

## SWIFT Center

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# **Leading Education Reform Initiatives: How SWIFT (Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation) Coordinates and Enhances Impact**

Prepared by

Mary Kingston (Institute for Educational Leadership)

Curtis Richards (Institute for Educational Leadership)

Rolf Blank (Council of Chief State School Officers)

Jennifer Stonemeier (TASH)

Barbara Trader (TASH)

Bill East (National Association of State Directors of Special Education)

## Leading Education Reform Initiatives: How SWIFT (Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation) Coordinates and Enhances Impact

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### Abstract

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In this Issue Brief we discuss the impact that the Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) has on improving the outcomes of several current federal, state, district, and school education reform initiatives. Federal initiatives include Race to the Top, School Improvement Grants, and Campaign for Grade-Level Reading; Common Core State Standards is a state-led initiative; and district or school-level initiatives include Universal Design for Learning, Multi-Tiered System of Support with embedded Response to Intervention and Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. We examine how the SWIFT approach can bring about more effective implementation and stronger buy-in and collaboration among key stakeholders for these initiatives, as well as improve sustainability for long-term impact on student achievement.

### Context: SWIFT

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The SWIFT Center is a national technical assistance center that provides academic and behavioral support for all K-8 students, including those with the most significant disabilities. The SWIFT Center partners with the whole school community in ways that positively transform learning outcomes for all students. The SWIFT framework builds on a long record of research documenting the positive benefits of inclusive approaches to teaching and learning for students with varying aptitudes, prior achievements, and socio economic advantages and disadvantages. SWIFT offers a comprehensive set of services and assistance to implement, evaluate, and scale-up inclusive education in states, districts, and schools. SWIFT Center's current state partners are Maryland, Mississippi, New Hampshire, Oregon, and Vermont.

Compelling research shows that the features of SWIFT significantly improve schoolwide student achievement (Sailor, 2009). For example, through implementation of the Schoolwide Applications Model (SAM), the White Church Elementary School became the highest-performing elementary school in Kansas in 2005. On the 2000 state assessments, only 29% of their students scored above proficient in math and only 42% scored above proficient in reading. By 2005 100% of students scored above proficient in math and 87.5% scored above proficient in

reading, including all but 1% of students in the school who were assessed using alternate achievement standards for some special education students.

SAM schools also narrowed the achievement gap between students with disabilities who have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and the rest of the students. For example, at three schools in Washington, DC that fully implemented SAM, students with IEPs rapidly increased their scaled scores to narrow the achievement gap between themselves and their non-IEP peers by 1.32 points in reading and by almost 3 points in math over the course of two years (Choi & Sailor, 2014). The rate of growth for students with disabilities out-paced the rate of growth for students without IEPs, indicating a deliberate focus by the schools on narrowing this achievement gap.

## Context: Federal and State Reform Initiatives

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State education agencies and districts have the opportunity to participate in four major reform initiatives that can be integrated with the SWIFT framework: Race to the Top, School Improvement Grants, Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, and Common Core State Standards. These programs are briefly described.

*Race to the Top:* A competitive grant for which states may apply, Race to the Top grants have been awarded to 18 states plus the District of Columbia, including Maryland (one of the five states partnered with the SWIFT Center). The Race to the Top grant requires applicants to commit to addressing four key areas:

- Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace
- Building data systems that measure student growth and success, and that inform teachers and principals how to improve instruction
- Recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most
- Turning around the persistently lowest-performing schools (Race to the Top Fund, 2013)

*School Improvement Grants:* School Improvement Grants, or SIG, are distributed in each state to the schools that are the lowest performing, or roughly 5,000 schools nationwide. These grants are intended to assist the schools in implementing a significant turnaround in student academic achievement. The SIG program received \$3.5 billion through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in addition to the \$500 million already appropriated to these schools through

Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. A school receiving a SIG grant must implement one of four models permissible under the grant—turnaround, restart, school closure, or transformation (SIG, 2013). Recently lawmakers added a fifth permissible model, “whole school reform,” which allows schools to try out interventions that have moderate track records of success.

*The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading:* A joint effort among foundations, nonprofit partners, states and communities nationwide, the Campaign focuses on tackling the challenge posed by the indicator that reading proficiency in 3rd grade is the most important predictor of high school graduation and career success, and that each year more than 80% of low-income children fall short of this benchmark. The Campaign pursues the goal of having more children in low-income families succeed in school and graduate “prepared for college, a career, and active citizenship” (Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, 2013, p. 1).

