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**TO:** Members of the State Board of Education  
**FROM:** Lillian M. Lowery, Ed.D. *Lillian M. Lowery*  
**DATE:** January 22, 2013  
**SUBJECT:** Race to the Top: The Breakthrough Center

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**PURPOSE:**

The purpose of this item is to update the Maryland State Board of Education regarding the leadership development support offered through The Breakthrough Center, a significant component of the education reform areas identified in the federal Race to the Top grant program.

**BACKGROUND/HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE:**

Although Maryland has a history of demonstrated action to improve performance for persistently low-achieving schools and students, that action has not yet met the State's expectations for effective and sustained change. Maryland is not satisfied with the number of low-achieving schools and the level of student performance across the state. To that end, Maryland has shown a willingness to learn from its experiences and adopt new approaches.

As a result, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) launched a major organizational and operational shift with the creation of the Breakthrough Center (the Center), which is the leading edge of Maryland's school turnaround work. The Center gives high visibility and high priority to the provision of integrated public and private services to support reform in underperforming districts and schools. It serves as the interface among MSDE, LEAs, and identified chronically underperforming schools and places strong emphasis on building capacity in these districts and schools so that turnaround is not just achieved, but sustained.

The Center establishes personal and customized relationships with district and school leaders and instructional staff. These solid, candid partnerships give way to authentic assessment of need and capacity for change, as well as clarity regarding the expectations and consequences when performance falls short. To solidify the expected outcomes and deliverables of these relationships, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) is developed between the LEA and the Breakthrough Center. The outcome, coupled with a mutual drive to turnaround low school performance, informs a tight and focused path to achievement. The coordination of Breakthrough Center services at the state level into three broad categories: leadership development, instructional supports, and student services make it easier for districts and schools to navigate the turnaround process and gain access to supports and services that will make a difference.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

MSDE's Breakthrough Center has provided turnaround services to the bottom 5 percent of schools in Maryland, 16 low-achieving schools required to adopt one of the four federal intervention models (Turnaround, Restart, Closure, and Transformation) and 20 feeder schools in the Baltimore City Schools and Prince George's County. Partnership agreements are in place with both districts to service the lowest-achieving schools and their feeder schools in the Breakthrough Zones, a five-year commitment of assistance from MSDE, coordinated by the State's Breakthrough Center. Needs assessments have been administered, monitoring visits are conducted three times each year for each Priority school and ongoing job-embedded professional development is provided for teachers in reading and mathematics as well as leadership training for principals and their instructional leadership teams. Additional support for improving school culture, climate, and student support services is also provided. Dorchester County Public Schools is identified as a Breakthrough Center district with partnership services provided in the areas of instruction and the leadership development. This Board update will focus specifically on leadership development through the Breakthrough Center.

The goal of the Leadership Development initiative through the Breakthrough Center is to: Provide professional development and technical assistance at the system and school level to build the instructional leadership capacity of school principals and support instructional leadership teams in the lowest-achieving schools in Baltimore City, Prince George's County, and Dorchester County Public Schools.

Breakthrough Center support is provided in a comprehensive, collaborative and focused manner that is customized to meet the needs of each district. In Prince George's County, leadership support in the area of strategic goal setting and planning is provided to the Director of Turnaround Schools. Principal and leadership team mentoring is provided for 3 feeder high schools to the Turnaround Schools. MSDE leadership staff is included in system leadership initiatives funded by the Wallace and Freddie Mac Foundations. In Prince George's County and Baltimore City an Aspiring Principals' Institute, a year-long program designed specifically to create a pipeline of leaders for Turnaround Schools is currently in session. Aspiring Principals' Institute fellows plan and implement year-long improvement projects that support their professional growth around the outcomes of the Maryland Instructional Leadership Framework and that are in support of the schools improvement plan. A Breakthrough Center leadership educational specialist works in each district to provide support directly to school leadership and leadership teams in the Turnaround Schools with particular emphasis on coaching the Aspiring Principals' Institute fellows as they design, implement and evaluate their improvement project. Prince George's County Turnaround Schools will have their second cohort of Aspiring Principals' Institute fellows working in their schools at the close of 2012-2013 academic year. In Baltimore City two cohorts of the Aspiring Principals' Institute were designed and implemented during the 2012-2013 school year; one for teacher leaders that has been coordinated with course content from another system partner, and a second that directly interfaces with the system leadership pipeline initiative.

The Breakthrough Center leadership development in Dorchester County Public Schools (DCPS) is a collaborative partnership between MSDE staff and system and school leaders to build the capacity of instructional leaders to improve instructional practices. With the laser-like focus of the DCPS Superintendent and clearly articulated expectations for instructional leaders, the Breakthrough Center collaboratively plans and implements monthly professional development to district and school leaders on the purposeful observation and evaluation of instruction to improve teacher capacity to deliver high quality instruction.

