



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

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ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER  
OFFICE OF SCHOOL INNOVATION  
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August 28, 2012

Sharon Contreras, Superintendent  
Syracuse City School District  
725 Harrison St.  
Syracuse, NY 13210

RE: Notice of Award: Systemic Supports for District and School Turnaround Grant  
Award Amount: \$2,005,640  
Time Period: September 1, 2012 to August 31, 2014

Dear Superintendent Contreras:

The New York State Education Department, School Turnaround Office (NYSED STO) is pleased to inform you that the Syracuse 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

## **I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**District Approach to School Turnaround** With student performance among the lowest in the state, it is clear that the Syracuse City School District (SCSD) needs to undertake bold, comprehensive action in order to accelerate student achievement, close achievement gaps, and ensure that all students graduate high school with the skills and knowledge for college and career readiness. Superintendent Sharon Contreras assumed leadership of SCSD in July 2011, with the stated vision of having the SCSD become the most improved urban school district in America. In furthering that vision, Superintendent Contreras initiated comprehensive external diagnostic reviews by nationally-recognized experts in school and school district reform to review SCSD's practices, processes and systems and identify areas for systemic improvement and transformation. The reviewers and their respective areas of expertise included: Collier Educational Consulting, LLC (curriculum and instruction), Cross & Jofus, LLC (talent management and special education), and Schoolhouse Partners, LLC (finance and budget, and information technology). The external diagnostic reviews identified explicit priority areas of need that included: organizational design; recruitment, selection and deployment; development, evaluation, and feedback; and strategic retention, promotion and exit.

Knowing that the need of our students is urgent – test scores and graduation rates have languished at unacceptably low levels for years – SCSD was empowered by the extensive amounts of systems data produced by the professional diagnostics, many details of which are cited throughout this proposal. The research-based findings and recommendations of the diagnostic reviews have guided every step of our strategic planning process, which was facilitated by Mass Insight Education's School Turnaround Group. This comprehensive process entailed the convening of seven task forces, intensive review of district data, ongoing guidance from external experts, and extensive community involvement from diverse stakeholder groups, culminating in the articulation of the five following dramatic, transformational goals around which our Strategic Plan is structured:

- (1) Provide all students with equitable access to rigorous curriculum with aligned instructional materials and assessments in all subjects and all grade levels.
- (2) Recruit, develop, support, and retain effective teachers and school leaders.
- (3) Develop infrastructure to support student success.
- (4) Build a district culture based on high expectations, respect, and co-accountability for performance that recognizes and rewards excellence at all levels of the organization.
- (5) Communicate effectively with all district stakeholders.

SCSD will utilize the Strategic Plan as our blueprint approach to school turnaround, with particular focus on **Goal 4: Building a district culture based on high expectations, respect, and co-accountability for performance that recognizes and rewards excellence at all levels of the organization**. The Strategic Plan identifies a set of core measures of progress toward the overarching goal of establishing an educational community that graduates every student as a responsible, active citizen prepared for success in college, careers and the global economy. SCSD will report annually on student outcome measures as well as on measures tied to key strategies. The Strategic Plan calls for monitoring a series of milestones at critical moments of a student's educational trajectory. Milestones include the following: 1) reading to learn at the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade; 2) prepared for middle school at the end of 5<sup>th</sup> grade; 3) prepared for high school at the end of 8<sup>th</sup> grade; 4) on track to graduate at the end of 9<sup>th</sup> grade; 5) ready for college and career success at the

end of 11<sup>th</sup> grade; 6) graduating from high school in 4 years; and 7) college or technical school enrollment. SCSD intends to develop and publish a district scorecard that reports on both student outcomes and plan implementation measures. Closing persistent achievement gaps for students of color, ELLs, students with disabilities, and those who are economically disadvantaged is a priority and SCSD will report progress annually by disaggregated groups on each measure.

### **Evidence of District Readiness to Build Upon Current Strengths and Opportunities**

While SCSD is solely seeking funds to support district capacity building under Strand 1, it is important to note that all four strands are high priorities to SCSD. As such, in alignment with the Regents Reform Agenda and the review findings of external experts, significant initiatives were undertaken in the 2011-2012 school year to transform our teaching and learning systems and establish a culture of high expectations and co-accountability, including:

- Newly-developed, customized Teacher and Learning and Leadership Frameworks and Rubrics, based on research and student growth data, received the Commissioner's approval in June 2012. Furthermore, we are awaiting NYSED approval of our APPR plan that we submitted in late June. The frameworks and rubrics provide a common language that clearly describes teacher and leader expectations and present SCSD with a chance to link educator performance with supports and rewards. These frameworks are aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and provide SCSD the opportunity to target professional development to the specific skills where teachers and leaders need the most support.
- The Strategic Compensation Task Force is working on the development of a Strategic Compensation System that seeks to accelerate student achievement by incentivizing the high performance of teachers through our Teacher Incentive Fund grant.
- Dr. Denise Collier has helped to audit and redesign curriculum, assuring it is rigorous, relevant, coherent and aligned to CCSS and a theory of action for teaching and learning. Curriculum writing is well underway; by the opening of school in 2012, SCSD will be prepared to implement newly-written CCSS-aligned curricula for ELA and Math in grades Pre-K-12 for the first two quarters. By late fall, new curricula in both subject areas will be completed. Our revised curriculum will be the cornerstone of a high-quality, student-centered instructional program and will create a culture of data-driven decision making.
- SCSD provided extensive professional development during the 2011-12 school year on implementation of the CCSS in English Language Arts and Math. Summer professional development is focused on the new Teacher and Learning (T&L) Framework, rubric norming, and the linkages between the CCSS and the SCSD T&L Framework.
- SCSD has begun the important work of establishing a district-wide data-driven culture through its participation in Network Team training; plans for in-district turnkey training for the 2012-2013 school year are in development.
- The District has applied for RttT Strengthening Teacher and Leader Effectiveness (TLE) funding to assist us in our efforts to develop a comprehensive end-state TLE continuum that will achieve a comprehensive systems approach to recruitment, development, retention and equitable distribution of effective teachers and school leaders.
- In 2012-13, SCSD will begin transitional implementation of an Innovation Zone (iZone) to provide models of educational excellence that will foster widespread educational reform

throughout the District. Overseen by the newly-created Office of School Transformation and Innovation (OSTI) and with the expertise of external partners, the iZone will prioritize turnaround strategies and supports for a feeder pattern cluster of chronically underperforming schools.

➤ Following an extensive strategic planning process, the SCSD has developed a Strategic Plan (please see attached) that will serve as a roadmap to guide the actions and decision-making of schools and the District over the next five years, prioritizing data-driven decision-making and results-oriented performance management at all levels of the organization.

**Key Partner Organizations** With the five-year Strategic Plan now completed and with the aforementioned reform initiatives well under way, SCSD is poised to move its reform agenda forward. A key finding of the external reviews is that the current structure of the SCSD central office is not conducive to dramatic and scalable school turnaround. Central to the Strategic Plan is the belief that in order to effectively support schools that have persistently failed to address the needs of their students, SCSD must improve its systems, structures, and academics. Core components outlined in the Strategic Plan are designed to support innovative approaches to district turnaround, including the establishment of an Office of School Transformation and Innovation (OSTI) and the piloting of an Innovation Zone (iZone) to achieve dramatic turnaround for a cluster of chronically underperforming feeder schools. The OSTI will be a sub-unit of the SCSD central office and will implement more flexible operating conditions, additional capacity, and expertise unique to school turnaround. Ultimately, the practices developed and piloted within the iZone will be applied throughout the District, enabling a broader transformation of schools district-wide. Systemic Supports for District and School Turnaround (SSDST) funds will provide a portion of the critical resources needed to build the requisite capacity to successfully turn around our failing schools and hold them accountable for needed gains in performance.

The possibility of securing SSDST funds affords our district the exciting opportunity to continue and deepen our partnership with **Mass Insight Education's School Turnaround Group (STG)**, a nationally-recognized organization whose focus is the foundational rethinking and improvement of district-level structures. SCSD will work closely with STG over the next two years to address **capacity-building Strand 1 District Systems and Structures for Support**. Mass Insight Education is a national nonprofit that partners with school districts and state education agencies to redesign the way they support their lowest-performing schools and to establish the conditions and capacity necessary to sustain academic results in turnaround environments. Services provided by STG will prioritize capacity-building for district leadership and staff that will result in increased sustainability for SCSD reforms. STG will focus on three main strategies:

- (1) Operationalizing the District's five-year (2012-2017) Strategic Plan, including implementing a data-driven, robust system of performance monitoring structures and protocols to ensure effective execution of each initiative;
- (2) Developing and implementing an Office of School Transformation and Innovation (OSTI) as an autonomous, streamlined support structure to manage, implement and monitor turnaround strategies in chronically low-performing schools; and
- (3) Restructuring SCSD's Human Resources function to support an integrated and aligned talent management system that recruits, hires, develops, and evaluates highly effective staff members and educators.