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Broad: New Award to Be 'Nobel' For Education

By Michelle R. Davis

Think Pulitzer Price or Nobel Prize. Then think education.

That's what philanthropist Eli Broad hopes people will do now that he's unveiled his Broad Prize for Urban Education.

Mr. Broad hopes the prize, announced March 15, will give urban school districts a goal to shoot for and bolster wavering confidence in America's public schools. The \$500,000 award, its creators say, will be the nation's largest cash prize for educational improvement.

"What will make the difference is recognizing a district and having other districts believe that they too can be recognized," Mr. Broad said. "It's important to get the public to believe that there can be reform and progress and student achievement in large urban districts."

The annual prize will be awarded by the Los Angeles-based Broad Foundation, created in 1999 to focus on philanthropy projects, including those involving education. The foundation provides funding to *Education Week* for coverage of leadership issues.

The prize will be awarded for the first time this summer to one of 108 eligible school districts across the country. Districts with more than 100,000 students are automatically eligible, but the pool also extends to districts with more than 35,000 students with at least 40 percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches and 40 percent ethnic-minority students. Proximity to urban areas also was a consideration, Mr. Broad said.

The list of eligible districts includes at least one district in each state. The foundation said the list of districts will be available on its Web site, www.broadfoundation.org, in the coming days.

The contest has no formal application process. Instead, a group of educators affiliated with the Austin-based National Center for Educational Accountability will evaluate the districts and winnow the field down for a panel of judges, who will then pick the winner. Frederick M. Hess, an assistant professor of government and education at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Va., will be among those who will do the initial evaluation.

The Broad prize will measure results instead of looking at the latest trends in K-12 instruction, Mr. Hess said.

"So often, the conversation is about what districts are trying to do and whether it's the right approach," he said. "What really matters is what works for kids."

The group of judges includes businessmen, politicians, and former U.S. Secretaries of Education Lamar Alexander and Richard W. Riley. They'll judge districts' success in improving test scores and in closing achievement gaps separating students of various ethnic and racial groups.

The prize will provide students in the winning district with scholarships for postsecondary education, said Melissa Bonney Ratcliff, a foundation spokeswoman. The education methods each winning district uses will be publicized to help other districts, she said.

Mr. Broad, the chairman of the financial-services company SunAmerica Inc., said he expects some criticism from those who believe the country should turn to public school alternatives like vouchers and charter schools. He's already getting some.

Chester E. Finn Jr., the president of the Washington-based Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, said the Broad Foundation's confidence in the public school system is misplaced.

"When I look at the truly broken school systems of America," he said, "they're so inert and helpless that I'm not sure that this incentive will do them much good."

In addition, many urban and large school districts have budgets measured in the hundreds of millions of dollars, Mr. Finn said. "This enormous amount of money [for the prize] is actually a modest amount of money" to such districts, he said.