FOSTERING INNOVATION AND EXCELLENCE

For all students to thrive in the classroom, in college, and in a career, our educational system must continuously develop and embrace the very best practices, policies, and ideas. Innovative practices are constantly emerging to help more students graduate ready for college and a career. We will ask policymakers and educators at all levels to carefully analyze the impact of their policies, practices, and systems on student outcomes. We will provide students and families with increased high-quality public school educational options, and empower them with improved information about the options available to them. And across programs, we will focus less on compliance and more on enabling effective local strategies to flourish.

OUR APPROACH

- Providing incentives for a Race to the Top among states and district willing to take on ambitious, comprehensive reforms.
- Developing, validating, and scaling up promising and proven educational strategies to improve student outcomes.
- Expanding educational options to increase choice within the public school system through high-performing new schools and meaningful public school choice.

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RACE TO THE TOP

OUR APPROACH

- **Encouraging systemic reforms.** Authorize Race to the Top as an ongoing program, giving competitive grants for systemic reforms that will lead to improvements in student outcomes.
- **Grants to states and districts.** Competitive grants to both states and districts, to support effective policies and reforms at both levels.
- **Focus on results.** Grantees will have flexibility in the use of funds in line with plans, but continued funding is contingent on progress towards performance targets.

Even before the Recovery Act's Race to the Top program awarded a single dollar, it had already drawn national attention to important reforms and led to many states and districts carefully rethinking their education laws and policies. For the first phase of the competition, 41 states and the District of Columbia submitted applications that laid out ambitious plans for putting in place the conditions for innovation and reform that will foster significant improvements in student achievement, high school graduation rates, and college enrollments, and to significant reductions in achievement gaps. While Tennessee and Delaware were the winners of the first phase of the competition, all of these states have taken crucial steps toward building stronger education systems.

Already, 12 states have passed laws that will lead to more children having access to high-quality charter schools, and others have passed laws to improve teacher evaluation, such as by considering student growth. In many states and districts, stakeholders have come together for the most productive conversations on education in years.

But we recognize that this isn't enough. That's why we'll employ a rigorous and fair selection process in both phases of the competition, and award funds only to applicants that put forward the best plans that will lead to the best results. And it's why we're proposing, through ESEA reauthorization, to continue the reform processes Race to the Top has sparked, so that the Department can continue to work with states, expand the competition to districts, and continue to call attention and steer funding toward the very best ideas and policies, so that more students can benefit from the improvements that will result.

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INVESTING IN INNOVATION

OUR APPROACH

- **Fostering effective innovations.** Authorize the Investing in Innovation fund as an ongoing program, giving competitive grants to districts or nonprofits to promote the development and expansion of promising and proven practices, strategies, and programs with potential for sustainability and significant scale.
- **Tiers of evidence.** Lower levels of funding for promising innovations with some research basis, and higher level of funding for proven innovations that are ready to go to scale.
- **Rotating priorities.** To drive innovations across the education sector, focus on a few consistent priorities like serving high-need students, but identify additional competitive priorities each year.

Innovation will be essential to achieving the dramatic improvements in educational achievement and attainment our nation seeks. Innovation is broadly recognized as the fundamental source of a nation's growth and prosperity (OECD, 2009). And long ago it was recognized that the opportunity for innovation in social sectors like education was at least as great as in business and the economy (Drucker, 1985). These improvements will require dramatic acceleration in the rate of improvement in each of these metrics (Snyder et al., 2009). Moreover, education reforms will occur in an environment of constrained state and local funding for education (McNichol and Johnson, 2010; National Governors Association, 2010), making innovative, cost-effective approaches even more essential. Meeting our goals will require new solutions—products, processes, strategies, and approaches—that may not yet exist or may be in use at too small a scale.

Effectively fostering innovation requires investments and strategies that are new for the education sector. It requires an accelerated investment in innovation, not only in basic research and development, but in developing, validating, and scaling up solutions that have already been developed. In the field of medical technology most innovations come from the field rather than the lab (Institute of Medicine, 1995). Similarly in education, another field characterized by continuous practitioner adaptation, significant innovations are developed by educators and educational entrepreneurs (Hess, 2007). Yet these innovations, even if effective, can have tremendous difficulty scaling due to a poorly-functioning educational market that limits funding to develop and scale promising innovations (Berger and Stevenson, 2007).

