

Schools to Watch: School Transformation Network
A Peer Innovation Development Grant
Development Grant: Absolute Priority #4; Competitive Priorities #7 and # 8

A. Need for the Project. The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform (the Forum) proposes a four-year, \$6 million grant (including a 20% match) to use its Schools to Watch (STW) rating criteria and innovative School Transformation Network to improve student achievement and close the achievement gap in 18 persistently low-performing schools with middle-grades. (For a list of the 12 urban/6 rural schools, see Appendix H #1). The consortium of schools represents three states--California, Illinois and North Carolina--deliberately chosen to serve as regional hubs for future scale-up efforts. The Forum will work with three non-profit partners—the Association of Illinois Middle-Level Schools (AIMS); the California League of Middle Schools (CLMS); and the North Carolina Middle School Association (NCMSA). Each is the lead organization for its State STW Program now in 19 states. The Academy for Educational Development (AED) will provide technical assistance in creating an early indicators at-risk student intervention system for the schools and their districts. The Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD) at the University of Illinois, Urbana/Champaign will be the evaluation partner.

The proposed project addresses Absolute Priority 4 and Competitive Priorities 7 and 8.

The consortium's 18 schools are persistently low performing and have high concentrations of students receiving free/reduced lunch, students with disabilities, and English Language Learners (ELL). (See Appendix H #1 for School Demographics and Appendix A for Letters of LEA/School Support) Consortium schools express the will, but need the skills to improve achievement of all students and to close achievement gaps. Our STW Transformation Network involves a whole-school approach, using the STW criteria as a framework for change, a

continuous learning process, and a combination of research-based school-improvement strategies, including coaching, peer networking, and focused professional development.

In addressing *Priority 7*, we will pay special attention to students with disabilities and ELLs. For example, consortium school mathematics teachers will be trained to use the tools and resources in the Forum’s Mathematics Improvement Toolkit (2009) to better serve their diverse populations. The project meets *Priority 8*, because it seeks to improve the performance of high-need students in rural schools. Like other poor rural schools, our six rural schools face unique challenges in meeting the needs of all students—e.g., limited ability to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers who can teach high-level math and science courses, limited staff opportunities to learn from peers, and lack of resources and opportunities for intensive and sustained professional development. Our STW Transformation Network directly addresses these challenges by incorporating tools and targeted resources, the use of mentor schools with similar demographics, and the use of technology that bridge geographical boundaries.

The Project Fills an Unmet Need. The middle grades represent the last best chance to keep students on the pathway to high school graduation (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; EdSource, 2010). In *The Forgotten Middle*, ACT researchers conclude that the academic achievement of eighth graders is a better predictor of college and career readiness than *anything* that happens academically in high school, including grade point average, advanced/honors courses, the quality of instruction, homework or the amount of effort students put into their courses (ACT, 2008). What’s more, Balfanz, Herzog and Mc Iver (2007) found that a 6th grader who exhibits even one of following early warning signals has a significantly diminished chance of graduating from high school: a failing grade in reading or math; attendance below 80 percent for the year, and a final “unsatisfactory behavior” mark in at least one class.

Despite their importance to future academic success, the middle-grades often do not fare well. Middle schools are almost twice as likely as elementary schools to be identified as in need of improvement, corrective action, or restructuring (22% versus 13%). The ACT researchers (2008) found that only 2 out of 10 students are on target to be ready for college-level work by the time they leave eighth grade. Recent NAEP data show nearly 25% of 8th graders cannot perform at the Basic level in reading, 29% cannot perform at the Basic level in math, and less than a third meet the Proficient standard on either test. All these percentages also mask large gaps in achievement among various student groups (NCES, 2010).

Although the need is great, supports for middle-grades schools in general, and high-need schools in particular, are lacking. Students in the middle and upper grades continue to receive far fewer dollars from ESEA Title I than do those in the elementary grades (McPartland & Jordan, 1999; McPartland, personal communication, November 17, 2009). Each year, the Forum and its state STW partners receive requests for technical assistance, but fiscal constraints limit our ability to meet the demand. This is especially true in the case of persistently low-performing schools, which rarely have the capacity to change without intensive and sustained external support. Most have a patchwork of programs and practices and lack the leadership ability and collaborative culture necessary to bring coherence and produce results. As Fullan (2001) notes, “The main problem in [low-performing] schools is not the lack of innovation, but rather too many disconnected, episodic, fragmented, and superficially adorned projects.” To accomplish lasting reform, he calls for “fundamental transformation in the learning cultures of schools and of the teaching profession itself.” This project fills these unmet needs.

