



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
OFFICE OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY

JUL 1 2008

Dr. Gerald L. Zahorchak
Secretary of Education
Pennsylvania Department of Education
333 Market Street
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17126

Dear Secretary Zahorchak:

Thank you for submitting a proposal for the U.S. Department of Education's (Department) differentiated accountability pilot. I appreciate the work you and your staff have done to try to develop a more nuanced way of distinguishing between schools and districts in need of intensive intervention and those that are closer to reaching their goals.

As you know, the Department forwarded Pennsylvania's differentiated accountability proposal to a group of outside peer reviewers who evaluated each proposal to determine whether it was technically sound and consistent with the core principles of the pilot. The peers identified several strengths in Pennsylvania's proposal, including the use of the state growth model, the Pennsylvania Value-Added Assessment System (PVAAS), as a method of differentiation. The peers were also impressed by the way in which Pennsylvania had begun to think about its system of interventions. However, the peers also raised significant specific concerns regarding Pennsylvania's proposal. In particular, the peers were concerned about the lack of evidence of the reliability of the PVAAS, most notably for non-proficient students, and the fact that the model does not require that schools demonstrate anything beyond annual growth to meet the growth component of the differentiation model. The peers also expressed concerns regarding the plan to merely put schools on a "warning" status as long as they meet the growth component, as it appears that a school on "warning" status might receive less attention or fewer interventions than it would receive if it had not met growth. The peers found this particularly troubling because the students in the school that meets the growth component may not be on the path to reach universal proficiency by 2013-14. Finally, the peers expressed concerns over allowing districts identified for improvement to serve as providers of supplemental educational services. Based on the peers' concerns and the Department's own analysis of Pennsylvania's proposal, the Department is not approving Pennsylvania to participate in the differentiated accountability pilot at this time.

In the fall, the Department will once again invite any interested state to submit a proposal to participate in the differentiated accountability pilot for 2009-10 based on assessments administered in 2008-09. Details about the timing of this review are forthcoming. I encourage Pennsylvania to submit a revised proposal so that it may be considered for participation in the pilot in 2009-10. To aid you in this effort, I am enclosing a copy of the peer report regarding Pennsylvania's proposal, as well as a memorandum prepared by the peer reviewers that discusses some of the overarching issues the peers identified during their review of all of the proposals that were submitted for the pilot. Additionally, the Department will be hosting a roundtable later this summer to discuss methods of differentiation and evaluation, and I encourage you to participate in that discussion. Please note that the Department intends to continue to limit participation in the pilot to ten states. Accordingly, I encourage you to review the peers' report and memorandum carefully, and to contact my staff so that we may discuss ways you may be able to refine Pennsylvania's proposal.

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The Department of Education's mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.

Again, I appreciate your interest in the differentiated accountability pilot and your continued efforts to ensure quality education for all children.

Sincerely,



Kerri L. Briggs, Ph.D.

Enclosures

cc: Governor Ed Rendell
Shula Nedley