The Investing in Innovation fund complements the Department's basic research and development function with specific resources targeted specifically at developing and scaling up these promising innovations. The $650 million Investing in Innovation fund authorized by the Recovery Act is already serving as a powerful lever for effective innovations in educational policies and practices. Thousands of potential applicants have expressed an interest in competing for program funds, and the program's focus on evidence-based approaches is encouraging district and nonprofit leaders to focus on expanding proven practices and evaluating promising ones. While this Recovery Act program will be instrumental in spurring the next generation of educational innovations, only an on-going program will be able to foster a culture of continuous innovation throughout the education system.

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SUPPORTING EFFECTIVE CHARTER SCHOOLS

OUR APPROACH

- **Multiple eligible grantees.** Grants to SEAs, authorizers, or nonprofits with a record of funding and supporting effective charter or other autonomous schools for the purpose of making subgrants, and direct grants to operators of charter and other autonomous schools.
- **High standards for autonomy.** Grantees and subgrantees may use funds for either charter schools or other autonomous schools that meet a rigorous standard of autonomy over budget, staffing, schedule, and program.
- **High standards for accountability and learning what works.** Charter and other autonomous schools will be held to high standards of accountability, and lessons learned will be disseminated to help other public schools.
- **Family empowerment.** Require that all grantees use funds for family outreach and information, and make lottery and admissions processes easy to navigate.
- **Capacity building.** Greater funding for capacity-building to raise standards for quality and support across the charter sector and for charter organizations that commit to partnering with districts for support and dissemination activities.

Low-income and minority students are dramatically more likely to attend schools that have low student achievement and low graduation rates. Minority students in America are four times as likely as non-minority students to attend a high school with graduation rates that are very low, and three times less likely to attend a high school with graduate rates that are very high (Balfanz and Legters, 2004). Scores of students attending high-poverty schools are consistently lower than students attending more affluent schools on NAEP reading and mathematics tests (Planty et al., 2009).

Over the last 20 years, a significant and growing number of charter schools have opened in high-poverty and high-minority communities and had their students achieve dramatically better results than other schools in the community or state. Uncommon Schools, a charter management organization that manages 16 schools in Newark, New York City, upstate New York, and Boston, had 98 percent of their grade 3–8 students, 99 percent of whom are African-American, score advanced or proficient on the 2009 New York State Math exams and 89 percent on the state English Language Arts exams, outperforming the percentage of white students in the states scoring at similar levels. The organization has outlined plans to double the number of schools it operates to 33 in the coming years (Uncommon Schools, 2010). Green Dot, a charter management organization that works collaboratively with its teachers union, has graduated 80 percent of entering ninth-grade students within four years, far higher than the Los Angeles Unified School District's graduation rate of 47 percent; in addition, 76 percent of graduating seniors have been admitted to four-year colleges (Green Dot, 2010). Mastery Charter Schools, which was recruited by the School District of Philadelphia in 2005 to run turnarounds of failing schools, has substantially improved student achievement in the

Philadelphia turnaround schools it operates, almost doubling and in some cases tripling the percentage of students scoring advanced or proficient in reading and math across all grade levels within two years of their restart. Every member of Mastery's 2009 graduating class was accepted into a postsecondary institution (Mastery, 2010). And a recent study of a KIPP school in Lynn, Massachusetts found that it is possible for these high-performing schools to serve high-need students, including English Learners and students with disabilities, at rates comparable to the district while delivering even greater gains for these students than for other students attending the school (Angrist et al., 2010).

Demand for high-quality options such as these schools is high, with significant numbers of students enrolling on waiting lists. The waiting list for Philadelphia schools operated by Mastery Charter Schools was over 300 in 2010, and there are similarly lengthy waiting lists for charter schools across the country. The Colorado Department of Education estimates that approximately 38,000 children are waiting to be accepted into Colorado charter schools, an average of 462 students per school (Colorado Department of Education, 2009). Nationally, estimates of the number of students on waiting lists for charters nationwide is as high as 365,000, with an estimated average of 238 students per school (NAPCS, 2009).

