Using RFPs to select high-capacity Lead Partners

February 2010
This report represents an extension of Mass Insight’s research on Partnership Zones as a model for school turnaround. The findings in this presentation focus on the need to create a high-quality Request for Proposal to solicit and vet Lead Partners.

The Lead Partner is a new entity, developed internally at Mass Insight, but its design was influenced by various models currently in operation. Therefore recommendations are derived from internal Mass Insight analysis as well as existing Requests for Proposals issued for roles similar to our concept of a Lead Partner. The external research for this report included reviews of RFPs from Chicago Public Schools, Petersburg City Public Schools, the Los Angeles Unified School District, the Texas Education Agency, the Louisiana Department of Education, the Illinois State Board of Education, the Virginia Department of Education, the Colorado Department of Education, and a collection of personal interviews. The examples vary in the level of autonomy afforded to partners.

Note that the guidance in this document was crafted specifically for Lead Partner RFPs; the recommendations may not be relevant for other models.

Mass Insight continues to lead research and development efforts in the turnaround sector both on a national level and for individual state partners. Our national Partnership Zone Initiative is funded by an initial grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, with a partial match from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.
• Overview of a Lead Partner RFP
• Development and issuance process
• RFP design
• Promising practices
A Request for Proposal (RFP) is a critical tool to facilitate successful school turnaround

An RFP is a formal invitation for organizations to submit proposals to provide services to districts or states

Goal for turnaround

To provide underperforming schools with organizational partners capable of achieving dramatic, fundamental improvement in student achievement and school culture

Role of an RFP

• External organizations compete to play a specific role in turnaround efforts
• Ideally, the RFP clearly establishes the basic conditions under which interventions can take place:
  1. States and districts must announce specific selection criteria and articulate the opportunity in a way that will attract high-capacity partners
  2. Partners are forced to consider how they will undertake turnaround in a specific context with a specific set of conditions
  3. The RFP process allows both parties to fully consider the appropriateness of the match
RFPs are used to solicit and vet Lead Partners

**Lead Partners are non-profit organizations or units of central offices on contract with the district central office or state for schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsibilities of a Lead Partner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Sign a 3-5 year performance contract for student achievement</strong> with the district or state; the agreement assigns the Lead Partner responsibility for a small “intentional” cluster of schools(^1) where systems and programs will be aligned and holds the Lead Partner accountable for improving the student achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Assume authority for decision making on school staffing</strong> (as well as time, money and program); in particular, the Lead Partner:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hires a new principal or approves the current one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Supports the principal in hiring and replacing teachers and has responsibility for bringing in a meaningful cohort of new instructional staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Provide core academic and student support services</strong> directly or align the services of other program and support partners, who are on sub-contracts with the Lead Partner, and build internal capacity within the schools and by extension, the district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Has an <strong>embedded, consistent and intense relationship with each school</strong> during the turnaround period (5 days per week)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\)Under ideal circumstances, a Lead Partner will manage a cluster of 3-5 schools within a district to achieve alignment and leverage scale, however could also begin by managing a single school. The cluster model is consistent with Mass Insight’s Partnership Zone framework.
An RFP helps ensure that the optimal Lead Partners are secured

**PURPOSES OF AN RFP**

- **Define needs**
  
  RFP development forces a process of thoughtful reflection about the needs of the state and/or district

- **Recruit and attract a pool of Lead Partners**
  
  Design of the RFP attracts the appropriate pool of Lead Partners by signaling priorities, requirements, and constraints

- **Evaluate and select optimal Lead Partners**
  
  The RFP evaluates partners along several critical dimensions such as:
  - Instructional model
  - Organizational and financial health
  - Evidence of prior success
• Overview of a Lead Partner RFP
• Development and issuance process
• RFP design
• Promising practices
The RFP development and implementation process requires significant work to complete

Prepare for RFP

- Articulate district-wide turnaround strategy
- Identify candidate schools/districts for Lead Partner management
- Determine range of autonomies that can be offered
- Determine evaluation metrics (both in the selection process and after the contract has been awarded)

RFP Process

- Issue RFP (make available to public)
- Market RFP (identify and approach candidate partner organizations)
- Review proposals and select partners*

