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Forging partnerships for turnaround: Emerging lessons from state RFP processes

February 2011

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 and review process 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 Virginia, Tennessee, and Colorado, and a collection of personal interviews. 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 a generous grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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Executive summary

- An RFP (Request for Proposal) is a critical first step in vetting and selecting Lead Partners to manage school turnaround efforts.

- The Lead Partner is not a typical vendor but a partner that is deeply embedded in the school and willing to take accountability for student achievement in exchange for increased autonomy. Currently few organizations fulfill all of the required competencies, but the RFP process can be used to attract and detect high potential candidates.

- In the wake of the new School Improvement Grant (SIG) program, many states have released RFPs to solicit and vet Lead Partners for use in schools that receive SIG funds. Many potential providers have responded to such solicitations from multiple states.

- This accumulated experience is a source of wisdom which can serve to improve and refine the partner qualification process for the second round of SIG and beyond.

- This report synthesizes insights from SEA officials in several states, including Colorado, Virginia, and Tennessee, as well as from five national organizations that submitted proposals.

- Several key success factors have emerged from state and partner experience to date, including the importance of establishing a clear vision for partnership, a comprehensive and accurate timeline, and an efficient review process.

- Recommendations for the future include establishing a central database of proposal opportunities, revising and standardizing RFPs to allow more cohesive responses, and providing more support for partner selection at the district level.

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- **Why the RFP?**

- Overview of the process

- Lessons from the field

- Recommendations

- Appendix: Case examples

A Request for Proposal (RFP) serves as a critical tool to facilitate successful school turnaround by recruiting and vetting Lead Partners

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	• To enable multiple external organizations to compete to play a specific role in turnaround efforts • To clearly articulate the basic conditions under which interventions can take place:

1. *States and districts announce specific selection criteria and articulate the opportunity in a way that will attract high-capacity partners*

2. *Potential partners consider how they will undertake turnaround in a specific <u>context</u> with a specific <u>set of conditions</u>*

3. *The RFP process allows both parties to fully consider the appropriateness of the match*

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"Old World": Due to the recent emergence of the Lead Partner model, few organizations currently fulfill all of its requirements

Existing school provider types

Supporting Partners	Comprehensive School Reform Organizations	Managing Organizations
• "Point solution" partners that can fill a targeted, strategic need for the school, such as curriculum or staffing assistance. • They are unlikely to become Lead Partners without dramatically altering their organizational structure and/or mission, but will likely continue to provide crucial support to Lead Partners.	• Partners that provide comprehensive curricular and organizational reform. Technical assistance providers with a comprehensive approach to supporting school improvement. • In most CSR models to date, district administrations retain authority over most conditions, although some provide key consulting roles and build capacity.	• Have charter or charter-like authority over all school conditions and full accountability for results. • Management Partners largely open new schools rather than work specifically in turnaround, but they constitute an important part of a district's or state's portfolio of options to transform its most challenging schools.

Each of these types can work well for its intended purpose, but none completely fulfills the needs of a new turnaround niche -- where partners need to share authority and accountability with schools and districts, work in a comprehensive "fresh start" way within existing schools, and manage and coordinate the work of other partners. A new partner paradigm is required.

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"New World": The Lead Partner achieves turnaround by increasing capacity, accountability, and intensity

Lead Partners are private organizations or units of central offices on contract with the district central office or state for the management of schools

Responsibilities of a Lead Partner

- **Sign a 3-5 year performance contract for student achievement** 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

- **Assume authority for decision making on school staffing** (as well as time, money and program); in particular, the Lead Partner:
  - Hires a new principal or approves the current one
  - Supports the principal in hiring and replacing teachers and has responsibility for bringing in a meaningful cohort of new instructional staff

- **Provide core academic and student support services** 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

- Has an **embedded, consistent and intense relationship with each school** during the turnaround period (5 days per week)

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Due to the recent emergence of the Lead Partner model, few organizations currently fulfill all of its requirements

