



## **SCALING INNOVATION TO CAUSE IMPACT –**

Recommendations for a Second Term: A Federal Transition Memorandum



## MEMORANDUM

To: U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan  
From: Brian Ross, President and CEO of KnowledgeWorks  
Date: November 16, 2012  
Subject: Scaling Innovation to Cause Impact – Recommendations for a Second Term

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The start of a second term provides a key opportunity to scale innovative and evidence based practice in K-12 education. KnowledgeWorks believes the federal government should accelerate four key areas of reform to accomplish this: competency based education, turnaround of struggling K-12 schools, community and collective impact, and strengthening the capacity of states to respond to educational challenges. KnowledgeWorks encourages the Administration to consider the following series of recommendations as it begins the hard work of charting an education agenda for the next four years. A federal agenda that focuses on scaling these innovative reforms will maximize the government's positive impact on our nation's schools.

### Who is KnowledgeWorks

KnowledgeWorks (KW) is an operating foundation focused on scaling innovative and proven practices to ensure that all students in the country are prepared for college and a meaningful career. In more than 185 schools and 80 communities in more than 25 States, we provide innovative tools, training and assistance to school leaders, teachers and community stakeholders to drive positive change. The KW portfolio includes three subsidiary organizations: [EDWorks](#), [New Tech Network](#), and [Strive](#). Our subsidiaries' extensive track record of helping reform districts, communities, and schools, provides KnowledgeWorks with a strong foundation for helping the federal government scale success.

### KnowledgeWorks' portfolio consists of three main objectives:

- (1) First, we work to change the way teaching and learning happens in our schools through [EDWorks](#) and the [New Tech Network](#). These organizations develop and help administrators and teachers implement innovative and more effective learning environments.
- (2) Second, we help engage community leaders to enable them to build civic infrastructure aimed at developing accountability, delivering resources, and most importantly sustaining reform within a community through [Strive](#). Strive assists in the creation of a shared community vision and empowers stakeholders to organize action and investment around data and evidence.
- (3) Lastly, we educate legislators, policy makers, educators, business leaders and the community at large on [future trends in teaching and learning](#) and the mechanisms to implement these ideas.

Our portfolio helps districts, communities, and schools come together to design local solutions, scale effective practices, and produce results.

## Why Now

The last four years has been a time of substantial change for our education system. Race to the Top and state waivers of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) incentivized states to change numerous laws and policies. Much of this change focused on mechanics, such as the number of charter schools in a state, how and if teacher evaluation can take place, new accountability structures, and the implementation of college and career ready standards. These were important changes that inspired a significant redesign of how states, school districts and schools themselves approach their mission of educating our nation's children. While states have implemented, or are in the process of implementing these changes, we need to encourage the next set of complementary reforms to take hold and further ensure our states, districts, and schools continue to move forward.

As the Administration looks to expand upon its existing efforts, learning from the first four years is crucial. We need to expand upon changing structures and ensure our schools and communities have the knowledge to tackle and overcome the educational challenges facing their children and educators. In short, we need to bring what we have learned to scale. We believe the recommendations we propose do just that.

## What we are Proposing and How it can be Accomplished

A focused effort by the Administration and Congress should build upon the change initiated during the last four years, focusing on the innovative ideas that maximize the ability of our K-12 schools to increase student achievement and prepare students for college and careers. At a time when federal and state resources are increasingly stretched, we must be smarter with education funding if we are to continue improving outcomes for our nation's children.

To bring what we have learned to scale, we recommend policy proposals in four areas: competency based learning, helping local communities turn around struggling schools, engaging communities to have impact, and helping states boost their capacity to drive change and innovation. Each section below describes how we believe these areas can be addressed by both administrative and congressional action.

### Competency Based Learning

We believe the current focus on seat time over actual mastery of academic content and skills fails to be a sufficient predictor of student success. Rather than rewarding students and teachers for having reached the end of the semester or class, we should instead value whether a student can demonstrate knowledge of a subject or mastery of a skill. When current K-12 students enter the workforce, their ability to demonstrate the knowledge and skills necessary to complete a task is more valuable than whether they have a certain course on their high school transcript. Responding to this, several states, including

#### What is Competency Based Learning?

Competency-based learning divorces academic attainment from seat time and instead focuses in on whether a skill or knowledge is mastered through means such as personalized learning opportunities. With a focus on mastery, students are more likely to be engaged and better outcomes can be achieved because the pace of learning is tailored to the student.

