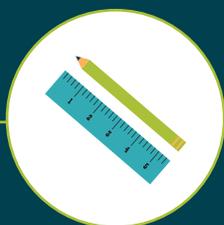


INSIDE
THE
SCHOOLHOUSE

→ UNTOLD STORIES
of DELAWARE'S
EDUCATION
PROGRESS 



Contents

- Introduction.....1
- Overall State Implementation.....2
- Improving Standards, Assessments and College Access.....8
- Building and Expanding Strong Data Systems.....12
- Developing Great Teachers and Leaders.....15
- Turning Around the Lowest-Performing Schools.....20
- Looking Ahead.....23

Introduction

A teacher who transferred from a high-performing school to a high-needs school to work with underserved children. A principal whose career trajectory shifted because of a new leadership development program. A teacher-leader who helped write new standards-aligned lessons for thousands of her peers statewide. A high school senior who aspires to join the military and credits his school for preparing him. A vocational-technical high school that used new funding and catalytic teacher leadership to change its performance trajectory.

These are among the dozens of opportunities made possible in the past five years of Delaware's energetic efforts to improve its public education system: a period of time that included new academic standards, a multifaceted campaign to increase postsecondary access, and a \$119 million Race to the Top grant that helped districts and charter schools enact a set of ambitious proposals aimed at preparing every Delaware student for success in college and the workplace.

In five years, what did the First State achieve? That question is at the heart of this report examining the past half-decade of Delaware's education work from the perspective of many of those on the ground. The state's districts and charter schools have undertaken a vast amount of work since 2010 touching all aspects of schooling — from the pipeline of teachers and leaders entering the profession, to the standards and assessments they teach and administer, to the way they are evaluated for their performance, to the data systems they use to monitor their students' progress.

Governor Jack Markell and the state Department of Education, under Education Secretaries Lillian Lowery (2009–12) and Mark Murphy (2012–15), oversaw the policy changes. But the nitty-gritty of implementation unfolded daily in the state's 225 schools through dedicated teachers, specialists, leaders and administrators. This report features some of their work. It also chronicles the lessons learned from the past five years — what worked; what was less successful; and what the state can do differently in the years to come regarding communications, engagement and capacity-building.

We invite you to read and reflect upon the past five years of progress for Delaware public education.



Overall State Implementation

One consistent feature of the past five years was implementation of Delaware's Race to the Top application. It was unique in that all 38 school districts and charter schools at the time signed on to implement its ambitious proposals. The state committed to providing strong performance management and support of local teams' work. Among the benefits, the effort produced new communication routines between the state and school systems.

Overall State Implementation: Major Race to the Top Commitments

"Ultimately, the success of Delaware's reform will depend on its capacity to deliver against its ambitious goals. The State is committed to actively managing outcomes with this reform plan. That is, the State will not just focus on compliance, it will focus on impact. Moreover, it will actively support [local education agencies] as they implement this reform, building their capacity to deliver results."

- 🎯 Project management office to track progress against goals and outcomes
- 🎯 Implementation support through individual district liaisons and cross-agency teams
- 🎯 Streamlining of applications for federal funds



Five years ago, the Colonial School District in New Castle found itself on the edge of a major wave of change: The Common Core State Standards crept closer, a new state standardized test was looming, its high school had not kept pace with college- or career-ready expectations, and the district had not written a strategic plan in at least two decades.

Then came what could have been the straw that broke the camel's back — but instead ended up being the spark: Colonial received \$5.1 million over five years as part of Delaware's Race to the Top award. The money came with a slew of ambitious requirements. But Colonial's leaders saw an opportunity to create a strategic plan with their families, educators and community members that would invest in their most pressing priorities while aligning with the state's goals. The result: a slow but steady shift in culture and routines that refocused the district's priorities.

"This district was much more focused on operations than it was on academics," said Lori Duerr, who started as the Race to the Top project manager and is now assistant superintendent. "It became an opportunity for us to have really tough conversations: making decisions based on data, having a real focus on teaching and learning, and creating a plan that forced us to look at our high school."

A WAVE OF REFORMS

Across the First State's school districts and charter schools, Race to the Top has been one of the biggest game-changers in the past five years: a driver of innovation, a set of overwhelming commitments and requirements, and an opportunity to rethink how and what Delaware students learn — often all at once.

Delaware's Race to the Top proposal drew from the state Department of Education's 2009 strategic plan, which promoted five goals:

1. Adopting higher standards and aligned assessments;
2. Maximizing the state's robust data systems;
3. Developing and uplifting excellent teachers and leaders;
4. Intervening in the state's lowest-performing schools; and
5. Refocusing the Department of Education's services on the state's most essential needs.

The 235-page proposal provided specifics on implementation of those goals, including dollars, structures, positions, expectations and timelines. The proposal built on Delaware's existing

fundamentals, such as a statewide student data system and the framework for revised educator evaluations already authorized in regulation. But there were many new aspects, including some initiatives that resulted in unprecedented state involvement in a school's daily work: coaches to work with principals on teacher observations and with teacher teams on analyzing data; required 90-minute weekly professional learning community sessions (PLCs) to analyze student data; school administrative managers to handle principals' administrative duties so the principals could focus more on classroom learning; online dashboards for teachers to review student data from a variety of sources; and state-run portals to provide job candidates for local teaching vacancies, to name a few.

"We looked at the Race to the Top application as an opportunity to do great work for Delaware but also to model great work for the country."

Dan Cruce, former deputy secretary and chief of staff, Department of Education



Rarely had the department funded districts and charter schools to undertake so many reforms at the same time, with such broad impact and so many dependencies. The work was not easy and led to some initiative fatigue among teachers and administrators, recalled Frederika Jenner, who in 2011 became president of the Delaware State Education Association.

Yet every school district and charter school, state and local teachers union affiliate, and local school board chair pledged support — a demonstration of will that the U.S. Department of Education highlighted when it announced Delaware as one of just two states to win in the program's first round of funding in spring 2010.

"We looked at the Race to the Top application as an opportunity to do great work for Delaware but also to model great work for the country," said Dan Cruce, who helped plan, write and implement the proposal as the department's deputy secretary and chief of staff at the time. "We looked at it as an opportunity to scale great things that were happening and scale the potential that we had, but for which we didn't have the funding or the will to push statewide."



What Was Race to the Top's Impact on Student Learning in Delaware?

It is the question for which everyone wants an answer: Did Delaware's Race to the Top grant improve student achievement over the past five years? The answer is both yes and no – or at least not to the degree envisioned in the original proposal.

There is no foolproof way to link Delaware's student gains over the past five years to the commitments made in Race to the Top. Too many other factors that the state cannot control had an impact on achievement. In addition, the four-year timeline was too short to see the kinds of massive improvements that Delaware promised, especially since some programs did not start until the grant's second or even third year. But Delaware did see some promising trends, including:

★ **Better student learning demonstrated on state assessments:** On the old Delaware Comprehensive Assessment System, scores generally went up in English and math. Some grades met or exceeded their 2014 targets, and others did not. The state received approval to revise grade-specific goals downward to make them more realistic, since the original Race to the Top goal was 100 percent of students meeting state standards in all grades and subjects. In early September 2015, the state released the inaugural Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium test results, which showed that about half of Delaware students in grades 3–8 and 11 were proficient in English and 39 percent were proficient in math.

★ **Soaring graduation rate:** Students are completing high school in record numbers: 84.4 percent in 2014, up from 78.5 percent in 2011. The 2014 number is higher than the Race to the Top target for that year.

★ **Increased Advanced Placement (AP) enrollment and passage:** Nearly one in five Delaware graduates in the class of 2014 passed at least one AP test with a score of 3 or better. That is up from one in 10 graduates a decade earlier. More Delaware students also are taking AP courses in the past five years.

★ **Stable levels of educator satisfaction:** Despite the waves of change in the state, a large majority of teachers, 77 percent, said their school was a good place to work according to the latest Delaware Performance Appraisal System survey in 2015.

But the state fell short of meeting other ambitious goals in the Race to the Top proposal:

↓ **Flat national test scores:** The state predicted that it would cut in half the achievement gap between black and white students and between Hispanic and white students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Those gaps ranged from 16 points to 29 points when the state wrote its Race to the Top proposal in 2009. Gaps shrank in 4th-grade mathematics for both black and Hispanic students but stayed the same or increased in 2015 for 4th-grade reading and 8th-grade reading and math.

