Conceptual Framework for Support for Struggling Schools

Charge

- In 2005, the Washington State Legislature directed the Washington State Board of Education (SBE) to create a statewide system of accountability and support that would identify the state's most successful and least successful schools, and improve achievement in the latter.

The Challenge

- Like all states, Washington has a small number of schools where students persistently achieve at significantly lower levels than at peer schools. In the lowest thirteen percent of these schools, more than half of the student body routinely fails to demonstrate proficiency on the WASL, with much higher percentages the norm for ELL, special education, and African-American students.
- Also like all states, Washington has not been able to eliminate the large achievement gap between affluent and high-poverty students and schools.
- Finally – like all states – Washington's public schools are not yet broadly and successfully preparing most high school graduates with college-ready or work-ready skills, after 15 years or more of standards-based reform.

The Context

- Funding for public education is a central element in the state's response to these challenges. The Basic Education Funding Task Force is reviewing the state's investments in public education, their adequacy to support schools' efforts to meet achievement goals, and the ways those funds are being spent. Providing deeper levels of assistance to all schools and districts – and more intensive levels of assistance to those having trouble meeting achievement goals – needs to be a primary consideration of the Task Force.

Addressing other barriers that have undercut the impact of school reform efforts to date must also be a central element in the state's response. National and Washington-based research reveals that these challenges include insufficient and unstable resources, insufficient time for learning and professional collaboration, inflexibility in allocating resources to higher need areas to improve student achievement, lack of coherent systems to recruit and prepare quality educators, insufficient coordination among intrastate agencies, and insufficient focus (i.e., with funding) on schools serving high-challenge student populations.

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Long- and Short-term Goals

The SBE recognizes that:

- Over the long term, assistance for struggling schools and districts should be part of a seamless system that supports continuous improvement for all schools, with progressively more intensive forms of assistance provided to districts where lower performance persists.
- In times of financial constraint, the state may justifiably choose to focus scarce resources on the districts and schools that demonstrably need additional assistance the most. Moreover, the state may justifiably choose to focus scarce resources more intensively on districts and schools that demonstrate the greatest readiness to make significant improvement, thereby generating models for other districts to emulate.

Concepts for This Proposal

The SBE proposes to establish, as one critical element in a larger state system of accountability and support, an initiative to provide intensive assistance to districts seeking to *significantly* improve performance in their lowest-performing schools. These schools, to be called Priority Schools, will be identified by the Accountability Index that the SBE is developing as part of its response to the Legislature's charge. The Index will include absolute measures of student achievement and improvement, along with a more detailed analysis of the context and local conditions for lower-performing schools.

The initiative is to be called the Washington State Innovation Zone. It was developed with extensive input from Washington State educators, the professional education organizations, and other stakeholders around the following concepts:

- ***Prioritize success*.** The Innovation Zone should establish bold exemplars of systematic, comprehensive turnaround, rather than attempt – probably unsuccessfully – to serve every needy school. Increased student achievement for all is the ultimate mission, but the most immediate need is to create exemplars that demonstrate the strategies and levels of support required.
- Generate change by ***enabling local leaders and their partners*,** rather than through state mandates and alternate governance.
- Make local leaders ***earn*** the opportunity to participate by insisting on ***transformation*** and addressing common barriers to reform with this initiative, not incremental change.
- ***Hold everyone accountable*,** from the state through the districts to the schools and the students, for both collectively developing solutions and sustaining deep commitment to them. In order for it to work, "reciprocal accountability" must be transparent, easily understandable, and backed by reciprocal consequences for all stakeholders.

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Proposal for Immediate Action – the Innovation Zone

- **Overall: The Innovation Zone is…**
  - **At the instructional level**, a chance for educators to ask fundamental questions about what it takes to help high-challenge, high-poverty students succeed, and to reshape their approach accordingly based on research conducted nationally and in Washington State.
  - **At the systems level**, an opportunity for district and community leaders and their partners, supported by the state, to re-imagine and rebuild the structures and operating habits that shape the nature and quality of the education they offer.
  - **At the policy level,** an effort to pilot the next generation of standards-based reform in Washington State – an approach marked by greater degrees of accountability by *every* stakeholder in the enterprise.
- **Key Elements of the Innovation Zone:**
  - **Making the reforms systemic and "scale-able."** Districts with Priority Schools as determined by the state's Accountability Index will be encouraged to apply to the Innovation Zone on behalf of a small clusters of schools – including their Priority School(s) – organized intentionally by feeder pattern or school type (within or across district lines), so that the reforms are systemic and scale-able, rather than being limited to a focus on individual schools.
  - **Integrating the Zone with other reform efforts to minimize overlaps and conflicts.** Districts with Priority Schools may apply to join the Innovation Zone **or** apply to participate in OSPI's Summit District Program **or** submit a plan for raising achievement on their own, if they believe they can demonstrate a pathway to success. All districts with a Priority School will be required to pursue one of these options. Districts pursuing their own plan will be provided with consulting assistance from OSPI (see page 6).
  - **Focusing on those districts best positioned to achieve success.** Districts will be selected to develop a comprehensive Innovation Zone plan after careful vetting by the State Board for readiness (i.e., strong signals of commitment to transformative change; evidence that it will be a collaborative effort among district leaders including the school board, superintendent, teachers union, and community officeholders; and a strong preliminary plan).
  - **Establishing demanding criteria and encouraging districts to enlist a highly capable lead partner.** Districts will be provided with resources to develop their Innovation Zone plan. The SBE recognizes that in most cases, districts will need outside support to produce a plan that meets the rigorous criteria the SBE will establish for Innovation Zone plans. The SBE will instruct OSPI to assist with this process and to facilitate the development of partnerships between districts and lead turnaround providers, both for the planning cycle and for implementation.
  - **Incorporating changes in operating conditions into the Zone criteria.** Through a collaborative, local process involving all key stakeholders (district administrators, school board, union, community, parents), districts with Priority Schools that want to apply to the Innovation Zone will need to develop more flexible operating conditions that research shows are required for