Function/Role	Traditional provider model	Lead Partner
Authority	None or advisory	Full authority over key aspects of schools: people, time, money and program
Accountability	None (except to extend contract)	Full accountability for student achievement gains
Intensity/presence in school	Varies, but often 1 day in school per month	Fully embedded (5 days per week); managing the school
Relationship to Other Partners	None (usually)	Able to select and manage all partners/ subcontractors
Services Provided	Single service (except for Comprehensive School Reform models)	All academic services and oversight of all others

In order to improve their lowest-performing schools, districts need access to a variety of high-quality, high-capacity partners that are deeply embedded in schools. However, the supply has not developed as fast as the demand for school turnaround.

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However, many strong organizations can and should enter the space by building new capacity

The Lead Partner must take on a complex role; few organizations can meet all of the requirements with their current capacity. To fulfill all of the critical responsibilities, Lead Partners can follow a number of options:

1 Leverage existing staff capacity and institutional experience

2 Acquire new capacity through deliberate hiring of new staff

3 Develop capacity in existing staff through training and development opportunities

4 Outsource appropriate capacity to Supporting Partners

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These Lead Partners can be drawn from multiple sources of existing organizations

Potential source	What they would need to do	Why they would do it
Charter/school management organizations	Adapt their model to work within a district architecture and to address turnaround issues	Access to facilities and other infrastructure, and ability to work in states without charter availability
Supporting partners (e.g. human capital, data, curriculum)	Ramp up their models to work more intensively, address a broader range of capacities, and adapt to turnarounds	Desire to see their core approaches implemented with greater fidelity and depth within schools
Local funders (e.g. local education funds)	Move into the operating role by adjusting current structure or spinning off a new organization that is focused on turnaround	Ability to leverage their expertise, resources, and local relationships to transform schools
Districts	Create a new office and bring in people with expertise in school turnarounds	Capacity to accelerate the pace of school turnarounds by helping transition district into new role and building support within the system for reform
Unions	Develop a school model relevant to turnaround and a process for assuming control	Opportunity to help shape the turnaround movement
Universities	Adjust their programs to incorporate turnaround and become more practice-based	Platform to demonstrate leadership and share expertise in addressing this critical education issue

The RFP is a critical tool to recruit and evaluate potential Lead Partners.

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- Why the RFP?

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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

