

WHY WE CAN'T WAIT

LOUISIANA'S BLUEPRINT FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

The Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) believes all children should receive a world-class education. This year, numerous federal and private grants (such as Race to the Top (R2T)) will finally provide the additional resources districts and schools need to transform their delivery of this education.

R2T is not a discussion about whether schools should be charters or should be run by the Recovery School District (RSD) or state. The management characteristics of Louisiana public schools are inconsequential. Of consequence are the fundamental ingredients for school reform: **accountability, empowerment, human capital, and innovation**. The resources and supports needed to cultivate and most effectively employ these ingredients at school sites across the state should not be limited to charter or RSD schools; rather, these should be available to **ALL**, regardless of where schools fall along the performance continuum.

Louisiana will soon enter a national competition, R2T, to receive an unprecedented level of funding to support school improvement efforts. R2T is Louisiana's best opportunity to ensure every student and school has the resources to achieve excellence. Yet winning the award is not enough. We will only be successful if we are united around a common purpose and vision for improving each of our schools and building enduring capacity in each of our districts.

While awaiting the final USDOE RFP for R2T – due out in late October or early November – the LDOE has developed this working draft concept plan (the “Draft Plan”) based on the four assurances outlined in the DRAFT RFP. ***This is a deliberative document, open for discussion.*** It is intended to clarify current thinking of the LDOE and dispel misinformation (*It is important to NOTE, that we are planning based on a draft RFP. Changes in the draft RFP will result in changes to this plan. It is also important to note, that a number of important interpretations in the draft RFP have had to be made by the LDOE. Changes in those interpretations could result in changes to this plan.*) We look forward to your comments.

Purpose and Objectives: R2T offers Louisiana a unique opportunity to dramatically improve all of its schools – from those in need of turnaround to those on the verge of excellence. In order to deliver a world-class education through each school, to each student, Louisiana will use R2T to pursue three objectives:

- I. **Turn around failing and high-priority schools using proven best practices of accountability, empowerment, human capital, and innovation;**
- II. **Provide comprehensive support to emerging schools led by ambitious district and school leaders wanting to make dramatic and sustainable gains in student achievement; and**
- III. **Transform the LDOE into a school improvement institution with the capacity, infrastructure and supports school districts need to deliver a world-class education.**

Federal Guidelines: Based on Federal requirements for both R2T and other programs such as Title I and School Improvement Grants, there are certain things about R2T we can assuredly say:

- The Federal government will expect states and districts to align other federal resources to support R2T turnaround efforts.
- President Barack Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan have made it clear that they want to turn around 5,000 persistently low achieving schools in the U.S.
- The R2T competition is intended to reward only a handful of states with substantial resources in order to make a significant change in the way that schools, districts and SEAs do business.
- Louisiana is well positioned based on a number of criteria in the DRAFT RFP; a number of Louisiana schools and districts have already made significant changes in line with R2T conditions.
- However, many states previously thought to be ineligible are now making statutory and policy changes to education and charter laws in order to become more competitive (e.g., California and Washington have called special sessions). Thus, R2T will be very competitive.
- Based on reviews of the DRAFT RFP, we believe that states making the most significant attempt to turn around schools will receive more favorable consideration.
- According to the DRAFT RFP, a state must agree to implement a turnaround plan for **at least** five percent of its persistently lowest-performing schools, which includes one of the following:
 - a. Putting in place new leadership and a majority of new staff, new governance, and improved instructional programs, and providing the school with flexibilities such as the ability to select staff, control its budget, and expand student learning time
 - b. Converting schools to charter schools or contracting with an education management organization
 - c. Closing the school and placing the school’s students in high-performing schools
 - d. Implementing a school transformation model that includes: hiring a new principal, measuring teacher and principal effectiveness, rewarding effective teachers and principals; implementing comprehensive instructional reform; extending learning time and community-oriented supports
- Louisiana can meet the five percent criterion with a small number of schools. However, the LDOE would like to offer R2T “turnaround” funds to as many partnership schools that are willing and able to participate beyond those five percent required by federal guidelines. In other words, this opportunity should be available to all districts and schools willing to pursue excellence.