Ohio and Michigan<sup>1</sup>, made it possible for students to earn credits through a competency based approach.

For this reason, we believe the Department of Education should help scale competency based learning for states and districts that wish to adopt this approach. Under such a proposal we recommend the Department take one or all of the following approaches:

- (1) Require states receiving assessment funding under section 6111 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (State Assessment funding) to develop competency based learning assessments for use by a limited number of breakthrough school districts;
- (2) Provide states with an incentive payment to empower districts to adopt or develop competency based learning approaches; and/or
- (3) Condition future state ESEA waiver requests on the adoption of such an initial program.

Under any of these approaches, a state would be required to define the competencies aligned to state standards and adopt a new accountability system that supports a competency based approach. The state would then select a limited number of school districts to pilot competency based strategies under this new system. Although students in the selected districts would take the assessments required of all students in the state for comparison purposes, these districts would be held accountable to student achievement on demonstrations of competency. Lastly, we recommend that participating school districts develop and implement personalized learning plans for all students. We believe these proposals could be executed through a combination of administrative and legislative action.

### Competency Based Education in Action

By transitioning away from seat time in 2009, Indiana paved the way for schools to customize the pace and place of learning. This flexibility empowered the New Tech Network to open 23 schools in Indiana to help students gain the knowledge and deeper learning skills necessary to succeed in life, college, and career. Students in these schools now use rubrics that outline the concepts and skills they need to demonstrate competency through the collection and defense of projects. Students present their evidence in relation to the rubric and negotiate their grade with the teacher accordingly.

A critical element of making such an approach work is a robust and adaptable data system that includes data backpacks for children. Data backpacks, a concept developed by Digital Learning Now!<sup>2</sup>, are electronic records of each student's academic history, including official transcript data, and teacher comments and input, that travels with a student from course to course, classroom to classroom, grade to grade and school to school. These backpacks are an essential tool for developing personalized learning plans in a competency learning environment. To accomplish this, we recommend that each district participating in a competency based pilot program develop data backpacks for all children.

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<sup>1</sup>Both Ohio and Michigan have State laws allowing students to earn high school credit outside of the normal school-based environment through various competency based demonstrations. See the following links: <http://www.ode.state.oh.us/GD/Templates/Pages/ODE/ODEDetail.aspx?page=3&TopicRelationID=1427&ContentID=61432> and [http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/5-O-B\\_SeatTimeWaivers\\_329678\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/5-O-B_SeatTimeWaivers_329678_7.pdf)

<sup>2</sup><http://digitallearningnow.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/DLN-Smart-Series-Databack-Final1.pdf>

To make competency based education a reality, we must develop a highly effective workforce of teachers and leaders with the skills to succeed in a personalized, student driven environment. **Therefore, we also recommend a targeted approach to prepare and scale a competency based educator workforce:**

- (1) Expand upcoming Department of Education regulations on Title II of the Higher Education Act to include reporting on which schools of education provide training to prospective teachers on competency based learning and personalized learning plans. This is an administrative action which the Department could execute in the short term.
- (2) Require school districts receiving funds under Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to devote a portion of such funds to training teachers in competency based teaching strategies, including development and implementation of personalized learning plans. This approach would require a legislative change which could be made in the upcoming reauthorization of ESEA.

## Turning Around Struggling Schools

Effective school turnaround is complicated and multifaceted work, but it must be brought to scale if we are going to close achievement gaps and ensure all children are college and career ready. While the Department of Education emphasized turnaround of low performing schools in its Race to the Top and School Improvement Grant (SIG) programs, and its state ESEA waivers, our work has taught us that additional steps are necessary to increase the pace of turning around the most challenged schools.

To expand upon these results, and to more effectively utilize existing resources devoted to turning around struggling schools, **we recommend supporting schools on track to becoming the worst performing; scaling effective turnaround programs and providers; and driving collaboration in school turnaround efforts through the following actions:**

- (1) Reserve a portion of the SIG national activities set-aside to encourage states to scale effective practices and providers in schools which are not SIG eligible but are on a trend line towards this designation. States receiving these additional resources must implement a system of early intervention for these schools by first analyzing the reasons for their lack of performance and the measures necessary to address it. We believe this could be accomplished through administrative action, as the legislative authority provided by the Department in appropriations legislation for the national activity set-aside in the SIG program is broad.
- (2) Increase the Title I set-aside for school improvement activities and target the additional resources to drive intrastate collaboration among school districts with low performing schools. Specifically, the state would utilize these resources to encourage school districts to work together to turn around their lowest performing schools. Collaborative efforts should focus on building district capacity by scaling strategies shown to work at the school level. We believe this proposal would require legislative action to accomplish.
- (3) Require school districts using SIG funding to partner with community organizations and entities to leverage these resources. Our work has shown that school turnaround efforts often don't reach their full potential without the knowledge, skills and resources of the community. We believe this proposal could be accomplished through administrative action in the short term if limited to the SIG program.

