

Sustaining the Race to the Top Reforms

Race to the Top (RTTT) presents states with a unique opportunity to accelerate their efforts to graduate all high school students prepared for college, careers and life – reinforcing and building on the college- and career-ready agenda already being pursued in many states. The Race to the Top application process encourages states to look across their education system, evaluate what has been working, determine where further efforts are needed, and take a long view toward creating an innovative and comprehensive system of reforms that are both successful and sustainable.

Achieve recently released a set of resources to help states build strategies for sustaining their hard-won college- and career-ready policies over the long run. Under the banner, *Taking Root: Strategies for Sustaining the College- and Career-Ready Agenda*, Achieve developed four case studies, highlighting the strategies employed by Indiana, Massachusetts, South Carolina and Texas, as they each successfully sustained education reform for over a decade. Achieve also released a “lessons learned” paper that synthesizes the cross-state strategies, and a sustainability audit for states to use to evaluate how well positioned they are to sustain their college- and career-ready policies.¹

Achieve’s findings from this project have direct relevance for states as they complete their Race to the Top applications. By calling for systemic education reform, RTTT is rightly encouraging states to think about what policies, programs and practices need to be developed or are already have in place and can be built on, improved upon or transformed into something more effective and efficient for students and the system as a whole. This type of long-term planning is critical in building a sustainable reform; states should take the time now to consider how the policies they are putting in place *today* will be sustained *tomorrow*.

There are a number of specific criteria embedded in the RTTT application that strongly align with some of the strategies for sustainability found in *Taking Root*. This brief is designed to identify areas within the RTTT application that provide states with the opportunity to describe their strategies for sustaining the Race to the Top reforms, and their P-20 reforms, more generally.

Building Strong Statewide Capacity to Implement, Scale Up and Sustain Proposed Plans

Beyond the four major policy areas included with the RTTT application – common standards and assessments, teacher and leader effectiveness, longitudinal data, and low-achieving schools² – there is another section, *State Success Factors Criteria*, which addresses the cross-cutting and environmental factors that are relevant and critical to the success of the four major policy areas: **progress, capacity, sustainability** and **stakeholder engagement**.³ In this section, the application asks states to describe and demonstrate the state’s success to date in meeting these criteria and include relevant attachments (including the state’s budget – required – and potential letters of commitment from key stakeholders).

¹ For the full suite of *Taking Root* materials, visit www.achieve.org/TakingRoot

² To read Achieve’s four policy briefs on each of the Race to the Top assurances, visit <http://www.achieve.org/Racetothetop>

³ To read the full set of program requirements and the final application, visit www.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop.

Capacity & Sustainability

The *State Success Factors* section of the application addresses, among other issues, the need for states to build the *financial* and *human* capital and capacity necessary to implement, scale and sustain the plans outside in the RTTT application.

Specifically, the application asks states to demonstrate their current and planned capacity to implement the proposed plan, with capacity defined as:

- *Providing strong leadership and dedicated teams to implement the statewide education reform plans the State has proposed;*
- *Supporting participating LEAs in successfully implementing the education reform plans the State has proposed;*
- *Providing effective and efficient operations and processes for implementing its Race to the Top grant in such areas as grant administration and oversight, budget reporting and monitoring, performance measure tracking and reporting, and fund disbursement;*
- *Using the funds for this grant...to accomplish the State's plans and meet its targets, including where feasible, by coordinating, reallocating, or repurposing education funds from other Federal, State, and local sources so that they align with the State's Race to the Top goals; and*
- *Using the fiscal, political, and human capital resources of the State to continue, after the period of funding has ended, those reforms funded under the grant for which there is evidence of success.*

These five indicators represent the building blocks that must be in place for a state to successfully sustain education reform. Ensuring there is strong leadership at the state and district levels; planning effective implementation, oversight and funding strategies; and developing a plan for supporting policies over time are all critical elements of a sustainability plan and need to be in place for a reform to be able to stand the test of time.

The last expectation, in particular, is all about long-term sustainability of the RTTT programs, specifically after the original funds are spent. In this context, fiscal, political and human capital resources do not refer only to money, but rather the time, commitment and partnerships states are willing to put forward – or already have in place – to protect, maintain and improve upon the policies and programs funded through RTTT.