*Common Core State Standards (CCSS):* CCSS are rigorous college and career-ready standards adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia. CCSS is an opportunity to influence the development and implementation of curricula and assessments. The implementation of CCSS is the responsibility of state education agencies, school districts and education services providers, including regional technical assistance centers, university-based specialists, and professional organizations. The transition of curriculum and instruction and professional learning toward the CCSS is typically organized by staff with subject area expertise (math, reading, and writing) or by staff who have a particular role in the system (principal, teacher, instructional coach, special educator). Five consortia of states (two focused on general education, two on special education, and one on English language proficiency) are developing corresponding assessments for these new standards that will be available for states to implement in the 2014-2015 school year (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013).

## Context: District and School Level Reform Initiatives

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At the district or school level, administrators implement a number of initiatives that can be integrated with the SWIFT framework to address the learning needs and opportunities of all children. These initiatives include: Universal Design for Learning, Multi-tiered System of Support/Response to Intervention, and Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. These programs are briefly described.

*Universal Design for Learning (UDL):* UDL is a set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn. UDL provides a blueprint for creating

instructional goals, environments, methods, materials, and assessments that can work for everyone—not a single, one-size-fits-all solution—but rather flexible approaches that can be customized and adjusted for individual needs (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2013). UDL focuses on three elements: (a) multiple means of teaching (e.g., multi-modal), (b) multiple means of expression (e.g., oral and written tests), and (c) multiple means of student engagement e.g., maximizing student motivation to tackle difficult material (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2013).

*Multi-Tiered System of Support/Response to Intervention (MTSS/RTI):* Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) is *inclusive academic and behavior instruction* that provides evidence-based tiered interventions to improve outcomes for ALL students. MTSS consistently and frequently use data for decision making and for flexible grouping of students for differentiated instruction and supports. Response to Intervention (RTI) is designed for making decisions about when to access specialized education resources and supports. MTSS/RTI creates a well-integrated system of instruction and support that is guided by student outcome data (Sailor, 2009; RTI Action Network, 2013). According to a brief issued by the National Center for Learning Disabilities (2013), more than 40 states have adopted their own version of MTSS/RTI.

*Schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS):* SWPBIS is applied schoolwide, in conjunction with MTSS, as a decision-making framework that guides selection, integration, and implementation of the best evidence-based academic and behavioral practices for improving important academic and behavior outcomes for all students (OSEP, 2013).

## Issues

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Although these reform initiatives result in states, districts, and schools examining their practices and modifying them to better support, engage, and challenge students, as a nation the U.S. still falls short on many measures of effectively educating children and youth. Every year more than one million students do not graduate from high school on time. Nationwide only about 78% of students earn their high school diplomas in four years (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2013). The graduation rate is lower for students with specific learning disabilities—just 68% of this group of students graduated from high school with a regular diploma during the 2010-2011 school year (Cortiella, 2013).

Reading and math scores of U.S. students measured on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, show a majority of students are still not proficient in reading and math and these scores have remained relatively stagnant over the years. In 2011, only 34% of 4th and 8th

grade students scored proficient in reading, and only 40% of 4th grade students and 35% of 8th grade students scored proficient in math.

Meanwhile, since 1992, the average 4th grade reading score has climbed just four points, to 221, on a 0-to-500 scale and the average 8th grade score rose five points (Robelen, 2011).

Approximately 70% of all students entering 9th grade read below grade level, and almost 2,000 high schools across the country graduate less than 60% of their students (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2013).

Although the rate of youth in confinement has dropped by 41% since 1995, as of 2010 we still had 63,565 youth in jail (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013). Early intervention for student success is critical, since students who do not read proficiently by 3rd grade are four times more likely to leave school without a diploma than proficient readers (Hernandez, 2012).

Finally, many U.S. young adults are not well prepared the 21st century workforce. Currently, industry advocates estimate that more than three million unfilled skilled jobs currently exist in the U.S. economy and that the U.S. will still fall short by at least 3 million middle- and high-skill workers by 2018 (Achieve, 2013).

In addition to these national challenges, each of the initiatives discussed in this brief represent a significant undertaking that depends on the support and collaboration of many stakeholders. We will examine three barriers that are slowing the progress of these federal, state, and school initiatives below.