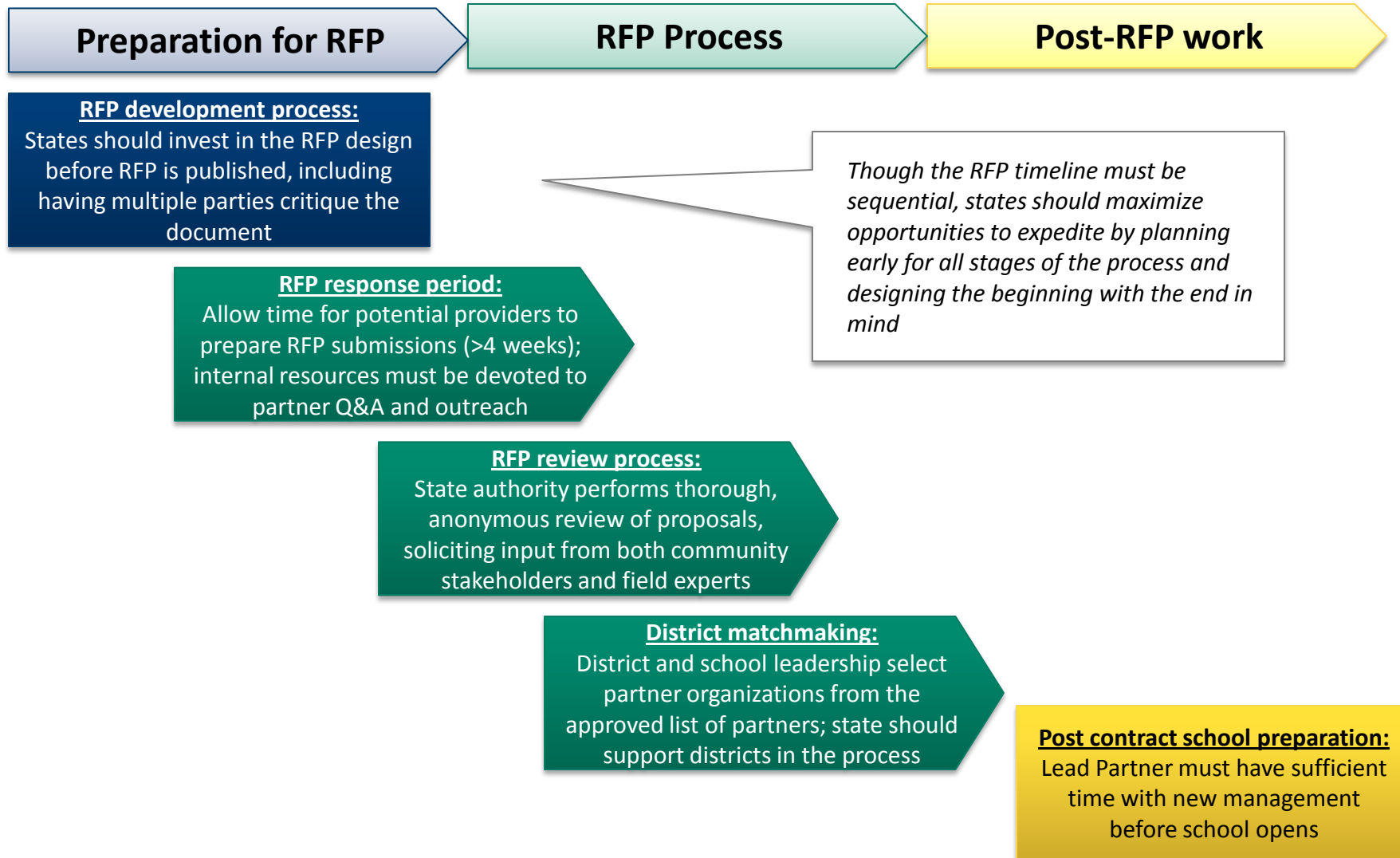SCHOOL TURNAROUND GROUP
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New federal context will significantly impact states' opportunities to solicit and work with Lead Partners

- Dramatically expanded School Improvement Grant (SIG) program affords states and districts the ability to expand partnerships already in place, and to attract new partners to areas of greatest need

- SIG funding must go to the "persistently lowest-achieving schools," with the highest priority (Tier I) being schools already identified by SEAs as in need of corrective action or restructuring

- The current policy environment represents unprecedented opportunity and attention for struggling schools; yet it can also create a "gold rush" in which states and providers scramble for their share of a large pool of financial resources

- This influx of partners coupled with the inexperience of states and districts in evaluating them results in the approval of ineffective partners as well as mismatches between schools and providers

- Thoughtful design and execution of the RFP process is of paramount importance

School Improvement Grants represent an unprecedented amount of federal money expressly targeted at underperforming schools; yet unless these funds (and other attendant resources) are wisely allocated, little improvement may result.

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The RFP timeline must be rapid, but not rushed

Preparation for RFP | **RFP Process** | **Post-RFP work**

RFP development process:
States should invest in the RFP design before RFP is published, including having multiple parties critique the document

Though the RFP timeline must be sequential, states should maximize opportunities to expedite by planning early for all stages of the process and designing the beginning with the end in mind

RFP response period:
Allow time for potential providers to prepare RFP submissions (>4 weeks); internal resources must be devoted to partner Q&A and outreach

RFP review process:
State authority performs thorough, anonymous review of proposals, soliciting input from both community stakeholders and field experts

District matchmaking:
District and school leadership select partner organizations from the approved list of partners; state should support districts in the process

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

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States must plan for potential delays and take steps to expedite where possible

Develop and publicize a complete timeline

- Timeline information is vital for partners that must consider their own capacity (e.g., how quickly they can mobilize into a school after receiving a contract, without sacrificing quality or likelihood of success)