Making this issue of capacity and sustainability even more critical and challenging is that 37 states will have gubernatorial elections in 2010 – just months after the RTTT grants are awarded – which will also inevitably have an impact on gubernatorial appointees (such as chief state school officers) in many states. Given the RTTT application must be signed by a state's governor, chief state school officer and president/chair of the state board of education, it is critical that leadership and support for the reforms put forward in the state's application exist at all levels, both within state agencies and in local districts and communities. If states are going to sustain the college- and career-ready agenda and RTTT – which are intrinsically linked and mutually reinforcing – during and after leadership changes, it is vital that they take the time upfront to identify the individuals, strategies and funding necessary to keep the reforms moving after state-level leaders leave office.

Some key areas states may want to consider as they are developing their RTTT applications and are creating sustainability plans are:

- ***Describe the breadth of support among your government leaders for the college- and career-ready agenda (and RTTT). Is this support cross-sector (e.g. K-12, higher education and workforce development) and bi-partisan?*** Reforms are more likely to be sustained when leadership is broad and bi-partisan. A group of united leaders with a common vision and common goals will always be stronger than any individual. The most successfully sustained reforms can all point to a cross-section of political and education leaders – including, but not limited to, governor, K-12 chief, higher education executive officer, legislative leadership, state boards of education, etc. – who championed the cause and didn’t back down, even when opposition arose.
- ***Describe how support for the college- and career-ready agenda (and RTTT) has penetrated to the district and school level. Do key district and school leaders feel ownership over the agenda?*** District and school leaders – including educators, counselors, principals and superintendents – are vital for the success of major education reform. They are on the front lines of education and must be able to integrate the new expectations, programs and initiatives into their schools and districts. These leaders need to not only understand the goals and motivations behind the reforms, but they need to be able to communicate those goals and motivations to students and parents. At the end of the day, teachers and administrators will own the college- and career-ready agenda, so it’s important to engage them early and often throughout the policy development and implementation process.
- ***Describe your state’s transition plan to maintain the college- and career-ready agenda and RTTT in light of any upcoming/expected leadership turnover.*** Changes in leadership are inevitable. More than two-thirds of the states have a gubernatorial election in 2010. The American Diploma Project (ADP) Network will face even more dramatic change in coming years; in 2010, 26 of the 35 ADP network states will have an election, including 16 states where the governor will definitely leave office because of term limits or a decision not to run again. These changes will likely have consequences for other state education leaders, based on each state’s appointment and election structure for leaders such as K-12 chiefs, state board of education members and even higher education executives.

Given this reality, it is important that states take the time now to begin to plan for the upcoming transitions and find ways to protect the college- and career-ready agenda and policies embedded in RTTT in the face of new leadership. Central to any transition plan should be ways in which your external champions (such as third-party coalitions) can help engage candidates about the agenda. In addition, it is important to identify future leaders – be they elected officials or critical staff members – within the government who will continue to champion and advance the college- and career-ready and RTTT agendas. The more bi-partisan and broad support is for the college- and career-ready agenda and RTTT, the more likely it is that those policies will be sustained under new leadership, even when the leadership change also results in a party change. Part of any transition plan should be a focus on the support already in place for the reforms from leaders across political parties and at different levels of leadership within the state – and ways in which that support can be strengthened before the election occurs.

- ***Describe your state's strategy (formal or informal) for implementing the college- and career-ready policies and RTTT reforms.*** A good implementation strategy is ultimately what makes or breaks a reform. All too often, the focus is on passing or adopting a new reform, not on how the reform will be implemented to ensure it is having its intended impact on instruction and learning. The Race to the Top application can – and should – serve as the roadmap to implementation, but it's important to recognize that an implementation strategy must be dynamic to address unintended challenges as they arise. A strong implementation strategy includes the setting of interim benchmarks, allows for mid-course corrections to be made as necessary, and provides schools and districts with supports and tools to help them with implementation.
- ***Describe how your state's education budget priorities are consistent with its policy priorities.*** This question hits on a major expectation of the RTTT application: States need to demonstrate that their budgets – of today and tomorrow – will continue to support the policies put forward under RTTT, even after the grant money runs out. More generally, states need to identify the key reform priorities that need to be bolstered and made possible in the future with smart and effective budgets.