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transformational – not simply incremental – change and to serve high-challenge, high-poverty students successfully. The four critical elements to address include:

CRITICAL ELEMENT #1 PEOPLE	
Traditional School Improvement Approach	**Comprehensive Turnaround Approach – Required for Participation in the Innovation Zone**
Help current staff perform at a higher level through training, coaching and leadership development.	Turnaround leaders have all necessary tools and authority to fulfill the turnaround plan including: recruiting incentives; flexibility on staff hiring, allocation; and sufficient time to make staff development coherent.
CRITICAL ELEMENT #2 TIME	
Tweak existing schedule, while maintaining same-length school day and year.	Strategic assessment to determine if expanding school day, school year and/or significant change to the schedule is necessary to fulfill the plan; resources to help fulfill those requirements .
CRITICAL ELEMENT #3 MONEY	
Minimal impact on budgetary authority. Sometimes includes additional resources generally for staff development.	Strategic re-allocation of the budget is allowed. Additional resources are provided to support the implementation including: pay for extra time, incentives and partner support.
CRITICAL ELEMENT #4 PROGRAM	
Improve quality of existing strategies through evaluation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment tools.	Development of a coherent, whole-school plan that integrates strategies to address impacts of poverty and other strategies shown to succeed in high-challenge schools. Also provides relief from compliance burden to allow focus on instruction.

- Staking t**he work to explicit contracts between the district and the state.** Districts chosen to be part of the Innovation Zone will enter into a contract with the SBE. The contract will detail state resources provided and expectations for the district. The local board of directors will act as signatory for the district. Under the principle of reciprocal accountability, the contract will be nullified if either party fails to fulfill the expectations expressed in it.
- **Establishing specific goals for improved achievement.** Innovation Zone schools will be expected to leave Priority Status within two complete years of implementation (which will follow at least nine months of planning). Within four years of implementation, they are expected to earn a rating of "acceptable" or "good" under the state's Accountability Index. The five-year goal for all Zone schools is to match or exceed the average performance by schools in the state with a poverty attendance level of less than 20 percent – essentially, to erase the poverty/non-poverty achievement gap.

ACADEMIC WATCH IF NO IMPROVEMENT

It is intended that Academic Watch would be used only after all other intervention efforts fail to improve the academic performance of students in the District's Priority Schools. The Accountability Index will be used to determine initially if the district's schools have moved out of Priority Status. OSPI will verify this status based on additional analysis.

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Based on this verification, OSPI will notify the district that it is on Academic Watch if the district has been unable to bring its Priority Schools out of Priority status after two full implementation years. The district will be required to undergo a performance or academic audit managed by one of a number of Peer Review Teams convened by OSPI. The Peer Review Teams will be composed of educators and experts with knowledge of school district processes and improvement strategies. The district will then take the performance audit and strategies and develop an implementation plan for approval by OSPI.

There are two options for the Board to consider under Academic Watch:

Option A: Authority for Implementation Remains with the Local District
After the corrective action and implementation plan is approved by OSPI, the local school board would be responsible for implementation of that plan and the state would provide needed resources to assist the district. OSPI would continue to monitor the district's progress with periodic updates to the State Board of Education.

Option B: Authority for Implementation Requires State-Specified Binding Conditions
OSPI may determine that the district requires a deeper level of state partnership to implement their plan successfully. In that event, after the corrective action and implementation plan is approved by OSPI, the Superintendent of Public Instruction may recommend to the State Board of Education that OSPI place the local school board under a set of binding conditions to carry out the corrective action and implementation plan. The State Board of Education could approve, disapprove, or modify the binding conditions. If the plan is not being carried out successfully after one year, OSPI and the Peer Review Team may recommend to the State Board of Education a new corrective plan of action for implementation for that district.

The Proposal in the Longer-Term Context of a Comprehensive System

The Innovation Zone represents both a recognition of Washington State's responsibility to assist its most highly challenged schools, and a ground-breaking effort to develop and model new "proof-point" strategies for schools and districts to serve high-challenge student populations successfully. The SBE believes it should be enacted and funded even in the absence of a truly comprehensive system of state support. Lack of achievement in Priority Schools, relative to the requirements of a successful, productive life in 21st-century Washington State, has reached emergency proportions and needs immediate attention.

