

Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools

Highlights of State Support Systems for School Turnaround

Race to the Top States offer a wide range of supports for local educational agency (LEA) implementation of one of four school intervention models.¹ Some States allocate resources on a regional basis, while others coordinate resources at the State level. Certain States also use data tools to measure district needs, capacity and progress on key performance indicators. This paper provides a snapshot of the work of the 12 Race to the Top grantees (Phases 1 and 2). These highlights address topics and give examples for others interested in learning from early implementation efforts. They were drawn from Race to the Top States' Year 1 State-Specific Summary Reports, State websites and, where applicable, approved Elementary and Secondary Education Act flexibility waiver applications.

¹ Race to the Top States' plans include supporting their LEAs in turning around the lowest achieving schools by implementing one of the four school intervention models:

- Turnaround model: Replace the principal and rehire no more than 50 percent of the staff and grant the principal sufficient operational flexibility (including in staffing, calendars/time and budgeting) to fully implement a comprehensive approach to substantially improve student outcomes.
- Restart model: Convert a school or close and reopen it under a charter school operator, a charter management organization or an education management organization that has been selected through a rigorous review process.
- School closure model: Close a school and enroll the students who attended that school in other schools in the district that are higher achieving.
- Transformation model: Implement each of the following strategies:
 - (1) replace the principal and take steps to increase teacher and school leader effectiveness;
 - (2) institute comprehensive instructional reforms;
 - (3) increase learning time and create community-oriented schools; and
 - (4) provide operational flexibility and sustained support.

Delaware has a State website dedicated to school turnaround (www.deturnaround.org) that provides planning and technical resources to districts with turnaround schools in its Partnership Zone (PZ). The resources include a **self-assessment tool** to help districts determine a new PZ governance structure. PZ districts need to pursue one of two options: 1) realign current district staff roles and responsibilities by creating an in-district turnaround unit or 2) engage an external partner. The purpose of the PZ diagnostic tool is to determine the capacity of the district office and identify possible needs for external supports to implement dramatic and innovative school improvement strategies. See <http://www.deturnaround.org/pzresources/technical-assistance/ta-session-1-selecting-an-intervention-model-governance-stru/module-4-governance-structure-for-turnaround/>.

Every month, the **District of Columbia** sends each school **instruments to assess progress**. The District clusters its schools and a cluster lead addresses issues that come out of the assessments. Additionally, LEAs in the District input their schools' individualized improvement plans into a web-based tool comparable to Indistar® to obtain ongoing feedback and self-evaluation from schools. Provided by the Center on Innovation and Improvement, Indistar is a free, web-based customizable tool that is populated with indicators of evidence-based practices at the district, school and classroom levels to improve student learning. The system also accommodates rubrics for assessment of the indicators. See <http://osse.dc.gov/service/race-top> and <http://www.centerii.org/>.

To provide direct support to schools, **Florida** has created a **regional system of support**. Each of five regional teams throughout the State consists of an executive director; instructional specialists for reading, mathematics, science, career and technical education, and using data; reading and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics)

coordinators; and response to intervention specialists. Response to intervention specialists work with schools to develop data systems to identify and provide support to students with academic and behavioral problems. The regional system of support gives LEAs and schools access to a range of specialists with a record of increasing student achievement in low-performing schools. These regional teams work directly with schools and LEAs in the areas of curriculum and instruction, school and LEA leadership, school improvement planning, professional development, teacher quality and data analysis.

The support and assistance provided to each school are individualized to meet the needs of that LEA and school. The lowest performing schools, known as priority schools, receive the most support and are required to implement the most robust interventions.

LEAs receive technical assistance annually through face-to-face meetings, webinars and online technical assistance papers. Florida also provides a detailed school improvement annual reporting timeline for the LEAs. The timeline and its components serve to ensure that the LEAs and schools are clearly defining the needs, aligning resources and identifying support strategies to ensure school improvement outcomes. See <http://flbsi.org/schoolimprovelindex.htm> and <http://flbsi.org/SIP/>.

Georgia's interventions in its lowest achieving schools focus on aligning efforts across programs, developing a robust assistance and monitoring plan and providing summer programs to support staff in those schools. The State **Office of School Turnaround** coordinates the School Improvement Grant (SIG) and Race to the Top programs and its Elementary and Secondary Education Act accountability system to assist each of the State's lowest achieving schools in implementing its selected intervention model. See <http://www.doe.k12.ga.us/School-Turnaround/Pages/default.aspx>.

