Race to the Top

ACCELERATING COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS IN STATES

Achieve

Low-Performing Schools

States seeking to prepare all high school graduates for college and careers need a strategy for responding to their lowest performing high schools, which are responsible for a disproportionate number of students who graduate unprepared for what's ahead. Continuing to rely upon incremental change strategies will not lead to effective change in these schools. Instead, states need to build capacity to undertake dramatic improvement in these schools via turnarounds and fresh starts. At the same time, many individual students in better performing high schools do not graduate ready for college and careers. As a result, a complete state strategy must identify and segment schools by level of under-performance and mobilize different interventions to match each school's circumstances so that all students – no matter where they go to school – can graduate prepared for success in college and careers.

Under draft guidelines for the program, states pursuing Race to the Top funding will need to show evidence of current policies designed to turn around struggling schools as well as robust plans to strengthen their approaches (see Table 1). But even without these federal incentives, any state committed to a college- and career-ready agenda needs a strategy for responding to the state's persistently low-performing schools. The nation's estimated 2,000 failing high schools, sometimes called "dropout factories," are responsible for a disproportionate number of students who reach adulthood unequipped for college or careers.[1] Chronically low-performing elementary and middle schools are part of the problem as well, since their students emerge from 8th grade without the foundations needed to succeed in high school and beyond.[2]

At the same time, persistently low-performing schools are not the only ones failing to prepare students for college and careers. While unprepared students are concentrated in these chronically struggling institutions, many students pass through mediocre schools and classrooms each year without gaining the skills and knowledge they need for their next life-steps. In these schools, too many students still drop out; others meet basic state proficiency standards and graduate, but do not demonstrate the knowledge and skills needed for success in college and careers.

States that are serious about their college- and career-ready agenda need to address both persistently low-performing schools *and* mediocre schools where a smaller – but not insignificant – proportion of children emerge unprepared. The strategies that will help each kind of school, however, are very different. Approaches that might pay off in middle-tier schools – such as professional development for staff, providing information about how successful schools work, and greater access to real-time data – are unlikely to "work" in schools that are chronically failing. Research from across sectors suggests that these schools need to follow a dramatic, more aggressive, and more intentional improvement strategy first to reverse years of organizational dysfunction.[3] Only then will they be in a position to take advantage of the supports and services that are

This guide is one of a series of papers Achieve has prepared to help states maximize the opportunities presented through the Race to the Top Fund (RTTT). In accompanying papers, Achieve addresses recommendations for leveraging high-quality standards and assessments, strengthening P-20 longitudinal data systems, and improving teacher effectiveness. Taken together, these papers offer advice to help state leaders develop comprehensive RTTT reform strategies firmly anchored in the goal of college and career readiness for all students. The full set of RTTT papers is available at http://www.achieve.org/RacetotheTop.

valuable to middle-tier schools seeking to improve. Because dramatic improvement strategies are so challenging to undertake, schools, and districts will need to build significant capacity to meet U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's stated goal of fixing the 5,000 lowest performing schools in five years.

The following two sections provide guidance for states about putting in place powerful ways of addressing chronically struggling schools as part of any Race to the Top application while also addressing the broader imperative to help all of a state's schools prepare students for college and careers.

Meeting the Race to the Top Challenge: Diagnosing Failing Schools

To implement a system that meets the dire needs of failing schools and the different needs of mediocre schools, states first need to assemble a set of critical elements, including:

Identification. First, a state needs strong information about exactly where students are not being adequately prepared for college and careers. Toward that end, states need to:

- ***Broaden the indicators used to assess school performance so they paint a more comprehensive picture of college and career readiness***. Critical indicators states and schools need include measures of course completion and success, measures of achievement (such as results on a college- and career-ready statewide anchor assessment and rates of postsecondary remediation), and measures of attainment (such as earning a college- and career-ready diploma).[4]
- ***Set ambitious statewide performance goals tied to those indicators***. Tennessee, for example, has drafted a set of ambitious ten-year goals and biennial targets across a range of college and career ready indicators. These include goals for increasing the high school graduation rate, increasing the percentage of students scoring at a college- and career-ready level on statewide high school assessments, reducing the percentage of students requiring college remediation, and increasing the percentage of graduates attending and succeeding in postsecondary education.
- ***Implement meaningful public reporting on those indicators***, including easily understood and readily accessible school-level report cards aligned with statewide performance goals on the college- and career-ready agenda.
- ***For each school, set a trajectory from its current performance to what is needed to meet college and career readiness goals.*** For example, a state could establish a set of three-year goals for a struggling school's graduation rates, course completion, and achievement results, and then set year-by-year interim benchmarks on the path to meeting them. A state might also identify "leading indicators" to monitor during the school year that predict success or failure on each accountability indicator, enabling a faster pace of mid-course improvement at the school level and state intervention to help schools in peril.

Segmentation. Using these data on college and career readiness, states can then segment schools based on the nature and severity of challenges each faces.[5] Most germane to the Race to Top criteria is identifying schools that are deeply and persistently low-performing: schools that year after year fall far below expectations. But states can also usefully segment other schools into meaningful categories, such as middle-tier performers that are not as far below the mark, and schools that have significant subgroups of students unprepared. *As states raise standards to a more ambitious college- and career-ready level, increasing numbers of schools will likely fall below expectations. This rising number of "identified" schools makes segmentation all the more important*: schools falling below the line will be very different from one another and require very different interventions and supports. Many newly identified schools will not be the chronically dysfunctional schools that currently fall into the lowest tiers of performance; instead, many will be mid-tier schools that have

internal capacity to improve once the spotlight shines on their need to meet a higher bar. These schools do not require the kind of dramatic change strategies that chronically low-performing schools need. This likely increase in the number of schools falling short is not a reason for states to back off setting high standards for college and career readiness. On the contrary, it underscores the need for states to devise different strategies for different segments of their schools if they want all of their students to emerge from high school prepared for what's next.

Table 1: Race to the Top Draft Criteria – Turning Around Struggling Schools

State Reform Conditions Criteria *A state's **past progress** in creating conditions for reform*	**Reform Plan Criteria** *A state's **plans for future efforts** to advance reform*
• State authority to intervene directly in persistently lowest-performing schools & LEAs • State charter school policy: o does not inhibit charter school growth through caps on numbers or enrollment o has state guidelines for charter authorizers (and authorizers have closed ineffective charter schools) o finances charters equitably o provides charter schools with facilities financing or related support	State has a "high-quality plan and ambitious yet achievable targets" to: • Identify persistently low-performing schools, including high schools • Support LEAs in turning these schools around by: o placing new leadership, staff, governance, instructional programs, with flexibility o converting them to charter schools or contracting with Education Management Organization (EMO) o closing them and placing students in high-performing schools o if the above are not possible, implementing a "school transformation model" that meets RTTT criteria

The criteria above reflect the *draft* guidance issued by the U.S. Department of Education in July 2009. As of September 2009, the Department had collected public comments on the draft but had not yet released final guidance. Final guidance will be available at: http://www.ed.gov/recovery.

Meeting the Race to the Top Challenge: Fixing Failing Schools

Insistence on Viable Dramatic Change Strategies. For persistently low-performing schools, states need policies that insist on viable dramatic change strategies with a significant chance of success. Evidence from across sectors – nonprofits, businesses, and government agencies – suggests that in cases of deep, chronic organizational failure, two modes of dramatic change are available. Notably, these modes align well with the methods suggested by the Race to the Top criteria (see Table 1):

- **Classic turnaround**, in which highly capable leadership (typically new) receives a strong mandate from the top to take the bold actions needed to achieve a fast boost in results;[6] and
- **Starting fresh**, in which the school "closes and reopens" with new leadership, staff, and programs.[7]

Research on many different kinds of organizations, including schools, suggests that in persistently, profoundly failing institutions, incremental change strategies have little chance of success. Staff members are demoralized and do not believe the organization can succeed. Leaders and employees lack the capacity and authority needed to revive the organization. In this context, typical school improvement tactics, like more staff professional development and new curriculum adjustments, are not sufficient to reverse years of failure. As a result, cases of successful dramatic improvement in the research almost always involve either a classic turnaround or a completely fresh start.