The proposed project is exceptional for several reasons. First, the Forum’s promising program does not start from scratch, but has an extensive national/state infrastructure with

dozens of leaders who work collaboratively to improve middle-grades education. Moreover, its innovative approach has shown promise in improving performance in low-performing schools in North Carolina.

Second, dysfunctional schools tend to address their challenges by purchasing new programs; however, what is really lacking is a school culture that supports high expectations, shared leadership and decision making, professional learning, and a sense of shared accountability. Even if schools improve by adopting proven programs and curricula, *to thrive*, they must become "learning organizations" that know how to collect, evaluate, and apply data to make decisions. Our program focuses on building organizational capacity, using the STW criteria (coupled with analysis of student data) as a comprehensive framework incorporating self-assessment, goal-setting, action planning and evaluation.

Third, most whole-school change models focus on improving overall student achievement, but do not generally address the specific needs of those students most at risk of educational failure. In addition to strengthening school-wide capacity for change, our program specifically targets high-need students including those who show early signs of dropping out.

Fourth, most turnaround strategies use a single strategy—e.g., a turnaround coach or intensive professional development in a specific content area. Our reasonable hypothesis recognizes that persistently low-performing schools face extreme challenges including large numbers of high-need students and limited resources; lack of organizational capacity to change; and few real-world role models. They need a multi-layered system of support (including school coaches, high-performing mentor schools with similar demographics, and mentor principals) that can provide a vision of what is possible, strengthen the school's leadership and empower the faculty to work together to achieve results. This grant draws upon the resources of the STW

programs to provide such a support system and offers focused professional development concentrated on two key topics: 1) building a professional learning community in which teacher teams analyze student data, identify and implement evidence-based practices, and reflect on results; and 2) developing a three-tiered early indicators system for meeting the needs of students with disabilities, ELLs, and others at risk of failure.

Project Design: The STW School Transformation Network has three short-term goals: 1) increasing consortium schools' capacity to engage in continuous improvement; 2) improving the academic performance of *all* the students in consortium schools; and 3) reducing the achievement gap among sub-groups. Its two long-term goals are scale-up and sustainability.

Our logic model (Appendix H, #2) will guide the development and testing of the innovation, including project goals and objectives, intervention strategies, and the immediate and distal outcomes against which we will assess the program. Our project design builds upon an adult developmental learning theoretical perspective, in particular transformative learning theory (Karpiak, 2006; Merriam, 2006; Mezirow, 1991b, 1995) and Fullan's work on organizational change (2007). Like Merriam, we are interested "in movement, in change, and, in particular, in the *process* of change" (p. 36). Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) posits how adults learn through a dynamic process of making meaning of their experiences, and Fullan (2007) explores the necessity of both *re-culturing* and *coherence* of improvement efforts in schools.

Given our focus on the process of change, school culture and coherence, we will work with administrators and teachers in the 18 schools to achieve four primary objectives, which reflect the Forum's vision and criteria for high-performing middle-grades schools:

1) Strengthen their structures, norms, and processes so they support continuous improvement

by setting clear goals that drive every facet of school change, adopting a laser-like focus on academic achievement, strengthening school leadership, ensuring coherence among programs and practices, and using data to inform decisions. ***2) Promote academic excellence*** by setting high expectations and having clear standards for student performance, aligning curriculum and instruction with those standards; and creating a professional learning community in which teachers analyze student needs, identify evidence-based practices, and reflect on results.

3) Ensure social equity and close achievement gaps by identifying those students at risk of educational failure and providing them with the extra time, resources and other supports they need to meet the high standards expected of them. ***4) Foster developmental responsiveness*** by creating a safe and personalized learning environment that values each student; providing students with the comprehensive services (e.g., health, mental health) they need to succeed academically; and involving families and communities in their children's education.

To achieve these goals and objectives, the project will use a multi-layered system of support and a comprehensive set of school improvement strategies which are supported by research and our own experiences. First, each State STW partner will conduct a two-day, cross-school orientation program for district leaders as well as the leadership teams from each participating school with the purpose of creating a shared vision of what high-performing schools look like, introducing the *STW* School Rating Rubric (Appendix H #3), providing an overview of the project design, outlining the responsibilities of each partner, introducing the support team, and launching a cross-school peer network. Next, each school will receive a STW trained coach who will visit the school at least twice per month and will assist the school's leadership team in completing the STW comprehensive self-assessment that encompasses

analysis of student achievement data (overall and by subgroup) and other measures by using the STW rubric to identify the school's strengths and weaknesses and AED's early indicators system to pinpoint students who show early warning signs of dropping out of high school. Based on the results, the coach will work with the leadership team to develop SMART goals that are Strategic, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound (Doran, 1981). Having a shared vision and common goals is compelling and energizing, creates meaning, commits people to action, establishes a standard of excellence, and converts followers into leaders (Naisbitt & Aburdene, 1985; Nanus, 1991). The school coach will then work with the school's leadership team and other faculty members to develop an integrated action plan that outlines concrete next steps and performance benchmarks. The faculty will implement the plan and monitor results, with assistance and feedback from the school coach and data from the evaluation partner, CPRD.

