



THE STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT / THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK / ALBANY, NY 12234

ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER
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September 5, 2012

Judith Johnson, Interim Superintendent
Mount Vernon City School District
165 North Columbus Ave.
Mount Vernon, NY 10553

RE: Notice of Award: Systemic Supports for District and School Turnaround Grant
Award Amount: \$267,320
Time Period: September 1, 2012 to August 31, 2014

Dear Superintendent Johnson:

The New York State Education Department, School Turnaround Office (NYSED STO) is pleased to inform you that the Mount Vernon City School District has been approved for the above referenced grant. As stated in the initial grant application, this award is contingent upon the submission and approval of the final Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the LEA and the partners no later than November 30, 2012.

The NYSED STO will serve as your lead program office for project oversight, assistance, monitoring, and reporting. Within the next several weeks you will be contacted by a representative from NYSED STO to set up an initial welcome and introduction telephone call.

We look forward to working with you and your leadership team on this innovative opportunity to improve student achievement in underperforming schools.

Sincerely,

Sally Bachofer

c: Owen Donovan

PROPOSAL NARRATIVE SUBMISSION

Executive Summary

Heralded by a powerful sense of urgency, school turnaround efforts supported by recent legislation, focus on dramatically improving student achievement in two-to-three years and building school and district capacity to sustain the improvements over time. This is the new reality that will undergird Mount Vernon School District (MVSD) school and district turnaround and transformation efforts. Currently, the leadership practices in the district that are required to promote school change lag behind the knowledge base of effective school and district leadership practices. Knowledge of the conditions for school change is widespread but effective practice is not readily apparent in the culture of our low performing schools. Without an embedded data- driven culture and focus on quality teaching and leading, our Priority and Focus schools will lack the information, direction and strategies to enable dramatic change in the school community and change in student performance. It is time for change to take place. The district has been identified as a Focus District due to having a Priority Middle School with 72% non-proficient students. The district's goal is to implement the turnaround model to drive and support dramatic, measurable and sustainable improvements in student achievement through district and school capacity building, developing a data-driven continuous improvement culture, and building the instructional capacity of teachers and leaders around Common Core implementation and effective practice.

The MVSD leadership is committed to implementing three research-based strategies necessary for the rapid, dramatic and sustained improvement needed for success with the turnaround model. Through previous work on school improvement with Teachscape, the district has a clearer understanding of how the following 3 strategies will support school and district turnaround:

- Building the capacity of district leaders to identify, mount and sustain the multidimensional processes necessary to dramatically raise and sustain student achievement as outlined in the RFP;
- Developing a data-driven continuous improvement culture in which all stakeholders are relentlessly focused on monitoring, measuring and driving student progress relative to clear, measurable, actionable and aggressive goals; and,
- Building the instructional capacity of teachers and building leaders to use data to provide rigorous and standard-based instruction focused on achievement.

The implementation of these strategies will be integrated rather than implemented piecemeal in order to disrupt the status quo and foster needed change.

ARRA legislation defines an instructional improvement system as: Tools that provide teachers, principals, and administrators with meaningful support for a cycle of continuous instructional improvement, including activities such as: instructional planning; gathering information (e.g., through formative assessments..., interim assessments..., assessing teacher and leader practices and looking at student work); analyzing information with the support of

rapid-time...reporting; using this information to inform decisions on appropriate next steps and improving teaching and leading practices...; and evaluating the effectiveness of the actions taken. Taken together, an instructional improvement system provides school districts and schools with a coherent set of interconnected tools and resources that support the implementation of the CCSS, vertically connecting standards, teaching and leading skills, and concepts across the grade levels, and horizontally aligning instructional pacing within each grade; multiple measures of student progress including delivery and reporting of student assessments; effective teacher and leader practices; and job-embedded professional learning for teachers and leaders to focus on their own professional development.

To assist the district in meeting the challenge of creating a continuous, interconnected improvement cycle, MVSD sought out partners with significant experience, expertise, processes and tools to support our low performing schools and build the capacity of school and district leadership for improvement priorities. Partners were selected because they possess a background of success in school and district turnaround efforts; a deep understanding of the research-based processes proven effective in building achievement-focused cultures; an array of tools and resources to support teacher improvement and promote instructional leadership; and the experience and expertise of specialists who have successfully turned around low performing schools. The district and its partner consortium will collaboratively work on building the capacity of leaders to identify, mount and sustain the multidimensional processes necessary to dramatically raise and sustain student achievement; developing a data-driven continuous improvement culture in which all stakeholders are relentlessly focused on monitoring, measuring and driving student progress relative to clear, measurable, actionable and aggressive goals; and, building the instructional capacity of teachers and leaders in low performing schools to provide rigorous and standard-based instruction around the NYSED Learning Standards including Common Core State Standards and the new APPR.