- At the outset, clearly identify dates for:
  - Initial RFP release
  - Q & A or clarification period (possibly including info session or webinar)
  - Response deadline
  - Notification date for approved partners
  - Process and timeline for matching approved partners to districts and schools
  - Date for opening of schools

Clear the path through existing state procurement procedures

- If one has not cleared the proper procurement channels beforehand, expect a significant lag time in the contract negotiation/awards process

- Many different SEA divisions may have legal and financial requirements that need to be met, such as verification of insurance coverage or certification to do business within the state

- These requirements may need to be addressed at proposal stage, at contracting stage, or both – but invest time upfront in coordinating the process to avoid unanticipated delays

"When [a contract] goes through procurement, that process was not designed for us. It was intended for partners who fix copiers or put roofs on schools. It's simply not a process equipped to deal with turnaround partnerships. There are a lot of delays."

- Executive at a turnaround partner organization

Consider ways to gather early or late information without compromising the schedule

Some states have developed an advance RFI (request for information) or a second round of proposal reviews which can enhance the RFP process:

- An RFI or solicitation for letters of intent could help states assess the state of the marketplace and quality of the potential provider field

- RFIs can establish lines of communication so partners are notified in a timely fashion when the RFP is released

- Opening a second round of competition allows for rapid review and execution of round one without turning away potential partners who cannot respond in time

"We issued an RFI not to procure services, but simply to gather information about what models were out there, who might be interested in working with us, and what we could reasonably expect of them. That definitely informed our proposal and rubric design process."

- State Education Agency staff member

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Designing an RFP: Define your needs

Results Needs *What is the desired outcome of the process?*	Proposal Needs *What elements should the RFP process contain to effect the desired outcomes?*
High-quality Lead Partners with a proven track record	• Emphasis on data: Can the partner prove its model has achieved real results with a similar population of students? How will progress be measured for this partnership? • Compelling, well- articulated opportunity and conditions: Will partner have access to key change levers in the areas of people, time, money, and program? • Questions that ensure that providers have a clear mission and idea about where they want to work: The RFP should be constructed to help determine the likelihood of an appropriate match.
Models well-matched to the needs and contexts of individual schools and districts	**The SEA should provide…** • An introductory narrative that reflects the state's unique vision and theory of change • Clearly defined roles for the LEA and SEA in actual district/partner matches: Is the state approving all partners who meet minimum criteria, or selecting a smaller group that it feels is best suited to deliver results? Will the options represent a portfolio of different partner approaches, or simply the top-scoring proposals regardless of their similarity or difference? **The SEA should require that candidates provide…** • Verification that selected partners will be willing to go to areas of greatest need, including/especially rural schools • Evidence that partner's approach is/can be comprehensive and customized rather than an "off the shelf" model repackaged as whole school reform • Demonstrated effectiveness with unique populations (e.g., high poverty, ELL, SPED) that corresponds to specific student needs
A transparent, user-friendly process that attracts all potential partners	• A timeline published in advance • A rubric that clearly outlines proposal evaluation criteria • Clear proposal preparation instructions that will ease review (specific page limits, appendices, binding instructions) without becoming too onerous for applicants • An accessible process for follow-up Q&A during proposal response phase

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Releasing an RFP: Attract the best partners

Have some idea of who is out there

Formally or informally assess the context:

- SEAs may already have some idea of who might have capacity to undertake the work
- Are there organizations already working in the districts/familiar with the landscape? (National networks, local universities?)
- Some states reach out to potential partners, but there is no process attached
- RFI process may help with this somewhat
- This knowledge of the field may help states overcome an imperfect dissemination process

Ensure a comprehensive dissemination strategy

Current RFP dissemination is scattershot, highly flawed, and not satisfactory from either the state or partner vantage point:

- RFPs should be posted in the state procurement database, directly on DOE website and Turnaround office website, AND announced via e-blasts or press releases
- States should also use their well-connected partners throughout the state and country to further spread the word
- A lot of one-by-one scouring is going on, both on the state and partner side
- Partners report missing deadlines in states they wanted to work in; have to expend a large amount in resources in just scouting for opportunities.

