

Lessons Learned in Sustaining Education Reforms

A Case Study on the State of Delaware

August 2015

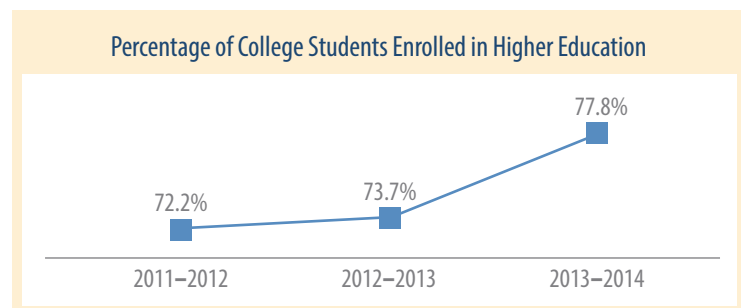
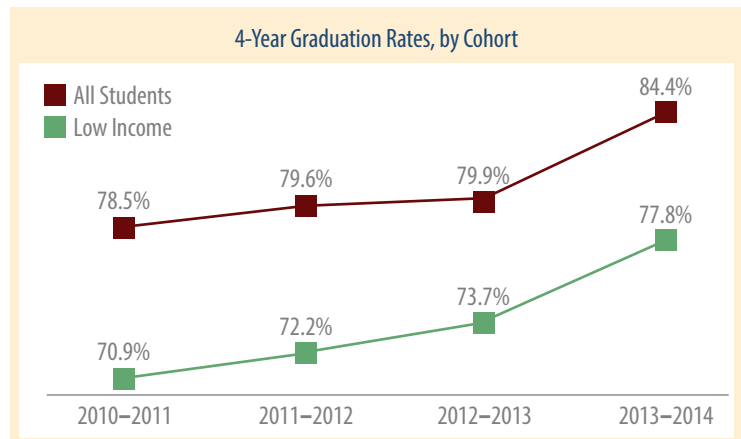
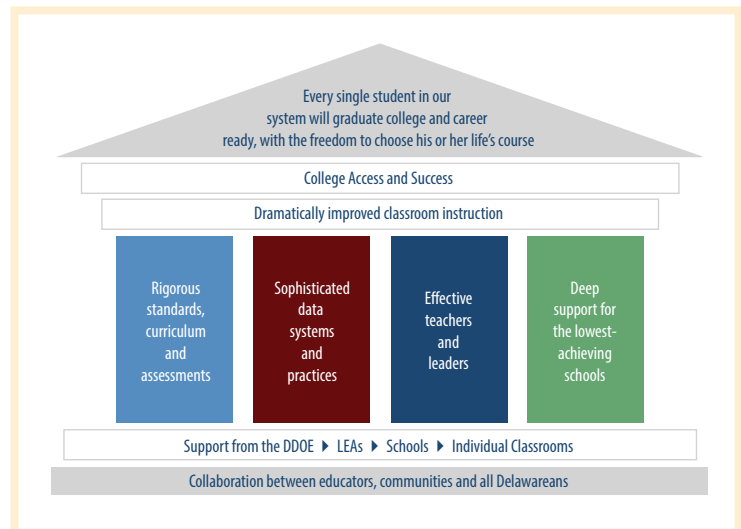
Introduction

Delaware was one of the first States to receive Race to the Top awards in early 2010. Since that time, the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE) has implemented a set of ambitious reforms to dramatically improve student achievement and realize the vision that “every single student in our system will graduate college and career ready, with the freedom to choose his or her life’s course.” Delaware began its Race to the Top efforts with a strong guiding coalition and stakeholder support from elected officials, school leaders, teachers, parents and communities, many of whom signed on to the initial grant application.

The DDOE built its Race to the Top plan on the four pillars driving Federal education reform:

- Rigorous standards, curriculum and assessments
- Sophisticated data systems and practices
- Effective teachers and leaders
- Deep support for the lowest-achieving schools

To implement and track these reforms Delaware established implementation plans with each district in the State and held regular, in-person performance monitoring conversations with district leadership.



The Reform Support Network, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, supports the Race to the Top grantees as they implement reforms in education policy and practice, learn from each other, and build their capacity to sustain these reforms, while sharing these promising practices and lessons learned with other States attempting to implement similarly bold education reform initiatives.