To coordinate efforts across Georgia's Department of Education, the State developed a crosswalk between SIG and Race to the Top program requirements to ensure alignment in Georgia's

approach to the two grant programs. To assess the quality of implementation of the intervention models in the selected schools, the State has a robust monitoring plan that includes the work of two school improvement specialists per school to provide assistance and support. One feature of Georgia's reform effort is that LEAs are required to identify a feeder school for each secondary school that is implementing one of the models. LEAs must develop a plan to work with this feeder school to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Georgia's monitoring plan covers detailed feedback on and assessments of the quality of implementation in these schools.

Hawaii identified two **Zones of School Innovation**, composed of 18 schools. The State operates as a single LEA and takes a community approach in creating zones based on existing organizational structures known as complex areas: if one school is identified as low performing, the entire feeder pattern is added to the zone. Under the Zones of School Innovation, reform plans are tailored for individual schools and rely on research-driven actions and strategies, attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers, providing data coaches, developing community partnerships and offering comprehensive support for students' nonacademic needs. Zones of School Innovation also serve as a means of piloting many of the State's reform initiatives in its Race to the Top plan before rolling them out to other areas in the State. Each zone is working with a lead partner to provide assistance to the schools in implementing their chosen turnaround models. See <http://hawaiidoereform.org/Zones-of-School-Innovation>.

Maryland's Breakthrough Center is a State Department of Education operation dedicated to coordinating, brokering and delivering support to districts and schools across the State. It aims to maximize the State's resources by partnering with local school districts to determine needs and necessary supports; identify, target and maximize resources in education, business, government and research centers; and create cross-district and cross-

sector access to people, programs and resources. See http://www.msde.maryland.gov/MSDE/divisions/leadership/programs/breakthrough_center.htm.

The center works with low-achieving schools to improve student performance by:

- Convening superintendents and LEA senior leadership from the two LEAs to review the requirements for turning around the lowest achieving schools and to identify the resources provided by the Race to the Top grant
- Administering a robust needs assessment in the lowest achieving schools and feeder schools to determine priorities for LEA and school action
- Collaborating with school districts to develop internal organizational structures within these districts to support the turnaround of the lowest achieving schools and their feeder schools
- Meeting monthly with senior leadership from districts with SIG schools to monitor the implementation of improvement strategies and their impact
- Providing feedback on the implementation of schools' intervention models, as required by the Federal SIG program, through site visits to each SIG school throughout the year
- Developing a directory of services available to the schools
- Providing job-embedded teacher professional development in reading and mathematics
- Providing leadership training for principals and their instructional leadership teams
- Building capacity for effective student services teams in all SIG schools and improving parent and community engagement

The **Massachusetts** Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has established six regional **District and School Assistance Centers** to help districts and their schools strategically access and use professional development and targeted assistance to

improve instruction and raise achievement for all students. In collaboration with partner organizations, District and School Assistance Centers use a regional approach that leverages the knowledge, skills and expertise of local educators to address shared needs through an emphasis on expanding district and school capacity for sustained improvement. The State has assembled a range of technical assistance resources for its districts with persistently low-performing schools. These resources include links to “Exploring Best Practices in School Redesign: Cases from the Field,” which highlight Massachusetts schools that have undergone the redesign process. See <http://www.doe.mass.edu/sdal/framework/level4/>.

New York has created a **School Turnaround Office** to provide comprehensive support for school innovation and the turnaround of low-achieving schools. The focus of this office is to:

- Provide access to information and models of best practice
- Create professional communities of practice across the State
- Connect districts and schools to key change partners and partner organizations
- Promote high-quality school design through funding and outreach

In addition, the School Turnaround Office awards grants through the School Innovation Fund to districts with persistently low-achieving schools to create new schools using specified design frameworks. The School Innovation Fund is designed to increase high school graduation rates, college persistence and college graduation rates by improving the availability of new high-quality seats for students at most risk for dropout, disengagement and poor academic performance. See <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/turnaround/>.

North Carolina's statewide system of support takes a regional approach to selecting and delivering technical assistance to its lowest achieving schools, in coordination with the State. It has partnered with Cambridge Education to develop the State's **Comprehensive Needs Assessment** and training protocol. The State considers the Comprehensive Needs Assessment to be its cornerstone of continuous improvement—ensuring the best possible education for all students.