Additionally, the project will employ a multi-layered system of supports, all of which have proved useful to schools in the STW state program. A STW mentor school will be assigned to each school for cross-site visitation, observation and peer mentoring. Further a principal coach will work directly with the school's principal on such leadership issues as setting high expectations, bringing coherence, sharing decision-making and fostering collective responsibility for student learning. In addition, consortium schools will have access to peer support from the entire STW network through online discussion groups, state and national STW conferences, and other experiences sponsored by the Forum and its partners.

Further, the Forum and its partners will offer focused professional development on selected topics aligned with the project's overall objectives, as well as the schools' goals and action plans. In the first year of the project, we will focus on important topics essential to creating a learning community and meeting the needs of those students who are most at risk. We

will help teacher teams learn how to analyze student data, identify and test evidence-based practices, and reflect on results. In carrying out this work, we will use NSDC's toolkit, *Becoming a Learning School* (Killion & Roy, 2009), which defines the role of the central office, principal and coach, and provides tools and strategies for planning, facilitating and evaluating collaborative professional learning. Second, we will work with school leadership teams to implement a 3-tiered, progressive intervention process to assist high-need students. The levels include 1) preventive strategies for an entire grade or school; 2) targeted strategies for the 15-20 percent of students who need extra support; and 3) intensive interventions for the 5-10 percent of students who require one-to-one support (Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007). As appropriate, we will also assist schools with other identified needs—e.g., using universal design principles, differentiated instruction and co-teaching to meet the needs of diverse learners; teaching high-level math to ELLs; and creating a safe and personalized environment that supports learning. The project will use a number of different channels including annual STW conferences; state-level institutes and workshops; school-based training sessions led by STW coaches and other professionals; and webinars organized by the Forum and its partners.

School-based monitoring and assessment will be ongoing, closely aligned with the project's evaluation plan and will address implementation and student outcomes. Intermediate outcomes will include improvements in the school's organizational capacity, academic excellence, social equity, and developmental responsiveness as measured by the STW Scoring Rubric. We will also use CPRD's School Improvement Self Study as another data source, since the teacher, student and parent surveys encompass 85 percent of the STW criteria and other outcomes. For example, the surveys measure 1) school-wide changes in culture and climate, use of evidence-based instructional practices, leadership and shared decision making, professional

development, team structure and activities, and parent involvement; 2) changes in teacher attitudes (e.g., increased buy-in, perceived efficacy and role clarity) and 3) changes in student attitudes and reported behaviors (e.g., academic expectations, student belonging, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and high-risk behaviors). Finally, we will assess intermediate outcomes by analyzing course grades, course-taking behavior, student attendance; and suspensions and expulsions. Ultimately, we will measure our success based on two distal outcomes: a) improved student performance on statewide tests in reading/language arts and math (overall and by sub-group) and b) reductions in the achievement gap among sub-groups.

B. Strength of Research, Significance and Magnitude of Effect. Research supports the

Forum's overall approach, including the use of STW criteria as a guiding framework for school change. For example, Lee, Smith, Perry, & Smylie (1999) found that 6th and 8th grade students in Chicago learned most when they experienced *both* strong academic press and social support. These findings were most pronounced in traditionally low-performing schools. Flowers, Mertens and Mulhall (2003) found that high-performing, high poverty schools were characterized by academic rigor, meaningful and relevant curriculum, engaging and active instruction, and a climate of mutual respect and positive interactions. A study of Kentucky's middle-grades schools revealed that STW schools outperformed matched comparisons on both desirable middle grades practices and higher levels of student achievement (Cook, Faulkner, & Kinne, 2009).

Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades: Why Some Schools Do Better (EdSource, 2010) provides additional support. After examining 303 California schools with at least half of their students living in poverty, the researchers found that schools that do better academically are characterized by 1) an intense school-wide focus on improving academic outcomes; 2) curriculum and instruction closely aligned with state academic standards; 3) extensive use of

assessment and other student data to improve learning and teacher practice; 4) early identification and proactive interventions for students with academic needs; 5) district, principal and teacher leadership that values the entire professional community and holds everyone accountable for results; and 6) teachers with strong competencies who have adequate time to work together to evaluate student performance and improve student outcomes.

