

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

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 schools¹ 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)

¹Under 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

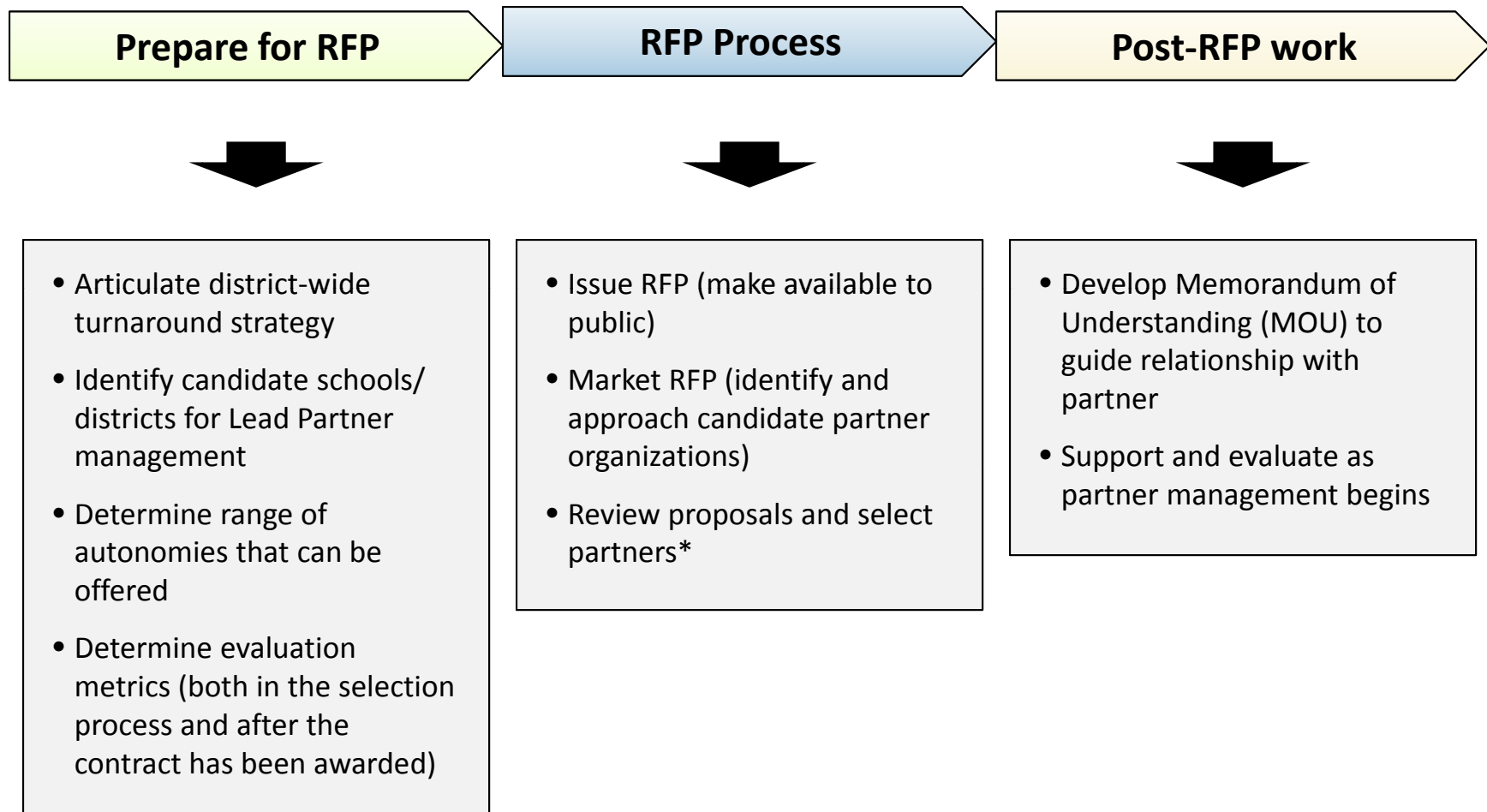
Evaluate and select optimal Lead Partners