During the past five years, Delaware has seen successes and challenges in implementation of Race to the Top and in delivering results for students.

Of note, more students than ever are graduating from high school, the high school dropout rate is at a 30-year low and more “college-ready” students are enrolling in college. The number of students taking AP exams and securing a 3 or better has increased, and the percentage of children enrolled in high-quality early learning centers has doubled.

Despite these signs of progress, Delaware still has a long way to go, according to the strategic plan DDOE is developing. Gaps persist in achievement based on income and race, gains on State reading and mathematics tests have plateaued, and the percentage of students achieving a 1550 on the SAT (a benchmark signifying college readiness) has remained virtually unchanged the past few years.

As the State’s leadership team looks to the future, two questions remain:

- How will Delaware sustain beyond Race to the Top funding the work at the school and district level with the greatest impact?
- What are the lessons learned thus far from the experience?

DDOE partnered with the Reform Support Network’s Sustainability Work Group to get support in answering these questions. This case study focuses on the process used to develop those answers.

Delaware’s Involvement in the Sustainability Group

To answer these questions, DDOE launched a comprehensive sustainability planning effort with support from the Reform Support Network. In particular, DDOE used the **sustainability rubric** and the **self-assessment process** to agree on areas of strength and challenge—identifying continuous improvement, aligned organizational structure and stakeholder engagement as areas needing attention.

Areas of Attention, Based on the Sustainability Rubric

Sustainability Rubric Element	What is DDOE trying to do?
Build a culture of continuous improvement toward priority goals	Institutionalize continuous improvement throughout the State
Align organizational structure with priority goals and reforms	Ensure that alignment of resources to prioritized reforms be sustained
Build a coalition to drive priority reforms	Re-establish a coalition to support this difficult work at scale

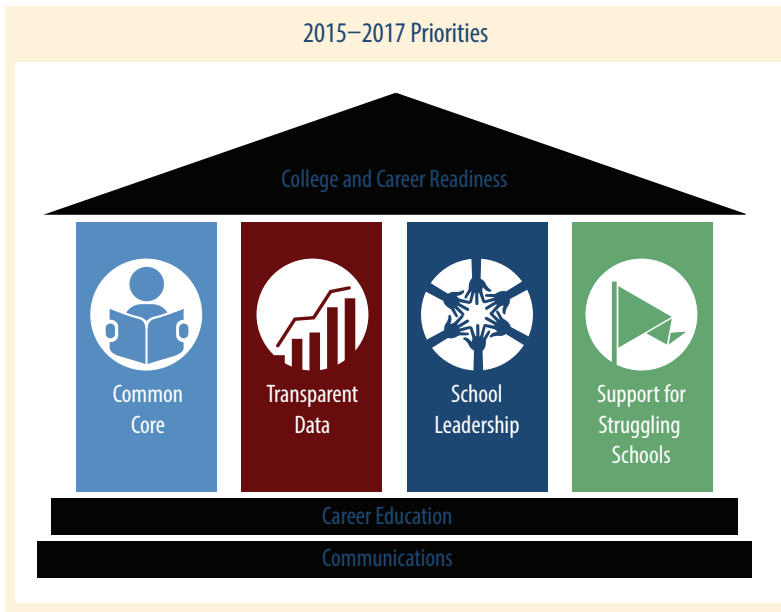
The DDOE team then asked: How can we reach a shared view of the initiatives to be sustained, and subsequently determine what it would take to sustain the work on these priorities?

With support from the Reform Support Network, DDOE embarked on a strategic planning process that involved reflecting on lessons learned from Race to the Top implementation, visioning about the DDOE’s future role, identifying priority initiatives, mapping resources and reorganizing staff, aligning resources and staff to priorities and adjusting and improving existing performance management routines to drive implementation of the priorities.

DDOE established six priorities to sustain progress begun under Race to the Top, codifying this work in a strategic plan for 2015–2017. The priorities connect to the original pillars of Delaware’s Race to the Top application:

- College- and Career-Ready Standards
- Transparent Data
- School Leadership
- Support for Struggling Schools
- Career Education
- Communications

To sustain these priorities, it is critical to take a close look at how DDOE works with its school districts.



