



## **PARTNERSHIP ZONES**

### ***The Transformation of Urban Education Through School Turnaround and District Redesign***

INITIATIVE PROFILE: FEBRUARY, 2009

Mass Insight's *Partnership Zones* project is designed to use the leverage and urgency of school turnaround to transform urban education and help thousands – ultimately millions – of disadvantaged children develop the skills they need to be successful in 21<sup>st</sup>-century America.

The initial goal of the initiative will be to model district redesign in three different communities through the creation of local “Partnership Zones” – mini-districts characterized by more flexible operating conditions and 21<sup>st</sup>-century organizational practices and partnerships. The ultimate goal will be the adoption of those practices districtwide in the three sites and scale-up across many more urban communities nationally.

Each of the three sites will implement its zone with strategies and partners that will vary according to local circumstance, but will collect around two central ideas:

- *Using new forms of mutually accountable partnerships, applied initially to small, purposefully organized clusters of turnaround schools, to advance whole-district redesign*
- *Creating the flexible operating conditions that our own research indicates are required for schools to serve high-challenge, high-poverty enrollments successfully*

The project is designed to enable state, district, community, and partner leaders in three “early adopter” sites to meet two objectives: improve student achievement significantly in clusters of their most struggling schools, and pilot the improved management structures and processes that are necessary to sustain higher achievement and substantially better student outcomes over time. It has been launched with a \$1.5M grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, with a partial match from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

The inability of our urban public education systems to bring even *half* of the students they serve to proficiency in academics and readiness for college and the workforce is the civil rights and societal-viability challenge of this generation. The nation's standards and accountability reform movement has produced at least one clear outcome: in order to serve high-challenge, high-poverty student populations successfully, we must do much more than tinker with incremental improvement strategies in our urban schools and districts. We now clearly know what does not work.

However, truly transformational school district reform – or at least its beginnings – has been limited to a handful of sites with particular circumstances or capacities: New Orleans, New York City, Chicago, Chattanooga. Elsewhere, mostly incremental strategies reign, bolstered by public education's considerable power to resist genuine change. But virtually all urban school districts now face a challenge that has become much more visible because of standards and accountability: turning around the schools that have been clearly identified as persistently and dramatically underperforming their peers. Using the consensus for fundamental change that is emerging in *some* locations, along with the application of a strict set of criteria (including

leadership commitment and stability, capacity of local partner and community organizations, and degree of support from the state), Mass Insight and our partners will launch Partnership Zone initiatives in three selected districts in three states.

Why do the Zones carry promise? After all, efforts to significantly redesign school districts and improve performance in struggling schools have had generally marginal impact. In our view, the fairly promising work on creating new school and district models has not been matched by sufficiently practical strategies to ignite and manage a productive change process. Reforms tend either to scratch the surface of genuine, systemic change or (as in the case of charter schools) to create alternate initiatives that simply work around the dysfunctions of the current system. The Partnership Zones approach addresses this challenge by using school turnaround as the most politically plausible entry point to help states, districts, school and community leaders, and school partner organizations:

- **Attack the incremental nature of most reform** by capitalizing on the quite literal indefensibility of the status quo in chronically underperforming schools
- **Pilot vastly improved management structures and processes** by applying a new partnership model – one that connects strategic, operating, and funding partners in limited-scale zones with special operating conditions that enable professional norms and draw new capacity
- **Connect and align major reform strategies at the state, district, school, and partner-support levels**, including standards and accountability, curriculum/PD/assessment, leadership building, HR reform, cluster management, and “new-world” models including small schools, close-and-replace strategies, charters and in-district charter-likes.

There is some urgency in this work – not only on behalf of struggling students in struggling schools, but because of the short window of opportunity in front of us to develop effective turnaround policies, implementation proof-points, and new capacity before a reauthorized No Child Left Behind Act begins channeling significant federal funding into school intervention. The lessons from the experience of NCLB’s expansion of support for failing students (through a federal program called Supplemental Educational Services) are clear. In the absence of good policy models, promising exemplars, and informed partners, federally-driven scale-up of support for struggling schools will result in the same chaotic and ineffective disarray that characterized the implementation of federal support for struggling students. **Foundations innovate; governments scale. Now is the time for innovation – but it won’t last long.**

Our work in 2009 will focus on the following three aspects of the initiative’s launch:

1. **Create and implement a rigorous vetting process to identify the best sites for the three Partnership Zone initiatives and establish strong partnerships in each site** (and building in part on a separate, parallel collaboration between Mass Insight and the National Governors Association, funded by the Gates Foundation)
2. **Complete a strategy-support process already underway, working with districts and partner organizations that are pioneering new approaches to turnaround design** that will finish the development of tools to be used in the Partnership Zone partner sites
3. **Develop Partnership Zone plans in each site, reflecting both the school-turnaround and the district-redesign goals for the initiative, and launch the work in the schools by fall, 2010**
4. **Raise the first \$6 million towards the project’s \$40-50 million five-year budget.**

This is not incremental reform. The Partnership Zones will create and put in place new systems, new structures, and new approaches, but unlike most efforts to undertake real transformation in public education (e.g., the charter movement), it provides a plausible change-management pathway to bring it about *at scale* and (at least partially) *from within the system*. To paraphrase the Carnegie Corporation’s Michele Cahill, one of the designers of New York City’s groundbreaking reform effort: “You cannot simply improve your way to something that does not now exist.” The Partnership Zones will capitalize on the urgency of school turnaround and the capacity of three early-adopter communities to demonstrate what fundamental district redesign looks like – and how to get it done.

### **Organizational Capacity**

Mass Insight Education and Research Institute, a 501(c)3 organization, has fought for higher student achievement and against status-quo thinking in education reform since its founding in 1997. In that time, we have become widely recognized as one of the nation’s two or three most effective state-based reform organizations, winning (among other achievements) the 2002 Education/Business Coalition of the Year Award from the National Alliance for Business (NAB). We firmly believe in the interrelatedness of education research, policy/advocacy, and practice, and remain fairly unique in maintaining major programs and capacity in each arena.

Though our work in schools has historically focused on Massachusetts, we have consistently been called upon to engage in related work nationally and in other states. The U.S. Education Department used our Building Blocks Initiative as a primary model for its promising practices program; we have conducted joint research and policy design projects in Washington State, Illinois, and Texas, and we have hosted, with other partners, high-level forums on education reform in Washington DC. We are the organizer of Massachusetts’ successful effort to be named one of six states receiving \$13 million, five-year Exxon-Mobil grants from the National Math and Science Initiative to increase AP course-taking as a means towards higher student achievement and college matriculation.

The research and practical ground-level experience that is driving the design of the Partnership Zones comes from two sources: our extensive services to schools and districts in leadership development and comprehensive school reform over the past decade, and a three-year, \$2.2M Gates Foundation-funded initiative to design new policy and implementation strategies for deeply challenged urban schools. The enormous interest (110,000 downloads to date) shown by policymakers and practitioners in *The Turnaround Challenge*, Mass Insight’s 2007 report, reveals the urgent need in the education reform community for new, organized thinking about turning around the nation’s poorest-performing schools. The report has earned Mass Insight a reputation as perhaps the nation’s principal thought leader on school turnaround design.

It is this blend of capacity in education research, design, policy development, advocacy, and ground-level implementation – along with our ten-year record of effective partnering and network management – that will enable us to lead the successful implementation of this project.