↓ **Struggling postsecondary enrollment:** The percentage of students graduating from high school and entering two- or four-year colleges at any time after they graduate was at 66.4 percent in 2014. That is up from more recent years but down from 2011. (The percentage of those entering immediately after graduation is 55 percent.)

State leaders do not apologize for the ambitious goals. Implementation is difficult, they said, and when it takes longer for new standards and assessments to work their way into classrooms, then it naturally will take longer to meet achievement goals.

"When you want to see results of changed standards and changed curriculum, you need to wait a couple of years until after implementation to truly see the impact," said Donna Johnson, executive director of the Delaware State Board of Education. "If we come back five years from now, my hope is we'd be much closer."

For districts and charter schools, the level of state involvement, at least in the early years, helped Race to the Top get off the ground through coaching and collaboration. Many districts and charter schools seized the dollars to build structures and supports that never existed — such as Advanced Placement (AP) courses, parent engagement centers, external partnerships on curriculum and longer school days, to name a few — to align their improvement goals with the state’s broader vision of college and career readiness.

“We went for the golden ring,” said Susan Bunting, superintendent of the Indian River School District. “We established International Baccalaureate, a STEM [science, technology, engineering and math] high school — we had an early childhood program for 15 years for children who are economically disadvantaged, and we created another site because we recognized the difference it makes. Looking back on it, we were really smart about what we did.”

BUILDING CAPACITY

A new Delivery Unit at the Department of Education — modeled off Sir Michael Barber’s performance management theory of “deliverology” to constantly monitor results and make changes if needed — helped districts craft their plans and instituted performance management routines. Those routines included semiannual progress reviews of districts’ plans and end-of-year evaluations of their performance.

The frequency and depth of the meetings with districts also highlighted what happens when a massive high-profile grant

opportunity gets layered on top of existing work: Schools faced competing programmatic performance goals, a multitude of funding sources, and conflicting requirements from other state and federal obligations. To provide some relief, the state streamlined the annual planning process and consolidated how districts applied for federal funds. Now, the state continues to require annual success plans but asks districts to strive toward overall student achievement goals that may have many different funding sources, rather than plan projects according to separate funding sources that have different goals.

Back in the Colonial School District, Lori Duerr reflected on the changes of the past five years’ improvement efforts. Colonial created its own teacher evaluation system, expanded prekindergarten, and joined a consortium of districts infusing schools with technology and blended learning options. The district’s single high school, William Penn High School, has seen its enrollment rebound to 2,200 students from a low of 1,800 students, and its graduation rate has risen to 84 percent. The strategic planning through Race to the Top also prompted the district to rethink how it used all of its federal grant dollars and whether they supported Colonial’s priorities. Not every Race to the Top-funded initiative worked smoothly, but on the whole, the district is sticking with its overall plan, Duerr said.

“Our district’s progress is slow, and we’ve had a lot of uphill battles,” Duerr said. “But it really is about staying the course, and that is what we’ve said all along — but also tweaking and making sure we’re constantly evaluating and adjusting what’s working and not working.”



A Closer Look



Three Districts' Projects Enabled by Race to the Top

Of the \$119 million awarded to Delaware for its winning Race to the Top proposal, half, or about \$60 million, went to the 38 school districts and charter schools that signed on to the application. They used the money to fund a variety of investments, including new curricula and technology, teacher professional development, and additional staff positions. Below are three examples of promising district programs that began with Race to the Top funding.

CAESAR RODNEY HIGH SCHOOL

Focus on Freshman Success

Prior to 2012, Caesar Rodney High School in Wyoming, Delaware, had a problem: It was holding back about 30 percent of its freshmen each year. Given the research-based connection between freshman retention and high school dropout rates, Caesar Rodney set a goal to increase freshman promotion and achievement, with the long-term objective of increasing the school's graduation rate.



The district's Race to the Top team used grant funds to design and implement a Summer Success Academy and Freshman Academy for its 9th-graders. The Success Academy began as a nine-day program for students to come to the school before classes start, work on an academic project and readings, and participate in team-building activities. Students who opt in to the program get to see their lockers, schedules and classrooms before the rest of their class. The program has since been reduced to four days but continues to serve many of the district's incoming freshmen — 308 of 510 total freshmen in the 2014–15 school year. Recent teacher and student survey data show that 100 percent of teachers and 85 percent of students believe that the Success Academy prepared students for freshman year.

In addition to the summer program, the district changed the way it organizes teaching and learning for its freshmen. Caesar Rodney 9th-graders are located in a separate wing of the high school and benefit from schedules individually designed by the academy's leadership team. Four days a week, students have 100-minute blocks of core content in the 9th-grade wing and 50-minute electives in the main section of the school. Class sizes are small in the academy — some core classes have as few as 15 students. Teachers are staffed on interdisciplinary teams so that they each know who teaches which students and can share learnings across classes.

Since implementing the Success Academy and the Freshman Academy, Caesar Rodney's rate of holding back freshmen dropped to 5 percent in the 2013–14 school year. Its graduation rate was 88.5 percent in 2013–14, compared with 77.4 percent in 2010–11.

INDIAN RIVER SCHOOL DISTRICT

Working with Parents

Indian River School District in Selbyville is the state's fifth-largest district, serving 9,800 students and growing. Forty-two percent of those students come from low-income backgrounds, and 12 percent are English language learners. Upon receiving Race to the Top grant funds, the district identified a need to support its diverse community beyond traditional school-based services, and the Indian River Parent Center opened its doors in 2011.

The center — which seeks to serve the whole child and create a supportive environment for parents — provides a combination of social services and academic support to families and students. For example, one of the center's most successful programs is its food pantry, which served 317 people last year. The center offers life skills and parenting workshops on a wide variety of topics, ranging from college application and Free Application for Federal Student Aid tips to healthy meals on a budget and teen suicide prevention. Donations from area nonprofits allow

Indian River to offer free computer training courses and health screenings at the center, which served a total of 1,134 people last year.

In 2012 and 2013, the center hosted large, grant-funded community events: Student Success STEMs from Parental Support offered activities related to science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), including creating bottle rockets and building with Legos, and Family Fun and Fitness included emergency medical service demonstrations and nutrition workshops. In addition to family-oriented programs, the center offers a school-based mentoring program for at-risk elementary and middle school students. Mentors — primarily community members and high school students — meet with students one on one for one hour per week during the school year. The program has received positive feedback from teachers, and district leaders say that student behavior and academic achievement have improved as a result of the mentoring.



“There is such a focus in schools these days on the daily grind and test scores, but it is equally important to encourage more family engagement and involvement,” said Michele Murphy, Parent Center coordinator. “Parents are a child’s first teacher, and partnering with our families to provide support in and out of school is critical to student success.”



SMYRNA SCHOOL DISTRICT

From Prekindergarten to the SAT

Smyrna School District used its Race to the Top funding to tackle both ends of the school spectrum: preschool and high school. The district’s Early Childhood Program, housed at North Smyrna Elementary School, now serves 100 3- and 4-year-olds, double the number it served before Race to the Top funding. The program has a 50-50 ratio of students with identified special needs and typically developing children, and the curriculum focuses on kindergarten readiness — in both academic and social skills. Smyrna School District also participates in the Delaware Readiness Team, an effort aimed at helping communities support students from birth to age 8. All students registering for kindergarten in the district receive a readiness backpack with books and supplies to prepare them for school. Kindergarten teachers have noticed advanced readiness in children coming out of the Early Childhood Program.



At the high school level, Delaware pays for all 10th-grade students to take the PSAT and all 11th-graders to take the SAT. Smyrna wanted to support student success on these assessments and initially used grant funds to provide all students the Kaplan test-prep program. The district now provides its high school juniors free online resources, including Khan Academy courses, to help prepare them for the exam.

In addition to using class time to help students set up online accounts and become familiar with the available resources, Smyrna High School English teachers offered incentives — such as a class doughnut party — for students to complete the online diagnostic quizzes. This preparation is especially important given the SAT’s redesign and focus on evidence-based reading and writing, essential math skills, and real-world context. The district also is looking into updating its curriculum to support SAT prep. Smyrna High School’s composite SAT score in 2015 was 1231, up slightly from 2014.

Improving Standards, Assessments and College Access



Five years ago, nearly all states adopted the Common Core State Standards in English language arts and mathematics as a way of helping more students graduate from high school with skills to succeed in college or careers. Since 2010, Delaware has committed to developing educators' understanding of the standards and aligned assessments through statewide training and new curricula. But the state also found unexpected successes in preparing students for college and careers through addressing root causes of why students were not applying for postsecondary education in the first place.