The State sends a team of four people to conduct a two-day assessment and generate a comprehensive needs assessment report, which is provided to a coach who works with the school. The coach reviews the needs assessment report to help the principal develop a plan. An important component of this approach is that the assessment and development of the plan are entirely completed by someone who does not work with the school on an ongoing basis. Based on the results of the Comprehensive Needs Assessment, the district may be provided with one or more school transformation coaches to work with principals and school personnel.

North Carolina's Comprehensive Needs Assessment

- Provides districts and schools with a clear view of their strengths, areas for improvement, and challenges and successes
- Enables a systematic review of practices, processes and systems within a school district
- Assists district and school leadership in determining needs, examining their nature and causes and setting priorities for future action
- Guides the development of a meaningful district or school plan and suggests benchmarks for evaluation

The State conducts professional development to assist educators whose schools or LEAs are undergoing an intervention. The transformation and instructional review coaches provide customized support based on their assessment of their assigned school or LEA. See <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/schooltransformation/>.

Ohio has created the **Office of Transforming Schools** to facilitate school turnaround efforts throughout the State and to integrate Race to the Top goals with the State's previous school reform efforts, including work done under SIG. The Office of Education Reform conducts school-level needs assessments to provide feedback about the following six critical components: alignment with standards, instructional practices, environment/climate, system of leadership, professional development, and data-driven decisions. This assessment, known as the Ohio Diagnostic Review, is conducted by an experienced and skilled external team using standardized processes and protocols for data collection and analysis. The review provides schools and districts with valuable insight into their current practices. The results also help the Ohio Department of Education to prioritize State and regional supports for improving student performance. The lowest achieving schools receive biweekly professional development visits and participate in phone conferences about best practices. Ohio also created the Ohio Network for Education Transformation (ONET). Through the network, the Education Service Center of Central Ohio will deploy experienced practitioners to provide onsite, intensive assistance to transformation teams and innovation grant recipients. According to the State, the goal is to build the knowledge, skill and leadership capacity of the school principal and enhance the quality of classroom instruction, assessment and intervention provided by educators at all points in the teaching and learning process. See more about the Office of Transforming Schools at <http://education.ohio.gov/GD/Templates/Pages/ODE/ODEDetail.aspx?page=812> and about ONET at <http://www.onetohio.org/facts/Pages/default.aspx>.

The **Rhode Island Department of Education's Office of Transformation** provides guidance, services, support and direction to leaders and decision-makers within LEAs. One element of its approach to providing technical assistance is the Academy for Transformative Leadership. The academy was designed to promote partnerships and best practices to prepare and develop better principals and leadership teams for the State's

schools. The Turnaround Principals Program is the academy's flagship initiative. It is planned as a year-long, intensive training program that will develop cohorts of new and existing principals each year for persistently low-achieving schools. The State will recruit program participants from across the State and nation based on their demonstrated effectiveness as teachers and leaders at turning around low-performing schools. In addition, school achievement specialists will provide building-level support in persistently low-achieving schools as these schools implement their reform plans. The school achievement specialists will, among other things, assist with professional development design and delivery, monitor performance and provide direct support for leadership and educators. See <http://www.ride.ri.gov/commissioner/RaceToTheTop/default.aspx>.

Tennessee has developed an accountability continuum along which the lowest achieving schools receive increasing levels of support. The most intensive stage in the continuum is the **Achievement School District (ASD)**, which is a State-run LEA that provides a structure for turning around the State's lowest achieving schools through direct oversight and charter conversions. All schools in the bottom 5 percent have the potential to be included in the ASD. In addition to being eligible for the ASD, schools in the lowest 5 percent may do one or more of the following: enter an LEA-run innovation zone, where LEAs are granted additional flexibility to turn around their lowest achieving schools; adopt one of the four SIG turnaround models; or undergo an LEA-led school improvement planning process. Through the authority of the commissioner, the ASD may at any point take over additional schools that are not achieving adequate results. The State education agency will also hire additional staff to create an ASD support team whose specific roles range from providing IT service and support, fiscal management, and human resource management to recruiting teachers, delivering new teacher training, and offering resources and professional development, and to engaging with the community

and managing marketing and public relations. The State will also contract with charter management organizations and non-profit partners to support its teacher and principal pipeline. See <http://www.achievementschooldistrict.org/> and <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/eseaflex/approved-requests/tn.pdf>.