The district selected 3 partners based on the need to build district capacity around the following (3) strands: District Support Systems and Structures; Common Core State Standards Implementation and Embedding a System of Data-driven instruction (DDI)/inquiry in Chronically Underperforming Schools. Each partner had to be able to both lead and support key turnaround activities. The District desired to work with partners that were collaborative, resourceful and strong. While all 3 partners had significant experience in managing all the deliverables associated with the 3 strands, the district opted to have a lead partner to coordinate the key activities and deliverables for the project in conjunction with 2 other partners. The lead partner was also tasked with executing an agreed upon set of the deliverables under District Support Systems and Structures strand as detailed in the preliminary Memorandum of Understanding. The district's work with its 3 partners follows a model that speaks simultaneously to differentiation, coherence, alignment and coordination as the district "works on the work" with its "thought partners". The district and its partner consortium will jointly establish a set of common expectations to ensure that coherence informs the work and more importantly, principals and administrators will not become "crushed" under the various layers of support.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR), the District's lead partner is a national policy-research and reform-support organization, affiliated with Brown University that focuses on improving conditions and outcomes for all students in urban public schools, especially those attended by traditionally underserved children. AISR's vision is the transformation of traditional school systems into "smart education systems" that develop and integrate high-quality learning opportunities in all areas of students' lives –at school, at home, and in the community. AISR conducts research and evaluation; works with a variety of partners committed to educational improvement to build capacity in school districts and communities; and shares its work through print and Web publications. Rather than providing a specific reform design or model to be implemented, AISR's approach is to offer an array of tools and strategies to help districts and communities strengthen their local capacity to provide and sustain high-quality education for all students.

In the last three years, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform has worked with over 25 school systems to conduct and support inquiry and analysis into central office effectiveness; to design and implement strategic plans resulting from that analysis; to disseminate knowledge about resulting changes in central office and school district structures, policies and practices; and to convene and facilitate related networks of local stakeholders, sites, funders, and reform support organizations. Additionally in the last decade, AISR has conducted its intensive Central Office Review for Results and Equity (CORRE) in partnership with 9 school systems and their communities.

AISR work improves school system practice by developing:

- **More effective central office staff deployment**
- **Improved district/union relationship and results**
- **Greater public investment in the school system**
- **More strategic board planning and decision-making**
- **Better communication between central office and principals and parents/community**
- **Increased internal and external accountability for improvement**

Specifically, these efforts have led to many concrete changes in their partner district's policies and practices, including:

- **Redesigned Human Resource departments (Portland and Knox County, TN [Knoxville])**
- **Increased funding for the school system (Hamilton County, TN [Chattanooga])**
- **Leadership succession planning (Boston)**
- **Development of a Local Education Fund (Knox County)**
- **More effective principal leadership institutes (Nashville)**
- **Development of College Readiness indicators, measures and supports (Dallas, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and San Jose)**

Along with AISR, Bank Street College was selected to build capacity within the District Support Systems and Structures strand around leader and teacher effectiveness. Bank Street College of Education is an independent, fully accredited graduate institution located in New York City. The

College's Graduate School of Education offers several teacher education and building and district leadership preparation programs, some in partnership with local school districts and NYC, and others in specialized fields of math, special education, and the arts. The College has considerable experience in assessing the quality of its programs and impact on its graduates, including a major effort to redesign the teacher education curriculum, funded through federal and private support, and participation in a national project to ascertain the effectiveness of teacher graduates.

It is to be noted that while the Systemic Support Grant requires that partners assist primarily in the creation of a comprehensive, comprehensible and cohesive strategic plan built around the four capacity building strands, the district has requested that Bank Street College serve as the partner to begin working with ineffective and developing teachers and leaders concurrently while the plan is being constructed. The first task of the MVSD partner team will be a document review of recent reports and Curriculum audits and to identify themes and gaps that require addressing. The responsibility for the outlining and beginning the professional development work in year one will be that of Bank Street. The district holds to the belief that while turnaround work must be focused, it is neither neat nor linear. Hence multiple activities will be taking place at the same time; however, it is the responsibility of the lead partner, AISR to keep all activities moving in the same direction. Bank Street will develop a leadership seminar for Leadership development for improved teacher supervision and support. A leadership development priority for school leaders is teacher supervision and development, using the new APPR and core content standards to guide teachers in improving instruction and student learning. While the turnaround capacity building efforts are being implemented, concurrently principals and assistant principals will need to be able to:

- **Conduct low inference observations of teaching and student learning**
- **reliably differentiate rate teacher performance using an approved NYS teaching rubric**
- **Conduct efficacious pre- and post-feedback conferences for formal observations, and post-feedback conferences for informal teacher observations**
- **Engage teachers to work on improving areas of teaching practice, providing support and guidance**
- **Develop standards and data-based teacher improvement plans that improve teachers' capacity to improve student learning**
- **Navigate difficult conversations with teachers based on rubric-based and student achievement based feedback on performance.**

MCREL was selected to lead activities around capacity building on Common Core implementation and Embedding a System of Data-driven instruction (DDI)/inquiry in Chronically Underperforming Schools. MCREL is a recognized leader in education research. MCREL synthesizes existing knowledge about effective schools and classrooms and conducts

scientifically based research and evaluation studies. Through research, MCREL identified “what matters most”- five key leverage points that, if addressed correctly, are most likely to result in dramatic changes in student outcomes. MCREL has a track record for implementing “what works” and not just writing theoretical papers about them. MVSD identified with (3) of the conditions that can change the odds for all students posited by MCREL: creating high performance school cultures, developing data-driven, “high reliability” systems and guaranteeing challenging, engaging and intentional curriculum. The district needs to build capacity in each of these areas to transform school culture by helping teachers and leaders use data and research to focus on changes that generate quick wins and long term results.

Freedictionary.com defines a partnership as a relationship between individual or groups that is characterized by mutual cooperation and responsibility for the achievement of a specified goal. The partnership concept undergirds the turnaround approach as well as how resources and strategies will be accessed and incorporated. The schools are required to have partners within their own organization and their staff will be encouraged to work collaboratively in exploring the root causes of insufficient student achievement and trying out viable solutions. Teachers and administrators within schools are not apt to think of themselves as partners as suggested in the definition. They may belong to committees, teams or communities but they are not necessarily partners. Each school must recruit partners from within the building to create a dynamic school partner group focused and responsible for school turnaround activities. Implementation of the proposed reform strategies will be built upon a partner concept—developing each individual teacher and leader’s capacity for improved instruction and their collective capacity as professional learning communities and communities of practice. The same is true for the district partner group that will serve to support the within school partnerships and access the strategies, resources and support from external partner organizations. The partner groups will work together as follows:

School Partners will ensure effective implementation of school-specific processes by promoting and supporting the turnaround activities; **District Partners** will provide strategic leadership and the time and support for implementing the approved improvement plan; provide resources and incentives for completion of appropriate activities; **Outside Partners** are responsible for building district capacity to help leaders develop the processes and structures that drive and support measurable and sustainable change, using a developmental process that enables collective capacity building, from initiation through independence.

It is to be noted at the outset of this proposal that the district is addressing all the strands described in the RFP even though the funding cannot support such a comprehensive undertaking. The District believes that a piecemeal approach to school and district turnaround will not bring about the dramatic changes required and will likely result in practices that are back to “business as usual”. To enable comprehensive, sustainable change, the district will utilize the grant funding in its entirety in Year 1 and leverage funding from the district’s Title 11A and RTTT set asides to fund the work in Year 2 and to fund the cost of a .2 FTE Project Coordinator for the turnaround model. **A diagram showing the alignment and interconnectedness of these funding streams will be presented as part of the project design.**

The district believes that the approach to funding, planning and implementation of the turnaround work is integrative and aligned.

In addition to aligning fiscal and human resources, partner work will provide an opportunity during Year 1 for the district to integrate NYSED's protocols for the District Review. Because the district desires to break the cycle of "start and stop" initiatives and ensure that despite leadership changes, school improvement initiatives will continue, the approach to the plan design will include the creation of a District Accountability Committee to monitor the turnaround work engaged by district and partners. The committee will include two district administrators, one board trustee, four parents, three teachers and one business representative from the district. The committee will meet monthly to review plan development and implementation and to ensure that nothing impedes the turnaround process. In addition, the district and the partners will align the work with the expectations set forth in the NYSED ESEA Flexibility Waiver so to create a new, common, robust school and district review process that would compare a school's and district's practices to the optimal conditions of learning, as defined by the Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness (DTSDE) rubric.

The project will follow the NYSED format and protocols including the development of a calibration assurance process to ensure that there is a process in place for vetting all the recommendations and findings. By focusing on capacity building of district and school leadership teams, and by creating cohesive strategic plans to drive, support and sustain improvements, the overall partnership plan is designed to promote sustainability. The knowledge, skills, tools, processes and strategies developed over the next two years will build on improvements which, in turn, will be supported through strong instructional leadership at the school and district level.