

Turnaround Partnership Zone Initiative

July 2009

Mass Insight Education and Research Institute (Mass Insight) is seeking support for the comprehensive piloting and early stage scale-up of *The Turnaround Challenge* framework, increasingly cited by state and national education reformers as the approach to school turnaround most likely to succeed at scale and introduce systemic change. We will work with three states, and a small number of districts within those states, to pilot the transformation of clusters of underperforming schools through **Partnership Zones**, which are characterized by model organizational practices, including **strong, accountable Lead Partner organizations** and **flexible operating conditions**. Lead Partner organizations are responsible for the integration of at least all academic and student support services and are accountable for student achievement and responsible for staffing. At the same time we will engage a larger group of 7-10 states, preparing them for future Zone cohorts, sharing effective practice and strategies, and helping them to align the elements needed to undertake dramatic change.

The immediate goal of this initiative is to eliminate the poverty achievement gap in 30-50 chronically low-performing schools through the implementation of Partnership Zones -- thus providing critical "proof points" for the efficacy of this intentional and transformational approach over the next two to three years. While both political will and significant funding are now being brought to bear on the turnaround of chronically underperforming schools, such real-life implementation of scalable, sustainable turnaround is still urgently needed to guide effective investment, particularly of vastly increased Title 1, Race to the Top and Innovation Fund dollars.

At the same time, while working in this area for the past four years, we have grown more convinced than ever of the relevance of *The Turnaround Challenge* framework to the broader cause of fundamental school reform. The ultimate goal of the project is to leverage the urgency and resources being directed at school turnaround to help re-engineer how districts work and to catalyze broader reform around human capacity, conditions and performance management. The pilot implementation addresses this larger goal up front through a range of reviews and services that will add value for the entire district, and in the longer term through plans for the replication of Zone clusters across the district that would ultimately change the role of the district office. The project also includes national and regional advocacy to promote the underlying concepts of the Zone and the growth of the Lead Partner marketplace, both of which will help create the environment for broader change in the management and delivery of public education across the country.

Mass Insight is an independent non-profit that organizes public schools, higher education, business, and state government to significantly improve student achievement, with a focus on

closing achievement gaps. The Institute's education reform strategies are defined by two convictions: that change at scale depends on the practical integration of research, policy, and practice; and that only dramatic and comprehensive change in high-poverty schools will produce significant achievement gains. We are requesting \$12 million in foundation funding each year for three years, with the potential to renew for two more years, to: implement comprehensive and intense "proof point" pilots, develop the larger group of states for subsequent Partnership Zone turnaround cohorts, share new effective practices, and advocate nationally and locally for conditions change and the development of the Partner marketplace.

DRAFT

August 3, 2009

Dear [insert selected states],

We hope that you are finding your involvement in Mass Insight's State Turnaround Development Group to be valuable as you think through new strategies for improving low-performing schools.

We are pleased to offer you the opportunity to participate in an exciting, high-profile national pilot, the Partnership Zone Initiative-- a five year, \$40 million dollar effort to create scalable and sustainable school turnaround. The Partnership Zone Initiative will bring together public and private support for partner organizations working with states and districts in transforming clusters of under-performing schools. We believe that this initiative will help you access Race to the Top and other competitive federal funds in order to implement a scalable school turnaround strategy and a sustainable method of improving district systems.

[Insert state name] is among a select group of states we are inviting to take the next step in committing to work with us in the Partnership Zone Initiative. Your state has been specifically identified because of: 1) your commitment to the Partnership Zone framework set forth in the *Turnaround Challenge* report; 2) your commitment to investing the additional resources necessary for successful turnaround; and the 3) alignment and support of your state and district leadership.

In its first year, the Partnership Zones will be established in up to three states with one or two volunteer districts participating in each state. We expect that the first group of states and districts will be selected by early 2010 in preparation to open Partnership Zones for the 2010-2011 school year.

Overview of the Partnership Zone

Partnership Zones provide a unique opportunity to create the conditions and support systems necessary to create sustainable, scalable change. States and local districts will support and fund **Partnership Zones** containing **clusters of three to five high-need, low-performing schools**, with a commitment to add additional clusters each year. **Lead Partners** will sign performance agreements with districts for full authority over staffing, school programs, and all service providers in the school clusters. In return, as part of the performance agreement, Lead Partners will accept full accountability for student performance. In order to support the Zones, states and districts will commit to creating **flexible operating conditions** for Zone schools with a particular focus on four key elements including:

- **People**—Who is recruited, hired, and retained

- **Time**—The length of the school day (7:30 am-5:00 pm)
- **Money**—How school budgets are allocated
- **Program**—The implementation of a rigorous, standards-based curriculum

Benefits to Participating States and Districts

The three states and participating districts will collaborate with Mass Insight to raise private funding. Such funding will be used to fund Partnership Zone implementation as well as additional services such as:

- Services to States and Districts:
 - Assistance to states in completing turnaround strategy for Race to the Top applications;
 - Assistance to states in applying for local and regional funding;
 - A comprehensive set of services, provided by Mass Insight and a national team of consultants including:
 - Analysis and implementation support for state and district policy reforms;
 - Assessment and recommendations for human capital strategies;
 - Identification and analysis of Partnership marketplace;
 - Assessment and recommendations for district data systems;
 - Review and recommendations for district data systems.

All private contributions will be matched by state and local public support for school-level turnaround.

State and District Commitments

As an initial step in the selection process, we are looking for six key commitments from states and districts identified as partners. Final selection of up to three states will be based on the timely ability to meet these commitments:

1. Commit to **target funds to Partnership Zones (Title I including 1003(g), other federal funds)** in the range of \$750,000 per school per year for the first three years for up to 8-10 schools;
2. Commit to the creation of **Partnership Zones with altered operating conditions** in order to achieve:
 - Funding and regulatory flexibility
 - Extended school day
 - Flexibility in hiring/program;
3. Commit to work with a **non-profit Strategic Partner** on the state level who will support the initiative; act as a fiscal agent for private funding, and coordinate all policy and advocacy activities;

4. Commit to *building local capacity by supporting a marketplace of lead partners who sign performance contracts with districts for school accountability*;
5. Commit to the **expansion and scalability of Partnership Zones** beyond the original cluster, adding additional clusters of schools each year;
6. Commit to align the state's *Race to the Top* application with Mass Insight's school turnaround framework.

Actions Required

We are asking you to indicate your commitment to these principles by signing this letter and returning it to our office by September 1st. Signing this letter indicates your agreement to realize the commitments listed above, your willingness to be identified in Mass Insight's national grant proposal, and your interest in moving forward to the next stage of the state selection process.

The Partnership Zone pilot provides an opportunity for states and districts, for the first time, to create the conditions necessary for successful, scalable, and sustainable school turnaround. We look forward to your participation.

Best,

William Guenther
President,
Mass Insight

Signature of State Commissioner/Superintendent of Education

Date