Sustainability Lessons Learned in DDOE's Relationship with Districts

Delaware had established effective implementation plans and performance management routines with its districts that were aligned to the original pillars of the Race to the Top application. However, neither the field nor the DDOE leadership team had reached consensus as to which initiatives had the greatest impact. In addition, the DDOE's approaches to providing support to the field and holding districts accountable were inconsistent. It was a constant challenge to define the DDOE's role from initiative to initiative. Because their support was often framed in compliance terms, districts and schools often perceived what the DDOE thought was support as primarily an accountability function. Lastly, support from the guiding coalition that helped Delaware win Race to the Top has waned, not surprisingly, because implementation required key players to make many difficult changes quickly. Early hiccups in implementation—often the downside of being first—contributed as well.

In approaching sustainability, DDOE had three priorities: (1) chart a course to continue implementing effective practices; (2) relieve some of the pressure of

efforts that had not been delivered or had gone awry; and (3) rebuild the partnerships and communications with the field.

The shifts in practice based on the strategic plan are very much in the early stages. But from DDOE's experiences through Race to the Top, and in planning and charting a course for continued improvements, we can draw some lessons learned that could help other States and implementers at any level.

Focus on What Works

Looking across the accomplishments of the previous five years, DDOE reaffirmed its vision for Delaware's students and then investigated the impact of strategies under Race to the Top, pushing for a shared view of what was most important to sustain.

The priorities in the strategic plan were ultimately refined based on Race to the Top implementation, field feedback and performance management routines. The process helped to achieve broad alignment among the DDOE leadership, the Governor's office and districts.

DDOE Performance Routines with Districts

DDOE established semi-annual performance management routines with districts to monitor and support progress on Race to the Top implementation. (The frequency of these routines may vary, depending on student performance in the district.) The DDOE is aligning performance routines with the priority strategies identified in its strategic plan, including the allocation of funds in these discussions.

Overall, DDOE sustainability efforts focused on a core set of priorities by:

- **Narrowing and naming the priorities.** At the outset of sustainability planning, at least 32 priority initiatives were the focus of implementation across the State. DDOE narrowed the focus to 15 key initiatives across six priorities in the strategic plan for school year (SY) 2015–2017.
- **Aligning resources to these areas of support.** Through an extensive resource mapping process that ultimately included 119 different initiatives, DDOE clarified priorities and identified resource needs and reallocations. This process included a reorganization of DDOE functions and responsibilities, with an increased investment in communications. DDOE also secured additional funds from the State legislature, albeit half of the amount DDOE requested. These funds, along with strategic allocations of vacant positions within DDOE, have been directed to the priorities.
- **Aligning performance management routines, internal and external.** Parallel to prioritization, DDOE adjusted district routines and planning processes to reflect the refined priorities, shifting its focus to the more limited set of initiatives having the most impact across the State. In addition, DDOE shifted its internal routines with the Secretary to reflect this focus.

Establish Proof Points for the SEA Technical Assistance Role

DDOE looked beyond 2017 to consider the State education agency's (SEA's) future role in relation to districts and schools. It considered what its support to districts and schools could look like and the role that DDOE should play.

From these conversations, DDOE established a shared theory of action that focused on its role in three primary areas: (1) creating a system of fair and transparent expectations; (2) providing supports; and (3) seeding innovation. This theory of action further identifies how DDOE will achieve each of these core functions, serving as a partner that provides leadership and supports and assumes some shared accountability for results.

Most notably, Delaware's Office of Teaching and Learning has reported high-profile successes that embrace this new role through the Common Ground and Getting to Zero initiatives. Both efforts have been well received by the field and the DDOE plans to continue supports to meet the needs of districts and schools.

Common Ground for the Common Core

Delaware adopted their Common Core State Standards in 2010 through legislation approved in advance of its Race to the Top application. Implementation of the standards was largely left to districts and schools through SY 2012–2013, although DDOE convened teachers to develop resources and supports in mathematics and literacy content.

With student scores plateauing on the State test, however, and growing recognition of the increased rigor demanded of instruction aligned to college- and career-ready standards, DDOE established Common Ground in SY 2013–2014. Common Ground is an opt-in professional learning experience with districts and schools designed to support educators as they transition to new college- and career-ready standards. DDOE made the network voluntary so that districts and schools could call upon the support but would ultimately own the outcomes from their implementation of Common Core. DDOE leveraged Regulation 1498 to design and facilitate deep, engaging, ongoing professional learning for educators. Participating districts and charter schools submitted implementation plans that DDOE reviewed and approved before they could join the network. In fact, DDOE denied entry to one district, finding that its plan lacked the necessary rigor and commitment.

