



October 22, 2009

Positioned for educational success

WILLIAM GUENTHER AND JUSTIN COHEN

The challenge -- turning around the nation's lowest-performing schools -- has never been greater. But then neither has the striking alignment of forces to address it.

President Barack Obama's \$4.35 billion Race to the Top initiative employs strong language on school turnaround and -- perhaps more significantly -- the draft guidance for \$3.5 billion in Title 1 school improvement grants is equally uncompromising. As we learned from our work with Delaware educators this past summer, Delaware is in an especially great position to take advantage of the unprecedented level of federal funding and attention.

For one, the scope of your challenge is manageable. In Delaware, only 26 schools, which serve 26,000 students, require intervention, as opposed to nearly 100 in New York alone. Through Vision 2015, you have a three-year head start over other states in building a broad coalition to create world-class schools. In Gov. Jack Markell and Secretary Lillian Lowery, you have new leaders with a real sense of urgency. State union leaders appear open to and aware of the need for comprehensive steps to improve low-performing schools, and the business community is actively engaged.

Capitalizing on these assets requires action in three areas.

Provide clear options for turnaround schools. Years of research tell us that merely providing technical assistance or more money to chronically low-performing schools will not solve the challenges. Delaware must offer clear leadership on what turnaround strategies actually hold promise and require low-performing schools to use one of those strategies. We know what works. Hundreds of schools across the country (some district schools, some charter schools) have dramatically accelerated learning for our neediest children who come to school with huge challenges. Their core strategies: more academic time and resources; clear and high aspirations; a team of great teachers and principals who are committed to being there and the flexibility to get the work done. Most of our most challenged schools have few of these conditions.

Offer a mix of positive and negative incentives. "Carrots" could include setting up a grant process where districts committed to rapid reform could compete for a share of the nearly \$10 million in new school improvement funding the state is slated to receive. "Sticks" could include closing and replacing underperforming schools. While such changes are never easy, helping more kids succeed sometimes means making some unpopular decisions.

Create a partnership zone for a cluster of schools. Turning around failing schools requires pulling multiple reform levers at once, and our framework provides for a "Lead Partner," acting on behalf of the district and state, that is responsible for integrating all services at the school level. Lead Partners would serve small clusters of schools -- ideally a "vertical" cluster of a high school and its feeder schools. These partners should sign performance contracts for student achievement; assume responsibility for school staffing; provide core academic services; and have embedded support staff in each school.

With the unprecedented national energy and resources dedicated to turning around failing schools, states must be both aggressive and sensible in their approach. Success will create momentum and hope -- for struggling school systems, but more important, for the millions of children who deserve a great public education. These children will never have a better opportunity, and it's up to us to make

sure, this time, we get it right.