Despite these high-performing examples, and despite the high levels of demand for charter schools, there is inconsistent quality in the charter sector, a result of both a poor state policy landscape and insufficiently rigorous and supportive charter authorizer

SUNY Charter Schools Institute

New York's Charter Schools Act of 1998 named the State University of New York (SUNY) Board of Trustees a "chartering entity" with authority to approve charter schools statewide. The SUNY Trustees created the SUNY Charter Schools Institute to help it carry out its work as an authorizer. The Institute's rigorous application process for new charter schools includes in-depth interviews with applicants and proposed board members, an extensive academic, fiscal and legal review by Institute staff, and a review by a panel of external experts in the fields of education and school finance. In its oversight and evaluation role, the Institute is in regular communication with all schools. Institute staff, or external evaluators contracted by the Institute, conduct on-site visits in the first, second, and third years of the charter and a comprehensive renewal visit in the school's fifth year. The visits include meetings with the principals or directors, school board members, staff, and students, classroom visits, and reviews of student work. In order for a charter to be renewed, the school must demonstrate that it has increased student achievement over the life of the charter both by the extent to which it has met SUNY's Charter Renewal Benchmarks (in the areas of academic success, organizational viability, fiscal stability, and reasonable and achievable plans for the future) and by the extent to which it has met its academic Accountability Plan goals (SUNY Charter Schools Institute, 2009). Of the 47 SUNY authorized charter schools that have applied for a full-term renewal, SUNY has not renewed, i.e. closed, seven schools. SUNY charter schools predominantly serve minority students (90 percent) and low-income students (76 percent qualify for free or reduced-price meals). Positive results of SUNY charter schools include:

- The average percentage of students in grades 3–8 scoring at the "proficient" level in English language arts in 2008–09 in SUNY-authorized charter schools (80 percent) exceeded the average proficiency rate for non-SUNY-authorized charter schools (73 percent) and all public schools state-wide, charter and non-charter (77 percent).
- There were similar results for mathematics: 92 percent, compared with 89 percent and 86 percent, respectively (SUNY Charter Schools Institute, 2009).

practices. Rigorous studies of the effectiveness of charter schools across multiple states have found that while many charters perform significantly better than state averages, many perform worse. A study of charter schools in 16 states found that 17 percent delivered learning gains for students significantly better than local public schools, but 37 percent delivered significantly worse results than local public schools (CREDO, 2009). A follow-up study focused on charter schools in New York City reversed these numbers, with a smaller percentage (12 percent in reading and 16 percent in math) of charters delivering significantly worse results and a larger percentage (29 percent in reading and 51 percent in math) delivering significantly better results (CREDO, 2010). Out of these, and other, studies, a similar picture emerges: there is a great deal of variation in quality in charter schools, with some schools achieving at levels that are higher than traditional public schools, and some schools achieving at levels that are lower.

This inconsistency in quality stems in part from authorizers employing insufficient rigorous charter renewal and revocation policies, and can be addressed in part by authorizers playing a greater role in monitoring and supporting their schools. A key component of the charter model is authorizers holding charter schools accountable for student achievement to a degree greater than traditional public schools. But despite the high percentages of charters performing worse than local schools, very few charters are shut down for poor academic performance; of the 657 charter schools closed between 1992 and 2009, only 14 percent were closed for reasons related to academic performance, and of the approximately 5600 charters ever opened, only 2 percent have been closed for academic reasons (CER, 2009; CER, 2010). Case studies of high-quality authorizers have found that these authorizers develop a strong talent pool and select quality applicants, support new school operations, provide meaningful and transparent oversight, and hold schools accountable for meeting performance goals (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

This inconsistent quality may also in part be a result of state policies that effectively limit the growth of effective charter schools, or that do not ensure strong authorizing practices. A recent survey of charter laws in every state found that 13 states have in place a cap that either allows no room for growth or only allows limited room for growth; such caps can make it difficult or impossible for even high-performing charters to replicate (NAPCS, 2010). The same survey found that only eight states had in place systems for authorizer accountability that included even some of the important characteristics like an application or registration process in which eligible authorizers must actively seek to become authorizers, submission of annual authorizer reports, an oversight body with the authority to remove the right of authorizers to approve schools, and periodic formal evaluations of the state's charter school program and its outcomes; only two states had in place many of these characteristics (NAPCS, 2010).