The RFP evaluates partners along several critical dimensions such as:

- Instructional model
- Organizational and financial health
- Evidence of prior success

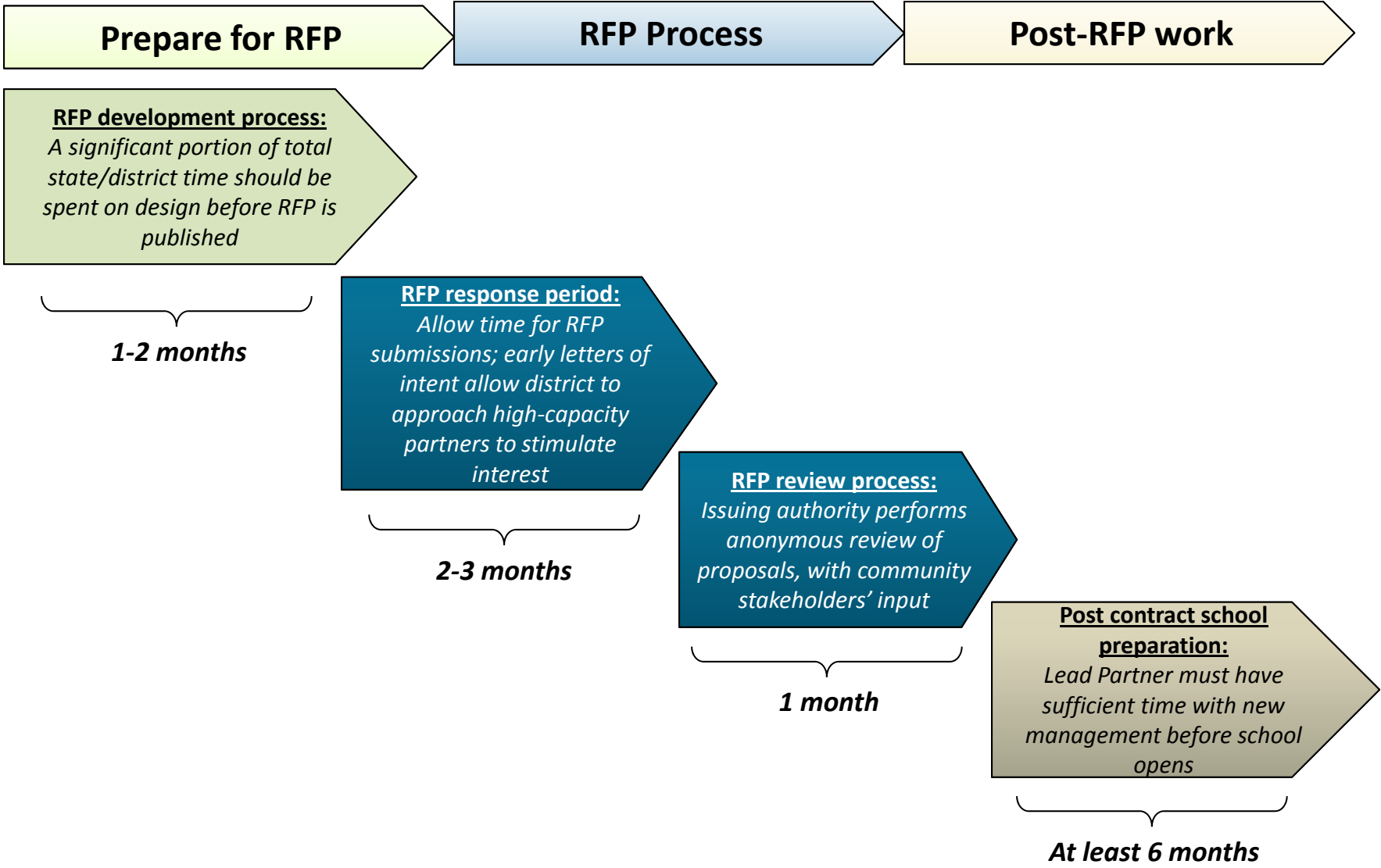
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The RFP development and implementation process requires significant work to complete



