Turning Around Struggling Schools

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This paper provides information to support the work of Colorado's Low Performing Schools Race to the Top (R2T) Committee. This information is intended to complement the information and framework presented in the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) papers describing how the conditions (laws, policies, rules and regulations) in the state meet the R2T guidelines. This paper first provides some background on the Colorado education system and the R2T process. Then it discusses opportunities for intervening in low performing schools made possible by the release of Colorado's growth model system. It goes on to describe how these intervention opportunities can best leverage federal and state funding opportunities. Finally, this paper will describe existing challenges that the state should address as it creates a more effective and efficient system for supporting its lowest performing schools, which aligns with the U.S. Department of Education's expectations.

Colorado Background

There are about 820,000 students and 49,000 teachers in Colorado K-12 schools. Colorado is one of the few states that constitutionally require local control of education. As a result, our state department of education traditionally has been fairly small, and many important decisions about education are made in our 178 very diverse school districts. Colorado school districts range in enrollment from 54 students to over 85,000, with half of the state's students in the 10 largest districts and the large majority of districts (108) facing declining enrollment. These districts serve student populations that include isolated rural poor, urban immigrant, and affluent suburban populations. Colorado education offers students a great variety in how and where to learn. In addition to the traditional neighborhood school, a student can choose take classes through an online school, or attend either a charter school, another school in the district, or even a school outside the district. Colorado ranks 40th in per-pupil expenditures adjusted for regional cost differences, and per-pupil revenues are nearly $1,500 below the national average. Although the state tends to perform well on national exams, it struggles with achievement gaps; that is low-income and Hispanic students (who represent over one-quarter of the student population) have much lower achievement, graduation rates and college attendance than white and middle/high income students.

Race to the Top (R2T)

The Race to the Top (R2T) is a competition for $300 million to $500 million per state of stimulus funds to be awarded by the U.S. Department of Education. Awards will be based on the strength of state plans to address four reform areas:
- Adopting rigorous college- and career-ready standards and high-quality assessments;

- Establishing longitudinal data systems and using data for improvement;
- Increasing teacher and principal effectiveness; and
- Turning around struggling schools.

It is possible that additional expectations around higher education and early childhood education will be included in the final Department of Education R2T guidelines to be issued in October. Initial applications are expected to be due in December 2009.

The R2T guidelines indicate that the Department will look for states to meet the following conditions in the "Turning Around Struggling Schools" reform area:

1. <u>The ability to intervene in the lowest-performing schools and Local Education Agencies (LEA).</u> The U.S. Department of Education will award this grant to states that have the legal, statutory or regulatory authority to intervene directly in the state's persistently lowest-performing schools.
2. <u>The ability to increase the supply of high-quality charter schools.</u> This includes few or no limits on the creation of charter schools, and a requirement that the statutes for approving charters – and renewing charters – include a student achievement component along with an equitable funding component for both operations and facilities.

If these conditions in the state exist, then the state can submit a plan that aims to improve low-performing schools by:

a) Replacing school leadership and developing improved instructional plans;
b) Converting the schools to charter schools or contracting with an education management organization;
c) Closing the school and placing the school's students in other high-performing schools; and
d) Implementing a school transformational model that meets a series of criteria that the department has outlined.[i]

Colorado's plan should take into consideration that R2T is a one-time investment in education reform over a short period. R2T should not be spent developing new programs if those programs cannot be sustained or are not aimed at generating new, lasting capacity for the Colorado education system. Funds should be invested in developing capital and capacity to improve education. This can include physical capital such as computer systems as well as human capacity such as the knowledge and skills of educators, policymakers and parents. This capacity can also include things such as new curricula, assessment systems, and training modules. Finally, R2T offers the opportunity to drive and accelerate reforms that would not be possible without the capacity development opportunities R2T presents.

Strengths: System for Identifying Low Performing Schools

The first step in improving low-performing schools is to identify these schools. The Colorado growth model is one of the most promising models available. This model allows the department to identify the districts (and schools) where student academic growth is low relative to current year performance. In the words of CDE, the growth model uses annual CSAP data to understand "how individual students and groups of students progress from year to year toward state standards based on where each individual student begins."[ii] These data are helpful for state and district leaders in a number of ways. The data identify how students perform compared to students with similar characteristics or past performance. One example of the use of these data is by comparing demographically alike schools. If both schools were low-performing and one is performing better than another, then district leaders could meet with those school

leaders to identify how they were able to turn around a low-performing school. The analysis also provides information on the conditions that exist in schools where all students show consistent growth.

Opportunities: Partners, Plans and Innovation
Colorado's efforts have been recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and by other national organizations. In January 2009, the U.S. Department of Education approved the use of a growth model type of measure in the accountability system in measuring Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in Colorado and 14 other states.[iii] In March 2009, Colorado was one of four states selected by the National Governor's Association (NGA) to work with Mass Insight to "support the development of a comprehensive strategy aimed at improving chronically low-performing schools."[iv] As part of this work, Colorado created an interdisciplinary team, comprised of representatives from the governor's office and key state and district agencies, to be part of a planning process that will result in turnaround plans and policies that create the conditions to improve chronically low-performing schools. According to NGA, state teams were asked "to include the following strategies in their turnaround plan:

- Identify clearly the indicators that distinguish chronically low-performing schools;
- Assess the degree of authority the state has to intervene, and if necessary, offer proposals that strengthen and reinforce that authority;
- Recommend state policies regarding hiring, staff allocation and compensation, budgeting and contracting with education personnel."[v]

In addition, as a result of the Forward Thinking Plan initiated by Education Commissioner Dwight Jones in 2007, CDE has developed a plan to support low-performing schools and has identified approximately 30 schools in districts across Colorado to work with in the coming year. CDE will provide districts with support to analyze, plan, implement, and evaluate efforts to turn around low-performing schools. One type of support that a district could choose is to work with reputable organizations that have refined intervention tools for low-performing schools, like America's Choice, McREL, and Edison Learning.[vi] These organizations provide interventions such as teacher professional development support, leadership development and instructional strategies. This work is in development, but CDE hopes to put these turnaround school plans into place over the next school year. This model of intervention aligns with the levels of intervention that the U.S. Department Education outlined in R2T.