Strategy and Principles: Our overarching strategy is to provide districts with **POSITIVE** incentives to volunteer and select schools within their district to be part of Louisiana’s R2T school improvement efforts. The preliminary concept is based on the following principles:

1. Districts or schools can choose to participate in the turnaround and school improvement aspect of R2T, however, districts need not volunteer all of its schools.
2. Volunteered schools will not be mandated to enter the RSD in order to participate, nor will they be automatically incorporated into the RSD should they fail to meet the objectives of R2T.
3. Turnaround schools are those with SPS score 79.9 and below and restructured in accord with two principles:
 - a. Change in leadership and a majority of staff; and

- b. Principal is afforded real autonomy to run the school and is held strictly accountable.
- 4. School improvement (i.e., continuous improvement) is defined as a school that affords the principal real autonomy to run the school and holds that principal strictly accountable where either:
 - a. For schools below SPS 80, a change in leadership and staff has already occurred; OR
 - b. For schools SPS 80 and above, the district has confidence in the leadership and staff to make additional improvements and wishes to retain them intact.
- 5. Districts which **volunteer** schools to be a part of the “turnaround” aspect of R2T and conform to the conditions and requirements of the school improvement concept will receive, at a minimum:
 - a. **Financial Resources:** Additional funds to support its improvement efforts which would be significant (we are budgeting on average approximately \$500,000 per year per school with greater amounts going to a prescribed number (TBD) of turnaround school and lesser amounts going to a prescribed number (TBD) of continuous improvement schools) and could be spent over the implementation of changes for up to a four year period commencing in September, 2010.
 - b. **Compliance and Regulation Waivers:** Participation in R2T will result in suspension of the effects of school accountability for as long as the school participates in compliance with the R2T conditions up to four years.
 - c. **Reporting Relief:** Participating districts and schools will have the opportunity to meet streamlined reporting requirements; and
 - d. **Technical Monitoring and Support:** The state will provide monitoring activities for the school at no cost to the school. It will also provide, at a district’s option, targeted, discretionary supports.
- 6. Schools that have already implemented portions of the USDOE R2T turnaround requirements within a certain time frame (TBD) should be eligible for additional supports if they are willing to meet the remaining conditions of comprehensive reform required by the RFP.
- 7. The LDOE is committed to helping certain districts interested in building permanent capacity to support and sustain school improvement and turnaround efforts with additional resources beyond the four years of R2T school expenditures.

Concept: The LDOE developed the following concept plan based on the four assurances outlined in the USDOE DRAFT RFP. This plan details state and partnering district and school responsibilities. If successful, half of the R2T funds would go directly to districts that voluntarily choose to participate in school turnaround and improvement efforts. The remaining half of funds would be used by the state to make available **OPTIONAL** supports which will be available for the benefit of **ALL** districts and schools, prioritizing partnership areas first. Thus, R2T will support the improvement of all schools and districts in Louisiana.

Objective I: Turnaround failing and high-priority schools through accountability, empowerment, human capital development, and innovation.

Failing schools have a School Performance Score (SPS) less than 60. High-priority schools are those with SPS of 60-79.9 by state definitions. Through R2T and other federal grants, these schools have

the opportunity to make dramatic improvements. The LDOE will issue a voluntary participation agreement for schools with SPS below 80 that would require districts and schools to commit to certain actions that represent the fundamental elements of reform: accountability, empowerment, human capital and innovation. These actions may include:

- *Accountability*
 - Relief of AYP/AUS requirements and participation in streamlined accountability reporting system
 - Adoption of a comprehensive data-driven instructional management system
 - Establishment of a comprehensive benchmarking system to monitor student progress and teacher performance
- *Empowerment*
 - Lengthening and restructuring the school day and year to increase instructional time on task and increase the amount of professional development time set aside for teachers and staff
 - Implementation of site-selection and greater school site autonomy over budgets
- *Human Capital*
 - Restructuring of local school staff that could include the replacement of principals and the reconstitution of teaching staff
 - Using a comprehensive teacher professional development and management model to reward effective instruction and establish strong school imbedded leadership teams
- *Innovation*
 - Establishment of a intensive intervention system to support struggling students and determine needed supports for struggling teachers
 - Expansion of local and state best practice school improvement models
 - Conversion of schools to charters or turning them over to an educational management organization; school closure; or transformation of a school according to data-proven best practices outlined by USDOE
 - Alignment of Title I stimulus funds and school improvement dollars to support core reforms

Objective II: Provide comprehensive support to emerging schools led by ambitious district and school leaders wanting to make dramatic and sustainable gains in student achievement.