A key attribute that allows charters to be successful is the substantial autonomy they enjoy, an autonomy that can be extended to public schools through means other than the chartering process. Greater autonomy can enhance efficiency, strengthen accountability, and allow for innovation and specialization (Plank and Smith, 2008). Plank and Smith's (2008) review of the literature on autonomous schools found that "when skillfully supported with fiscal and other resources" (p. 407), autonomous schools have been associated with greater commitment to local priorities, enhanced

Clark County (Nevada) School District's Autonomous Schools

Nevada's Clark County School District (CCSD) initially designated four district elementary schools as Empowerment Schools during the 2006–07 school year. There are currently 27 Empowerment Schools in CCSD, including one middle school and three high schools, and there will be 28 Empowerment Schools in the 2010–11 school year. Empowerment Schools are predicated on the idea that schools should be given the freedom to determine how to best accomplish their goals and that decisions are most likely to be successful when all stakeholders—including teachers, parents, and community members—are given a voice. Each Empowerment School is led by a principal with autonomy over governance, instruction, staffing, budget, and scheduling decisions. Each Empowerment School creates a School Empowerment Team (SET) comprised of administrators, teachers, support staff, students, parents, and community members. The purpose of the SET is to collectively establish school priorities and decide how the school will operate. Empowerment Schools receive an additional $50,000 per year from community partners. Along with autonomy comes accountability, and Empowerment Schools have set specific achievement targets and receive an incentive of up to two percent of pay if student achievement and school outcome target are met (Clark County School District, 2010; Council for a Better Nevada, 2009). Positive results include:

- Empowerment Schools have increased the percentage of students proficient in mathematics by 10 percentage points and in reading by 6 percentage points when compared with their pre-empowerment proficiency percentages (Council for a Better Nevada, 2009).
- Students in third, fourth, and fifth grades in the original four Empowerment Schools performed significantly better than students in comparison elementary schools in reading and mathematics on 2008–09 state achievement tests (Daellenbach and Carpenter, 2010).
- Parents whose children attend Empowerment Schools are more satisfied with their child's school than parents whose children attend other district schools. For example, 91 percent of parents of students at Empowerment Schools were satisfied with the schools' academic assistance opportunities compared with 82 percent of parents of students attending other district schools (Council for a Better Nevada, 2009).

teacher influence and engagement, and improved relations between schools, parents, and their communities. The literature review also found that sufficient knowledge and capacity at the school level is necessary for autonomous schools to improve student performance. In a study of autonomous high schools known as "innovation" schools in Baltimore, after controlling for student demographics and middle school test scores, students who attended innovation high schools had higher algebra and English state test scores and attendance rates than students attending other high schools in the district (Urban Institute, 2007). Understanding the promise of autonomy, many districts have created autonomous schools programs, including Chicago's Renaissance 2010, New York City's Empowerment Schools, Baton Rouge's Autonomous School Network, and Clark County, Nevada's Empowerment Schools.

Even when choices are available to parents, they may be unaware of their options. A survey by a community-based organization in Chicago found that only 43 percent of respondents knew that charter schools were public schools and only 40 percent knew that charter schools were free for students to attend. A similar percentage (38 percent) had not heard anything about charter schools (TARGET Area Development, 2010). Another study of parents in Denver, Milwaukee, and Washington, DC found that compared with wealthier parents, parents with annual incomes below $20,000 were socially connected to fewer people with knowledge of school choices, felt less well informed, and more often preferred assistance from a "school choice counselor" or parent information center (Teske, Fitzpatrick, and Kaplan, 2007).

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PROMOTING PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE

OUR APPROACH

- **Comprehensive systems.** Grants to LEAs and SEAs to build comprehensive systems and develop programs that give students and families better choices and information.
- **Flexibility in approach.** Grantees may use funds to implement multiple different approaches to increasing choices, which may include inter- and intra-district choice, magnet, online learning, or academic pathways programs.
- **Family empowerment.** Grantees must use funds for family outreach and information, so that families and students are aware of, and able to access, these options.