MSDE's Breakthrough Center will continue partnering with Baltimore City, Prince George's County and Dorchester County to turn around the lowest-achieving schools in Maryland. Leveraging and aligning state policies, programs, and practices through the Breakthrough Center and enabling policy and resource flexibility for the state's persistently lowest-achieving schools through the Breakthrough Zones will produce sustainable results for students.

**ACTION:**

This report is for information only.



## The Breakthrough Center

*Building A Community of Practice for  
Turnaround Within Maryland's Priority and Focus Schools*

### What is The Breakthrough Center?

The Breakthrough Center was created within the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) to make it *easier* for districts and schools in improvement to navigate the logistical complexities of school improvement and to also learn about and receive the types of support and resources that will improve teaching and learning—and sustain it.

Just as principals aim to create communities of practice among their teachers in Instructional Teams—sharing a strategy that made the difference for one child or asking for feedback on a lesson that didn't go as planned—The Breakthrough Center also aims to create communities of practice among various offices at the MSDE. It provides a dedicated space where discussion around the full-range of district or schools needs happens, followed by the streamlining of requests made and resources allocated to them. The result? Less time getting in the way of the hard work that must happen and more time supporting it.

### Who specifically does The Breakthrough Center support?

All schools aim to improve the teaching and learning in our classrooms. In that way, The Breakthrough Center will support every district and school in the state by sharing the research and the practices that have proven to improve teaching and learning in every classroom. The knowledge, experiences, and feedback from every district and school will inform and strengthen the community of practice for turnaround that we will build in Maryland. This is an emerging field in education and we are uniquely positioned to lead it.

The Breakthrough Center is prepared to work most closely with Maryland's lowest-performing districts and Title I schools in the state, specifically those that are identified as Priority or Focus Schools. In partnership with these district and schools—and external partners as appropriate—we identify the precise nature and magnitude of needs and assemble customized and strategic supports and interventions to address them. Strong emphasis is placed on building the capacity of the schools and districts to not only achieve turnaround, but to also sustain it.

### What is a Priority School and a Focus School?

**Priority Schools** are the lowest achieving five (5) percent of Title I schools in the State. In 2012-2013, there are **21 Priority Schools** in Maryland. These schools require school-wide, systemic turnaround.

**Focus Schools** are Title I schools with a significant achievement gap between the all students group and the lowest-performing subgroup(s). In 2012-2013, there are **41 Focus Schools** in Maryland. Unlike Priority Schools, low achievement is limited to one or two subgroup populations that require more intensive support and intervention.



## What types of support will The Breakthrough Center provide to Priority and Focus Schools?

**Priority Schools.** In order to receive School Improvement Grant (SIG) funds, districts with priority schools must adopt one of four intervention models identified by the US Department of Education, or develop their own model that meets USDE's seven turnaround principles, both of which are listed below.

On a broad level, The Breakthrough Center serves as the interface between the Maryland State Department of Education and the district in the adoption of an intervention model.

As the interface, it will work closely with the state, the district, and schools to assemble very specific structures and supports aligned with the identified needs and congruent with the intervention model that is in place. The Breakthrough Center's cross-functional team, comprised of decision-making staff from the various offices at MSDE, meet monthly to coordinate and deliver resources and support that will improve both operational and instructional outcomes at the district and school levels. Additionally, Breakthrough Center staff, including Title I staff, meet monthly with district staff to assess progress of and assist with implementation of the interventions.

**Focus Schools.** The Breakthrough Center works with districts and Focus Schools in the development and implementation of operational and instructional practices specifically targeted to close the gap between the achievement of specific subgroups and all students. Unlike with Priority Schools, where the needs are more systemic, Focus Schools have limited areas of concern. There is unique opportunity in Maryland to create cross-district partnerships and support systems to address these common areas of concern, to learn from one another what works with whom and under what conditions. Just as The Breakthrough Center serves as the interface between the state and districts, it serves as the connector between districts.

Some examples of the kinds of support that The Breakthrough Center has already coordinated for Priority and Focus Schools:

- Collaboration with Baltimore City and Prince George's County school districts to create a internal structures, Turnaround Offices, dedicated to identify and delivering support to Priority Schools and their feeder schools.
- Launch of the Aspiring Principals' Institutes in Prince George's County and Baltimore City Public Schools, which provides training to teacher-leaders on the required practices, skills, and nuances required to turnaround achievement in low performing schools and sustain it.
- Conducting a two-day intensive professional development Academy for School Turnaround in July 2012 for principals serving in low-achieving schools along with their supervisors, Executive Officers, that presented the most current research on school turnaround along with 21 specific practices that leaders of Turnaround Schools could begin to employ immediately. Follow-up sessions are currently in production.