Stakeholder Support

The application specifically asks states to demonstrate how they have enlisted statewide support and commitment in the development of their RTTT plan from a variety of groups, including, but not limited to: State's legislative leadership; charter school leaders; business, community, civil rights, and education association leaders; parent, student, and community organizations; and institutions of higher education.

This request highlights the vital role of leaders and coalitions outside the government in any successfully sustained reform. External leaders are critical partners at many stages of the policy development, adoption and implementation process, and are of particular importance during times of political turnover. As non-elected/non-political leaders, external advocates can help keep the state's attention focused on the policy agenda and help engage newly elected leaders around the agenda. External champions – particularly from the business and education communities – are a critical ingredient in the sustainability of a policy or reform agenda and states should be reaching out early and often to ensure they are involved in and committed to the college- and career-ready agenda and RTTT.

Some key areas states may want to consider as they are developing their RTTT applications and are creating sustainability plans are:

- ***Describe any coalition(s) within your state that are key champions for the college- and career-ready agenda, including their membership (e.g., any representation from the business community, policy and education leadership, higher education, local educators, community-based organizations and the philanthropic community).*** States that have been able to sustain their reform efforts can all point to the presence of external advocates as a major condition of their success. Outside advocates, and notably business leaders, can make the case and push for change, apply pressure to policymakers when the effort is stalled, and make sure reforms are implemented despite setbacks or changes in key elected leaders or majority political parties. External champions are particularly powerful when they join together in a coalition, coordinating their resources and strategies.

Coalitions of supporters can build and sustain the case for reform by leading or promoting communications and outreach efforts, building partnerships and fostering collaboration among key

organizations and actors, influencing policy and implementation, and finding ways to leverage new and existing programs or funds to support the reform efforts. If designed right, these coalitions – regardless of whether they are incorporated as nonprofit organizations, loosely affiliated groups of individuals or organizations, or offshoots of more formal organizations – can also live on well after key politicians leave office, thus becoming the long-term owners and drivers of reform.

- **Describe efforts your state has taken to build consensus for the college- and career-ready agenda (and RTTT).** The call for stakeholder support for the RTTT application highlights how important it is to ensure key stakeholders have a voice throughout the policy process. It is essential that teachers, administrators, local school boards, parents and students do not view the reform agenda as something being done to them but rather for them and with their input. Given they will be the front-line implementers of any new education policy, their opinions should be represented in any major reform effort as they are often best positioned to know what it will take to impact change in the classroom. In addition to district and school personnel and community and business leaders, higher education is another critical stakeholder in ensuring the success of states' RTTT reforms. Higher education institutions and leaders can be key partners in the development, adoption and implementation of the major policies required by RTTT – standards and assessments, data systems, teacher and leader effectiveness, and low-achieving turnaround schools – and in ensuring that the plans represent a coherent vision for P-20 alignment.⁴ Higher education leaders can offer a unique perspective on what it will take for all students to graduate college- and career-ready that should be taken in account as states develop their RTTT plans.

While much of stakeholder engagement is about the policy adoption and implementation process, states' communications and outreach efforts to keep growing the tent of supporters are also of critical importance in building and maintaining consensus for reform. As states make progress on the college- and career-ready agenda and on their RTTT reforms, state leaders should communicate early and often about the proposed changes and the process through which those changes will be implemented. State leaders, particularly political leaders, need to be open and clear about the reform's goals and why college and career readiness for all students is a priority for the state. Reaching out to key constituencies and engaging them in dialogue about how to best structure the reforms can also go a long way toward building on-the-ground support for the rigorous policies.

P-20 Coordination, Vertical and Horizontal Alignment

In addition to the requirements under the four policy assurances and the State Success Factors criteria described above, one of the application's *invitational priorities* – or a “nice to have” elements rather than a requirement – is for states to demonstrate how they are or will coordinate reform across the P-20 spectrum, to ensure the transitions from Pre-K to K-12 to postsecondary education to the workforce are in proper alignment. This section also calls for horizontal alignment between states' education systems and their other services relating to children that are offered through other state agencies or community partners. Schools cannot provide every service a student needs to succeed, and the call for horizontal alignment, or coordination of services, recognizes and seeks to address that fact. States are given the opportunity to provide up to two pages of written explanation for how they will ensure strong vertical and horizontal alignment.