Academic standards implementation is one of the most basic functions of a school district. But when Lincoln Hohler, the assistant superintendent of the Brandywine School District, visited his schools, he saw a clear disconnect — one that worried him given that the tougher Common Core State Standards were about to replace Delaware’s previous academic standards.

“We had teachers who could recite the standards verbatim, and we had teachers who honestly didn’t know where to find a copy,” Hohler recalled of his visits five years ago. “You wouldn’t expect that in a school system, and we knew we had to correct that immediately.”

Brandywine dispensed with its previous method of providing training on standards to only select teachers, who would then go back and communicate information to their colleagues. Instead, it started using its local share of Race to the Top dollars to partner with a vendor and immerse all 700 Brandywine teachers in professional development about the state standards. For the first two years, the shift in approach helped increase teachers’ knowledge of the academic standards and laid the groundwork for the upcoming transition to the Common Core. Then when the Common Core arrived, the district participated in a state-led initiative called Common Ground for the Common Core — an intense multiyear experience that walked entire school teams through both the new standards’ content and strategies to manage the change in their buildings.

Funded by Race to the Top, the three-year Common Ground for the Common Core is one of the signature projects in Delaware aimed at easing the transition to the standards and a new aligned state assessment (the Smarter Balanced assessment).

“Delaware is changing the way educators engage in professional learning. We know that effective professional learning is very intensive, it’s ongoing and 100 percent connected to practice and student outcomes. That’s what Common Ground embodies.”

*Michael Watson, chief academic officer,
Department of Education*



Other major efforts included building and scaling a “Dream Team” of teachers, who helped write lessons aligned with the new standards. Getting the standards transition right is crucial because so much rides on successful implementation, including student test results that factor into teacher and leader evaluations.

“Delaware is changing the way educators engage in professional learning,” Michael Watson, the Department of Education’s chief academic officer, said. “We know that effective professional learning is very intensive, it’s ongoing and 100 percent connected to practice and student outcomes. That’s what Common Ground embodies. We now have collaborative structures in place for an impressive group of teacher-leaders, and they are the change agents in the system.”

Standards, Assessments and College Access: Major Race to the Top Commitments

“Delaware’s commitment to common standards and high-quality assessment is not based on theory. It is proven to work. Nearly 15 years of efforts to create a unified, statewide instructional system that provides common standards, recommended curricula and common assessments have helped Delaware narrow the achievement gap Now as the Common Core standards are due to be released [in March 2011], and the development of common assessments is becoming a reality, Delaware is well-prepared for implementation.”

-  Support and professional development for the adoption and implementation of the Common Core State Standards in English and math
-  Support and professional development for the adoption and implementation of the Next Generation Science Standards
-  Support and professional development for the adoption and implementation of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium tests (aligned with Common Core) to replace the Delaware Comprehensive Assessment System
-  Support for the creation of new curricula aligned to the standards
-  College-access initiatives such as Advanced Placement preparation and training and free SATs and PSATs

FROM THE GROUND UP

Common Ground for the Common Core differed from previous state-run professional development sessions in a few respects, according to state leaders. First, organizers paired learning about the content of the standards with understanding how to manage change and deepen teachers' capacity at the school level. Instead of one-shot seminars or conferences, the initiative unfolded over three three-month cycles spanning the school year — each consisting of full-day convenings, clinics to check on progress, webinars and “feed-forward/feed-back” sessions to share artifacts. And the state posted tools and resources generated by participating schools (136 in all) online for all teachers in Delaware to use.

The result has been a focus in schools not just on content of the Common Core standards, but on helping schools plan for the changes in content, classroom teaching, materials and testing. The first year of Common Ground for the Common Core focused on local planning for the instructional shifts, and the second year (2014–15) delved into building assessment systems to measure the standards. The 2015–16 school year is focusing

on supporting students who might struggle to understand the standards, as well as on spreading literacy practices in every subject and not just English or reading classes.

Brandywine infused standards implementation into everything — the weekly PLC sessions in each school, the instrument used for classroom walkthroughs, everyday lesson planning and ongoing professional development. In four years, the number of students demonstrating proficiency on the old state assessment increased across the board in English and math, even for subsets of students who traditionally struggle on state tests, such as low-income students.

“We haven't seen those kinds of results in any four-year span previous to Race to the Top,” said Hohler.

ROADMAP TO COLLEGE

The hope of the Common Core is that fewer, clearer and more ambitious standards that compare favorably with international benchmarks will — if taught and supported well — enable more students to enter college or the workforce better equipped to succeed. But that kind of change can take years. Delaware's

Q&A

Creating Lessons for All Teachers

To ensure that Delaware teachers had access to Common Core-aligned lessons, the state partnered with the nonprofit LearnZillion to create a “Dream Team” of teachers who would create aligned lessons, refine them and post them online to share. SHANNON LAPINKSY, a math special education teacher at Fred Fifer Middle School in the Caesar Rodney School District, talks about her experience as a Dream Team member. This conversation has been edited for clarity and brevity.

How did you and the rest of the Dream Team get started creating aligned lessons?

We began with a Smarter Balanced practice test question. Then we created formative assessment lessons, which would provide students an entry point to solving the original problem. My question could be solved with various strategies such as unit rate adding/subtracting fractions and/or ratios. I then back-mapped to prior skills/standards needed by students to be successful when solving the given problem. I developed practice questions that students at my school answered. Then I used this data to help me determine the methods students would actually use to solve the problem. The student responses also provided me with common errors or misconceptions.

Your Dream Team experience involved a kick-off meeting over two days, then ongoing follow-up with your team of three teachers and a LearnZillion coach. What was it like?

It was probably two or three hours every weekend. You work hard, but it's not like you feel like you're working hard. You don't realize how rewarding this project could be not only to

create something, but to learn and collaborate on something that will benefit your students and other students in the state.

You're now a part of the national Dream Team. Did this experience leave you hopeful or worried about Common Core implementation?

I'm hopeful. As a classroom teacher, whatever standards I'm given, that's what I teach. You have to make yourself knowledgeable about the standards so students learn what they need to be college and career ready. I've learned a lot from different teachers about how to teach the standards and make connections between 5th and 6th grade.

How would you rank this experience compared with other professional development?

It gave me an opportunity outside the classroom to expand my knowledge. The professional development we have is state or district prescribed, and it takes away your creativity and ability to learn what you're teaching. Whether you teach English language arts or math, this was an opportunity to expand your horizons, produce a product and learn in a nonthreatening way.

challenge to prepare students for college, in particular, started with a much more fundamental and immediate push: getting qualified students to apply. Through a Race to the Top-funded project — paying the costs for all high school students to take the SAT and PSAT during the school day — the state obtained data showing that as many as 20 percent of students who achieved the minimum college-ready score of 1550 on the old 2,400-point SAT were not sending their scores to postsecondary institutions. That was a likely sign that they had no plans to apply to college even though they had favorable chances of getting in. Reasons ranged from lack of knowledge to uncertainty about admission to fear of the financial aid process.

The data from this Race to the Top project led to a new effort called Getting to Zero, aimed at ensuring that zero students chose to not forward their college-ready scores to postsecondary institutions. The effort, led by the state's Higher Education Office and conducted in partnership with Delaware's 37 district and charter high schools and six public and private postsecondary institutions, has five major components:

1. Visiting senior classes in the fall to share important resources about postsecondary pathways;
2. Matching volunteers with students to help complete college applications;
3. Assisting with financial aid forms;
4. Celebrating college acceptance in the spring; and
5. Helping plan the transition to college life during the summer.

In 2015, the state added a text-messaging component from February through August to send reminders about financial aid forms, housing decisions and other transition activities.

The result: 100 percent of students who reach the SAT's college-ready benchmark are choosing to send their results to postsecondary institutions, according to the latest data. Nearly all end up enrolling in two- or four-year colleges, said Shana Payne, the director of the state's Higher Education Office. But the state still has work to do for all of its graduating seniors: Just 55 percent of them enroll in community college or four-year institutions immediately after graduation, and the state's goal is 60 percent immediate enrollment by 2017–18. Far fewer persist to their second year of higher education.

Other efforts in Payne's office, some of them initially funded by Race to the Top, also aim to address college readiness:

“Delaware has always offered a lot of great opportunities, and I’m just so happy that I live in Delaware. I feel like I’ve gotten where I have because of all the different resources I get at school.”