## Community & Collective Impact

Communities and the organizations, businesses, and people that make them up, understand the challenges facing their schools. Our collective success depends on our ability to better leverage their time, expertise, and resources to support comprehensive education reform.

An infusion of community resources is not enough on its own however. A collaborative approach must also include a greater emphasis on outcomes and results. Too many federal grant programs do not demand measurable results and do not seek the outcomes we need to determine a program's effectiveness.

In order to maximize collective impact, we recommend incentives to scale greater community involvement in competitive school grant programs; requirements that programs meet quantifiable goals or lose funding; and greater public reporting on an expanded set of community outcomes:

- (1) Require recipients of federal competitive grants to secure additional private and non-Federal resources (either through the matching of funding, services or other in-kind contributions) at greater rates in the latter half of a grant cycle and use those resources to scale best practices. Federal funding would become a smaller and smaller portion of the funds spent by a grantee. If a grantee cannot meet this higher match, they would lose the remainder of the Federal grant funds. This would improve sustainability of effective programs and ensure that philanthropic dollars support the most effective practices identified by the grantee's continuous improvement process. We believe this approach would require legislative changes.
- (2) Require all federal grantees to meet quantifiable goals during key points in the grant cycle. If these goals are not met, the grant funding, no matter what stage of the process, would not continue. We believe this approach could be accomplished through administrative action.
- (3) Expand report card requirements under Title I of ESEA to provide a comprehensive picture of student learning. These outcomes should be developed collaboratively by school districts and the communities they are designed to inform, and span the spectrum of learning, with a minimum focus on entering kindergarten prepared to succeed in school, reading at grade level by the end of third grade, and graduating high school college- and career-ready. More robust reporting on indicators will give educators and community members actionable data to improve programs and outcomes. We believe this would require legislative changes to accomplish.

## Boosting State Capacity

Over the last few years, states have become the driver of much of the reforms in our nation's schools. Increasingly federal law and programs offered by many on both sides of the aisle recognize this fact. We propose to build upon this trend by ensuring that federal programs and resources support the development and improvement of state capacity to respond to the challenges facing their schools and school districts. States armed with the means and ability to drive reform among their schools will be effective at driving change. Greater awareness and use of evidence based practices is critical to the success of the states. For too long federal formula and competitive grant programs have not required or even incentivized the use of evidence based practices. This translates into less effective use of federal, state, and local funds, resulting in poorer outcomes for children.

To remedy this, we recommend incentives for states to establish public-private entities focused on identifying and scaling innovative practices; more effective use of Title I funding to replicate the use of evidence based practices; and greater use of evidence-based approaches by those receiving federal grants:

- (1) Encourage states to establish public-private agencies<sup>3</sup> that can identify and scale innovative practices proven to drive better outcomes for children. States could use these agencies to scale effective practices that are difficult or challenging for existing state educational agencies.
- (2) Incentivize states to use evidence based practices by allowing states to keep a larger portion of federal funding when outcomes are met. This could be accomplished through competitive grants and certain formula programs such as the Title I state set-aside. We believe this can be accomplished through a series of administrative and legislative actions.
- (3) States should give priority to competitive grant applicants proposing to use evidence based practices. We believe this largely must be accomplished through legislative changes, but in some programs, such as the SIG program, this may be done administratively.

## Conclusion

In order to scale innovation to cause impact, the next set of federal education reforms must build on the strategies and programs with a proven track record of success. Without a critical focus on competency based learning, turning around struggling schools, community and collective impact, and building state capacity, we will miss a critical opportunity to leverage federal resources toward better outcomes for our nation's children and the schools that educate them.

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<sup>3</sup>Existing examples of this include public private partnerships in Colorado and Kentucky. See Colorado Legacy Foundation: <http://colegacy.org/>. See the Fund for Transforming Education in Kentucky: <http://education.ky.gov/comm/Documents/R072tekfund.pdf>.