



MEMORANDUM

To: Mass Insight Partners and Education Reform Leaders
From: William Guenther, president
Date: February 18, 2009
Re: New initiatives and senior staff changes

\$1.5M Carnegie Corporation Grant Launches Three-State Partnership Zone Initiative to Help Transform Failing Schools and District Service Strategies

We are pleased to announce that the Carnegie Corporation of New York's Board of Trustees has awarded a \$1.5 million two-year grant to the Mass Insight Education & Research Institute to launch an intensive school turnaround strategy in three states. The initiative is further supported by matching funds from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for the first phase.

The goal of the initiative will be to significantly increase student achievement by establishing "Partnership Zones," linking lead turnaround partners with small clusters of schools in zones characterized by flexible operating conditions and model compensation systems. States and/or participating districts will commit to expansion of those practices within the district and then scale-up across other districts.

Through a competitive process, Mass Insight will choose three states (represented by a strategic partner and at least one district in each state) that are ready to implement the framework proposed in its groundbreaking 2007 report, *The Turnaround Challenge*. Each district will launch the initiative with a cluster of turnaround schools by the beginning of the 2010-11 school year. More information about the goals of the initiative and our turnaround work in general can be found on the Mass Insight website (www.massinsight.org). Information about the selection process and more details about the program will be forthcoming.

Each of the three sites will customize its approach, but will focus on two central strategies:

- ***Lead Partners: New-model partnerships that provide school leaders with deeply embedded lead turnaround partners that share accountability for achievement and authority to make staffing and mission-driven decisions, and that act as "systems integrators" with all other partners working in the school***
- ***Model Operating Conditions: Resources, policies, and new structures within the Partnership Zones – supported by the district and, as necessary, the state – in an effort to break the mold on compensation systems and ensure flexible operating authority regarding staff, use of time and budget, and programming, across strategically organized clusters of turnaround schools.***

Announced on the eve of a major infusion of innovation and incentive funds by the U.S. Education Department, this initiative will serve a vital role, we believe, as a proof point for the reform framework that Mass Insight developed for *The Turnaround Challenge* (which has now been downloaded more than 110,000 times). So do our funders and other partners.

Observes Michele Cahill, Vice-President of the Carnegie Corporation (and former senior counselor to NYC Department of Education Chancellor Joel Klein): “This Mass Insight initiative will integrate and apply lessons from some of the nation’s most extensive efforts to transform public education and to dramatically improve the performance of schools serving the highest need students, including reforms going on in Chicago and New York City, and redefine how urban school districts work – how they use partners and the kind of conditions necessary to ensure achievement for all students.”

Cahill is echoed by Don Feinstein, Executive Director of the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL), which runs a Chicago turnaround initiative that is very close to Mass Insight’s turnaround strategy – partly because the Chicago Public Schools based its turnaround RFP on Mass Insight’s framework. “Under Arne Duncan’s leadership,” says Don, “Chicago has been a leader in supporting strong, effective partnerships that have successfully transformed struggling schools. Mass Insight’s Partnership Zones are a terrifically promising opportunity for districts and lead partner organizations like AUSL to bring best practices to scale.” The announcement last December by then President-Elect Barack Obama of Duncan’s nomination to serve as Secretary of Education was held at one of the AUSL success-story turnaround schools in Chicago.

Former Boston Public Schools leader Mike Contompasis joins Mass Insight; strategic partnerships established; Andy Calkins moves to the Stupski Foundation

All of this work will mean significant expansion for Mass Insight’s School Turnaround Strategies division. There are a number of new developments on that front, as follows:

We’re proud to announce that Michael Contompasis is joining our turnaround group, effectively immediately. Mike, who was the longtime COO for Tom Payzant at the helm of the Boston Public Schools, will serve Mass Insight as interim president and CEO for the organization’s School Turnaround Division while we conduct a search for a full-time divisional president this spring (see description at <http://www.massinsight.org/about/jobs.aspx>). After that position is filled, Mike will stay on with us as a senior field service director, helping to lead the work in the three Partnership Zone sites. Mike already serves as chair of the board of trustees for our other division, the Advanced Placement®-focused Massachusetts Math & Science Initiative (MMSI) – Massachusetts’ primary high school excellence project and part of the six-state National Math & Science Initiative.

We couldn’t be more gratified that Mike has chosen Mass Insight and this initiative to focus his considerable talent and vast experience. He has worked at every level in urban education – including for 22 years as headmaster of Boston Latin School, the nation’s oldest public school – and has emerged as a driven and creative reformer whose instincts and skills are a perfect match with our own convictions about the need for genuine transformation, not just incremental change, in urban education.

Going forward, we're going to be working closely with Josh Baron, the Apollo Philanthropy Partners consultant who has spearheaded our turnaround strategic planning process, on an on-going basis to help implement our turnaround initiatives. Josh formerly worked at Bridgespan, where he was deeply involved in consulting work with a number of organizations – including AUSL, the group I mentioned earlier – that are prominent leaders in the nascent field of school turnaround.

We have been or will be working with a growing array of other partners on turnaround-related projects, as well: among them, the National Governors Association (as its chief strategist on a linked cohort of four turnaround-committed states); the Communities Foundation of Texas (on turnaround design in its home state); The Parthenon Group, the noted consulting firm; Cambridge Education, the U.K.-based school reform organization; and SchoolWorks, the national school performance evaluation and research group (and the organization that conducts the district reviews for the Broad Prize).

This capacity-building is happening at the right time, as I am also writing to let you know that Andy Calkins, our Senior Vice President and my long-time partner in school reform, has accepted a position with the San Francisco-based Stupski Foundation. The foundation's mission is to improve life options for children of color and poverty through education that prepares them for college, career, and life readiness in the 21st century. As Senior Program Officer, Andy will join other senior staff in developing and implementing initiatives to operationalize the foundation's new strategic direction, focused on galvanizing the radical reinvention of the education industry – not unlike Mass Insight's own education reform divisions (turnaround and the Massachusetts Math & Science Initiative), which are designed to generate transformational change. It's an exciting proposition and a great opportunity for Andy.

It's also going to be a promising opportunity for us, as Stupski has indicated strong interest in Mass Insight's work and there's a reasonable possibility that the two organizations will work together in the future. See www.stupski.org for more.

An opportunity to generate transformational change – not just incremental improvement

The challenge of failing schools is reaching crisis proportions. More than 5,000 schools are likely to be “in need of restructuring” under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) by the end of this school year. Research by Mass Insight and other organizations shows that the current set of NCLB intervention options has generally not produced successful results, in large part because districts and schools have tended to pursue fairly incremental “light touch” reform strategies.

Mass Insight's Partnership Zone approach addresses the challenges of limited capacity, restricted financial resources, and insufficient authority to implement major change.

Chronically under-performing schools, as we argue in *The Turnaround Challenge*, represent the most politically realistic entry points for states, districts, school leaders, and school partner organizations to attack the incremental nature of most reforms to date, and to cause the swift creation of substantial new capacity to help transform the nation's neediest schools. We look forward to working with you towards that end.