Selecting a School

Developing a School Improvement Strategy
"A great school will be at the heart of every Promise Neighborhood." (Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, 2009)

Building high-performing schools lies at the core of the Promise Neighborhoods vision. Strong schools are an essential component of the interventions to improve the outcomes of children in distressed community. The Department of Education wants every Promise Neighborhood to have a strong school or schools at the center of its effort. The ability of planning grant applicants to describe their school(s) improvement strategy, or their plan to develop such a strategy, will be important to making their case.

Issues to Consider
1. Understanding the Context. Understanding how schools in the neighborhood are currently performing is a good starting point for developing an improvement strategy. Planning grant applicants will want to take the following steps:

- Determine how schools in the area fit the categories described in the grant requirements. The Promise Neighborhoods Notice Inviting Applications (NIA) requires applicants to work with at least one school in the following categories: "persistently lowest-achieving," "low-performing," or "effective." (Applicants may work with schools outside these categories **in addition to** at least one school in one of these groups.) Information about school designations can be obtained from states' departments of education websites.
- Determine the effects of current or past school improvement efforts. Applicants should find out what interventions, if any, are being tried or have been tried in their community's low-performing schools. What are the impacts of those efforts?
- Examine student achievement trends in the community. Applicants will want to look at reading and math scores as well as other relevant school and achievement indicators in the community. Are they trending up or down? What do they show overall and for subgroups of students, compared to state and national averages?

2. *Forging Partnerships.* In their planning grant applications, sites must indicate the school(s) they intend to work with. This means that applicants need to approach a school or schools about a partnership. Initial reluctance to partner may come from both sides of the equation. In some cases, schools may not understand the value or the mechanics of a broad community-based approach to improving student achievement. Schools also may face restrictions on partnerships due to union regulations or city or state laws. For their part, some community-based organizations may have had previous difficulties navigating school bureaucracies.

Applicants will show strength by indicating how they are positioned to work through potential obstacles to effective and sustainable partnerships. In deciding which school or schools to approach, Promise Neighborhood sites will need to look at many factors. A primary consideration is the strength of the principal. Is the principal committed to achieving the results at the core of Promise Neighborhoods and to using data in a transparent process to measure those results? Is he or she open to a strong school improvement effort? Would *School A* be willing and able to lengthen the school day or year? Would it be receptive to offering health, mental health, social work, and other resources to parents and other neighborhood residents through partnerships? Would*School B* partner with community nonprofits to make available new enrichment resources, including staff for students before, during, and after school? Ultimately, the applicant will need to assess the likelihood of success at any school that is a potential partner.

3. *Considering a Charter School*. Applicants may also want to explore the possibility of starting one or more charter schools. This is a demanding and labor-intensive endeavor that does not automatically lead to academic success for students, so communities need to think carefully about the potential advantages and challenges of this option.

4. *Serving All Children.* Promise Neighborhoods sites ultimately need to offer services to all children in the target area, whether or not they attend the selected school(s). Sites may want to consider a gradual scaling up of their school partnerships, finding the best partner(s) to begin and bringing in all neighborhood schools over time.

5. *Formulating Plans to Improve Outcomes.* Planning grant applicants will need to indicate how they intend to determine their strategy to improve outcomes for children. The Promise Neighborhoods program provides several options for the work that sites do with schools. Sites can:
- Significantly improve one or more persistently **lowest-achieving schools** in the neighborhood by implementing one of the four school intervention models described in the federal Race to the Top program (see below);
- Significantly improve one or more **low-performing schools** by implementing ambitious, rigorous, and comprehensive interventions which may or may not include Race to the Top intervention models; or
- Support and sustain one or more **effective schools** by providing programs that significantly enhance and expand efforts to improve academic outcomes.

In other words, depending on the category of a partner school, sites may need to pursue intervention models from **Race to the Top**, the $4.35 billion federal grant program authorized in 2009. These models are:
- **Turnaround:** Replace the principal and rehire no more than 50 percent of the staff. Grant the new principal sufficient operational flexibility (including in staffing, calendars, and budgeting) to implement a comprehensive approach to substantially improve student outcomes.

- **Restart:** Convert a school or close and reopen it under a charter school operator, a charter management organization, or an education management organization selected through a rigorous review process.
- **Closure:** Close a school and enroll the students who attended that school in higher-achieving schools.
- **Transformation:** Implement each of the following strategies: (1) Replace the principal and take steps to increase teacher and school leader effectiveness; (2) Institute comprehensive instructional reforms; (3) Increase learning time and create community-oriented schools; and (4) Provide operational flexibility and sustained support.

An "**effective school**" is defined as one that has significantly closed the achievement gaps between subgroups of students or has significantly increased achievement for all subgroups of students, and has made significant improvements in other areas, such as graduation rates or recruitment of effective teachers and principals. If applicants choose to work with an effective school, they will need to indicate how their strategy will strengthen and expand current efforts to improve the academic outcomes of children in the neighborhood.

Applicants will need to research laws in their state that govern intervention models for particular categories of schools. States' current or future response to the Race to the Top competition may affect which intervention models can be applied to which schools. States law may be more specific than the Promise Neighborhoods Initiative in prescribing particular intervention models for particular school designations. Finally, whatever intervention applicants pursue, it must: (1) be rigorous and comprehensive enough to significantly improve academic and other outcomes for students; (2) address the effectiveness of teachers and leaders; and (3) consider the school's use of time and resources, including increased learning time.

Questions to Guide You
1. Do we have the expertise and experience in school improvement and reform efforts to ensure that we can plan and implement an effective strategy? If not, how can we integrate this expertise into our leadership and planning?
2. What is our initial thinking about how to seamlessly integrate our school improvement strategy with other elements of our continuum of solutions?
3. How can we ensure that our school reform approach has the necessary buy-in and support from key constituencies, including parents, teachers, school officials, community-based organizations, city officials, and unions?
4. What data collection efforts will we undertake in the planning year to inform our school improvement strategy?
5. What partnerships do we need to form to plan and implement our school improvement strategy?