Nicole Mejia, student



more training for AP teachers, more support for students to take AP classes, a Foundations of College Math course to help 12th-graders on the verge of readiness so they can avoid taking remedial courses in college and competitive grants to help schools better plan for SAT/PSAT prep. Much of the work centers on simple awareness raising for students unfamiliar with the steps required for college admissions. For example, Payne's office sends letters (and now, text messages) to students whose high scores on the PSAT signal that they may be ready for AP classes. More than 2,500 graduating seniors in the class of 2013 in Delaware took at least one AP course, compared with 1,900 five years before. (Each year, Delaware graduates roughly 8,500 seniors.)

For Nicole Mejia, a graduate of the Cab Calloway School of the Arts in Wilmington, the state's college-access programs helped her secure admission to the University of Delaware in fall 2015. The text messages kept her up to speed about financial aid forms, deadlines and other resources available to her as an entering student. Most important was the free SAT: Mejia took the exam for the first time in April of her junior year and realized how much preparation she had to put in if she wanted to get an admissions-ready score. She took SAT prep classes and actually sat for the test two more times at her own expense to attain the score she wanted.

“Delaware has always offered a lot of great opportunities, and I’m just so happy that I live in Delaware,” said Mejia, 18, who also participated in the White House's Beating the Odds summit aimed at preparing entering college freshmen for what awaited them in postsecondary education. “I feel like I've gotten where I have because of all the different resources I get at school.”

Building and Expanding Strong Data Systems



Delaware has long collected student and teacher data to inform school improvement. But schools lacked uniform access as well as the time to analyze their own students' work. The state's data commitments over the past five years aimed to change those conditions.

Strong Data Systems: Major Race to the Top Commitments

"Delaware's aspiration is to move from an environment in which general data reports and analyses are available, to one in which different stakeholders can easily access and customize specific reports that are most relevant to their decision-making – from educators, students, and parents, to policymakers and community members."

- 🎯 Data warehouse to house student demographic and achievement data
- 🎯 User-friendly dashboard to simplify access to data within the data warehouse
- 🎯 Single sign-on password to streamline data access
- 🎯 Common course codes to ease electronic transfer of transcripts between school districts and colleges/universities
- 🎯 Data coaches in every school to facilitate educators' understanding and analysis of student data
- 🎯 Weekly 90-minute professional learning communities dedicated to examining student data



Delaware has long had a robust data system. The state collects dozens of indicators on student performance, demographics, attendance, discipline and other measures and is able to link students to their classroom teachers. For teachers, the state knows their certification, educator preparation programs, and planned or completed professional development, among other indicators. With such information, the state, district, schools and teachers can monitor trends, look for success stories and trouble spots, and provide educators background data on their students.

But the vast amount of data was fragmented, existing in different online warehouses and not easily accessible. Sometimes the data were surface level — sharing a student's attendance figure, for example, but without context about whether the attendance was cause for concern. And schools spent varying amounts of time, or none at all, analyzing the data available to them. In the past five years, the state has advanced its data work by addressing some of these technical factors. Projects under Race to the Top, for example, paid for school-level assistance through data coaches and mandated weekly 90-minute sessions for teachers and school leaders to examine their own student data.

DATA DIVE

Among the first creations was the Education Insight Warehouse, which assembled data from multiple sources and consolidated them into a dashboard so that users — primarily school and district staff — could view key pieces of information in one place. Designed with the input of more than 175 educators through focus groups, the dashboard contains 70 individual student metrics (ranging from home language to discipline to achievement) that also can be aggregated at the class, school and district levels. No longer do teachers and principals have to sift through multiple spreadsheets or portals to view student information. The dashboard also has a pre-existing level of analysis to help guide decisions, said Reese Robinson, the department's Education Insight project director. For example, the department had research suggesting that student attendance dipping below 85 was a warning sign of a potential dropout. So a principal might see, for example, the attendance graphic turning red for his or her students with attendance below 85 percent, enabling quicker analysis. Or a teacher might be able to see how close or far away his or her student is from the next performance level on the state assessment, allowing potentially more targeted support.

Q&A

Building School Capacity for Data Analysis

For four years, MEGAN COX crisscrossed Delaware working in schools as a data coach. A former special education teacher, Cox helped teachers and leaders get more comfortable with data analysis and with running the state-mandated weekly professional learning communities (PLCs). Cox worked for Amplify, the vendor that supplied the state's data coaches under Race to the Top. This conversation has been edited for clarity and brevity.

You worked with about a dozen schools each year, three of them for all four years of the project. What did you do?

At the beginning, it was a lot of setting up a PLC culture, understanding what data-driven PLCs look like and how they should be structured, giving teachers tools to look at summative and formative assessments and change their instruction. The transition to the Common Core happened right in the middle of the project, so from there, it became a lot of work of looking at the standards, understanding what assessment questions look like if they're aligned.

How did schools respond?

It was a big mixture. Most schools had something they called a PLC, so it was a matter of taking the time they had and restructuring it so it was more results driven. The schools that were willing to make the sacrifice and commitment got back a lot.

How did the conversations shift?

A lot of larger school districts have a data tracking system, which organizes all their data for them. You can put in a student's name, and you're able to see the whole picture of that student and his or her progress. It was a matter of showing them that this is more than interesting. It's more of, what can you do with it? One of the things we worked on for a while was triangulation — looking at three different types of data and making a decision based on it.

What issues came up the most?

The mix of time of instruction and assessment. My answer was always to write down every assessment you're doing, the purpose, and use. If it has no purpose and no use, then it's a waste of time. Once we have the inventory, if we have something that's lacking, then we'll need another assessment. But a lot of the times, the assessments were just habitual: Do this assessment every December. We had to look at that and see that if we were going to address assessments, what were we going to eliminate?

“One of the things this has done is increase data quality. A lot of data was impossible to find, and people were questioning why the data is the way it is. We’re seeing more consistency, more standardization, more erroneous data being identified and fixed.”

Reese Robinson, Education Insight project director, Department of Education



To comply with privacy regulations and to make access more user friendly, the department created a single sign-on portal in which teachers and staff could find the wide range of data through one login and password. It restricted certain data only to eligible users (a principal could see all of his or her student- and teacher-level data, for example, but not another school's). The department also worked with private assessment vendors that served individual districts and charter schools to make sure their student testing information appeared only for their teachers and leaders.

The department estimates that more than half of Delaware's 9,500 teachers and administrators use the dashboard during the school year. One group of educators who have higher usage rates, according to Robinson: specialists, such as counselors or itinerant teachers, whose student caseloads may change regularly and who therefore always need at-a-glance information.

“One of the things this has done is increase data quality,” Robinson said. “A lot of data was impossible to find, and people were questioning why the data is the way it is. We’re seeing more consistency, more standardization, more erroneous data being identified and fixed.”

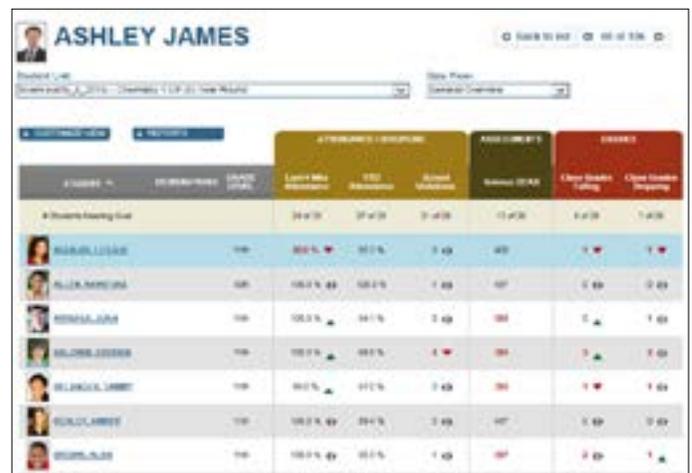
APPETITE FOR ANALYSIS

Providing access to data was one step to increase educators' use of and comfort with data. The state also had to ensure that teachers and leaders became more skilled at using the information they accessed. That was the focus of the mandate that all schools engage in weekly facilitated 90-minute PLCs with small groups of teachers to review and discuss student data. For years two and three of the grant, the state contracted with a vendor, Amplify (formerly Wireless Generation), to provide 29 data coaches, who split their time among the state's 200-plus schools. They facilitated the PLCs, introduced teachers to the dashboard and generally assisted with data analysis. Some schools grew to rely on their coach so much that they hired him or her full time.

