



# Race to the Top Highlights

## Third-Party Providers and School Turnaround

March 2013

The Race to the Top and the School Improvement Grant programs provide resources to States to implement significant interventions to turn around their persistently lowest achieving schools.<sup>1</sup> Implementation of school turnaround is a complex effort; States, local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools often engage outside experts and providers of specialized services to bring additional capacity and assist with implementation. In doing so, it is essential for schools, LEAs and States to initiate a process to ensure the high quality of the services provided by external partners. The purpose of this publication is to describe the varying approaches that some Race to the Top States have taken and to provide examples of safeguards that States are using to maximize the number of available providers while ensuring that they are supplying high-quality services.

With its Partnership Zone, **Delaware** has taken steps to vet lead partners working with its persistently lowest achieving schools. In collaboration with Mass Insight Education, the State crafted a request for qualifications, inviting providers to submit information regarding the services they would be able to provide to assist with the implementation of turnaround models. Mass Insight also assisted Delaware in developing a rubric to review submissions: 15 providers applied and 9 were approved. The State invited approved partners to participate in a Lead Partner Convening and compiled a list of approved partners for LEAs to draw upon. Delaware does not assist in matching partners with LEAs, because LEAs independently develop their Partnership Zone plans for schools. LEAs are responsible for ensuring that services provided by a partner are aligned with the Partnership Zone plan and for the outcomes of their services. In Delaware, LEAs hold partners accountable for the parameters of their contracts as the LEA monitors services or receives information from the State monitoring protocols. For more information about the Request for Qualifications (RFQ), see [www.doe.k12.de.us/rfp/DDOESTULeadPartnerRFQ-FINAL8-3-11.doc](http://www.doe.k12.de.us/rfp/DDOESTULeadPartnerRFQ-FINAL8-3-11.doc).

Additionally, **Delaware** has developed six decision point questions to evaluate an LEA's readiness to implement a new governance structure in a Partnership Zone school, determine a partnership

<sup>1</sup> Race to the Top State plans propose to support their LEAs in turning around the lowest achieving schools by implementing one of the four school intervention models, which are similar to the four intervention models required by School Improvement Grants:

- **Turnaround model:** Replace the principal, rehire no more than 50 percent of the staff and grant the principal sufficient operational flexibility (in staffing, calendars/time, budgeting and other areas) to fully implement a comprehensive approach to substantially improving student outcomes.
- **Restart model:** Convert a school or close and reopen it under a charter school operator, a charter management organization or an education management organization that has been selected through a rigorous review process.
- **School closure model:** Close a school and enroll the students who attended that school in other, higher achieving schools in the LEA
- **Transformation model:** Implement each of the following strategies: (1) replace the principal and take steps to increase teacher and school leader effectiveness, (2) institute comprehensive instructional reforms, (3) increase learning time and create community-oriented schools and (4) provide operational flexibility and sustained support.

**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.**

strategy, identify areas of strength and challenge and begin planning to address those areas. Each LEA completes the self-assessment prior to meeting with the Delaware School Turnaround Unit. This assessment is intended to help LEAs consider their internal capacity, systems and structures, resources and policies in place to support dramatic change in persistently low-achieving schools. The assessment is completed by a team of representatives that includes the LEA and local school board and is reviewed in an in-person meeting with the School Turnaround Unit. The decision point questions are:

1. Does the LEA have turnaround expertise, specifically in project management, human resources, operations, teaching and learning, communications, professional development, family and community engagement and extended learning time, or would you consider contracting for some or all of these areas to an external lead partner?
2. Does the LEA have leadership in place to manage the turnaround efforts?
3. Is the LEA prepared to give an in-district unit increased autonomy and flexibility?
4. Is the LEA prepared to take accountability for school improvement efforts?
5. Does the LEA have adequate systems and structures to manage and/or support all components of school transformation?
6. Does the LEA have a comprehensive strategy to bring about dramatic school improvement?

The School Turnaround Unit conducts one-to-one sessions with districts upon completing this self-assessment to develop a clear plan of action for managing turnaround work either internally or through a contract with an external lead partner. It also conducts bimonthly visits at cohort 1 sites and monthly visits at cohort 2 sites, as well as frequent informal visits with district and school leadership to monitor progress and provide support and guidance to these leaders as they develop and implement innovative school improvement strategies in the Partnership Zone schools.