Each approach has value in different contexts, depending on the availability of turnaround-ready leaders, the supply of operators to take over schools and "start fresh," and other factors (see Table 2). States and districts need a portfolio of options that can be matched to different school contexts as required.

Table 2: Classic Turnarounds vs. "Starting Fresh" [8]

Classic turnarounds have the best chance of success when:

- turnaround leaders who can drive rapid change and influence stakeholders are available;
- the district has the will to provide significant autonomy to turnaround leaders to innovate and deviate from district policies and practices required of other principals;
- a core of teachers is ready and willing to undertake dramatic improvement in the school (since turnarounds typically maintain a large portion of existing staff).

Starting fresh have the best chance of success when:

- capable fresh-start providers are available to operate schools for the students served;
- the district has or can create a mechanism (e.g., through chartering authority) to enter into a contract for school operation with an outside provider;
- a school's dysfunction is so complete that a "clean slate" appears to be the only way to gain traction for improvement.

For an extensive discussion and tools for deciding what kind of dramatic change strategy to pursue, see: Emily A. Hassel et al., *School Restructuring: What Works When? A Guide for Education Leaders* (Washington, DC: Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2009).

Insisting on the use of these strategies means adopting policies that:

- Preclude schools and districts from engaging in the kinds of incremental approaches that have been tried for years in low-performing schools without appreciable success. As discussed in the next section, these approaches may be very valuable in improving *other schools* in the state, and in supporting chronically low-performing schools once they turn around. Colorado's recently enacted accountability legislation, for example, limits options for the most chronically low-performing schools to a short list of dramatic change strategies.[9]
- Require that schools engaging in one of these dramatic change strategies have what MassInsight's report *The Turnaround Challenge* calls the "conditions" to succeed, namely the flexibility to adjust staffing, spending, and the use of time to meet their ambitious improvement goals.[10] Chicago Public Schools, for example, developed three different kinds of contracts with external providers specializing in failing schools, each offering significant (but different) types of autonomy relative to district policies and the teacher collective bargaining agreement.[11]
- Include the possibility of credible state-driven interventions in cases where districts lack the capacity and/or are unwilling to pursue viable change strategies in their struggling schools. "State-driven" does not necessarily mean state takeover of schools, an action that few state departments would have the capacity themselves to take. More plausible is the idea of state-initiated partnerships with external organizations that could become operators of struggling schools under these circumstances. Louisiana's state-run Recovery School District, for example, intervenes in failing schools statewide, but only operates a subset of the schools itself; the rest are run by charter school operators under a contract with the state.[12]

Building Capacity for Dramatic Improvement. Both classic turnarounds and fresh starts are extraordinarily challenging; both require special capacity in order to succeed. For classic turnarounds, the critical factor is a school leader with a specialized set of competencies needed to carry out the critical actions that research suggests are necessary to effect successful turnarounds.[13] For fresh starts, states need a stable of organizations capable of taking over and operating previously failing schools. In either case, schools also need to be able to attract and retain effective teachers. Some have argued that the difficulty of fixing struggling schools is especially acute at the high school level: the organizations are larger and more complex; the demand for specialized teacher content knowledge is higher; and students are farther behind with less time to catch up than in earlier grades.[14] As a result, the need for highly capable leaders, school operators, and teachers is potentially more severe at the high school level. In light of these conditions, what it takes for state leaders to dramatically improve low-performing high schools is complex.