Statewide support for the data coaches and the mandated PLCs ended with the conclusion of the Race to the Top grant. However, 34 schools will continue to get partial state support for both in 2015–16 through the renamed Amplify Network.



The new Education Insight Dashboard enables teachers to get information about their students through a single portal.



The dashboard also allows student comparisons on a number of indicators, such as academics, discipline or attendance.

Developing Great Teachers and Leaders



Among Delaware’s most ambitious work since 2010 was redesigning, rolling out and communicating about new teacher and principal evaluations. Linking these evaluations to student outcomes and using results for licensure and compensation incentives perhaps attracted the most public attention. The state also invested millions in coaching; professional development; and new pipelines to recruit teachers to Delaware, especially in high-needs schools.

Great Teachers and Leaders: Major Race to the Top Commitments

“The success of Delaware’s reform strategy rests with its teachers and leaders. For this reason, much of the State’s reform focuses on recruiting, retaining, developing, and supporting great teachers and leaders, particularly in schools where they are needed the most.”

- Redesigned mentoring/induction programs for new teachers
- Financial incentives to attract and retain highly effective teachers in high-needs schools
- New pathways to teaching and leading, such as Teach For America and the Delaware Leadership Project
- Grants to improve teacher and leader preparation, including analysis of these programs based on student outcomes
- Redesign, monitoring, professional development and continuous improvement of the Delaware Performance Appraisal System (DPAS-II) to include measures of student learning for all teachers and specialists
- School leadership coaches to assist principals with management and instructional leadership
- Development coaches to assist school leaders with DPAS-II implementation
- School administration managers to help school leaders focus their time on instructional work
- Statewide recruitment portal and marketing campaign to attract educators to Delaware
- Support for improved professional development planning



In some ways, it was one of the more audacious bargains in an already-demanding agreement: If Delaware school districts and charter schools wanted their share of millions of dollars in Race to the Top funds, they would have to commit to reconfiguring complicated school schedules to fit in weekly 90-minute PLCs, during which teachers would meet to discuss student data and improvement strategies.

The requirement intrigued district administrators, who have agonized over adding mere minutes to school days already packed with mandates. Heath Chasanov, now superintendent of the Woodbridge School District, remembers looking around the room at other district administrators five years ago when then-Delaware Secretary of Education Lillian Lowery outlined the PLC mandate as part of a suite of Race to the Top initiatives aimed at developing teachers' capacity.

"Everyone was looking at each other going, 'How are we going to do this?' because we'd all been through these negotiations before with our unions," Chasanov recalled.

Chasanov's district, like all in Delaware, eventually signed the agreement alongside key local stakeholders. He worked with his four school leaders to implement the 90-minute PLC requirement. Five years later, Woodbridge has embraced the PLC

not only for deep discussions about student work and teacher practice but also as an avenue for growing teacher development and leadership: The district has made management of the PLCs part of two teacher-leaders' full-time duties.

The expansion of teacher leadership, in fact, has been a pleasant outcome of Delaware's attempts to develop great educators by creating new opportunities for professional growth — ranging from leading PLCs to starting new pathways for becoming principals to launching networks of exemplary teachers sharing strategies.

"It's not just principals who need to have capacity in the building to lead; you have to have a body of teachers in a school who are folks that other people go to for information, advice, training, and whether informally or formally identified, are acting as teacher-leaders," said Frederika Jenner, president of the Delaware State Education Association. "That's been a real benefit."

EVALUATIONS FOR IMPACT

The primary tool Delaware used to expand professional growth, increase teacher leadership opportunities and identify exemplary educators was the revamped Delaware Performance Appraisal System (DPAS-II), the state's evaluation system for teachers and school leaders.

Q&A

Filling the Principal Pipeline

To increase the number of effective school leaders in high-needs schools, Delaware partnered with a local nonprofit, Innovative Schools, to create the Delaware Leadership Project (DLP). Aspiring principals apply to be part of a 14-month training program, including a year with a mentor principal, before committing to spending three years in a high-needs school. SHAN GREEN, a 12-year teacher who worked most recently at Dover High School, became principal of Central Middle School in Dover through the program. This conversation has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Why did you join the DLP?

My goal wasn't to be a principal, which is kind of funny. I wanted to work in a district office and be a supervisor of special education. But I knew I really needed to have that building-level experience because if you haven't run a building, you don't think about it when you're doing another job at a district-office level. I looked at it more as a steppingstone, but now that I'm in the job, I don't think I'll ever want to leave.

Before you are placed with a mentor, DLP puts you through a "summer intensive" — how was it?

It was probably more work than my graduate degree. We met five days a week from 8 to 4. We all worked closer to 8 to midnight every single day. It was all problems of practice and a lot of reading. It was taking a problem that might happen in a real middle school and working on it. They brought people in to pretend they were angry parents or people who were with the teachers union. We had all these different experiences that we just had to handle right there on the fly, and they gave us lots of feedback.

Your internship was at Central Middle School, where you later became principal. How was your intern year?

The person who was my mentor was a very strong instructional leader, and that's the area I needed the most help. It was a wonderful experience; he truly allowed me to learn from him. He'd question and challenge me. Aside from the internship, you make so many connections. On top of your regular job you have to meet twice a week, go on school visits and learn about learning models.

The 2014–15 school year was your second year as principal. What do you enjoy the most?

I love my kids. They come to school knowing they're loved. That's a huge thing with this age group especially — the kids are still so moldable and trying to figure out who they are. Middle school was terrible for me; I hated middle school. Knowing I can change that for kids, I absolutely love. When I think about the job I wanted before taking this, I'd have no contact with kids; I'd be dealing with adults all day long. I can't imagine not working with kids.

In short, Delaware bet that if its educator evaluations provided a more accurate gauge of practice, then districts and schools could better target supports; identify and reward top-performing educators; and use evaluation results for important decisions such as financial incentives, targeted professional development and teacher leadership opportunities.

The state tied evaluations to student growth results from state assessments, monitored districts' quality of DPAS-II implementation, awarded financial incentives to highly effective teachers in high-needs schools, and provided on-the-ground support and coaching. Districts, meanwhile, sent principals to be trained in the classroom observation rubric and tried to help teachers analyze student performance data to set goals. Because 70 percent of Delaware teachers do not teach in subjects with standardized test scores, they needed different ways to measure their students' growth. So the state engaged more than 600 educators to create hundreds of subject-specific assessments that teachers used to measure student performance for their evaluation.

Five years later, the state has found that more principals are grounding their classroom observations in evidence and linking their evaluations to professional growth opportunities for staff. And more than half of teachers, 57 percent, said they have changed their practices because of the feedback they received through DPAS-II, according to the state's most recent annual report on the appraisal system. While the state's distribution of teacher effectiveness has not changed — 99 percent of teachers and specialists are rated "highly effective" or "effective" — the revised evaluation system prompted deeper conversations among teachers and leaders about classroom instruction.

"The best part about DPAS-II has been the conversations about practice between evaluators and evaluatees," Chasanov said. "The conversations that are taking place are so much better because of the DPAS-II system."

IMPROVING THE SYSTEM

Yearly surveys by the state of the DPAS-II system have led to changes in response to educator feedback. For example, teachers without standardized test score data can set their own student growth goals on their students' assessments. Those student growth goals, which are part of their DPAS-II evaluations, can vary in quality, according to Department of Education monitoring reports. State leaders suggest, and teachers agree, that the department needs to provide more training on goal-setting to ensure more rigor. State leaders also recognize that conversations about performance are difficult in practice and require more of a culture change than three years of DPAS-II implementation can provide.

"The best part about DPAS-II has been the conversations about practice between evaluators and evaluatees. The conversations that are taking place are so much better because of the DPAS-II system."

*Heath Chasanov, superintendent,
Woodbridge School District*



DPAS-II has five components:

1. Planning and preparation;
2. Classroom environment;
3. Instruction;
4. Professional responsibilities; and
5. Student improvement.

While two-thirds of teachers believe that the first three components are accurate reflections of their practice, they are less sure about the student improvement component. (The combination of the first four components plus the achievement or performance measures provides teachers their overall earned rating.) In response, Delaware has made technical changes every year — such as tweaking the weight of the five components so that measures of performance are less of a determining factor or allowing for shorter classroom observations. In addition, the department began allowing districts and charter schools to develop alternative evaluation models to replace DPAS-II while maintaining its rigor; four charter schools applied and received permission to do so, and several other local education agencies have since followed. More recently, the Department of Education started looking for a contractor to conduct an evaluation of DPAS-II and suggest changes. At the same time, the General Assembly passed a joint resolution requiring a committee of stakeholders to examine DPAS-II for improvements.