Post-RFP work

- Develop Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to guide relationship with partner
- Support and evaluate as partner management begins

*If an SEA manages the RFP process on behalf of participating LEAs, the SEA should identify preferred providers and allow districts to select Lead Partners for their schools. One approach is to host a provider fair wherein district officials meet all preferred providers.
The entire process can take a year or more before schools can actually be opened

**Prepare for RFP**

**RFP development process:**
A significant portion of total state/district time should be spent on design before RFP is published

**RFP Process**

**RFP response period:**
Allow time for RFP submissions; early letters of intent allow district to approach high-capacity partners to stimulate interest

1-2 months

**RFP review process:**
Issuing authority performs anonymous review of proposals, with community stakeholders’ input

2-3 months

**Post-RFP work**

**Post contract school preparation:**
Lead Partner must have sufficient time with new management before school opens

1 month

At least 6 months
An RFP can attract Lead Partners from a wide range of sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential source</th>
<th>What they would need to do</th>
<th>Why they would do it</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charter/school management organizations</td>
<td>Adapt their model to work within a district architecture</td>
<td>Access to facilities and other infrastructure; opportunity to work in states without charter availability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting partners (e.g. human capital, data, curriculum)</td>
<td>Ramp up their models to work more intensively and address a broader range of capacities</td>
<td>Desire to see their core approaches implemented with greater fidelity and depth within schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local funders (e.g. local education funds)</td>
<td>Move into the operating role by adjusting current structure or spinning off a new organization</td>
<td>Ability to leverage their expertise, resources, and local relationships to transform schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Districts</td>
<td>Create a new office and bring in people with expertise in school turnarounds</td>
<td>Capacity to accelerate the pace of school turnarounds by transitioning district into new role; building support within the system for reform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unions</td>
<td>Develop a school model and process for assuming control</td>
<td>Opportunity to help shape the turnaround movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities</td>
<td>Expand their programs to incorporate turnaround and become more practice-based</td>
<td>Platform to demonstrate leadership and share expertise in addressing this critical education issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New start-ups</td>
<td>Raise the capital to build an operation capable of scaling</td>
<td>Access to a sustainable opportunity for growth created by public/private funds and national demand</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Overview of a Lead Partner RFP
• Development and issuance process
• RFP design
• Promising practices
A number of broader issues must be addressed prior to RFP release

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What partnerships already exist in the district or state?</th>
<th>How does RFP fit with overall school improvement plan?</th>
<th>What is funding strategy for new Lead Partners?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• What role do existing partners play?</td>
<td>• What is a clear vision of intervention over 2, 5, and 10 years?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do contracts mandate a continued role in those schools?</td>
<td>• What is the target cluster of schools and what are their needs?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is the partnership achieving results?</td>
<td>• What authorities and accountabilities will Lead Partners have?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How has the district used and supervised external partners?</td>
<td>• What will be the mechanism for partner oversight?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What is and is not working well in current partnerships?</td>
<td>• How much funding will the Lead Partner receive?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Where is the funding coming from (internal / external)?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Are the funding sources sustainable after the “turnaround” phase?</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
RFPs are designed around two main components

**MAJOR RFP COMPONENTS**

1. **Basic process and partnership information**
   - Communication of critical RFP detail:
     - Explanation of RFP process and timeline
     - Outline of critical partnership conditions and parameters
   - List of basic, objective organizational questions

2. **Vision for turnaround**
   - List of detailed questions that allow potential partner to present their model of school management, instructional design, student supports
   - Opportunity for partner to demonstrate evidence of organization’s governance and leadership structure, financial stability, and prior success in turning around schools.
## Typical RFP items: Basic information component

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic process and partnership information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Description of the state/district’s turnaround strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Submission and selection timeline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Eligible applicant criteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Evaluation rubric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Assignment of responsibility for key operational services (e.g., capital expenditures, IT infrastructure, maintenance, food services, transportation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Description of performance contract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Amount and source of funds available are specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Definition of progress/outcome metrics and reporting procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Demographic and performance data on district and/or schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Length of partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Criteria for agreement termination by district or partner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Typical RFP items: Vision for turnaround component

