Race to the Top: Promising Approaches to Assisting the Lowest-Performing Schools (Goal 4)
March 2009

Introduction
Through the recently passed American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), the U.S. Department of Education will conduct a national competition among states for a $4.35 billion “Race to the Top” incentive program designed to push states to improve education quality and results. The Race to the Top fund will help drive substantial gains in student achievement by supporting states that make dramatic progress on four reform goals outlined in the ARRA. Race to the Top grants will be awarded in two rounds — fall 2009 and spring 2010.

What are the four reform goals?
Race to the Top funds must support efforts designed to achieve four goals:
1. Making progress toward rigorous college- and career-ready standards and high-quality assessments that are valid and reliable for all students, including English language learners and students with disabilities
2. Establishing pre-K to college and career data systems that track progress and foster continuous improvement
3. Making improvements in teacher effectiveness and in the equitable distribution of qualified teachers for all students, particularly students who are most in need
4. Providing intensive support and effective interventions for the lowest-performing schools.

Some promising actions
This ECS Briefing Memo highlights promising state approaches aimed at achieving Goal 4 — and identifies what makes them so promising. If your state has achieved strong results using different approaches, please let us know.

Florida
School improvement plans based on data analysis and best practice:
Effectiveness determined through local data analysis better reflects the effectiveness of implementation — yet few states require districts to analyze student achievement data in targeting interventions for the lowest-performing schools. Florida, however, requires local boards to annually approve and implement a school improvement plan for every school in the district. Each plan must include an accurate, data-based analysis of student achievement and other school performance data. The Florida Secondary School Redesign Act specifies that the annual improvement plan for each secondary school (serving students in grades 6-12) also must have a “redesign component” based on the guiding principles for best practice enumerated in FLA. STAT. ANN. § 1003.413(2)(a). Per FLA. STAT. ANN. § 1001.42(18)(a), the school improvement plan for any school that earns a “C” or below through the state accountability system or is required under federal law to have a school improvement plan must additionally include:
• Professional development that supports enhanced and differentiated instructional strategies to improve teaching and learning
• Continuous use of disaggregated student achievement data to determine effectiveness of instructional strategies
• Ongoing informal and formal assessments to monitor individual student progress, including progress toward mastery of the Sunshine State Standards, and to redesign instruction if needed
• Alternative instructional delivery methods to support remediation, acceleration and enrichment strategies.  

Evaluation component: While a piece of legislation or rulemaking may sound good on its face, only evaluation can determine whether policies truly are making a positive impact. Florida legislation requires the department of education to use data to provide the legislature with an annual longitudinal analysis of the success of the Secondary School Redesign Act (the aforementioned provision that requires a “redesign component” in each secondary school’s improvement plan), including the progress of 6th- and 9th-grade students scoring at Level 1 on FCAT Reading or FCAT Mathematics.

Virginia
Turnaround specialists and school improvement plans based on data analysis: Turning around a low-performing school often necessitates different skills than those most school principals (or even district-level staff) possess. Launched by then-Governor Warner, Virginia’s Turnaround Specialist Program is one of the only statewide programs designed to recruit and train a cadre of turnaround experts to help low-performing schools implement improvement efforts. As the program Web site explains, many other turnaround programs consist “of teams of coaches or mentors who only provide advice to particular principals on a weekly or monthly basis”; research suggests such programs see limited results. Alternatively, “the UVA-School Turnaround Specialist Program is the only turnaround program in the country that combines a top business school and a top education school to provide training and support to turnaround principals, as well as to district and school-level leadership teams. Moreover, rather than taking over the school as an outside management provider would, this program helps to build internal capacity within both schools and districts.” Legislation authorizes local boards to offer turnaround specialists incentives such as increased compensation, improved retirement benefits, increased deferred compensation, relocation expenses, bonuses and other incentives as may be determined by the board.

Toolkits and/or other resources to help local school staff make better decisions: State-set criteria for curriculum materials help guide local decisions and reduce the number of poor selections. Virginia requires any school rated “Accredited with Warning” in English or math to adopt a research-based instructional intervention that has proven successful with low-achieving students. The state has set criteria that all such interventions must meet: (1) Scientifically-based evidence of effectiveness, (2) Implementation and capacity for technical assistance; (3) Replicability and (4) Correlation with or adaptability to the Virginia Standards of Learning in English or math. The state board of education is required to publish a list of recommended instructional interventions, subject to amendment.

Massachusetts
Autonomy balanced with accountability, resulting in a different school model: In November 2006, the state board offered four “Underperforming” schools the option of either being designated “Chronically Underperforming,” or applying to become “Commonwealth Pilot Schools” (“Pilot Schools”). The state’s model is based on the Boston Public Schools’ successful Pilot School initiative. The four defining characteristics allow state Pilot Schools to increase their potential for transformation:
• Autonomy: The operational theory of Pilot Schools is that if schools are given maximum flexibility over key operational elements in exchange for greater accountability, student engagement and achievement will improve. Pilot Schools must follow state and federal laws, but are exempt from district policies — and given “autonomy over budget, staffing, curriculum/assessment, governance/policies and the schedule.”
• Accountability: High expectations are set for all Pilot Schools by means of a school quality review process “using a set of benchmarks that articulate the criteria for high-performing schools.”
• Personalization: Pilot Schools strive to create a more nurturing school community through small class sizes (19-20 students per class), low student-teacher loads (averaging 55-60 students per teacher in the secondary grades) and “advisories, learning centers and student support teams.”
• **High expectations for all students:** Every Pilot School is founded on the belief that with the right supports, all students are capable of academic success. Autonomy allows schools “to hire teachers and staff who support this vision.”