The state also used Race to the Top dollars for boots-on-the-ground resources to help principals with the increased demands of DPAS-II and other requirements. The state hired nine development coaches through the University of Delaware to work with principals on DPAS-II implementation, specifically, help with conducting observations and measuring teacher practice. Race to the Top also paid for school administration managers, who helped principals track and increase their

time spent on instructional matters, largely by taking on administrative or operational issues that would have occupied the school leaders' time. These supports enabled more Delaware principals to spend time devoted to instructional leadership rather than operations, a key balancing act for school leaders and a benchmark in the Race to the Top proposal. Another set of coaches, school leadership coaches, worked with a subset of principals on identified areas of need, such as financial management or teacher development.

FOCUS ON TALENT

Fortifying and expanding DPAS-II was the centerpiece of Delaware's commitments to strengthening teacher quality in the state and ensuring that students have equitable access to the most effective educators. Other key pieces were using the evaluation results to uplift and reward exemplary teaching through the Delaware Talent Cooperative and strengthening the pipeline of educators coming to work in the state's districts and charter schools.

The Delaware Talent Cooperative intended to reward highly effective educators (as identified in the DPAS-II evaluation) who worked in high-poverty, high-needs schools. The program awarded retention incentives of up to \$10,000 over two years to highly effective educators who remained in their high-needs schools and attraction incentives of up to \$20,000 over two years to highly effective educators who transferred from

their current school to work in a high-needs school. Those who received the incentives formed a cohort that received professional development and met to give each other feedback and strategies about their work.

About 197 educators received the retention incentives, and 17 educators received the attraction incentives, but the state had budgeted for many more. State leaders said these numbers reflect the fact that only 18 of 49 eligible schools chose to participate, primarily because of concerns about awarding compensation incentives for select teachers. One district, the Christina School District, even forfeited more than \$2.4 million of its Race to the Top grant largely because it would not implement the initiative even though it committed to doing so. Statewide, the program did retain highly effective teachers in high-needs schools at higher rates than their peers, according to an independent evaluation by the University of Pennsylvania. The report also suggested better communication about the project, re-engagement of a stakeholder design team and more robust professional development for participants.

Delaware also attempted to strengthen the pipeline of teachers coming into its classrooms, with a particular focus on ensuring equitable access to high-performing educators. It partnered with Teach For America to place teachers in high-needs schools, designed a statewide portal and associated marketing campaign to recruit and match candidates with vacancies,

Q&A

Excellent Educators for All: Top Teachers for the Highest-Need Schools

Delaware created the Talent Cooperative to attract and retain highly effective teachers in high-needs schools through financial incentives of up to \$20,000. PHYLLIS WOOLLEY-ROY spent 16 years in corporate marketing before becoming a teacher in 2008. While working in the Brandywine School District, she became eligible for the Talent Cooperative and transferred to Harlan Elementary School, where she had taught previously. This conversation has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Why did you want to work in a high-needs school?

For me, it's giving students who have the greatest gaps in education an opportunity to excel. Even when I was in corporate, I volunteered in a high-needs school. I went in every week, and what I saw were students that teachers gave up on: "Oh, he can't learn." I spent time with those students and found out they could learn. You really have to have a mission mindset. You're not in there for money. You're in there to change the trajectory of these students' lives.

What's been your experience in the Talent Cooperative?

The professional development aspect is what I liked. Different experts in different areas come to speak with you, and you participate in workshops. The best part about the workshops is learning and sharing from other teachers and getting colleagues you can reach out to during the school year just to chat about things.

What have you gotten out of the Cooperative?

I love that recognition. I love the fact that you have like-minded colleagues. It's hard work, and to get the monetary reward helps a lot. A lot of us spend our own money on kids. In some years, I spent thousands of dollars on different activities, teaching kids how to eat properly, taking them to restaurants, taking them to different types of outside learning activities, museums. Schools don't reimburse you for that.

Performance-based compensation in education is controversial. What is your opinion of the pushback?

I think what is fair about the Talent Cooperative is that it's targeting schools that have high needs. They're not giving this award to teachers at schools that have students whose parents talk to them about education and come from generations of relatives who have been educated in college. They're targeting schools that have kids that usually don't make it to college.

Helping Principals Navigate the New World of New Teacher Evaluations

JOHN KREITZER, who worked in Delaware schools for 30 years primarily as an administrator, became a development coach through *Race to the Top* to work with principals on implementing the Delaware Performance Appraisal System (DPAS-II). His role was to guide them on executing the revised method of evaluating teachers and specialists. This conversation has been edited for clarity and brevity.

You worked with 13 schools over the past four years. What appealed to you about the development coach role?

I saw that the role was helping principals on teacher evaluation, and that always interested me. Professional development has always interested me. It was a good fit.

How did your schools receive you?

A lot of these principals I knew, and once we explained the work we set out to do with them, they embraced it pretty quickly. There were changes in teacher evaluations, and we knew the changes pretty well. They were trying to figure it out, and they thought, “Someone’s going to help me; I have a resource.”

DPAS-II implementation is no small thing. How did you get started?

We started out by doing walkthroughs of classrooms for a sense of calibration. We’d say, “Let’s talk about what we saw,” and let them do the talking. It was more questioning than telling. We sat through preconferences with principals, prepping them for the kinds of questions they may ask. We co-observed with them, talked about the evidence they collected and where they might rate the teacher. If it was a particularly tough conference, we’d role-play it.

In many of the schools, I worked with teachers, helping them understand the teacher evaluation system. During the fall professional development, I’d work with professional learning communities or the whole faculty on issues related to teacher evaluation. Teachers learned to understand my role in the school. I was in and out of the classrooms with the administrators.

What was your biggest take-away?

I couldn’t be a principal today. There are way too many responsibilities, even more so than when I was a principal. Principals really need to know how to sort their time and prioritize things. They know teacher evaluation is important, and the biggest impact a principal could have is in instruction and student achievement, but sometimes there’s still not enough time.

What did principals tell you was their biggest concern?

Time is the biggest thing. Time to complete the evaluations, time to get in classrooms, time to write quality evaluations, time to follow up on issues if there are expectations or improvement plans. [Being a principal] is an exercise in time management. It’s a lot of work, and schools aren’t getting any easier.

and created the Delaware Leadership Project to train and place leaders in high-needs schools. Other talent management efforts, such as a STEM residency to attract teachers into science and mathematics classes or the Delaware Teaching Fellows program that sought to place up to 50 teachers in high-needs schools, were phased out after not meeting targets.

Work on educator effectiveness extends into the state’s teacher preparation programs as well. In late 2015, the state released *Educator Preparation Program Reports* that rated programs on five domains: recruitment, candidate performance, placement, retention and graduate performance. There are no consequences for this first year of review, though the state has always had the authority to approve or close poorly performing preparation programs. Separately, the state has awarded grants (through both state and federal funding sources) to Delaware State University, Wilmington University and the University of Delaware to pilot better ways to prepare incoming teachers, such as longer residencies in schools for student teachers and better alignment with the requirements of educator evaluation systems.

NEXT STEPS

Reflecting on the past five years, Christopher Ruszkowski, chief officer of the department’s Teacher and Leader Effectiveness Unit, outlined four priorities to advance post-*Race to the Top*:

- Building better capacity for teachers and leaders;
- Developing a more effective accountability system for districts and charter schools;
- Gathering more diverse voices from the field to help the state make decisions; and
- Thinking of implementation in terms of a long-term calendar – not just a five-year time span.

“Educator evaluation is and will remain the fulcrum of educator effectiveness,” Ruszkowski said. “We need it to be a meaningful tool in order to do anything else around impacting educator quality.”

Turning Around the Lowest-Performing Schools



Delaware's commitments to the lowest-performing schools involved flooding those schools with financial resources and state assistance. Five years later, most of those schools showed increased results, though some remain in the lower tiers of performance. Schools acknowledge that while the label of an underperforming school was tough to swallow, the additional resources and planning helped move them in the right direction.

School Turnaround: Major Race to the Top Commitments

"Delaware is committed to rapidly improving its lowest-achieving schools, and will lead at least 10 failing schools [at least 5 percent of all public schools in Delaware] to achieve [adequate yearly progress] over the next five years."