"Sell" the opportunity

Partners want environments where they will have the greatest likelihood of success.

- Set the tone of partnership early: accountability plus support; this includes support for applicants in the proposal process.
- State staff should reach out if they feel there is a match to verify that the partner is informed of the RFP
- States should expect and prepare for a LOT of bandwith/staff capacity to be used for fairly basic RFP questions – e.g., does an addendum count in the total proposal page length?
- If your submission and review process is clear and transparent, there is no conflict in encouraging/inviting particular organizations to apply

> "Finding posted RFPs involves a lot of reconnaissance, investigative work, triangulated conversations...and we still miss things. It shouldn't be this hard to find opportunities."
>
> - Executive at a turnaround partner organization

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Selecting Partners:
Design a comprehensive, yet efficient, review process

Begin with the end in mind

- Develop evaluation rubric concurrent with the rest of the RFP
- Data is king. Potential providers' track record of success (established with EXTERNALLY validated data) should be emphasized above all else ; ideally applicants will be able to show "comps" – track records in similar areas
- Review is a time-consuming process: specify how you want proposal responses to look for ease of reading, up to and including font and spacing, headers/footers, and section headings
- Make decisions up front about desired results: Are you approving all partners who meet the standards? Assembling an array of options? Looking for only the top tier? Will you approve only comprehensive plans or also partners who provide a specific component (such as Professional Development), to be matched with schools that need lighter-touch approaches?

Get input from a diverse array of stakeholders

- Assemble internal and external reviewers:
    - SEA officials (in and outside of the turnaround office)
    - District superintendents
    - Experts from the field, including private organizations
- Though coordination is challenging, assembling a rich real-time discussion (rather than independent reviews) is beneficial

Anticipate budget and cost projection issues

- Cost transparency and predictability is a very difficult issue for states, districts, and providers to navigate
- Involve fiscal and procurement specialists early on in the review process
- Verify providers are willing to bill for just turnaround management services (no required curriculums, software, technology that carries an additional charge)

Know what happens next

- How will providers be notified of approval? Will they get any additional feedback or comments?
- Are there going to be additional negotiations or approval processes required from procurement, legal, or other state offices? What kinds of delays might be expected?
- Is there an appeals process?
- Some states have developed a "resubmit" option in which rejected partners can revise their application. However, it is not clear whether this is necessary, especially if the goal is to whittle down partners to a manageable list

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What <u>partners</u> want in an RFP (1 of 2)

A sense of the context

- External providers need a clear understanding of what their change levers will be to determine if their program is a good fit
- More freedom over conditions is preferred, but regardless, all partners will want full disclosure of what they will/won't be able to change within a school or district

Standardization, up to a point

"Why are we all doing the same thing? A lot of the partners are national, there is way too much duplication of work in the current system."
 - State Education Agency staff member

- Partnership approach will differ in different contexts
- However, there is a ~60-70% of overlap in the information requested in each state's RFP (e.g., staff bios, budget information, professional development plans), yet each currently requests this information in a different format
- This results in a significant duplication of efforts as respondents repackage the same data for different proposals

Opportunity to articulate their approach

- Respondents need enough free reign to outline their own program/vision in a way they see as cohesive
- Most partners would prefer a page limit and broader question rather than breaking answers up into many shorter and more specific responses

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Transparent timeline from start to finish

"Please, post the key milestones and dates on the SIG web page. 9 times out of 10 we have had to resort to private investigative work to find this information"
    - Executive at a turnaround partner organization

- Time from RFP release to RFP response deadline is only one part of the timeline; yet frequently this is the only part publicized

- Respondents also need to know when they will be notified of the results, how districts plan to select from approved partners, and when they will be expected to come onboard a school

Understanding of the purpose of the RFP

"Increasingly, states are expanding their [approved provider] list and I'm guessing they are under pressure that if their list is too short, they are not allowing enough competition or choice. But there's no sense of a partnership when there are 40 partners."
    - Executive at a turnaround partner organization