### *Inadequate Capacity*

Schools, districts, and states often lack the capacity to develop and implement some federal initiatives resulting in varying levels of support, fidelity, and preparedness according to reports from the field. A report from the Center on Education Policy cited a survey of state Title I directors in which only slightly more than one-third of the respondents said their state had adequate numbers of staff and sufficient time to assist with implementing School Improvement Grants (McMurrer & McIntosh, 2012). The School Turnaround Group noted that among applicants for the first cohort of School Improvement Grants, “many districts submitted independent, largely school-level strategies and failed to describe how the district would also transform itself in order to support these schools. Schools that have failed to improve for multiple years do not have the capacity to do this alone; the district must be a key player” (Shea & Liu, 2010, p. 10).

A report from the Center for American Progress on the implementation of Race to the Top grants noted that many states had inadequate capacity (Boser, 2012). North Carolina, for example, was mentioned as having delayed its instructional improvement system, an initiative that aims to help teachers improve classroom practice. David Sciarra (2012), executive director of the Education Law Center, pointed out that Race to the Top grantee states are those that have unequal state funding formulas and will not (and may choose not) to have the capacity to sustain the reforms they promised in their applications after the program funding is spent.

Similarly, the Center for American Progress Race to the Top implementation review noted the need for states to build adequate capacity for reform at the state and district levels:

States promised a great deal in their Race to the Top grants. If states plan to achieve these lofty goals they will need to do far more to improve capacity at the state and local levels to deliver on their promises. This means investing in both the people and the technology needed to produce results. It also means creating better management structures so that educators have the autonomy to innovate (Boser, 2012, p. 4).

ASCD (formerly the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development), a nonprofit association of roughly 140,000 educators, hosted four statewide summits to learn more about their members' thoughts and concerns about implementing CCSS. ASCD found that "educators are unclear about where to focus their instructional efforts, and many school leaders are overwhelmed by trying to lead multiple, major reform efforts and uncertain about where to direct professional development. Furthermore, the simultaneous reforms have exceeded the capacity of most state and local education agencies, compromising educators' ability to best implement any reform" (ASCD, 2012, p. 12).

#### *Insufficient Collaboration and/or Communication among Key Stakeholders*

The successes of implementing the whole-school initiatives led by districts or schools are dependent on strong leadership at the district and school levels, as well as the level of collaboration, training, understanding, and buy-in among key stakeholders. Strong leadership and support from the state education agency is also critical.

A survey from approximately 90 participants in a virtual forum conducted by the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (Sopko, 2008) cited the top ten challenges to implementing UDL (Universal Design for Learning). Most of these challenges are related directly to stakeholder collaboration and buy-in, including how to:

- Engage and excite educators at all levels: pre-service, in-service, mentors, coaches, and higher education faculty
- Communicate and ensure that all stakeholders understand the problems UDL addresses and the benefits/solutions UDL offers

- Integrate UDL and technology within school cultures and communities
- Identify and provide the support needed for the effective implementation of UDL, including existing practices and initiatives as well as newly available tools and resources to encourage and sustain the engagement of educators and families
- Re-examine current systems through two lenses: those that impede the implementation of UDL and those that encourage the collaboration and cooperation needed to implement UDL.

Similarly, the Center for American Progress assessing states' performance in Race to the Top implementation noted the need for better communication and buy-in among key stakeholders, including teachers, parents, teacher unions and other stakeholders (Boser, 2012). Mass Insight Education also cited insufficient communication by several states about the School Improvement Grant program, what it is, and who is eligible. This insufficient communication resulted in many eligible schools in those states not applying for funds or submitting very poor applications (Shea & Liu, 2010).

#### *Inadequate Funding to Implement and Sustain Reform in a Tight-Budget Era*

The unforeseen costs of implementing some federal grants, sometimes surpassing the actual funding grantees have received, imposes a financial burden on grantees and risks sustaining these efforts. The Race to the Top program has earned the most criticism for this. In New York, for example, the Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach at the State University of New York at New Paltz found

In six Rockland County districts, leaders projected a total four-year cost of almost \$11 million. This compares with an aggregate revenue of about \$400K in Race to the Top funding—a \$10 million deficit representing an increase in average per pupil spending for this single initiative of nearly \$400 per student (Mitchell, 2012, p. 2).