*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



An RFP can attract Lead Partners from a wide range of sources

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	Access to facilities and other infrastructure; opportunity to work in states without charter availability
Supporting partners (e.g. human capital, data, curriculum)	Ramp up their models to work more intensively and address a broader range of capacities	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	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 transitioning district into new role; building support within the system for reform
Unions	Develop a school model and process for assuming control	Opportunity to help shape the turnaround movement
Universities	Expand their programs to incorporate turnaround and become more practice-based	Platform to demonstrate leadership and share expertise in addressing this critical education issue
New start-ups	Raise the capital to build an operation capable of scaling	Access to a sustainable opportunity for growth created by public/private funds and national demand

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A number of broader issues must be addressed prior to RFP release

What partnerships already exist in the district or state?

- What role do existing partners play?
- Do contracts mandate a continued role in those schools?
- Is the partnership achieving results?
- How has the district used and supervised external partners?
- What is and is not working well in current partnerships?

How does RFP fit with overall school improvement plan?

- What is a clear vision of intervention over 2, 5, and 10 years?
- What is the target cluster of schools and what are their needs?
- What authorities and accountabilities will Lead Partners have?
- What will be the mechanism for partner oversight?

What is funding strategy for new Lead Partners?

- How much funding will the Lead Partner receive?
- Where is the funding coming from (internal / external)?
- Are the funding sources sustainable after the “turnaround” phase?

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

1

Basic process and partnership information

- Description of the state/district's turnaround strategy
- Submission and selection timeline
- Eligible applicant criteria
- Evaluation rubric
- Assignment of responsibility for key operational services (e.g., capital expenditures, IT infrastructure, maintenance, food services, transportation)
- Description of performance contract
- Amount and source of funds available are specified
- Definition of progress/outcome metrics and reporting procedures
- Demographic and performance data on district and/or schools
- Length of partnership
- Criteria for agreement termination by district or partner

Typical RFP items: Vision for turnaround component

2

Vision for turnaround

- School mission and vision
- School leadership and governance
- Staffing plan
- Compensation plan (ability to offer performance/incentive pay)
- Proposed school schedule and calendar
- Curriculum and instruction
- Assessment plan
- Promotion and graduation policies
- Operational goals and metrics
- Programs to modify, eliminate, or create
- Student support
- Professional development
- Plans for central management and staff recruitment
- Student assignment
- School and cluster budgets
- Community engagement strategies

States and districts must communicate critical information to potential Lead Partners through RFPs