Finally, in *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools*, the What Works Clearinghouse (2008) identified four strategies for improving schools' performance, all of which focus on strengthening the school's capacity for change: 1) signal the need for dramatic changes with strong leadership; 2) maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction; 3) work toward visible improvement early in the turnaround process (quick wins); and 4) build a committed staff. Their recommendations mirror decades of research that show that effective schools have a clear vision, effective leadership, a positive climate, and a professional learning community that focuses on results (Bryk et. al., 1998; Carter, 2000; Cotton, 2000; Glickman, 1998; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Langer, 2004; Rosenholtz, 1991).

Research supports our multi-layered support system. School change research substantiates our reasonable hypotheses and theories about coaching, peer-to-peer learning, and networking. All enhance professional development, embed changed practice and translate teacher learning into student learning (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2002). Instructional coaching fosters a culture of collaboration and professionalism in addition to improving the level of implementation of new instructional techniques and curriculum (Wong & Nicotera, AIR, 2003). Our use of a principal coach from the STW network reflects the importance of effective school leadership in the transformation process (Lambert, 1998; Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003).

Numerous researchers have found that professional learning communities enhance both teaching and learning, particularly in low-performing schools (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Darling-Hammond et al. 2009; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994; Hord, 1997; Lieberman & Miller, 2008; Newman & Wehlage, 1997; Sergiovanni, 1994; Snow-Renner & Lauer, 2005). Learning from peers is especially important for new teachers and has had a positive impact on novice teachers in inner-city schools (Jackson & Bruegmann, 2009). In addition, deepest knowledge (deep smarts) involves peers in "learning by doing" and actively engaging in activities such as coaching and mentoring; guided practice; experimentation; and feedback and reflection (Leonard & Swap, 2004). Finally, school reform networks encourage joint problem solving, give members a voice in their own learning, and afford teachers the opportunity to label, articulate and share their knowledge. When networks of schools last long enough to create ongoing learning communities, they foster real learning by members and accelerate change (Glickman, Allen, & Lunsford, 1994; Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996).

Previous attempts reveal promising results. The STW Transformation Network is modeled after the work undertaken by the NC STW Team, which worked for one year with the 36 lowest performing middle-grades schools in North Carolina. These schools were highly diverse (70% African American, 16% Hispanic, and 10% White), and 82% of their students qualified for free/reduced lunch. Each school had a principal coach and a STW coach who spent 15 days working with the staff to identify areas of need, meeting with teachers and leadership teams, modeling lessons, observing and giving feedback, and providing other assistance as appropriate. Despite a long history of low performance, the schools showed ***promising results after just one year.*** Based on the 2008 state End-of Grade Tests, nine of the 36 schools were recognized as making "High Growth," while 15 were recognized as making "Expected Growth" on the state's

growth composite index. Two of these schools actually made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Although 12 schools did not meet expected growth overall, four increased the number of subgroups that met their performance targets.

The CA State Team also used the STW criteria and rubric in their Principals to Watch Leadership Academy to help 30 Los Angeles County low-performing middle-grades schools better serve their economically disadvantaged, ethnically and linguistically diverse students with promising results. For example, the five principals from Hacienda-La Puente Unified School District implemented the academy strategies. In one year, their five schools collectively surpassed the state's average school Academic Performance Index (API) score by 22 points, and their schools' ELLs surpassed the state's average EL API score by 50 points.

We expect to see significant and important effects. Clearly, the STW Transformation Network is based on strong theory and research about what works in transforming low-performing middle-grades schools and shows promising early results. Usually, whole-school change models require three years to bring about important changes in student performance, but two-thirds of the NC schools demonstrated positive results in just one year. Moreover, the STW work to date has had limited funding and has lacked access to the full range of tools, materials and human resources available from the Forum, its state STW partners and its network of designated schools. By working and coordinating efforts over a 4-year period, we expect to dramatically improve overall student achievement, while closing achievement gaps among subgroups in all schools in the consortium in the three states (regional hubs).

C. Experience of Eligible Applicants. *The National Forum*, a 501(c) 3 launched in 1997, is an alliance of 50 major organizations and individuals committed to improving middle-grades schools, strengthening leadership, and educating policy makers. *Record and Past Performance:*

For 4 years, the Forum's staff has provided on-the-ground technical assistance to the *Chicago Middle Grade Project* to increase academic rigor and improve outcomes in a cluster of 24 K-8 schools with school-within-a-school middle grades programs. According to a focus group study (December, 2009), "creating a collaborative culture for learning" was the most important factor in producing results. This year, 3 of the Chicago project schools were designated as Illinois Schools to Watch because they had transformed dramatically, making AYP and increasing performance in both mathematics and reading.