Other turnaround plan recommendations can be found in the literature. Research conducted by the Aspen Institute indicate that at the local level, district focus keenly on six areas: teacher professional development that focuses on instructional improvement, a comprehensive strategy to attract and retain teachers, clear expectations for instructional practice, anchor standards and align assessments to support effective instruction, align the core curriculum and create lessons based on the anchor standards and aligned assessments, and a system that builds teacher capacity.[vii]

There are other opportunities that Colorado could leverage with the R2T grant. State policymakers recently passed legislation to provide incentives for districts that are interested in changing the way teachers are compensated, although the money for the legislation was

rescinded at the last minute due to budget cutbacks. These changes could include linking student performance to teacher compensation, providing incentives to shift good teachers to schools that are hard to serve and ensuring that job-embedded professional development occurs over time.[viii]

Some other opportunities to leverage R2T support include highlighting those districts that are willing to make tough choices (like closing schools). In districts like Littleton and Poudre, the decision-making processes are information-driven with broad community engagement where people ask tough questions. Finally, Colorado could leverage some key partnerships that have developed in the state. For example, some members of the business community in Colorado support education in active ways. These include setting up scholarship funds, participating in the Public Education Business Coalition, developing foundations with an education focus (Piton and Donnell-Kay) and engaging in the Colorado Forum. All of these groups could be a source for letters of support in the R2T proposal.

Colorado could use the short-term, limited R2T funds in very systemic ways. It could request funds to:
- Continue to build its infrastructure to support low-performing schools (this would be integrated with new data systems, refined standards and improved teacher quality);
- Identify specific needs within the districts that are low-performing or that have low-performing schools;
- Identify the tools and costs associated with those needs; and
- Engage in outreach efforts to support districts in turning around their schools with methods that are based on best practice.

Districts could also use the R2T funds to address the financial needs that will arise when thinking through and implementing plans for turning around low-performing schools. Districts can look to SB 09-256, the School Finance Act passed this year, which provided districts with the opportunity for more overrides (mill levies). Historically, districts that have passed mill levies do so because districts connect increased student performance to why they need increased funding. When this connection is made, voters are more likely to vote yes.

One way that CDE has demonstrated its capacity to work collaboratively with districts is through activities it engaged in over the 2008-09 school year. It published Profiles of Success, a guide – along with a DVD – that was sent to all districts to highlight how eight schools across Colorado are beating the odds (schools that are performing at high levels despite characteristics that would lead one to think that the schools would not succeed).

In addition to the education and business leaders, the education issue network (the advocacy community, the education support organizations and the education professional organizations) in Colorado is active and receives support from national and local funders (Padres Unidos, Metropolitan Organization for People and Good Schools Colorado) who could assist with raising additional funds to leverage change. Additionally, the Colorado Association of School Executives, the Colorado Association of School Boards and the Colorado Education Association have active memberships that could be enlisted in the reform process.

Challenges: Data and Authority

The challenge with these state-level plans for turning around schools is that Colorado has limited longitudinal data about specific interventions in specific schools. Furthermore, Colorado's constitutional limitation, coupled with how that has been interpreted over the years, has lead to limited state involvement in supporting schools through centralized means. Districts are generally familiar with the research base that identifies the options for turning around low-performing schools, but are not guided by the state in a particular direction when making decisions about which reform to choose. Therefore, there is wide variation in how local leaders respond to the choices that are provided in the literature to turn around schools. Finally, the way that schools are funded in Colorado often leads to unpredictability throughout the school year and lower than expected resources, which lead to limited multi-year planning.

The state will also need to offer some additional wrap-around services that support improvement like creating incentives for counties across the state to create programs that will increase the number of children in preschool and the number of high-quality programs available to families.

Conclusions

Despite these challenges, Colorado is well positioned to leverage R2T resources to turn around its lowest performing schools. The state has identified innovative ways to identify low-performing schools, developed preliminary plans to turn around its lowest-performing schools, developed strong partnerships with local and national organizations, and cultivated a culture that enables tough decisions to be made. Some questions that need to be deliberated over the next few months include:

- What is Colorado's low-performing school turnaround strategy and plan?
- How do we align the strategy and plan with the R2T guidelines?
- How can this plan be aligned with the current turnaround plans in districts?
- How will this work be sustained beyond the availability of R2T funds?

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[i] Pp 32-34 of the assurances document: http://www.ed.gov/legislation/FedRegister/proprule/2009-3/072909d.html

[ii] http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdeassess/growthmodel.html

[iii] http://www.cde.state.co.us/communications/download/PDF/20090108growthmodel.pdf

[iv] http://www.massinsight.org/resourcefiles/Mass%20Insight%20Partnership%20Zones%20Initiative.pdf; http://www.massinsight.org/turnaround/services.aspx

[v] http://www.nga.org/portal/site/nga/menuitem.be806d93bb5ee77eee28aca9501010a0/?vgnextoid=0fac4f5e2e5cf110VgnVCM1000005e00100aRCRD&vgnextchannel=759b8f2005361010VgnVCM1000001a01010aRCRD&vgnextfmt=print

[vi] http://www.americaschoice.org/; http://www.mcrel.org/; http://www.edisonlearning.com/

[vii] http://www.aspeninstitute.org/education

[viii] http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdeprof/ALTCOMP.htm

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