- In states with an excess of approved partners, some partners are beginning to doubt the likelihood that pursuing approval will actually resulting in contracts

- Providers would like to see more upfront descriptions of how many approved partners there may be, how districts will actually choose partners, and the degree of overlap between state and district processes

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What <u>states</u> want in an RFP response (1 of 2)

Pricing transparency

"One of the biggest issue is true prices... we know there are unknowns in schools. But there is a sense that these organizations feel they can't possibly tell us how much it would cost. Even once they're at a site, it's difficult to get accurate reports on [price]."
  - State Education Agency staff member

- Delivery of education management services is an inexact science; however it is impossible to navigate contracts and procurement without accurate, comparable estimates of partner costs
- Per-pupil costs need to reflect everything required to implement the program, without mandatory add-ons for curriculum or technology services

Approaches that are comprehensive but not "one-size-fits-all"

- Though states need providers with comprehensive models, these providers should still take into consideration the unique needs of the district and not insist on elements (e.g., technology/software) that are not needed or wanted
- This is particularly true when these new components would replace successful programs that schools have already invested in

Externally validated data

"You absolutely have to prove to us that you can do what you say you can do. If that data is not there, the rest of the proposal is irrelevant."
  - State Education Agency staff member

- Evidence of success with comparable student populations is the single most important factor in the selection process
- Case studies or partner-tracked results do not substitute for objective data; yet many partners still attempt to build a case without external evidence
- Most review committees also prefer to see external evaluations and third party evaluations of the partners

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Leading success indicators

"We have to give them an out for something that is not working, and yet both sides need reasonable guarantees/good faith protection against cutting and running. I think the leading indicators will be key to that conversation."
  - State Education Agency staff member

- A well-developed understanding of leading success indicators is key as states and partners make an investment in these partnerships
- Reviewers would like data not just on achievement but on "ease of use" (i.e., some indication of how quickly a model can adapt and transform a school culture)
- States want partners to demonstrate a meaningful understanding of what data should be tracked and how this data will result in a plan for course corrections as needed

An interview with finalists

- While capacity issues have not yet permitted most states to add an interview component, nearly all acknowledged that it is difficult to get complete information without it
- An interview (in person or via phone) would allow states to further probe difficult questions such as "how would you deal with rural areas?" and allow reviewers to separate mere good proposal writers from organizations that actually have viable plans

Material to help districts select partners

- Some states ask respondents to include one-page model summaries or other material intended for school and district level personnel
- Material should be clear and succinct to support decision-making without being too "sales-pitchy"

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Recommendations: A centralized database of opportunities

The issue

- Partners have difficulty finding RFP's as they are released, therefore it is not guaranteed that the best possible organizations will respond

- This uncertainty also impacts the quality of proposals received; some of them are prepared in a rush, because organizations didn't have enough notice to allocate their grant writing capacity effectively

- Partner organizations are currently forced to expend a lot of time and effort monitoring states and districts for potential opportunities

Recommendation

- Create a centralized database of opportunities for partners:

   – All RFPs would be filed in a single, searchable database that is guaranteed to be up to date and comprehensive

   – A simple version would be a common website that contains links to individual state websites or PDF versions of open RFPs

   – Centralization will help partners be more thoughtful and mission-driven by allowing for more strategic choices and less energy wasted on searching for opportunities

> *"You have to look everywhere for these things… they show up in the craziest places!"*
> - Executive at a turnaround partner organization

> *"Sometimes we have inside information from personal contacts or conversations, 'I know this [RFP] is coming… I know this is coming… and then we still can't find it.'"*
> - Executive at a turnaround partner organization

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Recommendations: More standardization, and yet more freedom in RFPs and proposal responses

The issue

- Partner organizations are spending a large amount of time repackaging the same information to fit the different formats of various states

- At the same time, many templates do not have enough flexibility for partners to report all of the pertinent information on their models