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vision for turnaround</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• School mission and vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• School leadership and governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Staffing plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Compensation plan (ability to offer performance/incentive pay)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Proposed school schedule and calendar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Curriculum and instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Assessment plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Promotion and graduation policies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
States and districts must communicate critical information to potential Lead Partners through RFPs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Clear list of autonomies</th>
<th>Snapshot of student need</th>
<th>Outline of partner responsibilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Provide list of autonomies (people, time, money, program) that will be granted to Lead Partners</td>
<td>Share student demographic data and historical performance data of targeted schools</td>
<td>RFP should state basic responsibilities and accountabilities required of key partners (particularly district role versus Lead Partner role)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Districts/states should wait to release RFP until appropriate conditions are secured, or at least until they know what autonomies they will be able to grant</td>
<td>Ensures that providers respond to the RFP with a better idea of the schools’ needs and what services they can offer in those schools</td>
<td>More granular details of the partnership should be specified during the MOU phase</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Upfront communication through the RFP document ensures the Lead Partner is well matched with the district/state/school
Autonomies afforded to Lead Partner should be stated upfront

1. **Clear list of autonomies**
   - Provide list of autonomies (people, time, money, program) that will be granted to Lead Partners

2. **Snapshot of student need**
   - Share student demographic data and historical performance data of targeted schools

3. **Outline of partner responsibilities**
   - RFP should state basic responsibilities and accountabilities required of key partners
     - Particularly district role versus Lead Partner role

   - Districts/states should wait to release RFP until appropriate conditions are secured, or at least until they know what autonomies they will be able to grant

   - Ensures that providers respond to the RFP with a better idea of the schools’ needs and what services they can offer in those schools

   - More granular details of the partnership should be specified during the MOU phase

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**Autonomies should include as many of the following as possible:**

- Personnel decisions (e.g., school staff reviews, replacement of school leader, replacement of teaching staff, ability to reassign staff within building)
- Compensation systems (e.g., bonuses for retention and/or extended time, pay for performance)
- Budget authorities
- Program design
- Daily schedule and yearly calendar
- Professional development curriculum
- Non-academic support services
RFP should communicate the specific needs of the targeted student population

1. Clear list of autonomies
   - Provide list of autonomies (people, time, money, program) that will be granted to Lead Partners
   - Districts/states should wait to release RFP until appropriate conditions are secured, or at least until they know what autonomies they will be able to grant

2. Snapshot of student need
   - Share student demographic data and historical performance data of targeted schools
   - Ensures that providers respond to the RFP with a better idea of the schools’ needs and what services they can offer in those schools

3. Outline of partner responsibilities
   - RFP should state basic responsibilities and accountabilities required of key partners (particularly district role versus Lead Partner role)
   - More granular details of the partnership should be specified during the MOU phase

Include information on the following:
- Which schools will be placed under Lead Partner management
- Relevant data on past student and school performance
- Specific information on unique populations (e.g. ELL, SPED)
- How these particular schools were targeted for turnaround
- Student support needs (E.g., Chicago: student homelessness, Louisiana: community engagement)
Partners responsibilities must be clearly delineated in RFP

1. Clear list of autonomies
   - Provide list of autonomies (people, time, money, program) that will be granted to Lead Partners

2. Snapshot of student need
   - Share student demographic data and historical performance data of targeted schools

3. Outline of partner responsibilities
   - RFP should state basic responsibilities and accountabilities required of key partners (particularly district role versus Lead Partner role)
     - More granular details of the partnership should be specified during the MOU phase

The following responsibilities should be stated:
- Duration of partnership
- Partnership renewal mechanism
- Criteria for agreement termination by the district or partner
- Frequency of evaluation (at least annually, possibly mid- and end-of-year)
- Definitions of progress metrics and reporting procedures
- Definitions of outcome metrics and reporting procedures

