




Nancy S. Grasmick  
State Superintendent of Schools

200 West Baltimore Street • Baltimore, MD 21201 • 410-767-0100 • 410-333-6442 TTY/TDD

**TO:** Members of the State Board of Education  
**FROM:** Nancy S. Grasmick   
**DATE:** October 26, 2010  
**SUBJECT:** Race to the Top: The Breakthrough Center

---

**PURPOSE:**

The purpose of this item is to update the Maryland State Board of Education regarding The Breakthrough Center, a significant component of the education reform areas identified in the federal Race to the Top grant program designed to encourage and reward states that are creating conditions for education innovation and reform.

**BACKGROUND/HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE:**

Maryland's vision of reform is based on a foundation that began with the Sondheim Commission Report (1989) and continued through a second wave of reform which began with the Report of the Visionary Panel (2002). These previous reforms resulted in such actions as the Voluntary State Curriculum, the Maryland School Assessments, and the consolidation of early childhood programs. At the same time, the Maryland General Assembly increased funding for public education by \$1.3 billion over 6 years.

These reform efforts have earned Maryland the number one ranking on overall education quality by *Education Week Quality Counts* for both 2009 and 2010. Additionally, Maryland has been cited for first place ranking in the nation by the College Board for the number of students participating in and earning passing scores on Advanced Placement Exams and by *Newsweek* magazine (June 2009) for the number of rigorous programs offered in high schools. The State recognizes, however, that there is still room for improvement in order to meet the needs of all Maryland students and prepare them for college and the workforce in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



Although Maryland has a history of demonstrated action to improve performance for persistently low-achieving schools and students, that action has not yet met the State's expectations for effective and sustained change. Maryland is not satisfied with the number of low-achieving schools and the level of student performance across the state. To that end, Maryland has shown a willingness to learn from its experiences and adopt new approaches.

In 2008, I initiated action to address long-standing internal challenges that limited MSDE's ability to deliver effective and successful support to low-achieving schools. Challenges included the pervasive lack of (1) coordination in services provided by MSDE offices and external partners; (2) clarity or prioritization around which schools are required to participate in which services; (3) breakthrough vision, standards, and services to address the needs of low-achieving schools; and (4) a cohesive portfolio of turnaround services.

To address these challenges and increase the urgency for improved performance in persistently low-achieving schools, MSDE partnered with the National Governors Association, Mass Insight, and The Education Alliance at Brown University to overhaul its approach to low-achieving schools. As a result, MSDE launched a major organizational and operational shift with the creation of the Breakthrough Center (the Center), which is the leading edge of Maryland's school turnaround work. The Center gives high visibility and high priority to the provision of integrated public and private services to support reform in underperforming districts and schools. It serves as the interface among MSDE, LEAs, and identified chronically underperforming schools adopting one of the four intervention models — Turnaround, Restart, Closure, and Transformation — and places strong emphasis on building capacity in these districts and schools so that turnaround is not just achieved, but sustained.

The mission of the Center is to ensure that the right services are delivered to the right districts and schools at the right time to accelerate school performance and cultivate people by improving the capacity of individuals through Breakthrough Leading and Teaching. The core work of the Center's operation is instruction. Every effort, every expectation, and every consequence leads to the same result: improved teaching, improved school leadership, and improved learning.

The Center establishes personal and customized relationships with district and school leaders and instructional staff. These solid, candid partnerships give way to authentic assessment of need and capacity for change, as well as clarity regarding the expectations and consequences when performance falls short. To solidify the expected outcomes and deliverables of these relationships, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) is developed between the LEA and the Breakthrough Center. The outcome, coupled with a mutual drive to turnaround low school performance, informs a tight and focused path to achievement. The newly achieved coordination at the state level makes it easier for districts and schools to navigate the turnaround process and gain access to supports and services that will make a difference.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

The Breakthrough Center is unique for many reasons: its strategic identification and allocation of resources (human, material, fiscal), its integrative approach, its knowledge-management repository, and its cross-district sharing of best practices. Moving forward, the Center will:

- Scale the MSDE's Breakthrough Center services to provide coordinated turnaround services to the bottom 5 percent of schools. This will focus on 16 low-achieving schools and 20 feeder schools in the Baltimore City Schools and the Prince George's County schools in years 1 and 2 of the Race to the Top grant period. Additionally, intensive support will be provided to improve student performance in cluster of low-achieving schools in Dorchester County and build capacity of principals' instructional leadership in all schools.
- Establish a Breakthrough Zone that provides resources, assistance, flexibility, and authority. Schools and districts identified for inclusion in the Breakthrough Zone will have access to policy, monetary, and assistance resources to support the implementation of one of the four intervention models and promote rapid and sustained student achievement. In addition, MSDE will work with district leaders in the Zone to negotiate policy flexibility to ensure that district and school leaders have the authority they need to take strong action to reverse low performance and succeed with turnaround efforts. The State Superintendent currently meets with the superintendents from Prince George's County and Baltimore City Public Schools biweekly to maximize current flexibility for Breakthrough Zone schools.