However, the SBE strongly encourages the Legislature, Governor, and Basic Education Funding Task Force to consider providing a comprehensive system that would help Washington State's districts and schools *prevent* the need for such emergency assistance. Like healthcare providers providing a full range of services ranging from wellness programs to low-intensity medical care to high-intensity care when necessary, the state's political leadership can save substantial funds over the long-term and produce much "healthier" achievement levels across the board by investing in educational support programs across a comprehensive continuum. That system of supports is presented, in draft form and with the assistance of OSPI, in the graphic provided on the next page. Even as the state takes care of its emergency education cases through the Innovation Zone (Support Category 3b in this graphic), it would do well to find a way to support the entire system.

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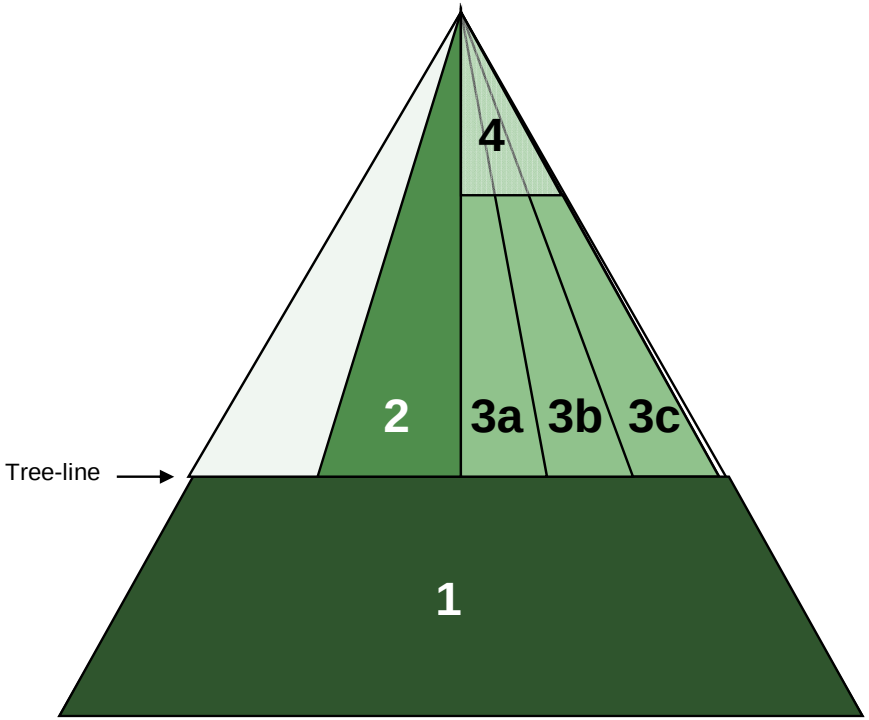
Climbing the Mountain of Student Achievement:

A Comprehensive, Integrated System of School Support for Washington State



Tree-line: School/district performance assessment, based on WA Accountability Index. Provides data for all districts. Identifies districts for Category 2 support (targeted for challenges in some areas); Priority Districts with Priority Schools for Category 3 support in three forms.

4. Academic Watch *(Most intensive assistance, at prerogative of State Board following OSPI-directed analysis and peer review process, for districts in Categories 3/3a/3b that fail to improve)*: SBE instructs OSPI and district to co-develop a revised improvement plan for its Priority Schools, to be approved by SBE. Based on OSPI analysis and peer review, SBE *may* establish a set of binding conditions to help district carry out its plan. Supports and resources provided as described in 3/3a/3b, tailored to findings of the district analysis and resulting plan.

3c. Consulting Assistance *(required with opt-out provisions for districts with Priority Schools)*: Support for districts that do not opt into 3a or 3b below (or do not create a proposal that meets state criteria), and elect and develop and implement a plan for their Priority School(s) outside of those two initiatives. State provides an Improvement Facilitator to assist with implementation of district plan; training, tools, other supports.

3b. Summit District Initiative *(opt-in for districts with Priority Schools):* Comprehensive district *reform* opportunity for Priority Districts that can meet state criteria. Assistance in mounting comprehensive, districtwide reform with focus on instructional practice, use of data, leadership, assessment.

3a. Innovation Zone *(opt-in for districts with Priority Schools)*: School and district *redesign* opportunity for districts with Priority Schools that can meet state criteria. Assistance in creating Innovation Zones that enable clusters of schools to undertake fundamental, transformational reform. Designed to model district redesign with flexible operating conditions, new school models, schedules, policies. Strong lead partner collaborating on the work.

2. Targeted Assistance for Districts Challenged in Some Areas *(opt-in)*: For districts not meeting expectations in specific areas (i.e., ELL, special education, reading, math, low-income). Regional training, reform tools, self-review assistance.

1. General Assistance for All Districts *(opt-in)*: Services and tools available to all districts and schools regardless of performance

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