For schools with SPS above 80, R2T and other school improvement initiatives provide an opportunity to achieve excellence through new and comprehensive supports. Similarly, LDOE will issue a voluntary participation agreement for emerging schools, those with SPS 80-99.9. Participating schools would be willing to enter into the above mentioned reforms of accountability, empowerment, human capital and innovation. However, *restructuring, charter conversion, or closure will not be mandatory requirements for participation*. Schools would be required to align their Title I stimulus and school improvement dollars to support these core reforms.

Objective III: Transform the LDOE into a school improvement institution with the capacity, infrastructure, and supports school districts need to deliver a world-class education.

Meeting this objective enables the LDOE to effectively support the schools in R2T-funded school turnaround, while at the same time building the institutional structure to ensure long-term school improvement throughout the state. For districts, participation in these initiatives provides sustainable assistance and supports that will allow districts to continue its reforms beyond the life of the federal grants. Further, these optional supports will provide financial, programmatic, and regulatory relief for districts and their schools.

- *Standards and Assessments:* The LDOE will support districts in their pursuit to adopt rigorous college- and career-ready standards and high-quality assessments. Other supports include:
 - Expansion of the LDOE curriculum and instructional frameworks to include data-driven curriculum, instructional, and intervention models, along with the training and supports needed to implement these
 - Development of computerized adaptive assessments for early grades and end-of-course exams aligned with college readiness requirements for secondary courses
- *Data Systems to Support Instruction:* The LDOE will establish statewide longitudinal data and knowledge management systems to help schools improve staff and student performance. Additional supports include:
 - Creation of a statewide, real-time Student Information System that integrates a knowledge management system with a longitudinal data store, providing comprehensive data to key stakeholders including parents, students, teachers, principals and school partners (e.g., unions) on a rapid (72 hours or less) basis
- *Great Teachers and Leaders:* LDOE will assist schools and districts in their efforts to increase teacher effectiveness and ensure the equitable distribution of effective teachers across the state. Other supports include:
 - Establishment of a program to evaluate and reward effective school leaders and teachers through a comprehensive data-driven performance management system
 - Expansion of the statewide talent pipeline to increase the number of and widen the distribution of effective teacher and school leaders, particularly in high-need areas
 - Creation of a statewide institute for the training of high quality school leaders and the establishment of local school leadership team development models
 - Development, screening, and recruitment of school turnaround teams (charters, private managers, or incubated school leadership teams) that can restructure failing schools
- *School Turnaround:* The LDOE is committed to helping those districts and schools desiring to create fundamental change in and depart from business as usual with its struggling schools. Supports include:
 - Establishment of School Support Teams to conduct School Quality Reviews, develop applicable and actionable School Improvement Plans, and provide ongoing monitoring of and assistance in local school improvement efforts undertaken by the schools and districts willing to volunteer to commit to participate in the Draft Plan when finalized.

Conclusion: We share a common goal of providing all of our students with a world-class education. A world class-education is one where...

- Teachers, principals, and schools are **accountable** to students and parents for employing high expectations and globally-benchmarked standards to increase student achievement each day. These professionals utilize good, transparent data and are evaluated and rewarded for their performance based on that objective data.
- School leaders and teachers are **empowered** by their districts and local boards with the capacity to effect and manage change. These educators are endowed with the operational responsibility and budgetary autonomy to improve student achievement.
- **Human capital** is our most valuable resource. Great leadership is found at the top of every school. We recruit great people and train them well through the continuous improvement of pedagogical skills and knowledge.
- **Innovation** is encouraged and replicated. Best-practices are shared within and among districts. Business-as-usual and traditional ways of thinking are taken skeptically, while new ideas are championed, resourced and pursued.

For the first time in many years, the nation is talking about Louisiana for the right reasons. Delegations from other states and organizations are coming to Louisiana to study and replicate our school turnaround efforts. Non-profit, research, and academic institutions are for the first time competing with one another to partner with our schools and districts in their innovation efforts. Whether successful in R2T or not, Louisiana will continue to pursue the above objectives. The chance to dramatically improve all of Louisiana's schools has arrived. Let's seize the opportunity together so that we provide all children with a world-class education.