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

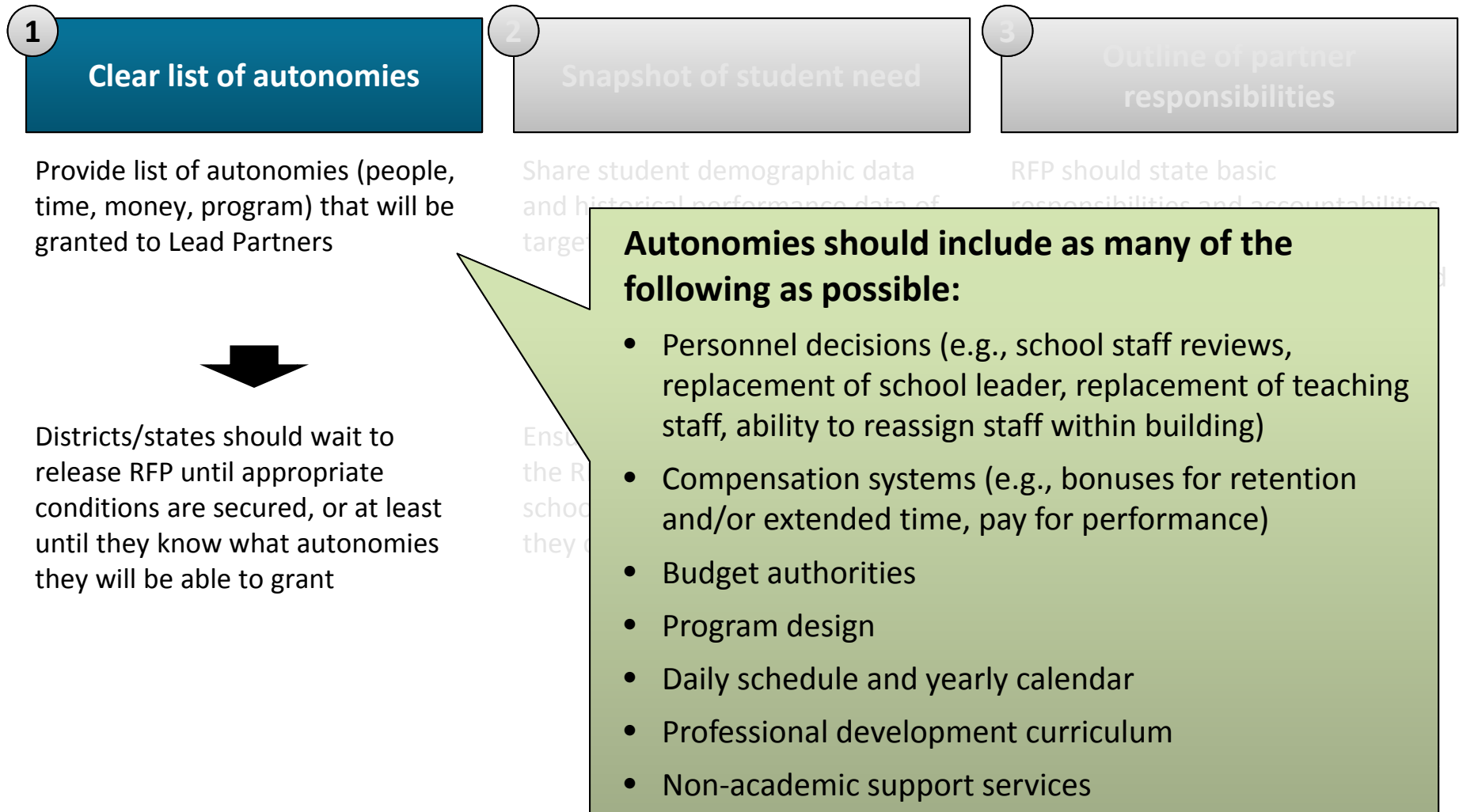
RFP should state basic responsibilities and accountabilities required of key partners (particularly district role versus Lead Partner role)