Both intra-district and inter-district choice programs increase the options available to students and parents and have the ability to produce positive outcomes of students. Low-income and minority families frequently live in areas with high concentrations of low-performing schools, and their limited ability to move residences restricts their ability to select other schools for their children. Many school districts have addressed this inequality of opportunity by offering intra-district choice programs, which allow students and parents to choose a school other than their neighborhood school. Inter-district choice further increases the number of options available to students and their parents. Two studies of intra-district school choice programs found that students who were assigned to low-performing schools and chose to attend a higher-performing school experienced increases in mathematics and reading achievement (Hastings and Weinstein, 2008; Phillips et al., 2009). A comprehensive review of eight inter-district transfer programs found that, after an initial adjustment period, students who

New Haven Public Choice, Connecticut

The New Haven Public Choice project has received two consecutive five-year Voluntary Public School Choice (VPSC) grants from the Department. New Haven is expanding efforts to provide high-quality school choice options to students who attend low-performing Title I schools. The project consists of a range of choice strategies, including inter- and intra-district magnet schools, charter schools, non-magnet schools called Lighthouse Schools, and a transfer program involving 13 urban and suburban school districts called Project Choice. Program practices include investing additional resources in receiving schools to attract students from low-performing schools, investing in a multi-pronged recruitment effort for inter-district magnets, and offering free transportation to promote inter-district magnet program enrollment. More than 15 percent of eligible students participated in New Haven's school choice project in 2007–08 (U.S Department of Education, 2009a). Positive results include:

- In 2005–06, 48 percent of magnet schools in New Haven made adequate yearly progress (AYP) in mathematics and reading, while only 24 percent and 19 percent of non-magnet schools made AYP in the respective subjects (New Haven Public Schools, 2007).
- Students who transfer under VPSC have tended to outperform those remaining in lower-performing schools, regardless of the students' ethnicity, gender, or access to supplemental education (U.S. Department of Education, 2008b).

transferred from urban districts to suburban districts tended to demonstrate achievement gains (Holme and Wells, 2008). Additionally, parents who choose the public school their child attends are more satisfied with their child's school, its teachers, and its order and discipline compared with parents whose child attends a district-assigned school (Tice et al., 2006).

Online courses offer a new tool to expanding choice programs by connecting students to resources regardless of their location or economic circumstance (Lips 2010; Watson et al., 2009; Zucker and Kozma, 2003). Online learning allows students to access advanced or specialized courses and expert teachers, regardless of the school they attend (NEA, 2006; Picciano and Seamen, 2009; Tucker, 2007). A recent synthesis of rigorous research addressing learning outcomes in online courses, mostly at the postsecondary level, generally found that students performed better, on average, in online and blended learning courses than in more traditional face-to-face classes (U.S Department of Education, 2009a). Another study of high school seniors taking online courses in Washington state concluded that the online option increased the proportion of students qualified for a high school diploma (Baker et al., 2006).

Families need better information than is typically provided about their choice options. In 2006–07, 95 percent of Title I districts that were required to offer parents the option of transferring to another school reported notifying parents of this option but only 20 percent of parents in eight large, urban districts said that they were notified of the transfer option (U.S. Department of Education, 2009b). Furthermore, an analysis of 21 notices to parents about Title I school choice found that fewer than half identified the schools from which families could choose or offered advice on how to choose the best school for their child (U.S. Department of Education, 2008a). Better information can make a difference. A study of school choice in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina found that simplified information on school-level achievement gains increased choice participation and that families were more likely to choose schools with higher test scores (Hastings and Weinstein, 2008).

Louisiana's Algebra I Online Project

This pilot project, a part of the Louisiana Virtual School (LVS), provides Louisiana students with a certified Algebra I instructor and with a high quality Algebra I curriculum through a web-based course. The Algebra I Online Project targets rural and urban districts with schools where one or more sections of Algebra I are taught by an uncertified mathematics teacher. In addition, districts desiring to provide certified teachers access to pedagogy training and mentoring in order to build capacity for strong mathematics instruction are eligible to participate. The online teachers are Louisiana secondary certified mathematics teachers who were identified based on their outstanding teaching credentials. These teachers provide year-long instruction to students and mentor the in-class teacher throughout the year. The in-class teacher serves as the site-based facilitator and co-instructor. Students benefit by having two teachers (the certified online teacher and the in-class teacher) who facilitate the in-class algebra learning activities. Students also utilize technologies, such as the graphing calculator, digital tablet, and e-mail (Louisiana Virtual School, 2010).

Positive results include:

- A 2007 quasi-experimental study that compared the learning of students participating in the Louisiana Algebra I Online initiative with the learning of students in comparison classrooms found that online students performed better than their peers in conventional classrooms on a researcher-developed multiple choice test (O'Dwyer et al., 2007).

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