Creation of the Partnership Zone to provide resources and support for the 10 lowest-performing schools



School Turnaround Unit to assist Partnership Zone schools



Just off South Dupont Highway in Camden, surrounded by fast-food restaurants, bargain retailers, automobile repair stores and roaring traffic, sits Positive Outcomes Charter School. There is no grand driveway for parents to drop off their children, just a simple glass front door and a gray-blue building that, except for the school sign, might substitute for a warehouse or an office in an industrial park.

Yet behind the unassuming walls, the students and staff of Positive Outcomes are trying to build a new legacy of improvement, five years after being named one of Delaware's lowest-performing schools. As part of Delaware's Partnership Zone, Positive Outcomes and nine other schools received additional resources, flexibility to overhaul their instructional approaches and greater support from a new Department of Education office dedicated to their improvement. While not every so-called PZ school saw success, Positive Outcomes leaders and teachers credit the school's time under the state's microscope as the catalyst for overhauling their approach to teaching and learning.

"Would I ever want to go through it again? No," said Edward Emmett Jr., the school's director. "But for what it did to this community and these kids, it was remarkable."

Delaware's \$8.2 million Partnership Zone focused state attention and resources on 10 struggling schools and gave them leeway to create their own turnaround plans. The state Department of Education conducted intensive monitoring, support and problem-solving. The schools had to negotiate

new agreements with their unions, where applicable, and submit detailed improvement plans of how they would reverse stagnating or declining student achievement.

Five years later, the results are mostly promising: Eight of the 10 schools made enough progress to exit the Partnership Zone. One did not, and another saw initial increases in achievement but then lost ground. The state is continuing its monitoring and assistance to these schools and others as part of its waiver under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

The state arranged for the schools to access both Race to the Top dollars and federal School Improvement Grant funds, which increased the resources available. Many schools spent the money on professional development, additional staffing that extended the day, external partners or new instructional approaches. New agreements with collective bargaining units allowed some flexibility for how schools divided up the school day.

"Would I ever want to go through it again? No. But for what it did to this community and these kids, it was remarkable."

Edward Emmett Jr., director, Positive Outcomes Charter School



“Being in the Partnership Zone gave us that financial support to partner with more people and implement more programs at the same time.”

Rachel Warren, coordinator of postsecondary transitions and learning through internships, Positive Outcomes Charter School



While most of the schools exited the Partnership Zone, some of them remain the state's lowest performing. Positive Outcomes' overall achievement, for example, remains below the state average. But its growth outpaced nearly all other Partnership Zone schools: Since 2011, proficiency for all Positive Outcomes students on the state's former test, the Delaware Comprehensive Assessment System, has risen to 51 percent — an increase of 30 points, according to the Delaware Department of Education. Math proficiency for all students rose to 37 percent, an increase of 14 points. The progress is considerable given that the school educates a challenging population: 70 percent of its 120 students receive special education services.

On the new Smarter Balanced test, however, results show how far Positive Outcomes has to go. About 19 percent of the school's 11th-graders were proficient in English and nearly 4 percent in math, which were among the lowest percentages in the state.

Principal Steven Norman said Positive Outcomes decided to use the Partnership Zone resources to find a new academic approach that would better prepare its students academically, while maintaining the personalized approach for which Positive Outcomes is known. The school used resources and tools from Big Picture Learning, a nonprofit that helps schools create more individualized environments through advisories, internships and student-centered curriculum. Partnership Zone funds, roughly \$1.7 million over three years (including other federal grants), paid for training of teachers, new partnerships with providers and longer school days.

Over time, teachers began organizing their lessons and assessments in more coherent ways and having deeper discussions about what high-quality instruction looks like. The school implemented PLCs focused on data and has begun focusing on postsecondary outcomes for its students — roughly two-thirds of whom are accepted to two-year or four-year schools.

“I don't like the way it came about that we were a Partnership Zone school, but becoming a Partnership Zone school was definitely worth it,” said Rachel Warren, the coordinator of postsecondary transitions and learning through internships.

“Being in the Partnership Zone gave us that financial support to partner with more people and implement more programs at the same time.”



Students credit the daily advisory periods for giving them more individual attention. Internships have opened their minds to life after high school, and quarterly exhibitions and presentations about their classwork have helped them focus on their required subjects. Students are well aware of the requirements of Big Picture Learning and know about the additional attention the school has received through the Partnership Zone.

“When I went to a traditional public school, I had a little bit of an attitude,” said Zachary Lindale, 17, a 12th-grader who is interning at an auto-repair shop and hopes to join the military. “This school has helped me control more and given me a positive outlook on life. My grades have gotten better since I've been here.”



Looking Ahead

As a 3rd-grade teacher, Shani Benson never had many connections with the education policy world — until recently.

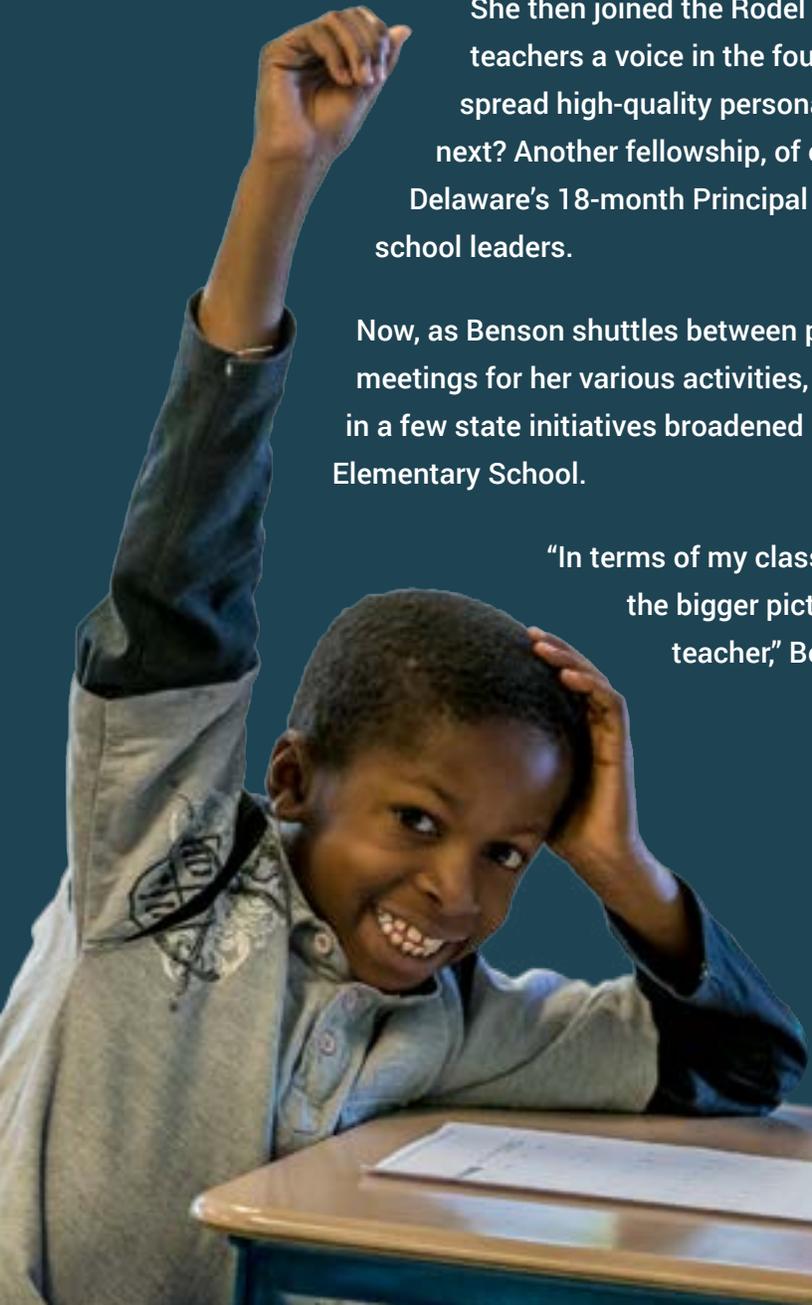
Attending her first meeting as a Delaware Talent Cooperative participant, she learned about the Dream Team, another Race to the Top project that brought together skilled teachers to create Common Core-aligned lessons for the entire state. Through *that* community, she was accepted onto LearnZillion’s national Dream Team and also heard about a fellowship through the nonprofit America

Achieves that would bring her and other educators together to discuss education issues with elected officials and policymakers. Yet another acceptance into a program.