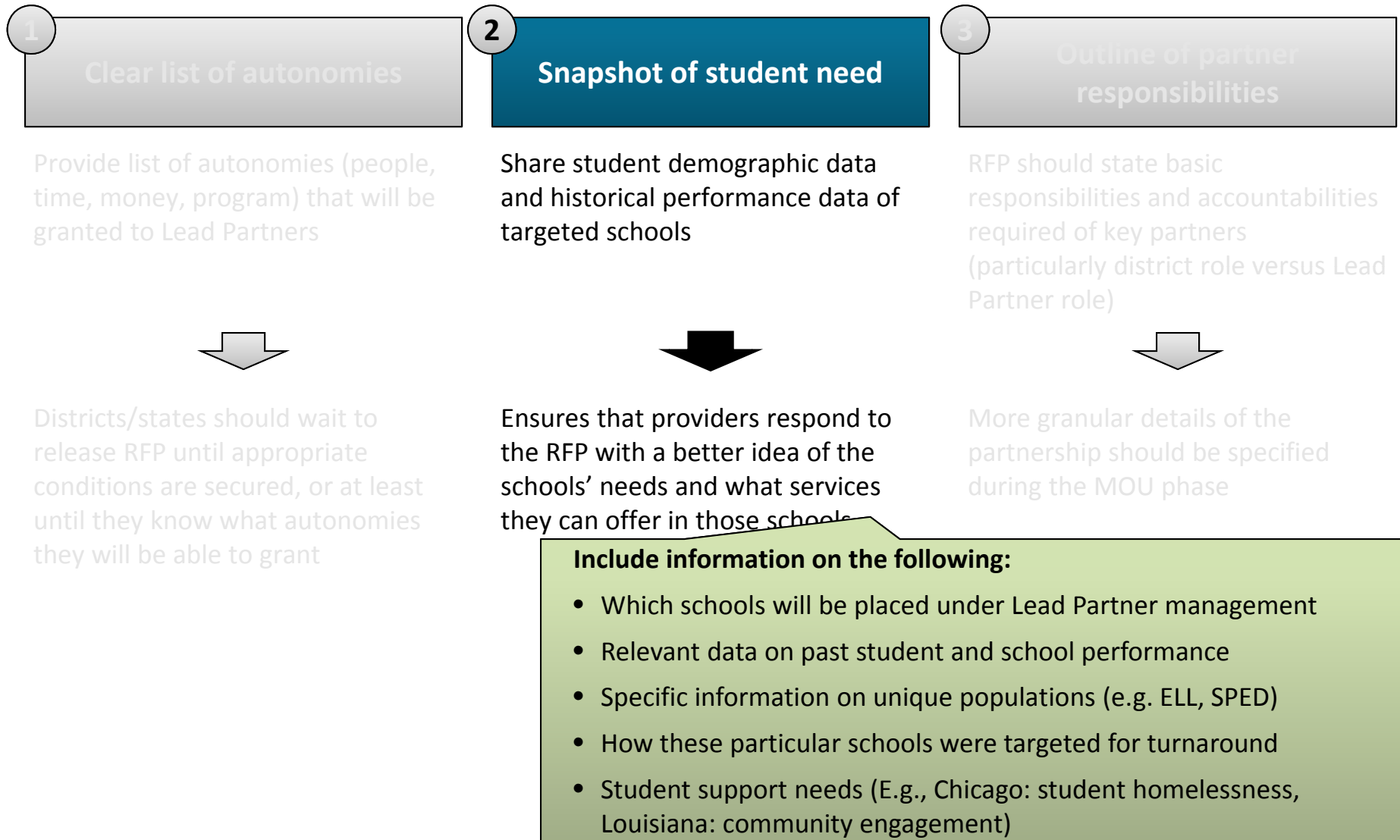
More granular details of the partnership should be specified during the MOU phase

Upfront communication through the RFP document ensures the Lead Partner is well matched with the district/state/school