None of these "resources" needed for dramatic improvement exists in ample supply, and few school districts are likely to be able to create the supply on their own. As a result, a state's strategy for fixing failing schools needs a strong state-level supply-building component. Possibilities for states to consider include:

- vigorous recruitment of turnaround leaders, start-fresh operators, and teachers, particularly to fill the hard-to-staff subjects that are so critical to the college and career ready agenda;
- training programs for prospective turnaround leaders;
- extended reach of teachers who are very high performing in these challenging schools to as many students as possible, both within schools and across schools in the state;[15]
- "incubation" of new start-fresh operators, including operators prepared to take over failing high schools;
- financial incentives for taking on and achieving success in persistently low-performing schools;
- support of efforts to start completely new schools, such as replications of successful district or charter high schools, that can serve the students who currently attend persistently low-performing schools.

Low-Performing School Districts. States face a particular capacity challenge when the *districts* in which low-performing schools reside are themselves struggling organizations. In these cases, states cannot rely on district leaders to make good decisions about dramatic improvement approaches, to offer the right conditions for schools pursuing turnarounds or fresh starts, to build the supply of needed talent, or to hold schools accountable for rapid improvement.[16] While building district capacity to do this work should be a medium-term goal for states, in the immediate term states must prepare to play a more direct role in these situations, perhaps through partnerships with organizations that can lead dramatic improvement efforts on their behalf.

Accountability for Results, with Short Timelines. Cross-sector research also suggests that many – probably most – efforts to fix struggling schools will fall short. An estimated 70% of major change efforts in organizations do not succeed; the failure rate for new start-ups is even higher. Yet states and districts can achieve a much higher "*cumulative success rate"* by committing to retrying efforts to fix failing schools rapidly when initial attempts fall short (e.g., seeking a new leader or shifting to a fresh-start operator one to two years into a flagging effort). To do so, they need information systems that provide "leading indicators" of troubled efforts that can lead to swift retries. Potential leading indicators include early- and mid-year student results on benchmark tests in high-priority subjects; teacher and student attendance and disciplinary trends; and the assessments of trained site visitors sent in by the district or state to observe. A commitment to rapid retries heightens the importance of supply-building strategies discussed above;[17] it also suggests state leaders need a robust plan for public communications and media outreach about the goals and outcomes of this work.

Going Above and Beyond Race to the Top

Because of the concentration of failing students in low-performing schools, vigorously intervening in these schools would contribute greatly to a state's effort to prepare more students for college and careers. But a sole focus on turning around the bottom 5% of schools would fall short for two reasons. First, it would ignore many other students who, despite attending schools other than the lowest-performing ones, are not emerging prepared for the world they enter. Second, after the lowest-performing schools successfully emerge from chronic dysfunction, they likely need a different set of supports and services that are more appropriate to middle-tier performers.

For both of these reasons, states that are serious about their college- and career-ready agenda need to go above and beyond the Race to the Top's focus on the lowest-performing schools and find ways of boosting the performance of middle-tier schools – both those that are currently middle-tier, and those that move into the middle as a result of successful dramatic change strategies.

State strategies for middle-tier schools need not all involve hands-on support or intervention by the state. Instead, states can stimulate significant improvement in many middle-tier schools by (a) encouraging schools by shining a bright spotlight on their need to increase college and career readiness, and (b) linking schools to readily available resources (e.g., materials, websites, organizations that help schools with these issues) that do not require direct state involvement to be helpful to schools. Middle-tier schools themselves, their school districts, and external partners can then in many cases rise to the occasion since, unlike the chronically low-performing schools discussed above, they have some level of capacity to improve on their own.

In developing such strategies, states can draw on existing frameworks that elucidate the critical elements of "statewide systems of support,"[18] but give special attention to issues that are vital to improving high school expectations and performance. Key elements of this system likely include:

- **Standards.** Clear, ambitious standards for college and career readiness benchmarked against the real demands of the global economy and society, and against which schools' progress and performance is assessed.