The Forum's grassroots *State STW Program (2002-present)* demonstrates its capacity to 1) scale-up small pilot projects to a national level; 2) work in partnership with multiple SEAs, LEAs and schools; and 3) sustain its operations and programs long after external funding ends. States create a STW Team (including the SEA, association affiliates, LEAs and middle-grades leaders) that identifies schools that meet the STW criteria and, where resources permit, assists those that do not. It has grown from three to 19 states that encompass 70 percent of the country's middle-grades students and features over 250 schools, including several turnaround sites. With limited funds, STW teams donate their time and organizational resources.

Additionally, the Forum serves as the prime grantee on a four-year, \$3.1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education (2006-2010), demonstrating its capacity to manage large-scale, multi-year federally-funded projects involving multiple partners. The grant's goal was to *improve mathematics performance for students with disabilities, ELL students, and students in rural communities* and pilot test results were promising. In one Michigan pilot school, for example, math performance increased by 36 percent over 3 years.

The Forum has the capacity to secure the 20% match. It has received several grants from private foundations including Kellogg, McConnell Clark, Lilly, Kauffman and Knight. It is

planning to meet the 20% matching requirement through a combination of 1) private grants; 2) in-kind contributions; and 3) the Forum's own funding from non-federal sources.

Evidence of the Capacity and Track Record of Official 501(c)3 Partners. *Association of Illinois Middle Level Schools* (AIMS) has conducted its STW work since 2003. Its expertise in middle-grades reform dates back to 1989 when it first launched the Illinois Middle Grades Network which has grown from 12 to 122 schools and it has a track record of success with high-need schools. It currently works with 23 schools participating in the Illinois STW program. AIMS also provided assistance to 32 schools engaging in comprehensive school reform as a *Turning Points* Regional Service Center (1999-2004). AIMS provided these schools with twice weekly on-site coaching, embedded professional development, cross-school networking, and principal leadership development. The longitudinal study of *Turning Points* schools showed academic achievement outpaced a matched comparison group (CPRD, 2003). *California League of Middle Schools* (CLMS) operates the CA STW and has identified 27 Schools since 2002. Its high-need STW schools serve as models for other schools with similar populations. CLMS worked with the California Department of Education (CDE) to adapt the STW criteria to the state's education policy which ultimately led to the development of the state's innovative web portal. Entitled *Taking Center Stage—Act II*, it has been accessed by educators all across the country. CLMS created the Principals to Watch Leadership Academy with funding from the United Way of Greater Los Angeles (UWGLA) and trained 30 principals from nine county districts in management and instructional leadership. The academy shows the STW criteria in action at STW model sites, and principals receive assistance in applying the STW rubric and developing a School Improvement Plan (SIP) that brings coherence to the change process. Based on promising early results, UWGLA has made this program a centerpiece of its initiative to

increase the high school graduation rate in LA County and has committed to increase support in 2010-2013. *North Carolina Middle School Association (NCMSA)* has operated its STW program since 2002 and has identified 37 schools. These schools serve an important role in the state as beacons and living laboratories where best practices are being implemented, and changes are being made on a daily basis. To extend its work to high-needs schools, NC STW partnered with the SEA's Center for School Leadership Development to take the STW criteria to schools in need of academic improvement. A full description of the program and its results appeared in Section B. NC's work serves as a promising model for this grant. *Academy for Educational Development (AED)* has over 15 years experience in implementing and scaling up Middle Start, its middle-grades school transformation program. Piloted in 25 Michigan middle schools in 1995-96, the program has since served over 250 middle-grades schools in eight states. Independent and program studies found students in Middle Start schools improved significantly in reading and mathematics and consistently outpaced comparison schools and state averages in achievement gains. Recently, AED has been working with LEAs on an early indicators initiative applying the findings from Belfanz et. al. to create district/school systems for interventions and supports. *Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD) at University of Illinois* CPRD uses applied research and evaluation, policy analysis, and professional development to conduct research and evaluation projects in the areas of school reform, human service reform, and prevention. CPRD has served as evaluator for regional and national middle school reform initiatives such as the Carnegie Corporation's *Turning Points* Initiative, the Kellogg Foundation's Middle Start Initiative and the National Center for Supercomputing Applications' federally funded project to improve math and science teacher preparation programs. Its cornerstone tool is the *School Improvement Self-Study*, a middle grades data collection system

(1990). It links student achievement to practices associated with improved teaching and learning. The tool has been validated as accurate and reliable. Surveys for teachers, students, principals, and parents are grounded in research and have been used with over a million students and a hundred thousand teachers in more than a thousand schools.

