-likeautonomies to in-district schools; fund readiness centers designed to improve teaching; provide wraparound services to help students overcome non-academic obstacles to learning, such as a lack of healthcare or housing; and build a state data system to give teachers more immediate information on how their students are doing.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan joined Mr. Patrick and Mr. Reville on a conference call yesterday morning to mark the anniversary of the state’s participation in Race to the Top initiative, and Mr. Duncan praised Massachusetts for its commitment to reform and called the commonwealth “a great example for the country.”

“They know that education’s a critical, critical investment in our children’s future and also in the future of the nation’s economy,” he said.

Mr. Patrick, who said he visits a school at least once a week, praised Mr. Reville, of Worcester, as “a visionary” and said that the state will continue to try to close gaps between different groups of students, such as that between low-income students and their wealthier peers. The “continuing work is about ensuring that your ZIP code is not the determiner of your life outcome,” Mr. Patrick said.

Mr. Reville noted that the reforms that made Massachusetts a strong contender for Race to the Top, such as identifying the state’s 35 lowest performing and un-improving schools last year and making dramatic changes that have raised test scores at roughly two-thirds of them. A state law passed last year, the Act Relative to the Achievement Gap, also allowed for the creation of more charter schools and created innovation schools, a model that lets faculty at individual schools apply to their local School Committee for more autonomy over curriculum, hiring and other areas.

Those changes should also make the state a strong contender for a waiver to some of the federal 2002 No Child Left Behind Act
provisions, such as the requirement that all students be proficient in English and math by 2014 and meet benchmarks on the way there. Eighty-two percent of the state’s schools did not meet those benchmarks this year.

“The problem with No Child Left Behind and adequate yearly progress is that it’s not giving us much guidance when 80 percent of our schools are being identified as not measuring up,” Mr. Chester said. “We need a system that differentiates the schools we should be concerned about, the schools we should celebrate and the schools in between.”

Mr. Chester announced Tuesday that he will seek a waiver by the Nov. 14 deadline. He said yesterday that the waiver would not exempt the state from measuring student progress by race and ethnicity, income and ability, measures which have helped show which groups of students are struggling the most. “Subgroup measure is essential in my mind,” he said.

Also yesterday, Mr. Duncan touted the president’s American Jobs Act proposal, which he said would send $378 million to Massachusetts to support up to 4,900 educators’ jobs.