Similarly, in a sample of 18 Lower Hudson school districts, the aggregate cost just to prepare for the first year of Race to the Top in September 2012 was \$6,472,166, and the aggregate funding was only \$520,415 (Mitchell, 2012). As a result, these 18 districts had a cost differential of \$5,951,751 to make up with local taxpayer dollars. Additionally, shrinking state and district education budgets in a time of overall increases in student enrollment poses another financial challenge as local and state superintendents craft their budgets. Between 2008 and 2011, at least 34 states and the District of Columbia cut aid to K-12 schools and various education programs (Johnson, Oliff, & Williams, 2011), and this decreased state funding was compounded by the impact of the subsequent sequester that cut funding for all federal education programs by 5%. Meanwhile, total public elementary and secondary enrollment is projected to set new records every year from now to 2020 (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).



## Lessons

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At the outset of this Issue Brief we suggested that the approach to school and district reform offered by the SWIFT Center could enhance implementation of federal initiatives, create stronger buy-in and collaboration among key stakeholders, and result in better sustainability, so that the initiatives could bring long term positive impact on student achievement. Below we address how the SWIFT approach takes on three barriers that are slowing implementation of federal, state, district and school initiatives.

### *Addressing Inadequate Capacity*

The SWIFT framework for technical assistance supports leadership at the district and state levels to help schools break down any artificial barriers that result in operating and funding “silos.” The process of opening communication and functioning is not simply for the short-term, but addresses the long-term relationships among stakeholders. As a result, not only do teachers learn new inclusive practices, but schoolwide and district-level policies and practices also improve when principals as well as district-and state-level administrators embrace an integrated systems approach.

For each district or school-level initiative listed in this Brief (i.e., UDL, MTSS/RTI, SWPBIS), the SWIFT framework enhances the capacity of those implementing to adopt the approaches collaboratively and seamlessly. A unity of purpose emerges under a common strategy of inclusiveness, rather than operating separately and with different objectives and strategies. In a SWIFT scenario, teams of both general and special educators work to ensure the SWIFT principles and strategies guide plans for all populations of students, thereby increasing the capacity of all educators to implement the same strategies schoolwide.

The SWIFT approach builds a data wall to collect reliable and valid behavioral and academic data to help choose appropriate instruction and supports for students in all levels of the MTSS/RTI system. The SWIFT approach makes such data readily accessible to educators and recommends key steps for improvement (Lane et al., 2010). This crucial sharing and application of data is designed to increase the capacity of all stakeholders to best serve the unique needs of each student.

SWIFT Center technical assistance uses an exploration self-assessment tool to examine the capacity of schools and communities to implement the SWIFT framework. The tool is designed to assist school, community, district, and state leaders' efforts to determine:

- How ready are we to implement SWIFT?
- What elements of SWIFT are already in place in our schools?
- Where and how can we strengthen our system to sustain SWIFT?

#### *Addressing Insufficient Collaboration and Communication among Key Stakeholders*

The SWIFT Center technical assistance strengthens the states' implementation of the federal, state, district and school initiatives by bringing a collaborative approach to implementation. SWIFT provides a systems design for organization and improvement of instruction based on teams of leaders and specialists working together to define needed change and assistance for students and teachers.

Transition to instruction with CCSS will require many schools to change classroom instructional practices, to more frequently use data to analyze student needs, and collaboration among teachers across grades and specializations in order for student learning to meet these more demanding standards. The SWIFT approach to identifying and addressing needs of students and teachers provides the kind of teamwork and ground-up solutions called for by CCSS.

Similarly, SWIFT can strengthen a SIG initiative through an emphasis on partnering, collaborating, and communicating with all relevant stakeholders to produce positive change. Researcher David Stuit (2012) notes that schools that remain low performing year after year continue to produce low-performing students despite incentives and various efforts on the part of states and districts to enforce change. Two important factors that contribute to this challenge are (a) specialized programs with services that go only to some and not all students who need the services, and (b) disengagement of family members from their children's schools due to inadequate outreach on the part of the school. The SWIFT approach is uniquely positioned to address these challenges through its strategy to assist the school leadership and staff to integrate and use all school resources for the benefit of all students, and to emphasize parent and community partnerships as critical components of effective school turnaround (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Easton, & Luppescu., 2010; Turnbull et al., 2010).

The SWIFT framework can also strengthen the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading's focus on stronger parent involvement as a means of helping all students read on grade level by 3rd grade. SWIFT implements a system of documenting and sharing with parents their children's academic, social, emotional and health profiles. As a result, parents have a comprehensive understanding of their children's educational progress on multiple measures, as opposed to just knowing their

math and reading scores, their special education status, etc. Adopting the SWIFT approach in schools that are partnering with the Campaign's efforts will better guarantee that children of low-income families can read proficiently by the 3rd grade and subsequently graduate from high school and meet with career success.