D. Project Evaluation. *Detailed Design:* The evaluation will employ a matched, quasi-experimental, mixed-methods design using data collected via STW's *School Rating Rubric*, CPRD's *School Improvement Self-Study Surveys*, focus groups, coaches' logs, and student outcome and performance data. The research design will allow the evaluation team to conduct formative evaluation to inform and refine the intervention and summative evaluation to assess change in the consortium schools versus matched comparison schools. Unique identification numbers will be assigned to link data and track students and teachers over time. The whole school will serve as a unit of analysis as will sub-groups of students and teachers.

The evaluation utilizes 36 middle-grades schools (18 consortium and 18 comparison) from three states (see letters of support, Appendix A) The consortium sample is comprised of persistently low performing public schools serving the middle grades in either an urban or rural location. Overall, they have an average of 81% free/reduced lunch students, contain 86% minority students, serve 36% ELL, and have an average enrollment of 650 (see Consortium School Demographics in Appendix H #1). The comparison schools will be selected using key demographics to match the consortium schools in each state. For over a decade, CPRD has served as the evaluator for numerous regional and national middle school reform initiatives. Its *School Improvement Self-Study* (SISS) is a set of survey measures designed specifically for middle-grades schools. The SISS has been validated in prior research and the results widely

disseminated (see evaluation references for a complete list of publications). CPRD will collaborate with USDOE evaluators and technical assistance.

Research Hypotheses: Consortium schools, teachers, and students participating in the *STW School Transformation Program* will report the following differences as compared to the comparison group: H1 Higher levels of school performance on the STW criteria (e.g., organizational capacity for improvement, academic excellence, social equity, developmental responsiveness); H2 Improved school-wide changes in culture and climate (e.g., use of best instructional practices, classroom climate, leadership and shared decision making, professional development, team structures and activities, and parent involvement); H3 Improved teacher attitudes and buy-in (e.g., perceived efficacy, role clarity); H4 Improved student attitudes and behavior (e.g., academic expectations, belonging, school climate, self-efficacy, self-esteem, behavior, discipline, attendance); H5 Higher levels of academic performance on statewide tests; H6 Reductions in the achievement gap among subgroups.

Implementation Data and Performance Feedback: The evaluation will use two process and outcome measurement elements for assessing STW implementation and adoption of instructional practices, and student outcomes. First, the STW's *School Rating Rubric* will be administered twice per year at consortium schools to assess the intermediate outcomes of improvement in the criteria associated with the four key components of the STW Program (organizational capacity, academic excellence, social equity, and developmental responsiveness). Comparison schools will administer the rubric annually to serve as a reference point. Second, CPRD will administer the SISS surveys of teachers, students, and parents every other year at consortium schools to collect data on the intermediate outcomes of culture and climate, instructional practices, leadership, shared decision making, professional development, team structures and activities,

parent involvement, teacher attitudes, and student attitudes and behavior. The SISS has been demonstrated in prior research to be correlated with increases in student achievement (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2003; Mertens & Flowers, 2004, 2006).

The qualitative work will use focus groups with school leadership teams and teachers at consortium schools every other year beginning in Year 2. The purpose of the focus groups is to provide formative results regarding the experiences of implementation and to assess the multi-layered system of support (e.g., coaching, mentoring activities, peer support, focused professional development). Coaching activities, including assistance with comprehensive self-assessment, will be tracked using a coaches' log that documents the purpose of the contact, number/types of staff present, decisions made, barriers, and any other pertinent issues. Focus group data and coaches' logs will be analyzed using an inductive, constant-comparative method to identify categories for coding and common themes (Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2006).

The quantitative data from the SISS and student achievement scores will provide both formative and summative results. CPRD will assign students entering 6th grade with individual identifiers and track them through 8th grade, while it will use a cross-sectional method for assessing 7th and 8th grade performance. The SISS surveys will provide formative feedback on such measures as teacher reports of developmentally appropriate instructional practices (e.g., parent involvement, collaborative planning, authentic instruction and assessment, school climate and academic focus, etc.). Data for the long-term or distal outcomes for the project, improved student performance on statewide tests (i.e., reading/language arts and math) and reductions in the achievement gap among subgroups of students (e.g., ELL, disabled, free/reduced lunch) will be collected every year from all schools via student achievement scores on annual state assessments (California Standards Tests, Illinois Standards Achievement Test, North Carolina

End of Grade Tests). We will use standard deviation measures to provide an approximation of size of treatment effects across different state tests (Kim & Herman, 2009). We also will examine other standardization methods or conduct within-state analyses of consortium and comparison groups.