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RFPs should assess Lead Partners according to a number of key criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Willingness</th>
<th>Readiness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lead Partners must have experience:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Lead Partners must be willing to:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Lead Partners must be ready to:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Achieving results with high poverty, urban student populations</td>
<td>• Work with unionized teaching staff (under modified contracts)</td>
<td>• Ramp up capacity quickly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Working in a school turnaround environment</td>
<td>• Be held accountable for student performance</td>
<td>• Modify an existing school model to meet the needs of a turnaround environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Working in high schools (many but not all Lead Partners will be brought in to manage high schools)</td>
<td>• Operate under some but not most district procedures and regulations</td>
<td>• Open new operations in or expand existing operations to a new location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Use some but not all district central office services</td>
<td>• Have excess cash or ability to raise capital quickly (in some cases)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Competencies**

**Lead Partners must be able to:**

- Design a comprehensive school model including instructional program, socio-emotional supports, co-curricular program
- Transform the existing culture to create a positive learning environment
- Execute a full community engagement plan

- Work collaboratively with district central office staff
- Identify and develop a strong school leader
- Recruit and develop effective teaching staff
- Manage multiple schools simultaneously (in many cases)
- Handle the operational aspects of the school including Supporting Partner contract management

*With the increasing demand for turnaround partner accompanied by and fueled by an influx of federal funding, a number of unprepared organizations will gravitate towards turnaround; potential Lead Partner organizations must be evaluated carefully to determine if they are prepared to take on this role.*
• Overview of a Lead Partner RFP

• Development and issuance process

• RFP design

• Promising practices
To ensure selection of optimal Lead Partners, the best RFPs follow a number of key practices (1 of 2)

Consider the ideal length of partnership

• Need at least 2-3 years to see results
• Most partnerships are designed for 5 year terms
• Longer partnerships require extensive midpoint evaluations to allow for course correction

Require external evidence of success

Applicants should be held to an externally validated standard of success rather than self-reported results

Request letters of intent

Allows states/districts to pause early in the process and assess if RFP specifications match with any high-capacity organizations (process used in Texas and Los Angeles)
To ensure selection of optimal Lead Partners, the best RFPs follow a number of key practices (2 of 2)

| Require demographic parity | Stipulate that partner-operated schools must maintain a certain level of similarity of school population to overall district composition |

| Achieve balance between district/state criteria for success and partner’s unique approach | Lead Partner should be evaluated across benchmarked criteria but also considered for unique theory of change and record of turnaround |

| Create detailed questions | RFP questions should illuminate LP capacity and assess alignment with state/district goals:  
  - How many schools in Restructuring has the organization worked in? What were the results?  
  - What strategies has the organization found most effective in addressing the chronically lowest-performing schools?  
  - Example: Chicago: “Attach a sample teacher job description for the proposed school.” |
Examples from the field: Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) RFSP for preferred Lead and Supporting Partners

**RFSP outline**

**RFP objective:** To identify Lead and Supporting Partners with a demonstrated record of successful and effective work with underperforming schools to participate in the Illinois Partnership Zone Initiative

**Eligible applicants:** Regional offices of education (ROEs), intermediate service centers (ISCs), postsecondary institutions, community organizations, not-for-profit and for-profit entities

**Application turnaround time:** 39 days

**Selection of preferred providers:** Jan. ‘10

**Turnaround schools open:** Sept. ‘10

**Selected Lead Partners:** Academy of Urban School Leadership, America’s Choice, Inc., Consortium for Educational Change, Diplomas Now, Edison Learning, Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools, Learning Point Associates, Success For All, Talent Development

**Core components**

**Proposal requirements:**
- Service Area/Capacity Limitations
- Work plan*
- Demonstrated record of effectiveness, including specific examples of successes
- Fiscal and management capabilities including staff qualifications and evidence of financial, organizational, and technical resources
- Proposed budget, including personnel costs, supplies, travel, production costs, subcontracting information, in-kind funding, other costs
- Certification and assurances

*Lead Partner work plan requirements:
Needs assessment, community involvement and engagement, intervention plan, capacity building for sustained improvement, outcomes-based measurement plan, nonoperational support, fiscal status reporting

**Lead Partner evaluation criteria:**
Candidates are evaluated based on their experience with the following: school culture and climate, developing teacher and school leader effectiveness, comprehensive instructional reform strategies, extending learning time, and, providing operating flexibility

A copy of ISBE’s preferred partner RFP can be found at [http://www.massinsight.org/resourcefiles/ILPARTZONE.pdf](http://www.massinsight.org/resourcefiles/ILPARTZONE.pdf)