- **Valuing and Incentivizing College and Career Readiness.** Assessment and accountability systems that gather and share rich information about student performance, teacher performance, and school performance relative to college- and career-ready standards, delivered in a timely and fine-grained enough fashion to inform ongoing improvement in schools. These systems should make clear that the primary purpose of high school is to prepare students for the demands of college and careers, and must include a broader range of indicators that capture whether students are successfully completing rigorous courses, achieving on rigorous assessments that measure postsecondary readiness, and attaining meaningful high school credentials. States should make better use of public reporting, positive incentives, and rewards to create motivating conditions for college and career readiness progress and success.[19] Of additional importance to the college and career readiness agenda is data that give schools and districts "early warning" information about individual students so that they can deploy supports, interventions, and safety nets accordingly.[20]

- **Diagnostic tools and processes.** For middle-tier schools, a critical step is identifying the school's strengths and challenges, which can lead to an action plan for improvement. General diagnostic tools

are unlikely to get at the specific demands of college and career readiness, and so states with that commitment need to design or obtain tools that have this focus. For example, Education Trust-West's "Educational Opportunity Audit and Blueprint Design Toolkit" guides districts or schools through a study of their policies and practices related to curriculum and instruction, safety nets for struggling students, capacity of the teaching force to deliver college and career ready curriculum, and other issues, resulting in a "roadmap to reform."[21] School improvement goals must flow directly from the student college readiness gaps identified with data systems in each school.

- **Knowledge.** Wide-scale dissemination of knowledge about the practices of schools and districts that meet these high standards successfully, so that educators have a clear picture of what they are trying to create in their own schools. Knowledge dissemination can take many forms, from web portals to materials to tools that guide school and district leaders through key processes. Since so many states are pursuing a college and career ready agenda, and since the knowledge and dissemination needs are so similar from state to state, multi-state collaboration to build web portals, commission the creation of helpful materials and online professional development aligned to common college- and career-ready standards, and undertake other activities is an appealing option. States might also consider facilitating the use of a growing repository of open education resources – online open source instructional materials that can be modified and customized by end users.

- **Identification and Scale-Up of the Best Instructors and Instruction.** Using data, states can help schools identify which instructors and technology-based instruction produce the highest levels of learning progress for students with differing characteristics – and help schools extend the reach of these to more students.[22] States can incent schools to scale up the number of children reached by identified "super-instructors," within schools, across districts, and statewide. States might consider making multi-state pacts to eliminate cross-state barriers to sharing super-instructor lectures as part of the core curriculum. There are numerous ways to extend top teachers' reach, even within single schools. For example, high schools with one outstanding algebra teacher and two mediocre ones should enable all students to benefit from the top teacher via video recordings of his lessons, freeing him to use the rest of his work time helping a much larger number of students tackle learning barriers. Videos would also enable the top teacher to model good instruction and provide customized feedback and guidance to the other instructors.

- **Professional Development.** One focus of professional development for college and career readiness, of course, is boosting the subject matter knowledge of high school teachers, too many of whom are not currently masters of the content they need to convey to students. But even teachers who are currently "effective" and have a high level of subject matter knowledge face significant challenges in the move toward college and career readiness for all. For example, teachers of higher level mathematics and science courses may have honed their craft teaching students who are highly motivated to take these courses. As schools increasingly ask *all* students to take advanced classes, this motivation is no longer a given. Teachers like this may need professional development in student engagement strategies, for example, to meet the new challenge.

- **Providers.** States are not generally in a position to offer, directly, all of the "support" listed above. A key state role, then, is cultivation of multiple providers of assistance to schools in implementing those practices, via professional development, coaching, and deployment of proven and promising comprehensive school reform models. In this role, states can identify the kinds of services that need providing; issue requests-for-proposals or use other methods to select or rate providers that districts

and schools can then use; pinpoint gaps in the support infrastructure and invest in incubation of new services to fill those niches; and evaluate providers' success over time.