⁴ Achieve recently released a brief on the role of postsecondary leaders in Race to the Top, “The Historic Opportunity to Get College Readiness Right: The Federal Race to the Top Fund and Postsecondary Education,” which can be found at www.achieve.org/Racetothetop.

Policy integration and vertical and horizontal alignment are not only valued by the U.S. Department of Education, but are also a key strategy for sustaining the college- and career-ready reforms. A coherent policy structure that integrates college and career readiness across the P-20 education system – and with policies outside the education sphere – is more difficult to dismantle and in a better position to impact change and improve student achievement and attainment. If higher education and K-12 are both signaling the same expectations of students, for example, through aligned graduation and admissions requirements that are also tied to financial aid eligibility and reinforced through college planning offered by a community-based organization, those requirements would be difficult to roll back or weaken.

Similarly, all four major assurances included in RTTT need to be coordinated across the P-20 pipeline, particularly standards and assessments that should be co-developed by K-12 and postsecondary leaders; data systems that connect student-level records between Pre-K, K-12, and postsecondary systems; teacher preparation and professional development programs; and research and development around the most effective turnaround strategies. RTTT rightfully calls for a comprehensive approach to reform, which requires strong collaboration between K-12, higher education, workforce development, and external partners.

Some key areas states may want to consider as they are developing their RTTT applications and are creating sustainability plans are:

- ***Describe how your state has/will linked the college- and career-ready and RTTT policies with other K-12, higher education or workforce policies, initiatives or incentives.*** Reforms are strongest when they are aligned with other reforms and thus become part of a larger whole. Piecemeal efforts are relatively easier to “pick off” and roll back than reforms that have hooks and tentacles that reach across a state’s policy landscape. And more important, policies are more effective when they are connected coherently across the P-20 spectrum and are well integrated within the state’s policy environment.

After any major reform has been passed, as new policies come online, there should be a concerted effort to make sure they are aligned – or, at a minimum, not in conflict with – the reform. Otherwise, the system will suffer from a lack of cohesion and may lead to the education reforms being siloed by level of education (e.g. early education, elementary, secondary, higher education, etc.) or by the student populations they aim to serve, often to the detriment of the state’s full P-20 education pipeline.

- ***Describe any cross-governmental entities in your state and what role they will play in contributing to the success of the college- and career-ready agenda and RTTT, if applicable.*** Having a cross-governmental organization can be a very effective mechanism for broadening ownership, at least at the state level, over comprehensive education reform and can also serve a vehicle for ensuring a coherent state education system. The most common type of cross-governmental organizations are P-20 councils, which typically include the governor and leaders from Pre-K, K-12, higher education, workforce development and often the business community, representing the full P-20 pipeline. In some states, these councils are focused around the “whole child” model and include representation from the state’s health and social services departments.

At a minimum, cross-governmental agencies can provide an important feedback loop for the implementers of education policies (including those related to RTTT and the college- and career-

ready agenda), and allow them to discuss ways in which each agency can better support each other to reach a truly coherent P-20 system. The most successful cross-governmental entities, however, are those that are institutionalized by law or executive order, meet regularly, have survived beyond one governor, and direct its members to make and execute policy decisions in their individual state agencies. At their best, cross-governmental organizations allow state education leaders to monitor the strengths and weaknesses of the state's P-20 education system and provide actionable recommendations for improvement across agencies (to be acted upon by the organizations' members) all with an eye on how the policies should be working together, both vertically and horizontally.

Designing good education policy is only first step toward improving our schools and raising student achievement; sustaining that policy so that it has time to take root and impact change is a separate challenge that can often be overlooked during the policy development and adoption process. Race to the Top smartly asks states to not only design comprehensive education reform, but also to take the time to develop strategies for the implementation and sustainability of the proposed reforms, critical to ensuring state reform plans emerge that can deliver on the promise of graduating all students ready for college and careers.