CPRD will use SISS and state achievement at the individual level to examine longitudinal growth from 6th grade to 8th grade. It will also examine cross-sectional data at the school level for the 7th and 8th grade groups over the four years of the project. Analyses will also allow us to examine various key school sub-groups (race/ethnicity, free/reduced lunch, gender) and to link changes in individual and school outcomes to the *STW Rubric* ratings, and selected SISS constructs such as instructional practices, parent involvement and school climate. This will help us create an STW implementation measure as a mediating variable to determine both individual and school-level changes in student outcomes. Statistical analysis will initially employ baseline comparisons (t-tests, ANOVA's) to determine school and student level equivalence. Since school settings are more similar within than between (intraclass correlations or ICC), we will use hierarchical linear modeling to differentiate two or three nested levels – school, grade/team and individual to determine overall program effects for the grade 6 – 8 longitudinal cohort (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2005; Goldstein, 2003).

Sharing of Evaluation Results: The evaluators will report the formative and summative data to schools, coaches, the Forum, and state STW teams so they can use it to monitor and refine program implementation. Individual school data from the *STW's Rubric* and CPRD's SISS will be reported to schools in a user-friendly notebook of charts and tables for use in reflection, discussion, and goal setting. Student outcome data will also reported to individual schools to assist them in tracking the impact of the project on students and teachers, paying particular

attention to sub-groups. The evaluation team is used to working in a collaborative partnership that provides data to participating schools for data-based decision making and program improvement (Flowers & Carpenter, 2009; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2007). Evaluation results will also be shared with the USDOE and the other members of the i3 evaluation team.

Evaluation Resources: Nine percent of the total budget (\$140,000 per year) will be allocated to the evaluation. CPRD resources to conduct the evaluation include a multi-disciplinary staff of 30 professionals who have developed and conducted major research and evaluation projects for federal and state agencies, foundations, and community-based organizations for the past 20 years. CPRD provides high quality, expert evaluation services using standardized measures and technology tools to achieve extraordinary levels of cost-efficiency.

E. Strategy and capacity to further develop and bring to scale. The proposed project has the capacity to reach 10,000 students in Year I and nearly 18,000 at the end of Year IV. These students come from 18 urban and rural schools, in three states representing different regions of the country—the Southeast, Midwest, and West. The Forum and its official partners are established organizations with stable management, a strong commitment to sustaining and expanding the work and a ready-made infrastructure for further development and scale-up. Each has a wide network of partners, trainers, coaches and consultants who can be accessed and nurtured during and after the official grant ends. We will begin with expansion in the three pilot states, all of which are committed to improving student achievement in their persistently low-performing schools and have agreed to serve as regional hubs to facilitate future expansion.

Eight years in, the STW program is stronger than ever and has become a national movement that influences national and state policy, as well as school and classroom practice. Most of the STW states have made the program a centerpiece of their middle-grades reform

efforts, and some are already assisting chronically low-performing schools. We expect scale-up to begin as early as years three or four and to accelerate over time as it did with the State STW.

In addition to the 50 National Forum member organizations, over 80 organizations (including state education agencies, non-profits, colleges and universities) are now serving as state-level partners across the 19 STW states. These organizations include administrators, college educators, state department officials, teachers and researchers, all of whom are critical to the program's further development and scale-up. While the development project is unfolding, the other state leaders will be contributing their knowledge, tools and resources; reviewing draft products; learning the steps and strategies for undertaking the work, and preparing their states to use the school transformation program. The Forum's own STW leadership team, a group of volunteer leaders representing various states, will facilitate this knowledge exchange.

Forum members and state teams contribute countless hours of in-kind support to the Forum and its STW program, because they believe that the collective work of the Forum adds value to their organizational goals and interests. "It's a diverse and committed membership with the will and capacity to develop and undertake efforts, in collaboration with other organizations and individuals, which can continue the process of transformation" (Kronley & Handley, 2003, pg. 82-83). We recognize, however, that going to scale in such a challenging endeavor will require additional financial resources. The Forum and its partners have a history of securing funds from multiple sources, including private foundations, federal grants, state and local grants, and fees for conferences, training and technical assistance. In fact, the NC school transformation program on which this project is based received a \$1,000,000 grant from the State of NC for up to 40 schools. We are confident that we will be able to secure funds for program expansion, and, further, that the rigorous evaluation effort will be extremely helpful in securing financial support.