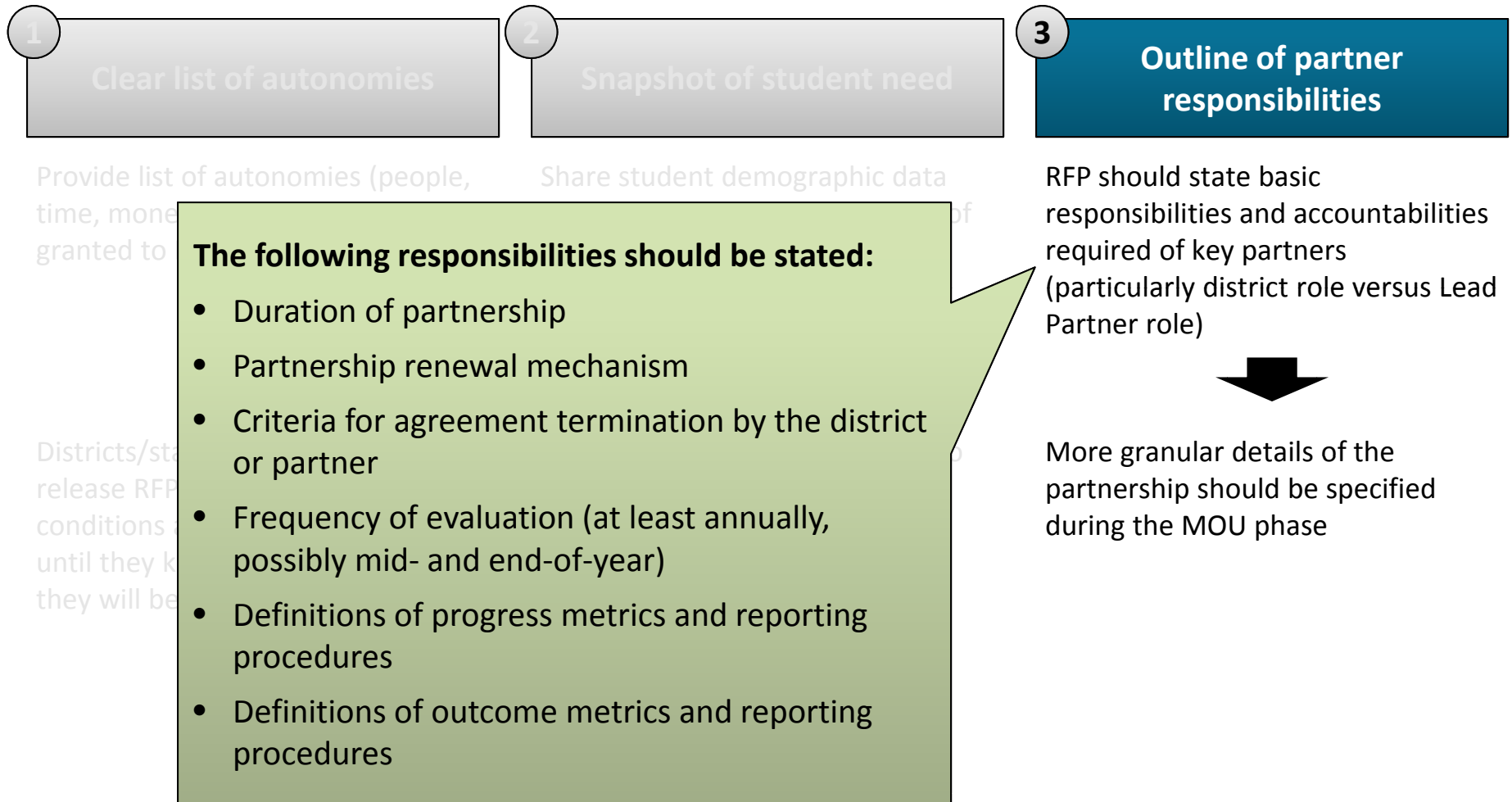
Autonomies afforded to Lead Partner should be stated upfront



RFP should communicate the specific needs of the targeted student population



Partners responsibilities must be clearly delineated in RFP



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

Experience

Lead Partners must have experience:

- Achieving results with high poverty, urban student populations
- Working in a school turnaround environment
- Working in high schools (many but not all Lead Partners will be brought in to manage high schools)

Willingness

Lead Partners must be willing to:

- Work with unionized teaching staff (under modified contracts)
- Be held accountable for student performance
- Operate under some but not most district procedures and regulations
- Use some but not all district central office services

Readiness

Lead Partners must be ready to:

- Ramp up capacity quickly
- Modify an existing school model to meet the needs of a turnaround environment
- Open new operations in or expand existing operations to a new location
- Have excess cash or ability to raise capital quickly (in some cases)

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
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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

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

Examples from the field: Colorado Department of Education RFI for preferred supporting partners

RFI outline

RFP objective: to identify preferred providers to implement the four school intervention models identified for federal Title I School Improvement Grants

Eligible applicants: EMOs; charter school operators / CMOs; institutions of higher education; Boards of Cooperative Educational Services; other organizations with history of public school improvement

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>

Core components

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

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

A copy of the CDE educational service provider RFI can be found at <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.

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