**Florida** has a policy that governs LEA contracts with third-party providers.<sup>2</sup> According to that policy, third-party provider organizations must demonstrate a record of success in school improvement by providing information to the LEA that includes the following:

- Data that demonstrate the provider's effectiveness in improving student outcomes in similar school settings.
- Evidence of scalability and capacity.

The State of Florida approves LEA turnaround plans, which include the above information. The State, however, does not approve or preselect providers.

**Georgia** has identified a small slate of Partnering Organizations for School Turnaround to provide services statewide, and otherwise allows LEAs flexibility in selecting partners. For example, the State has selected Communities in Schools to provide select support services. Local affiliates of Communities in Schools partner with LEAs to provide services such as mentoring, after-school programs, tutoring, parent engagement, literacy and Performance Learning Centers.<sup>3</sup> State school improvement specialists, who spend two to four days a week with persistently lowest achieving schools, also play a significant role in ensuring that the work of partners is aligned with a school's intervention plan. For a full description of partners, see <http://rt3ga.com>.

**Illinois** is working with the American Institutes for Research to establish the Center for School Improvement, which will coordinate the work of various district improvement systems, including turnaround efforts and third-party providers. The mission of the center is to provide high-quality coordinated, and consistent assistance to the current statewide system of support to LEAs. The Center will include a District Accountability and Oversight Unit, which will oversee comprehensive interventions in the State's lowest performing schools. For additional details about the work of the new center, see <http://www.isbe.net/grants/center/default.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Florida School Improvement Bureau Chief, e-mail message to RSN staff, May 16, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Performance Learning Centers are small, nontraditional high schools geared toward students who are not succeeding in traditional school settings.

**Massachusetts** has taken an active role in approving providers. Priority Partners for Turnaround is a State-developed initiative aimed at qualifying organizations from a preapproved list of vendors to support LEAs and school turnaround in LEAs with persistently lowest achieving schools. Priority Partners are familiar with the context and requirements of Massachusetts school turnaround work because they are first vetted through a rigorous review process and must have a demonstrated record of effectiveness in accelerating school improvement. The services provided by these Priority Partners also promote the Massachusetts Conditions for School Effectiveness (see <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/accountability/sr>).

Organizations selected as Priority Partners become part of the Priority Partners Network, which is intended to facilitate collaboration among partners and alignment with State initiatives. LEAs participating in the Race to the Top may use their grant dollars to help fund partnerships with Priority Partners organizations.

The selection process has two phases: the preapproval process and a secondary vetting and selection process, which requires organizations to submit targeted proposals describing how they will assist schools in specific areas aligned with the Conditions for School

## Theory of Action

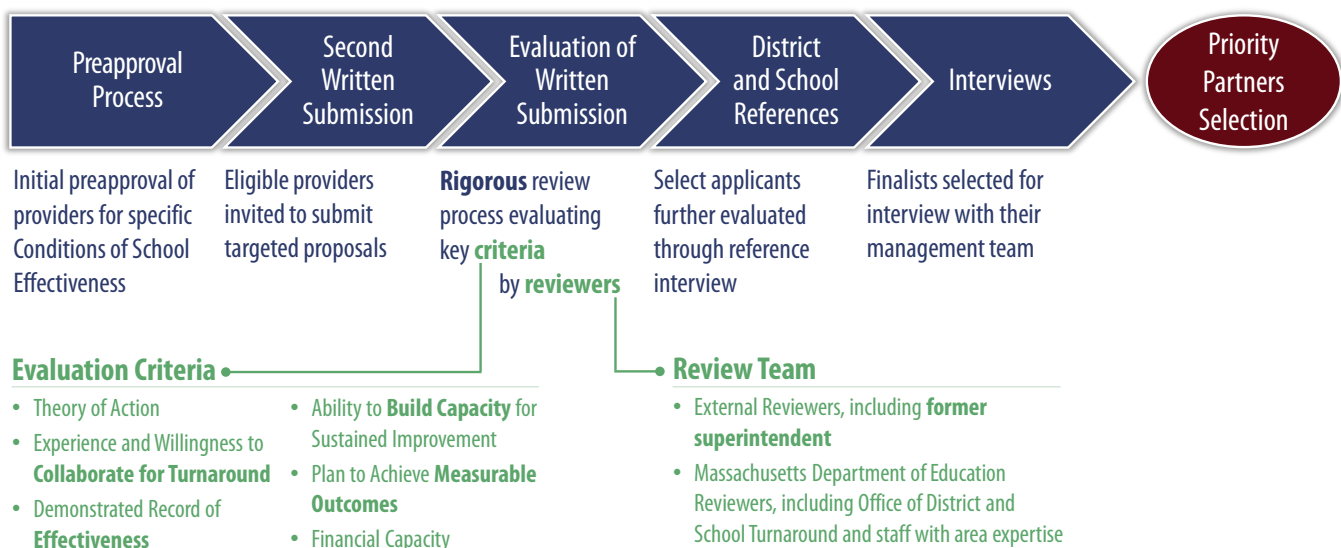
**IF** Massachusetts Department of Education can effectively screen and select partners with demonstrated success in promoting Conditions for School Effectiveness,