Recommendation #1

- Improve the format and structure of the RFP to provide more flexibility over content for partners including,

    – States should be sure that the RFP spells out their theory of change so respondents understand its purpose

    – RFPs should emphasize the use of data to tell the story

    – Provide page limits and guides for ease of review; 10 or 20 pages should be enough to describe everything, yet some proposals are tipping the scale at 100+, which wastes reviewer time as well

    – However, proposal responses should not be unnecessarily restricted (e.g., character limits for certain questions)

Recommendation #2

- Develop a national, standardized RFP (akin to the common college application)

    – Common, general information would be submitted through a single form

    – States can also create a customized supplement to address their specific needs

"I'm not looking to have overly standardized RFPs – each state has a viewpoint of how school improvement happens, I'd much rather see THEIR theory of change and THEIR vision. What do they expect?"

- Executive at a turnaround partner organization

"The pressure they put on us to restrict length, I actually appreciate it, but I want to be able to present our model cohesively rather than in short, small sections describing discrete elements. Spreading it out over so many short pieces makes it hard to tell the story in a coherent way."

- Executive at a turnaround partner organization

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Recommendations: Support for District-level matchmaking

Quotations from State Education Agency staff members

"As a state department, we need to do a better job of giving districts the right questions to ask [providers] and the right tools to evaluate their answers."

"Is our job to vet partners or is our job to provide guidance? Can we take we do and put that in the protocol format, to empower [LEAs] to make better decisions."

"It would be good if we had a concise way to look at the partner without looking at the bells and whistles. It's hard to separate the actual difference in models from the provider sales pitch."

"I worry that at the district level we won't see coherent approaches happening if schools aren't making informed choices and instead are picking a little bit from here and a little bit from there -- We don't believe that will work. We don't want to do piecemeal. "

The issue

- State provider approval is not the final step– from there, district and school officials will face choices about whom to bring into their schools
- Districts may still need significant help in finding the best matches: some districts have a lot of familiarity with different partners and capacity to review/oversee, but many do not
- SEAs need to establish the right size pool of partners: if there are too many approved partners the process is meaningless; if there are too few, there isn't really much local choice or control

Recommendations

- States need to find ways to support districts in identifying providers from the approved list:
  - Some states are providing "blind" partner profiles so districts choose on the best match to needs rather than on provider reputation
  - Tools such as an evaluation rubric, a needs assessment, a matrix highlighting model components, or short model summaries can enable LEA decision making
  - States need ongoing staff capacity to support district choice
  - Hold a partner fair for districts to be able to meet potential providers
  - Design a system for districts and schools to provide feedback on an ongoing basis

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Emerging lessons from state processes: Colorado

CO

| Create a process and solicit proposals | Review and approve partners |
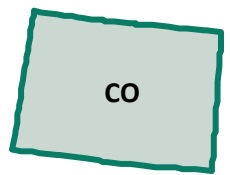
Create a process and solicit proposals

- **Establish RFP deadlines.** RFP (RFI) issued on November 23, 2009; responses due on December 11, 2009; partners notified by December 28, 2009; and partners released to the public on January 5, 2010.

- **Create a reasonable RFP timeline.** Process felt too rushed. Steps such as identifying external reviewers, fell by the wayside.

- **Publicize the RFP and effectively disseminate materials.** CO DOE lacked a formal strategy to publicize the RFP. It was publicized through a press release and available on the state's turnaround site, but it was not posted within the state procurement database.

- **Develop a communication strategy.** Partners had difficulty accessing posted information. At least one partner missed the submission deadline due to communication weaknesses.

- **Create alignment with existing state systems.** SIG RFP process was informed by lessons learned through the state's other RFP processes; however, some of these lessons were not acted upon during the first round.

Review and approve partners

- **Set evaluation criteria.** Proposals were evaluated according to the following 5 categories: academics, learning environment, leadership, planning, and operations.

- **Create a rigorous review process.** Few partners produced great proposals up front; CO DOE requested more information from several partners. Some partners received a "Recommended with Changes" evaluation.