She then joined the Rodell Foundation Teacher Council, aimed at giving teachers a voice in the foundation’s education initiatives and its efforts to spread high-quality personalized learning throughout the state. What next? Another fellowship, of course — this time as part of the University of Delaware’s 18-month Principal Preparation Program to develop high-quality school leaders.

Now, as Benson shuttles between professional development sessions and meetings for her various activities, she marvels at how her initial participation in a few state initiatives broadened her horizons beyond her work at South Dover Elementary School.

“In terms of my classroom, my ability to understand connections and the bigger picture is much greater, which makes me a better teacher,” Benson said.



LESSONS LEARNED

Benson's experience is but one illustration of Delaware's enormous efforts to advance its public schools over the past five years. While Race to the Top was one factor, the collective political will to enact policies that might have been months or years in the making provided the energy to get things done. As a result, Delaware introduced new generations of teacher-leaders. It launched professional development for teacher teams throughout the year rather than the typical "sit and get" sessions. More recently, the state has experienced a less-polarizing climate than others about common college- and career-ready standards and assessments and educator evaluations that incorporated student learning measures.

Though funding has run out for the 19 states that won awards, Race to the Top will continue in the form of lessons learned to consider; legislation to implement; and grant initiatives to continue, modify or end. Those involved in Delaware's education improvements over the past five years offer suggestions for the future — for both the First State and beyond.

- **States need a common vision for their public schools to drive large-scale change.** Delaware benefited from a coalition of elected officials, union representatives, community groups, educators and business groups that produced *Vision 2015*, the 10-year plan that set broad principles for building a world-class public education system in the state. Many of those principles laid the foundation for

the Race to the Top proposal, and the coalition has released an updated plan called *Student Success 2025*. The original *Vision 2015* enabled the state to gather steam quickly for its Race to the Top proposal and achieve unanimous support from school districts, school boards and union leaders. The challenge for Delaware will be to keep the coalition together. Without it, the state will lack a common vision that can develop the next generation of Delaware's education agenda.

- **Districts need guidance on change management, not just technical aspects of projects.** In the early years of Race to the Top, Delaware regularly convened district teams to work on implementation. There were district liaisons, technical assistance meetings and unprecedented scrutiny of each district's plans for the funds. Yet the changes Race to the Top required were so dramatic that districts needed hand-holding of a different kind, even on matters not connected to Race to the Top. They required deeper capacity-building about how to handle the pace of change and build a culture in schools that accepts overhauls of longstanding policies. The state's Common Ground for the Common Core is an example of how a focus on change management and helping schools develop internal capacity can lead to greater acceptance of massive changes such as new standards. State departments of education struggle with providing high-quality professional development, but they can and should try to create conditions and space for more discussions on change management.



A Closer Look



Inside Howard High School of Technology

Imagine a school that “did it all” when it came to Delaware’s education improvement efforts.

Participating in Common Ground for the Common Core. Having teachers selected for the Dream Team to create Common Core-aligned lessons. Hiring teachers from Teach For America. Rewarding teachers through the Talent Cooperative. Participating in the Partnership Zone for low-performing schools. Focusing on postsecondary education through college access programs.

Howard High School of Technology in Wilmington, one of four high schools in the New Castle County Vocational Technical School District, is one such place. Once placed in the Race to the Top Partnership Zone as one of the state’s 10 lowest-performing schools, Howard has seen impressive growth on state assessments and a more stable and collaborative culture among its teachers. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan visited the school twice, most recently in February 2015 to note its progress.

Howard’s principal, Stanley Spoor, takes a nuanced view of how much of Howard’s progress stems from the past five years of work, particularly Race to the Top. Efforts such as the Talent Cooperative helped ensure that highly effective teachers stayed at the school. The emphasis on college access — which includes two-year community colleges and trade programs more aligned with Howard’s course of study — also helped. Revisions to the Delaware Performance Appraisal System made evaluations more focused on data and evidence. The state-required weekly professional learning communities gave the school the chance to do something it wanted to do anyway.

But not every state initiative helped. The school and its home district already had invested in data analysis, so a data coach added less value. A development coach also was not as helpful, since the district had initiated similar work two years

before. And while being named a Partnership Zone allowed resources and an opportunity for planning a new start, the sting of the label remains hard to shed. Howard relies entirely on applications from students throughout New Castle County to fill its enrollment. So being named a Partnership Zone school caused a drop in interest from prospective students.

“When you look at the rationale for putting these specific programs in place, you had some good thoughts and ideas that have come about through Race to the Top,” Spoor said. “The details matter, and management of projects and initiatives is key. A lot of times, good projects and good initiatives don’t come to fruition because they get sidetracked with poor management or bad details.”

Howard’s participation in the Partnership Zone was the biggest influence. Working with teachers, the school created an improvement plan based on four pillars: instructional reform, instructional practice and extended learning, flexible operating conditions, and parent and community engagement. The school lengthened its day by half an hour and embraced the mandated professional learning community sessions to give teachers time to reflect on their practice and work together. That did not happen before the Partnership Zone, Spoor said, and it has improved school culture.

After a while, it was hard to tell which initiatives were under Race to the Top and which were simply what the school did as part of its Partnership Zone plan. Spoor maintained a giant spreadsheet to track projects, and the district central office helped with management and reporting.

In 2014, 82 percent of Howard 10th-graders met state standards in reading, and 78 percent met them in math. That is compared with 41 percent and 45 percent five years ago. The graduation rate also stands at about 90 percent, five points higher than the state average. Spoor acknowledges that the school has much more work to do.

“Howard is a better place today than it was then,” Spoor said. “Is it because it was named a ‘PZ’ school? I’m not exactly sure. It may have provided that sense of urgency. It may have provided some of the structure to get things done maybe in a more rapid fashion than it could have been done before.”



- **Communication about new education initiatives needs to be proactive, more frequent and contextual.** The department did communicate about its work — a lot. Press releases, celebrations of progress, recognitions of exemplary teachers through the Dream Team and the Talent Cooperative, and detailed reports responding to survey feedback are some examples of how the state both pushed out information and responded to it. The vision and overall agenda were harder to communicate, particularly concerning Race to the Top. Even though the state’s work had its roots in its strategic plan for education and drew from *Vision 2015*, the term “Race to the Top” became synonymous with individual and often controversial pieces, rather than the larger agenda of providing more than \$60 million to districts and charter schools, upholding college- and career-ready expectations, expanding data systems, improving teacher practice, and supporting low-performing schools. Moving forward, the state must ensure that larger messages of future efforts do not drown amidst the details. The state can meet this goal by consistently reporting progress, highlighting locally developed innovation, elevating the voices of educators involved in key initiatives and communicating more frequently with public opinion leaders.
- **Keeping stakeholders engaged must mean more than just keeping the highest-profile stakeholders at the table.** As a small state, Delaware is known for assembling partners in a room for policy discussions. Keeping them there is much harder, and the unified front of state policymakers, teachers union leaders, district administrators, business leaders and school board members assembled to win the Race to the Top grant has frayed. In one sense, it is not surprising: Winning grants is easier than executing them, and choices made during implementation will create rifts.

Delaware had numerous planning sessions for teams of local administrators, teachers and school board members to discuss their Race to the Top work. But even that high-touch approach and visibility with district and charter school teams did not mean that district stakeholders would remain on board. The state must find ways to ensure that it hears not just from organization leaders but also from stakeholders several layers below working on the ground in schools or with community organizations.

- **Incentives are powerful drivers of behavior, but scaling good practices is the challenge.** Delaware’s districts and charter schools received half of the Race to the Top dollars, almost \$60 million, over five years. From technology specialists to social workers to International Baccalaureate programs to extra time for collaboration, the districts took advantage of the additional resources. Such large-scale infusions of dollars are unlikely to happen again, so the state faces a question: Should it spread whatever limited resources can be used most flexibly (usually grant dollars) to all districts and charter schools in hopes that everyone will improve? Or should it seed creative programs in fewer districts and work with them on quality and scale, thereby creating something of a roadmap? Most state education agencies do the former. Delaware is trying the latter in some areas (allowing districts and charters to create innovative educator evaluations, for example), and it should consider adopting the approach for other priorities.

The next five years will usher in new changes that build upon those in the past five years. With a collective vision and continued political and policy will, Delaware can continue its promising work of ensuring that every child is ready for success.



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