Further, SWIFT Center's Field Guide for administrators, educators, families, and community members increases collaboration and communication among these key stakeholders. This Internet accessible tool provides guidance for teams to address the leadership, teacher support systems, evidenced-based instruction, organizational structures, policy revisions, and family and community engagement partnerships needed to transform schools to educate all learners.

Key stakeholder groups including school districts and state education departments may collaborate with one another in applying these recommendations. These stakeholders include students, parents, teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, related services and other school personnel, school-based community partners, school boards, education professional organizations, teacher preparation programs, relevant advocacy/policy groups, and district, state and federal education officials, and lawmakers.

#### *Addressing Inadequate Funding to Implement and Sustain Reform*

The SWIFT approach to transformation has an extremely cost-efficient strategy. Therefore, states and districts can begin to implement SWIFT features now as they continue to recover from the recession and regain funds for education. Because SWIFT implementation includes all educators and students at the school level, it is not just another program that the school has to figure out how to fund; but rather it is a comprehensive and inclusive strategy and, as evidenced by the research in this Brief, carries a valuable return on investment through student success.

School leaders would not need to scramble to find money in the budget to pay for a specialist to come to the school to train staff on the SWIFT approach. Instead, school leaders themselves learn the SWIFT approach to transformation and lead the school in implementation. This method differs from that used by schools choosing to implement just MTSS/RTI, which could require hiring a consultant or specialist for training. Instead SWIFT integrates all of these approaches (i.e., UDL, MTSS/RTI, and SWPBIS) through its comprehensive system-wide framework. With effective SWIFT implementation all: school-level stakeholders understand what SWIFT is; educators learn how to move their instruction toward this vision; parents learn how to monitor and support their children on its various measures of academic, health, and social and emotional well-being; and students thrive through the increased personalization of the curriculum.

The Race to the Top and School Improvement Grants provide finite funding streams and schools must adopt a plan to sustain the reforms they implement after these funds go away. The SWIFT approach provides a sustainable solution because SWIFT is not a program but a transformation framework in which success relies on strong leadership and collaboration and communication among stakeholders. In this way, current and future grantees of these federal programs are well positioned to sustain their reforms by implementing SWIFT during their grant period.

Similarly, adoption of the CCSS is expected to require unprecedented collaboration among educators of different subjects, grade levels, and groups of students, and the SWIFT approach already embeds such collaboration. The rethinking and redesigning of standards, instruction, assessments, and supports are cohesive under the SWIFT approach as educators are encouraged to think about how to personalize instruction, curriculum, and academic and behavioral supports for all students, whether or not those students access the supports and services of special education.

In sum, the reforms noted here, as well as others, bring opportunities for improvement but also challenges for funding. In contrast, the SWIFT approach is a sustainable, cost-effective strategy that provides schools, districts, and states stability and continuing improvements in student outcomes long after grant funding expires.

## Recommendation

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Any school, district, or state that is preparing for or currently implementing any school improvement initiative should consider implementing the SWIFT approach to strengthen the efforts and intended outcomes of these initiatives.

A great opportunity exists for the SWIFT approach to help inform, influence, and strengthen the implementation of each federal, state, district, or school-led initiative noted in this Brief. Given the continuing significant national challenges, from a high dropout rate to stagnant reading and math scores, practitioners need more support and evidence-based strategies to assist them. Specifically, the barriers identified for these reform initiatives including inadequate capacity, collaboration, and funding are addressed and ameliorated by the SWIFT framework for transformation.

SWIFT offers a systematic approach to defining policies and practices that are needed in a state, district, or school to make available the needed resources and assistance to support all students. SWIFT also offers a model for braiding funding and flexible use of support personnel to address

all student needs at the school and classroom levels. As a result, all of the initiatives noted in this Brief are complemented and supported by the SWIFT framework.

## Conclusion

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The SWIFT approach has begun and will continue to produce promising academic and behavioral outcomes for all students because of a shared commitment to the inclusion of all students in a personalized and comprehensive manner. Because of the rising tide of education reform initiatives, SWIFT is a particularly welcome approach to educators, administrators, and other stakeholders who apply SWIFT at the school, district, and state levels—not as another initiative to pursue, but as a comprehensive schoolwide framework that enriches, enhances, and coordinates other initiatives to maximize efficiencies, resources, and most importantly, outcomes for children. To learn more, please visit the SWIFT Center website at [www.swiftschools.org](http://www.swiftschools.org).

## Suggested Citation

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