Common Ground brings educators together in clinics, online webinars and large-scale meetings with national experts for structured opportunities for collaboration. The cycle of direct learning, ongoing support through webinars, site-based implementation, evidence and artifact sharing and peer feedback was well received by participating districts and schools. As a result, DDOE secured funding to continue the effort into SY 2014–2015, with the participation of eight charter schools and 15 of 19 districts. Eighty-six percent of Common Ground attendees have reported that

the experience has helped them engage students in learning with Common Core-aligned expectations.

DDOE has approached Common Ground's implementation with care and thoughtfulness, including an evaluation of Common Ground conducted through on-site visits in schools and a comparison of schools that are part of Common Ground with a sample that are not. DDOE and district staff conducted these school visits jointly. Their purpose is to reach a shared view of Common Core implementation status at each school and to identify next steps, including specific ways DDOE can assist.

Getting to Zero

For the past two years, due to DDOE's coordinated efforts, 100 percent of all college-ready seniors in Delaware applied to college or other postsecondary programs, and almost 80 percent completed the Federal Student Aid Form (FAFSA), the highest rate ever achieved in the State. Before Getting to Zero, of the 19 percent of Delaware students who met the college-ready benchmark (an SAT score of 1550 or higher), only 82 percent applied to college.

Governor Jack Markell launched the Getting to Zero initiative in 2013 to boost the college-going rate among students who achieve the college-ready benchmark. The Governor and DDOE leaders tour each high school in the State to speak to students about the importance of college and post-secondary programs. Through the diligent efforts of school counselors—and a partnership with the University of Delaware during the first College Application Month in SY 2014–2015—students receive support during the school day to complete post-secondary applications and the FAFSA. All Delaware colleges now waive application fees for students, and the College Board provides application waivers to low-income students for up to eight out-of-State colleges.

DDOE organizes this effort, supports counselors, builds partnerships with higher education institutions and conducts direct outreach to students who need additional support in completing an application.

Don't Forget to Communicate

DDOE began Race to the Top with broad support from stakeholders across Delaware. Maintaining that momentum throughout implementation and leadership changes has been a challenge.

During the sustainability planning process, DDOE leaders reflected that although their capacity for reactive communication was strong, they did not do enough to engage stakeholders and communicate the successes and challenges from implementation of Race to the Top. In addition, DDOE reflected that the initial support it received from the local teacher's union and district superintendents has declined. Implementing multiple complex reforms without adequate and focused communications to these groups may have weakened DDOE's ability to make greater progress and potentially sustain key areas of the reforms.

In response, DDOE has realigned resources and systems to improve communications and engagement with stakeholders across the State. With support from the Reform Support Network, DDOE developed a plan for implementing its new strategies, drawing from communications best practices of Delaware districts and States across the United States. The plan creates a set of strategic communications priorities to ensure that everyone in the agency is on the same page, creating new mechanisms and processes for communications and engagement, embedding communications expertise within each DDOE unit and adding additional staff resources through a department-wide reorganization. As part of its new strategy, DDOE is more deliberately involving key stakeholders in developing plans at the front end of initiatives, rather than reaching out after the decisions are made and the work accomplished.

Although challenges remain for building support for some priority reforms at the district and school levels, Delaware has made progress. In developing the new **School Accountability Framework**, for example, more than 6,500 educators and citizens weighed in on the multiple indicators of student and school progress.

Conclusion

Race to the Top gave Delaware an opportunity to innovate and implement reforms to improve student achievement. DDOE is positioned to sustain the initiatives that are having the most impact by narrowing the focus on what works, shifting the role of the SEA from compliance to support and increasing communications and engagement throughout the State. Sustainability of core reforms takes time and

effort, but it is vital to building lasting reforms that can withstand changing landscapes and maximize impact on students.

Other States, districts and schools can learn from Delaware's experiences and consider the tools from the Reform Support Network Sustainability Work Group as important support for sustainability planning and implementation.

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