



February 3, 2010

Ally welcomed in race to save Delaware's sinking schools

Delaware hopes new partnership can reverse slide

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The News Journal

Delaware was one of six states selected Tuesday to take part in a three-year, \$75 million public-private partnership to improve its most academically troubled schools through interventions ranging from raising teacher salaries to converting to a charter school to replacing at least 50 percent of the staff.

Delaware Secretary of Education Lillian Lowery said she would not rule out using any option to help effect change.

"We're going to have to act in the best interest of the children, period," she said.

Under the program developed by a Boston nonprofit, states and school districts will select local "lead" partners to manage underperforming schools in so-called partnership zones and determine, with state school officials, which services or changes are needed to reverse the downward slide.

The lead partners would become responsible for student outcomes, would have the authority to select principals and oversee every program in the school.

State education officials say they will target two to four schools in one to two school districts. The schools have not yet been identified.

"We're trying to help the states with the best political leadership and capacity for turning around lowest-performing schools," said Justin Cohen, president of <http://www.massinsight.org/turnaround/index.aspx> "The School Turnaround Group at Mass Insight Education & Research Institute. "We have very high hopes for it."

Cohen said Delaware was chosen because the state has worked "above and beyond" many other states in putting a regulatory framework in place that could help lift its schools.

Federal guidelines feature four models to turn around underperforming schools: shutting down the school and sending students to higher-achieving schools; converting it to a charter school; bringing someone in from the outside to run it; or replacing the principal and at least 50 percent of the staff.

Cohen said Mass Insight is best equipped to implement the latter two options.

"There is a chance that a large percentage of the staff, up to 50 percent of the teachers, might have to leave the school," he said. "We think the districts should make that decision. Turnaround in any industry requires hard decisions. We see a lot of failed turnaround efforts of the past come from a reluctance to make these kinds of decisions."

Frederika Jenner, a sixth-grade science teacher at H.B. du Pont Middle School and president of the Red Clay Education Association, hopes it does not just come down to firing staff members.

"Factors that determine underperforming schools are much broader than the staff of the school," said Jenner, a teacher for 38 years. "If they are just going to change 50 percent of the staff, that would not be a very productive plan. I don't think it would be a very successful plan on its own, because there are so many other factors that make or break a school's success."

Lowery hopes to identify the underperforming schools in Delaware early next week. Some schools could begin the turnaround process by next school year.

"The schools and districts now have to write plans that make sense to kids," Lowery said. "There's no more that just because we exist we get dollars."

The initiative is viewed as a complement to the federal Race to the Top effort announced in November that seeks to award portions of a \$4 billion competitive grant to states willing to undertake changes in the way schools are run. Delaware applied for \$107 million of that funding, which will begin to be awarded this spring.

Planning and development for the six-state partnership initiative -- Colorado, Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts and New York also will participate -- has been funded with a \$1.5 million, two-year grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, along with a partial match from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The initiative includes \$45 million in federal school-improvement funds, including stimulus funds, that will be spread among the states.

Mass Insight and its partners are committed to raising an additional \$30 million in private funding for the three-year initial program, as well as further funding for a two-year extension to match the \$45 million of school-level public funding, he said.

Diane Donahue, president of the Delaware State Education Association, which represents teachers in Delaware's 19 school districts, applauded that the major single investment in partnership zone schools will go toward increased teacher compensation to support extended learning time and incentive pay.

But, she said, "Everything needs to be done collectively and within the collaborative bargaining unit. So how that plays out is yet to be decided.

"Our members who are educators know what works, so they need to be part of the process," she said. "This is the first time in many, many years, I believe, that we've been included in the process. Teachers are being asked for the first time what works, what doesn't work, what's going to benefit our students."

Paul Herdman, president of the Rodel Foundation, a nonprofit foundation whose sole mission is improving public education in Delaware, is encouraged the initiative could make some long-awaited headway.

The state distributes \$50,000 in federal funding to each restructured school to help with its turnaround, but that has not been enough to help make the changes that are needed. So Herdman said he also welcomed the additional federal funding earmarked for underperforming schools.

Not much has been done to tackle the problem of underperforming schools, and many of the solutions have called for a piecemeal approach, Herdman said. But there have been some success stories, proving that applying the right strategy can work.

One exception has been the Red Clay Consolidated School District, he said. It created the grade 6-12 Conrad Schools of Science magnet school out of a formerly struggling middle school, emphasizing health and biology. The same type of tactic is being planned for Red Clay's Dickinson High School, which next year will feature a Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Academy.

"I think they're doing an outstanding job," Red Clay Superintendent Merv Daugherty said of the Conrad Schools of Science, which made adequate yearly progress academically last year. "It's not fair to the student if you allow a school to continually underperform."

But in order for something like that to work, it takes a group effort, Daugherty said.

"I think you have to have a buy-in for everyone involved," he said. "I think there has to be a lot of people at the table to help make the decisions."

Herdman agrees that all stakeholders will have to work together, including the state with the school districts and the districts with their boards as they prepare a strategy.

"I think it's a really helpful thing," he said of the initiative, "because from our perspective, it's really a huge problem that hasn't been addressed."