- **Funding.** States typically use at least some resources for improvement activities as levers to affect change. Formulas may determine how some of these funds are distributed, but states have discretion over other "pots." In these cases, states are in a better position to use the power of the purse to induce schools and districts to engage in activities relevant to the college- and career-ready agenda, such as preparing teachers for the new demands of high standards or adopting proven high school reform models. Having clear priorities that drive grant allocations is a must for states seeking maximum leverage with their dollars.

Of course, a central dilemma for state leaders is the reality of limited resources, both financial and human. The dual approach suggested here, in which a state concentrates resources both on addressing struggling schools *and* on building a wider system of support for middle-tier schools, is highly demanding. But while state leaders may have to make tough choices at times, movement on both fronts is essential to advancing the college- and career-ready agenda. For states eager to meet these challenges, the Race to the Top provides a rare opportunity to obtain and use extra resources in this way.

Acknowledgments

Achieve would like to thank Bryan C. Hassel and Emily Ayscue Hassel of Public Impact, Inc. for writing this guide. Thanks also to Bill Porter of Education First Consulting for his editorial contributions.

Lesley Muldoon, Achieve Policy Analyst, served as editor of the full set of Race to the Top papers, and Alissa Peltzman, Associate Director for State Leadership and Policy Development, provided strategic and editorial guidance. Matt Gandal, Executive Vice President, provided overall leadership for Achieve's Race to the Top strategy.

ENDNOTES

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[2] Craig D. Jerald, *Identifying Potential Dropouts: Key Lessons for Building an Early Warning Data System* (Washington, DC: Achieve, 2006).

[3]Emily A. Hassel et al., *School Restructuring Under NCLB: What Works When? A Guide for Education Leaders* (Washington, DC: Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2006); Andrew Calkins et al., *The Turnaround Challenge* (Boston, MA: Mass Insight Education and Research Institute, 2007).

[4] See the website for "Measures that Matter," a joint effort by Achieve and The Education Trust to provide strategic and technical assistance to states in creating college- and career-ready assessment and accountability systems, http://www.achieve.org/measuresthatmatter.

[5] See Hassel et al., *School Restructuring*, for more about segmenting schools based on performance and other factors. For one proposal on the design of a segmentation system, see McKinsey & Company, *Creating a World Class Education System in Ohio* (Washington, DC: Achieve, 2007), pp. 60-65.

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[7] Public Impact, *Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools: A New Option for District Leaders* (Chicago, IL: National Association of Charter School Authorizers, n.d.)

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[9] See Colorado Senate Bill 09-163, "Education Accountability." Full text available at http://www.leg.state.co.us.

[10] Calkins et al., *The Turnaround Challenge*.

[11] Chicago's Renaissance 2010 website explains the three types of contracts on the following page: http://www.ren2010.cps.k12.il.us/types.shtml.

[12] The Louisiana Recovery School District's website, http://www.rsdla.net.

[13] Public Impact, *School Turnaround Leaders: Competencies for Success* (Chapel Hill, NC: Author, 2008.)

[14] Pinkus, *Action Required.*

[15] Public Impact, *3X for All: Extending the Reach of Education's Best* (A forthcoming paper sponsored by The Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation, 2009).

[16] On the district role in school turnarounds, see Julie Kowal, Emily A. Hassel, and Bryan C. Hassel, *Successful School Turnarounds: Seven Steps for District Leaders* (Washington, DC: Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, forthcoming 2009).

[17] Public Impact, *Try, Try Again: How to Triple The Number of Fixed Failing Schools Without Getting Any Better at Fixing Schools* (Chapel Hill, NC: Author, 2008.)

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[19] Achieve and The Education Trust. *Measures that Matter*.

[20] See Jerald, *Identifying Potential Dropouts.*

[21] Education Trust West, "CA District and School Services" webpage; http://www2.edtrust.org/EdTrust/etw/in+school.

[22] Public Impact, *3X for All: Extending the Reach of Education's Best* (forthcoming, 2009).