## What exactly are the four intervention models approved by USDE?



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Maryland's Statewide System of Support

- The "**turnaround model**" in which the LEA replaces the principal and rehires no more than 50% of the staff, gives the principal greater autonomy and implements other prescribed and recommended strategies.
- The "**restart model**" in which the LEA converts or closes and reopens a school under a operator in a charter management organization or education management organization.
- The "**school closure model**" in which the LEA closes the school and enrolls the students in other schools in the LEA that are higher achieving.
- The "**transformation model**" in which the LEA replaces the principal (except in specified situations), implements a rigorous evaluation of staff and school operations, institutes comprehensive instructional reform, increases learning time and applies community-oriented school strategies, and provides greater operational flexibility and support for the school.

Districts may also develop their own models for intervention that meet the following **seven turnaround principles**:

1. Providing strong leadership
2. Ensuring that teachers are effective and able to improve instruction
3. Redesigning the school day, week, or year to include additional time for student learning and support
4. Strengthening the school's instructional program
5. Using data to inform instruction for continuous improvement
6. Establishing a school environment that improves school safety and discipline
7. Providing ongoing mechanisms for family and community engagement

The MSDE electronic applications and templates for Priority and Focus schools are available online at the Title I website: <http://marylandpublicschools.org/MSDE/programs/titleI>.

## **What about schools that are doing well? How will The Breakthrough Center interact with them?**

The Breakthrough Center is very interested in learning what works in schools—from the instructional approaches that are being used to the operational practices that support them and when possible, the Center find ways to bring it to scale in other districts and schools.

As part of Maryland's Race to the Top Award, MSDE contracted with the Center for Application of Innovative Research in Education (CAIRE) to conduct a multi-year formative and summative evaluation to measure The Breakthrough Center's impact on district and school capacity to implement turnaround practices (operational and instructional) and then sustain them.

The Breakthrough Center's focus on building a community of practice for turnaround does not begin and end with Priority and Focus Schools. The Breakthrough Center aims to build this community throughout the state, and in many cases, the nation. Every level of education—State, district, school—and all of the people within must contribute their knowledge, experiences, skills, and resources to improve teaching and learning in the classroom. The Breakthrough Center is committed to finding new ways to illuminate breakthrough ideas, breakthrough practices, and breakthrough results.