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# Examples from the field: Virginia Department of Education

## RFP for turnaround partners

### RFP outline

**RFP objective:** To develop and implement an academic program for one or more of the core discipline areas of math, science, social studies and language arts for students in persistently low-achieving public schools

**Eligible applicants:** “Qualified sources,” (no restriction placed on organization type)

**Application turnaround time:** 44 days

**Proposed length of contract:** Three year term with three optional one-year renewals

**Selection of preferred providers:** May ’10 (estimated)

**Turnaround schools likely to open:** Sept. ’10

**Selected partners:** VA DOE anticipates selection in late Spring 2010

### Core components

**Proposal requirements:**
- Names, qualifications and experience of key personnel and a summary of experience and past effectiveness in increasing student academic achievement
- A written narrative explaining how the partner will meet the 25 criteria outlined in the RFP’s statement of needs, as well as the provider’s assessment of “what it takes to be successful in a turnaround environment”
- A proposed per student unit price

**Evaluation criteria:**
Candidates are evaluated based on a 100-point rubric:
- Experience in providing the same or similar type service (20 points)
- Qualifications of key staff (10 points)
- Past effectiveness in increasing student academic achievement (20 points)
- Description of what is required to be successful in a turnaround environment (10 points)
- Explanation as to why the provider should be selected to perform the services (5 points)
- Approach to meeting the services (25 points)
- References (5 points)
- Proposed per student base unit price (5 points)

A complete copy of this lead turnaround partner RFP can be found at: [http://www.doe.virginia.gov/school_finance/procurement/solicitations/2010-03/low_achieving_schools.pdf](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/school_finance/procurement/solicitations/2010-03/low_achieving_schools.pdf)
### Examples from the field: Colorado Department of Education RFI for preferred supporting partners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RFI outline</th>
<th>Core components</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **RFP objective:** to identify preferred providers to implement the four school intervention models identified for federal Title I School Improvement Grants | **Eligibility requirements:**  
- Demonstrated capacity to offer services that have been shown to be effective in increasing achievement  
- Services are aligned with state academic standards  
- Demonstrated, strong fiscal capacity  
- Detailed budget estimate for provision of services  
- Commitment that instructional programs will be secular, neutral and non-ideological |
| **Eligible applicants:** EMOs; charter school operators / CMOs; institutions of higher education; Boards of Cooperative Educational Services; other organizations with history of public school improvement | **Evaluation criteria:**  
Candidates are evaluated based on evidence of bringing schools to competency in the following 5 areas:  
- Organizational Management and Instructional Leadership (10 points) - Substantial experience with turning around low performing schools, evidence of capacity to open a well-designed school with adequate resources  
- Academic Performance (20 points) - Curriculum aligned with CO standards, evidence of a comprehensive and coordinated approach to assessment  
- Learning Environment (10 points) - Professional development plan with comprehensive evaluation process  
- Financial Management (10 points) - Compendium of services offered and an accompanying cost structure  
- Comprehensive Planning (50 points) - Narrative discussing a school improvement project coordinated within the past two years |
| **Application turnaround time:** 22 days |  
**Selection of preferred providers:** Jan. ‘10 Turnaround schools likely to open: Sept. ‘10  
**Selected partners:** CDE identified an initial list of 19 providers that will focus primarily on turnaround and transformation efforts; the full list of providers can be found here: [http://www.cde.state.co.us/Communications/download/PDF/20100122approvedproviders.pdf](http://www.cde.state.co.us/Communications/download/PDF/20100122approvedproviders.pdf) | A copy of the CDE educational service provider RFI can be found at [http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdegen/downloads/TurnaroundRFIFINAL.pdf](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdegen/downloads/TurnaroundRFIFINAL.pdf)
The report and related documents are the result of a research and development process led by Mass Insight with the support of various partners.

It should be used in conjunction with the Main Report, “The Turnaround Challenge: Why America’s best opportunity to dramatically improve student achievement lies in our worst performing schools,” and a variety of other resources we have developed and distributed.

For more information on The Turnaround Challenge and our Partnership Zone Initiative, please visit our website at www.massinsight.org or contact us at turnaround@massinsight.org.