Six States Sign On to School Turnaround Project

By Lesli A. Maxwell

Dozens of schools are slated for aggressive interventions over the next three years under a new, multistate effort that aims to clear hurdles that have hindered previous attempts to improve underperforming schools.

Education officials in Colorado, Delaware, Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, and New York have agreed to partner with Mass Insight Education and Research Institute, a Boston-based nonprofit group that has developed a set of strategies it says will reverse years of low achievement in schools.

The effort will be fueled in part by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which is channeling billions of extra dollars in federal aid into school improvement, a top priority of the Obama administration.

The Partnership Zone Initiative, spearheaded by Mass Insight, is a $75 million effort that will tap into the $3.5 billion in new Title I school improvement aid that states will receive later this year, as well as private philanthropy.

And if any of the six participating states wins some of the $4 billion in Race to the Top grants also being financed by the economic-stimulus law, a slice of that money could go to districts that elect to be part of the school turnaround project.

Much of the public money would be used to pay for increased salaries for teachers who are hired to work in the “turnaround” schools and to cover the costs of longer school days, project officials say, and the states have committed to spend roughly $750,000 per year, per school.

“We saw this as a chance to be a real partner with our districts on one of the most challenging problems we face,” said Dwight D. Jones, the education commissioner in Colorado. “Historically, we’ve been in the business of monitoring our districts. We say, ‘Here’s what you need to do, and we’ll be back to check on you.’ ”

Previously, Colorado didn’t have the staff capacity or other resources to do school turnarounds on any scale or with any staying power, Mr. Jones said. Two districts—one in Pueblo, the other in Westminster—are likely to participate in the Partnership Zone Initiative, Mr. Jones said. The Denver school system is also considering it, he said.
“Now that we do have the resources, we wanted to make sure we spent them well and created the greatest possible impact,” he said.

Blueprint for Change

The partnership-zone strategy was recommended nearly three years ago by Mass Insight in a report called “The Turnaround Challenge.” (“Turnaround' Work Needs Rethinking, New Report Says,” Nov. 14, 2007). Mass Insight researchers laid out a flexible blueprint that states and school districts could follow to create protected “zones” free of traditional rules and operating conditions, such as restrictions on the length of the school day, or central-office hiring practices that give principals no authority to select teachers for their schools.

Under the initiative announced this week, states and school districts will set up specialized units to oversee the work of local “lead” partners, which will be tapped to manage a cluster of three to five low-performing schools and to supervise the broad array of services that each will need to reverse its downward slide.

“Look, we know what doesn’t work, which is the light-touch, drive-by coaches who come once a week to talk to principals in failing schools, or hiring a retired administrator to go into one of these schools to help out,” said William E. Guenther, the founder and president of Mass Insight.

“This isn’t that,” he said. “What we are talking about here is changing the underlying working and operating conditions at these schools that have persistently failed.”

Districts that opt to be part of their states’ zones will select their lead partners, although state schools superintendents will play a role in vetting and approving those partners. Illinois, for example, has already selected a group of potential lead partners for districts to choose from.

Whether the turnaround approach succeeds will hinge, in large measure, on the quality of the lead partners selected to supervise the schools targeted to be turned around, Mr Guenther said.

As envisioned by Mass Insight, lead partners could be local groups dedicated to school improvement, charter-management organizations, or a group of in-house turnaround specialists who are given a wide berth to operate outside regular school district rules. Every state will have to help cultivate the lead partners, Mr. Guenther said.

Regardless of who they are, he said, all lead partners must meet four conditions. They must agree to a multiyear performance contract that holds them accountable for student outcomes in the cluster of schools they manage. They must have the authority to select principals in their schools, and the power to supervise every program or provider that brings in support services. Finally, he said, they must place a staff member at each of the schools to work alongside the principal.

“This is about building real capacity,” Mr. Guenther said. “Simply having a deputy or area superintendent in charge of a network of schools has not been sufficient to actually produce turnarounds.”
In Delaware, education officials are working on strategies to foster home-grown lead partners that districts and schools won't view as outsiders, said Daniel Cruce, the state’s deputy secretary of education.

“We know there is a need for a high level of trust to do this right,” he said.

**Plenty of Advice**

As part of the collaboration with Mass Insight, each of the six states will receive advice and services from several national education organizations in the areas of human capital, policy, budgets, and nonacademic supports for children. Mass Insight, in combination with state-based nonprofit groups in each of the states involved, has pledged to raise $30 million to help pay for those services.

The New York City-based New Teacher Project, for example, will conduct in-depth audits of human capital in the districts that participate in their states’ partnership zones.

“We'll be examining hiring practices, recruiting practices, development programs for teachers, evaluations, retention of top performers,” said Dan Weisberg, the group’s vice president of policy and general counsel. “It will be all of those things that matter so much in every school, but matter in spades when it comes to chronically underperforming schools.”

In Delaware, state education officials expect to target two to four schools in one or two districts for the partnership zone initially, said Mr. Cruce, who is also the chief of staff to Lillian M. Lowery, the state’s secretary of education.

Ms. Lowery, under new regulations in Delaware, will have considerable influence over how the state’s lowest-achieving schools are restructured, a condition that Mr. Guenther said will strengthen the state’s partnership zone.

Once the schools are identified, Ms. Lowery will have authority to select those that she wants to join the partnership zone, Mr. Cruce said. She will negotiate, with the local superintendents, the best turnaround options for those schools, based on data and their history.