- **Evaluate proposals.** Evaluation distinctions made it possible to sort partners according to strengths within particular areas, which may be helpful to certain schools.

- **Help districts select partners.** Partner vetting was only part of the process; CO DOE then increased district capacity to select partners.

> *"We would ask for people [through the RFP process] who would build scope and sequence and teacher training programs… but we might get a writing partner or a math partner. There is still a gap in what 'comprehensive turnaround' means."*
>
> -Colorado SEA staff member

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Emerging lessons from state processes: Virginia

Create a process and solicit proposals

- **Establish RFP deadlines.** RFP issued on October 29, 2009; submissions due on December 11, 2009; winners announced on April 1, 2010; and partners selected in July 2010. Partners were vetted before SIG applications were released.

- **Plan for the RFP process.** VDOE anticipated federal SIG guidelines, which allowed for a more thorough RFP process. This early start then allowed plenty of ramp up time for selected partners.

- **Create alignment with existing state systems.** Committee of 12 representatives developed a conceptual frame for the RFP, and a procurement officer merged this with state requirements. RFP was not developed in isolation; it took existing state systems into account. RFP presented a clear and well articulated vision.

- **Develop an easy-to-use RFP.** Virginia's RFP requirements were very state- and vision-specific (and a bit complicated). Some partners struggled with the required format.

- **Think strategically about the RFP requirements.** The RFP may have favored partners with more grant-writing capacity, rather than evaluating their ability to do the actual work.

Review and approve partners

- **Set evaluation criteria.** Committee of 12 people from across the state used the Mass Insight model to flesh out evaluation criteria (i.e., what should a proposal include in terms of time, conditions, money, etc.).

- **Create a rigorous review process.** Review committee of 5 evaluated the proposals (2 VDOE staffers, 3 superintendents). During the review process, a "natural line" developed between the four approved partners and the rest of the pack.

- **Anticipate a negotiation period.** Negotiations with finalists required more time and effort than anticipated. Each partner negotiated contract terms and pricing structure separately.

- **Help districts select partners.** Approved partners presented webinars to district staff; VDOE was heavily involved in the selection process at the district level.

> *"The ideal way to have done this would be one school at a time, developing a statement of needs. That also might have presented a [way for partners to bid at a] fixed price. But that just isn't scalable so we are looking for the next best thing."*
>
> -Virginia SEA staff member

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Emerging lessons from state processes: Tennessee TN

Create a process and solicit proposals

- **Establish RFP timeline.** RFP issued on April 30, 2010; responses due on May 21, 2010; partners notified by June 1, 2010. First round RFP timeline was very tight: RFP respondents had just three weeks to submit proposals. However, partners were aware that a second opportunity would be coming shortly thereafter.

- **Develop a solid RFP document.** Several partners reported that Tennessee had one of the best, most user-friendly RFPs.

- **Use RFI to inform the RFP process.** RFI provided a good survey of the field; however, it is unclear how the RFP process drew from information gathered during the RFI process.

- **Create alignment with existing state systems.** RFP process was intended to dovetail with the current state procurement requirements without being bound by them (e.g., partners had to submit proof that they were in the process of getting licensed to do business in TN, yet they did not already need to be approved).

Review and approve partners

- **Create a rigorous review process.** Team of 20-30 external reviewers convened over two days to receive training and then rate proposals. Reviewers were not compensated but received travel/lodging stipends.

- **Set evaluation criteria.** Turnaround team worked with internal director of fiscal review to create criteria for measuring financial soundness.

- **Evaluate proposals.** Each applicant was notified as to whether their proposal was approved, denied, or not reviewed because the proposal was incomplete. TN DOE provided detailed feedback to each applicant and then had an appeals process.

- **Help districts select partners.** Simply identifying "approved" partners leaves district with a high volume of information to sort through in order to identify their ideal partner.

> *"One big issue we had was to fully communicate over and over again that this process was about whole-school service providers. It was not about tools, it was not about technology. It was just about making the staff of schools more effective."*
> -Tennessee SEA staff member

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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.*