**THEN** districts will be able to accelerate school turnaround through strategic partnerships.

Effectiveness. Priority Partners profiles were created to highlight key information about the organizations selected and the specific services offered in the areas for which they are approved: effective use of data; maximizing learning time; social, emotional and health supports; and LEA systems of support. For more information, see <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/framework/level4/PriorityPartners.pdf>.

Massachusetts has also created a toolkit designed to assist LEA leadership and staff in evaluating the quality and cost-effectiveness of external provider services over time. In addition to offering general guidance about the processes of hiring and monitoring external

### Massachusetts' Priority Partners Selection Process<sup>4</sup>



<sup>4</sup> Adapted from *Priority Partners for Turnaround: Summary List and Profiles*, Massachusetts Department of Education (2012). <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/framework/level4/PriorityPartners.pdf>

providers, the toolkit provides samples of the types of evidence an LEA may request to evaluate providers and their performance. For a link to the toolkit, see <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/partnership>.

To expand the pool of services available across the State, Massachusetts has created a Priority Partners Investment Fund to advance the expansion, service development and collaboration of proven partners. This fund is supporting a select number of initiatives that respond to a demonstrated LEA need, align with State priority areas for persistently lowest achieving LEAs and schools and promise to have meaningful impact on student outcomes and overall LEA and school improvement efforts.

**New York** has developed a database that describes which partners are working with specific schools and their particular expertise. The State asked vendors and partners to describe the demographics and grade spans of the schools in which they had worked, as well as achievement results, in order to identify experienced providers. (See <http://usny.nysed.gov/rttt/docs/rfi/schoolturnaround.html> to learn more about the request for information New York issued to collect vendor data.) New York has also created a grant program entitled Systemic Supports for District and School Turnaround, which awards two-year grants to LEAs with priority schools.<sup>5</sup> According to the State, the purpose of these grants is to provide opportunities for LEAs to partner with support organizations to:

- Build supportive LEA-level operating structures, and reframe LEA systems to sustain schools in improving student academic performance and to hold them accountable for needed performance gains.
- Build the capacity of LEA and school leaders to design and implement school turnaround plans that ensure dramatic gains in student academic performance through the effective implementation of the Common Core State Standards, systems for teacher and leader effectiveness and a cycle of data-driven instruction, inquiry and action.
- Coordinate and streamline an LEA's current school turnaround efforts (through existing School

<sup>5</sup> Priority schools are the State's lowest achieving schools, as defined in New York's approved Elementary and Secondary Education Act flexibility waiver.

Improvement Grant, Race to the Top and other funding sources) into one integrated approach to school turnaround.

For more information about the grant program, see <http://usny.nysed.gov/rttt/rfp/systemic-supports-district-school-turnaround/home.html>.

**Ohio** issued a request for proposals to identify high-quality external providers to assist schools in turnaround efforts. As a result, Ohio identified 99 providers throughout the State and subsequently developed a resource manual to name the providers and their areas of expertise. After engaging with partners to implement turnaround strategies, LEA grantees are required to submit an external provider report three times a year to track their progress. Ohio has also surveyed its School Improvement Grant schools in order to assess the quality of their current third-party providers in terms of outcomes, staff, instructional materials and professional development services. Ohio is using the results of the survey to develop its protocol for monitoring schools, which occurs weekly and monthly. For the list of approved providers, see <http://education.ohio.gov/GD/DocumentManagement/DocumentDownload.aspx?DocumentID=122053>.

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For more information and resources from the Reform Support Network, please visit <http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/implementation-support-unit/tech-assist/resources.html>.

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