Pilot Schools generally are characterized by substantial common planning time to improve instruction, and, in most Pilot Schools, graduation from grades 8 or 12 by demonstrated mastery of specific knowledge and skills through a set of assessments, including exhibitions and portfolios. Pilot Schools also seek to “ensure that the right conditions are in place for each school” to succeed, gain the school community’s “buy-in and ownership” of the Pilot Schools model, and “closely document the progress and process of each school, so that there is ample data and feedback to use in mid-course correction and improvement.”

**North Carolina**

School improvement plans based on data analysis and best practice, serving the neediest schools first:

Most states fail to focus on schools’ fiscal policies and practices. But in reality, if schools knew what to change, they would do it. North Carolina bases school assistance models on successful policies and practices. Specifically, legislation directs the state board to study the instructional, administrative and fiscal practices and policies employed by the schools that are meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) with the subgroups identified in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), and to create assistance models for each subgroup based on policies and practices in these successful schools. In addition to helping the state board develop these models, the schools of education at the University of North Carolina (UNC) campuses and the UNC Center for School Leadership Development must provide technical assistance to districts based on these models, with priority given to districts with the highest concentration of schools not meeting AYP. The technical assistance must include peer assistance and professional development by teachers, support staff and administrators in schools whose subgroups are meeting AYP.

**California**

Renegotiating collective bargaining agreements for the lowest-performing schools:

In a unique approach that most other states are not using, legislation authorizes the state superintendent to renegotiate a new collective bargaining agreement for a state-monitored school.

**Colorado**

Converting a low-performing school to a charter school:

Turning a low-performing school into a charter school removes the choice of “tinkering around the edges” that many other states permit in their options for restructuring. Legislation authorizes the state board to recommend that a school receiving an “unsatisfactory” rating after two years under a school improvement plan be converted into a charter school. If the charter school created by these means is ranked “low” or “unsatisfactory” during its third year of operation, the state board must issue a new request for proposals and begin a new charter school application process.

**Louisiana**

Statewide district to administer struggling schools:

A unique approach in Louisiana provides an intermediary level of governance that offers the potential for higher-level management expertise and protects schools against well-intentioned but potentially distracting outside influences. Legislation creates a statewide “Recovery School District,” administered by the Louisiana Department of Education, that assumes jurisdiction over a chronically low-performing school if any of the following conditions exist:

- The school has been labeled an academically unacceptable school for four consecutive years
- The local board:
  - Fails to present to the state board a plan to reconstitute the failed school
  - Presents a reconstitution plan that is unacceptable to the state board
  - Fails at any time to comply with the terms of the reconstitution plan approved by the state board.
The Recovery School District retains oversight of the school for a minimum of five full academic years.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Tennessee}

\textbf{Intensive onsite assistance, targeted toward the neediest schools:}
Some states have programs providing peer-to-peer onsite assistance to staff in schools not making AYP, but it is not the norm. Intensive assistance is vital. The \textit{Tennessee Exemplary Educators Program} selects and trains recently retired educators as independent contractors, who are sent to High Priority schools to model effective instruction, mentor teachers and principals, review student achievement data, “[connect] with professional development providers and [build] capacity for continuous school improvement.”

In addition to being certified instructors with knowledge of current educational practice in the state, Exemplary Educators should be able to:
- Understand and use qualitative and quantitative data to develop strategic plans
- Use good judgment when helping schools identify and solve problems
- Work collaboratively with peers
- Mentor and provide leadership
- Model effective organizational and classroom practices
- Use technology.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{Additional resources}

ECS state policy collections and analysis can guide you as your state moves forward to address the effectiveness and equitable distribution of teachers. The following resources may be of particular help:

- \textit{The State Role in Accelerating Growth in Low-Performing High Schools:} http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/74/66/7466.pdf
- \textit{Recent State Policies/Activities: No Child Left Behind – Consequences for Schools:} http://www.ecs.org/ecs/ecscat.nsf/WebTopicView?OpenView&count=-1&RestrictToCategory=No+Child+Left+Behind--Consequences+for+Schools
• **Recent State Policies/Activities: No Child Left Behind – School Support:**

• **Synthesis from ECS Research Study database:** School Turnarounds: A Review of the Cross-Sector Evidence on Dramatic Organizational Improvement:

• **Synthesis from ECS Research Study database:** Best Policies and Practices in Urban Educational Reform: A Summary of Empirical Analysis Focusing on Student Achievement and Equity:

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This Briefing Memo was authored by Kathy Christie, ECS Chief of Staff (303.299.3613; kchristie@ecs.org), Jennifer Dounay, Senior Policy Analyst (303.299.3689; jdounay@ecs.org) and Melodye Bush, Researcher (303.299.3631; mbush@ecs.org).

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1. [FLA. STAT. ANN. § 1003.413(2)](http://www.ecs.org/rs/Studies/DetailStudy.aspx?study_ID=105)
6. 8 VA. ADMIN. CODE § 20-131-310(B)
8. ibid.
12. [COLO. REV. STAT. § 22-7-609(5), 22-30.5-301 through -308](http://www.ecs.org/rs/Studies/DetailStudy.aspx?study_ID=99)