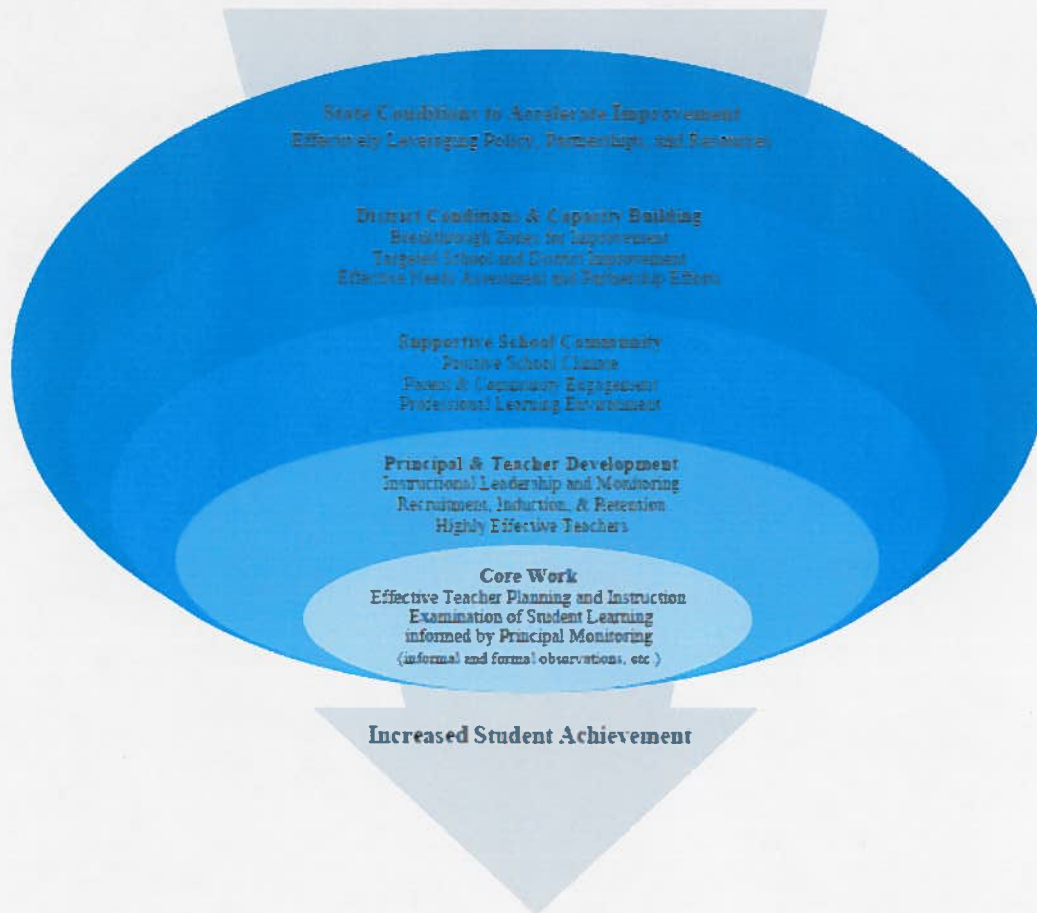


# THE BREAKTHROUGH CENTER

Maryland's Statewide System of Support

## Breakthrough Zones

*Focus on District Capacity Building and School Improvement through focused Instructional Improvement*





## The Aspiring Principals' Institute: *Turnaround Schools*

- **Research Based Content:** The *Maryland Instructional Leadership Framework, Restructuring Implementation Technical Assistance (RITA) standards*, National Turnaround Schools Research and Proven Practice that includes the *Institute of Educational Science: IES Practice Guide* [http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practice\\_guides/Turnaround\\_pg\\_04181.pdf](http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practice_guides/Turnaround_pg_04181.pdf) and the work by the *Center on Innovation and Improvement* <http://centerii.org/>.
- **Curricular Coherence:** The goal of the experience is for candidates to develop a level of competency around each of the Maryland Instructional Leadership Framework Outcomes <http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/NR/rdoniyres/20FBD612-415E-42D0-9B35-886DB1A972AF/9383/InstructionalLeadershipFrameworkFeb2006.pdf> in the context of Turnaround Schools.
- **Year-long Job-embedded Professional Development:** Institute Fellows are supported in the completion of their leadership project by a mentor/coach provided by the Breakthrough Center. They participate on the school's leadership teams, engage in structured network opportunities with members of their cohort, and participate in state and district level learning experiences.
- **Problem Based Learning Strategies:** All Aspiring Principal Fellows complete a year-long Turnaround Leadership Project as part of their participation in The Maryland Aspiring *Principals'* Institute. The Succession Planning Guide <http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/NR/rdoniyres/20FBD612-415E-42D0-9B35-886DB1A972AF/10150/SuccessionGuide062106.pdf> is used to frame and monitor individual progress throughout the experience. The School Improvement Plan for the respective school provides the connection to Turnaround work for the leadership project.
- **Mentoring/Coaching:** Through the lens of the year-long project the Institute Fellows work closely with the Breakthrough Center Coach and Building Principal, under the auspices of the Turnaround Director. To ensure continuity in expectations and alignment of the leadership project to the direction planned for the school the building principal is asked to participate alongside the Institute Fellows for the first day of the institute.
- **Partnership Collaboration:** Continuing education credits are earned for successful completion. The Breakthrough Center provides and/or partners to deliver specialized training and relevant experiences throughout the institute. Local School Systems provide the Breakthrough Center, particularly the Coach/Mentor, with the opportunity to participate in system leadership professional development to ensure continued alignment of the work.
- **Financial Support:** Local Systems provide the venue and modest meals for the two-day summer institute and two whole group follow-up sessions. The MSDE Breakthrough Center provides the content and staff for the institute that includes ongoing mentoring/coaching of the institute fellows.
- **State and Local School Systems Breakthrough Center Infrastructure:** Collaborate on the design, implementation and establishment of evaluation criteria of the program content. *The Aspiring Principals' Institute: Turnaround is not a guarantee of position rather it is an integral component of the system pipeline towards the principalship of Turnaround Schools.*





## Prince George's County Public Schools/MSDE Turnaround Aspiring Principals' Leadership Experience *(provided as an example)*

*The Aspiring Principals' Institute Fellow will:*

- Demonstrate Successful Classroom Experience
- Demonstrate Experience as Teacher Leader
- Be Identified as Instructional Leader in the Building
- Be Selected for Turnaround Aspiring Principals' Institute
- Be Provided Materials on Turnaround to Develop an Understanding of the Foundations of Turnaround Work
- Participate in the **Aspiring Principals' Institute: Turnaround Schools** Orientation Meeting *(Live and Recorded Webinar(s))*
- Participate in the **Aspiring Principals' Institute: Turnaround Schools** Summer Session, Fall and Spring Content Sessions *(building principal to participate with fellow on day 1 of the Institute)*
- Identify, Plan and Implement a Year-long Turnaround Leadership Project
- Participate in Ongoing Job-Embedded Support to Complete a Leadership Project *(Support will be Individual and Small Group)*
- Participate in a Final Interview Connecting the **Aspiring Principals' Institute: Turnaround Schools** Leadership Project with Professional Goals and Next Steps

