



Nancy S. Grasmick
State Superintendent of Schools

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

TO: Members of the State Board of Education
FROM: Nancy S. Grasmick *Nancy*
DATE: April 26, 2011
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.

BACKGROUND/HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE:

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.

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 and places strong emphasis on building capacity in these districts and schools so that turnaround is not just achieved, but sustained.

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:

During 2010-2011 MSDE's Breakthrough Center has provided turnaround services to the bottom 5 percent of schools in Maryland, 11 low-achieving schools required to adopt one of the four federal intervention models (Turnaround, Restart, Closure, and Transformation) and 10 feeder schools in the Baltimore City Schools and Prince George's County.

The creation of a Breakthrough Zone in Baltimore City and Prince George's County provides access to policy, monetary, and resources to support turning around the lowest-achieving schools and promotes rapid and sustained student achievement. In addition, MSDE works 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.

Throughout 2010 -2011, the Center created partnership agreements with Baltimore City and Prince George's County for the lowest-achieving schools and their feeder schools in the Breakthrough Zones, a five-year commitment of assistance from MSDE, coordinated by the State's Breakthrough Center. Specific activities implemented through the Breakthrough Center include:

- Convening the superintendents and senior leadership staff from Baltimore City and Prince George's County Public Schools to review the requirements for turning around the lowest-achieving schools and identify the available resources provided by the Race to the Top grant.
- Administering robust needs assessments in the lowest-achieving schools to determine priorities for district and school action and state assistance.
- Providing feedback to the implementation of schools' intervention models, as required by the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG), through site visits to each SIG school throughout the school year.
- Coordinating the delivery of support services from MSDE through the Cross-Functional Team's monthly meetings, including the development of a directory of services available to the schools in the Breakthrough Zone.
- Providing teacher professional development in reading and mathematics, leadership training for instructional leadership teams, and support for improving school culture, climate, and student support services.

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- Exploring innovative district and school organizational structures, such as course scheduling, collaborative planning, changes to length of schools day and year for teachers, recruitment and selection of highly-effective teachers, incentive pay and benefits, and ways to foster community engagement.
- Collaborating with the Board of Public Works (Interagency Committee on School Construction) to identify a funding stream for school renovations from the Quality Zone Academy Bonds for Breakthrough Center schools.

In 2011-2012, MSDE's Breakthrough Center will continue partnering with Baltimore City and Prince George's County to turn around the lowest-achieving schools in Maryland. An additional ten feeder schools to the lowest-achieving schools will be identified to receive support services from the Center. Leveraging and aligning state policies, programs, and practices through the Breakthrough Center and enabling policy and resource flexibility for the state's persistently lowest-achieving schools through the Breakthrough Zones will produce sustainable results for students.

ACTION:

This report is for information only.

NSG/ROG/cc