Key features of the Breakthrough Zones include the following:

- Schools and districts in the Breakthrough Zone will receive a five-year commitment of assistance from MSDE, coordinated by the State's Breakthrough Center.
- Support for the implementation of the four intervention models will be given to districts through high-priority access to resources, regulatory flexibility, and assistance that can help LEAs and schools successfully turn around their patterns of underperformance.
- MSDE will help LEAs in the Zone explore innovative organizational structures, such as flexible teacher schedules, course scheduling, collaborative planning, changes to length of day and year for teachers, incentive pay and benefits, and alternative uses of the school facility to foster community engagement.
- MSDE will work with district leaders in the Zone to negotiate policy flexibility to ensure that district and school leaders have the authority they need to take strong action to reverse low performance and succeed with turnaround efforts.

Five strategic priorities will drive Maryland's turnaround of the lowest achieving schools. These include:

1. Robust school needs assessments to determine priorities for district action and state assistance;
2. Focus on teacher and principal effectiveness, including negotiating policy flexibility, building new pipeline for effective educators, increasing effectiveness of existing teachers, and supporting chosen intervention models;
3. Breakthrough networks for persistently lowest-achieving schools and districts to strengthen their capacity;
4. Technology as an accelerator to transform Breakthrough Zone school performance; and
5. Improved school culture, climate, and student support to increase performance.

Maryland is well positioned to fully implement the Breakthrough Center, a model for turning around the lowest-achieving schools. Leveraging and aligning state policies, programs, and practices through the Center and enabling policy and resource flexibility for the state's persistently lowest-achieving schools through the Breakthrough Zone will produce sustainable results for students.

Members of the Maryland State Board of Education  
October 26, 2010  
Page 5

**ACTION:**

This report is for information only.

Attachments





# THE BREAKTHROUGH CENTER

Maryland's Statewide System of Support

**BUILDING CAPACITY, CHANGING CONDITIONS, SUSTAINING RESULTS**

*MARYLAND'S STATEWIDE SYSTEM OF SUPPORT FOR LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS*

- CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT ALIGNMENT/DEVELOPMENT
- DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS, EVALUATION
- STUDENT, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

**THE BREAKTHROUGH CENTER**  
*Build-Up Services*

- PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT
- TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
- SCHOOL CLIMATE AND INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

**BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS**  
*Human and Fiscal Support*

- LEADERSHIP SUPPORT
- ALIGNED, INTEGRATED APPROACH
- TARGETED FUNDING
- COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES

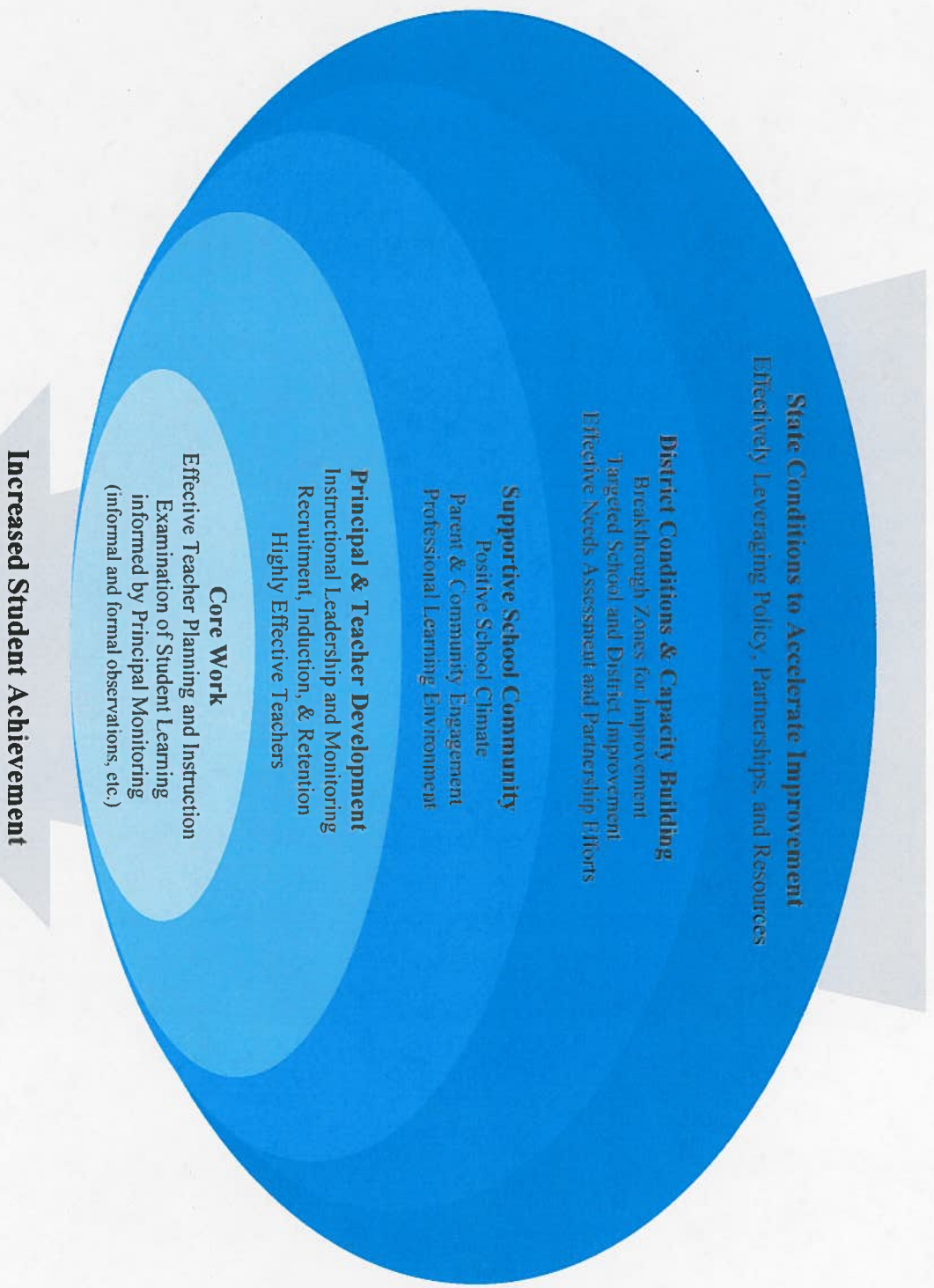
● LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS  
● HIGH POVERTY ENVIRONMENT  
● MULTIPLE CHALLENGES

**LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICT**  
*Differentiated Support Services*

- TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATIVE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION
- DIFFERENTIATED SCHOOL STAFFING AND COMPENSATION
- HIGHLY QUALIFIED AND EFFECTIVE TEACHERS AND SCHOOL LEADERS
- TEACHER AND PRINCIPAL EVALUATION SYSTEM
- SCHOOL/DISTRICT DATA MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

● ACCELERATED STUDENT PERFORMANCE  
● SUSTAINED SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

**Breakthrough Zones**  
*Focus on District Capacity Building and School Improvement through focused Instructional Improvement*





## **Partnership Development Process: Local School System and Maryland State Department of Education**

### **Initial Entry: Establish Relationships, Expectations, and Responsibilities in the Partnership**

- Initial district contact by MSDE State Superintendent
- Follow-up discussions with the Executive Director of the Breakthrough Center (and other appropriate MSDE staff)
- Formation of the District Improvement Team (both MSDE and district leadership)
- Identification of potential external and community partners
- Development and articulation of the Partnership Agreement

### **Collaboratively Assess Needs**

- Identify school- and district- needs through a collaborative analysis of school and district performance indicators
- Use MSDE and district tools to identify priority needs

### **Co-interpret Results**

- School and district leaders
- Agreement upon key findings
- Collaborative identification of priority needs
- Articulation of recommendations for significant school and district improvement

### **Integrate Recommended Activities with the District's Master Plan and School Improvement Plans**

- School level
- District level

### **Identify and Broker Applicable Resources and Partners**

- MSDE resources
- District and school resources
- Federal and State resources
- Core partners (consultants and organizations)

### **Establish and Ensure Effective Implementation of School, District, MSDE, and Partner Activities**

- Finalize partnership agreement
- Ensure coherent implementation of aligned assistance
- Focus on district capacity building with school-based improvement efforts

### **Monitor and Assess Implementation Activities and their Impact (at all levels – classroom, school, district, and partnership efforts)**

- Planning and establishment of Partnership Agreement (Year 1)
- Intensive support (Years 2-4)
- Establish district capacity for continuous improvement (Years 4-5)

### **Exit to Agreed Upon Continuing Supportive and Sustainable Relationship**