The project has the potential for replication in various settings with various populations. The 18 consortium schools represent both large and medium-sized cities and small rural communities. While they all have high concentrations of students living in poverty and chronic problems with student performance, they differ in size, racial/ethnic composition, percentage of English language learners and other characteristics. We believe that if we can demonstrate success with these schools, we can replicate the program in varied settings all across the country, and we will use our vast Forum and STW network to disseminate all information. *The proposed project is cost-effective since the Forum and its partners have low overhead and, the project routinely relies on in-kind contributions from Forum members, State STW teams, and other individuals in the STW network.* The entire budget per year averages \$1.5 million, including a 20% match. About \$1 million (NC, CA and IL subcontracts) will annually to consortium schools direct services so we estimate the annual per student cost will be \$100 (10,000 students).

F. Sustainability. Sustainability happens where great passion and common purpose co-exist. The Forum's mission is to make high-performing middle grades schools the norm, not the exception. Its members are driven by a moral imperative to "help each child produce work of high quality by overcoming systematic variation in resources and outcomes related to race, class, gender and ability" (Forum Vision Statement, 1998). Even though private grants originally underwrote the Forum's initial efforts, philanthropy started shifting its emphasis to high school reform in 2000. As a result, the Forum needed to secure more funding at the very moment its promising STW program was taking shape. Undaunted and with minimal resources to take the initial STW program to scale, Forum members pooled resources, contributed thousands of hours of in-kind services and diversified the revenue stream through fee-based services, sustaining the STW program and expanding it nationally.

Yet passion only goes so far. Turning around persistently low-performing schools will require additional financial resources, and this demonstration project will help. The Forum will use the outcome data from this project to aggressively seek out other partners and sources of financial support.

In addition to private foundations, we will look for state and local funding. In some states--like NC, GA, NY and CA--the STW criteria are already deeply embedded in the state's policy and guidance to schools. For example, the Forum's STW vision and criteria are at the heart of the CA's plan for improving middle-level education (*Taking Center Stage-Act II*) and are featured on the department's web portal. We will work with all the state agencies in our STW network to not only strengthen state policy, but also explore funding options.

Another crucial type of sustainability resides at the school level. Regrettably, too many schools backslide when external support ends or school leadership changes. Most of the schools designated as STW have witnessed continued growth over time, however, *despite changes in leadership*. For example, 37 NC schools have been recognized since 2002, and only 10 (27%) still have their original principal. Most of the schools continue to demonstrate improvement, for three important reasons: 1) STW criteria encourage schools to create a shared vision, collaborative leadership, and a professional learning community that can survive even the loss of a charismatic and effective leader (Lambert, 1998); 2) these schools receive ongoing support from their state team and other schools in the STW network; and 3) the "redesignation" process, which occurs every three years, encourages schools to engage in ongoing reflection and continuous improvement and elevates the teachers' role in the process.

G. Management Plan. The Forum as the grantee will oversee all the work in addition to performing tasks that bridge all partners. The Forum will coordinate cross-state training, develop

the electronic platforms and host webinars, create tools for replication, and organize all reporting requirements. The STW state training teams will be responsible for the school-based work and will coordinate professional development, coaching, building-to-building mentorship, and leadership support. They will guide STW assessment, development of goals and action plans, and progress monitoring. AED will provide training to assist districts/schools in developing early indicators systems for students at risk and in developing multi-tier interventions. CPRD will conduct the overall evaluation. All partners have experience in carrying out these roles and in meeting grant targets (See Work Plan, Appendix H #4), and project management will assess progress semi-annually. The first year will be devoted to orienting schools, assisting them with self-assessment, goal-setting and action planning; and initial implementation. CPRD will finalize the evaluation design, obtain Human Subjects clearance, identify matched comparison schools and begin gathering baseline data. During years 2 and 3, state teams will intensify their assistance to the 18 consortium schools to improve their performance and close achievement gaps, while CPRD collects and analyzes evaluation data. The fourth and final year will focus primarily on ensuring sustainability, scaling up, and completing the summative evaluation (See Timeline, Appendix H #5 and STW Network Organization Chart, Appendix H #6).

Key Personnel: Deborah Kasak, Principal Investigator and Executive Director (2002-present),

National Forum: She manages the Forum's \$3M USDE grant (math needs of ELL, special education and rural students) which developed the web-based Mathematics Enhancement Toolkit. She works with 24 low-performing middle-grades schools through Chicago's Middle Grades Initiative. She provided technical assistance to 23 high-needs schools through Illinois Turning Points CSR and co-developed the Illinois Middle Grades Network (USDE, 1989 grant) which found highly implemented schools had improved academic outcomes. **John Harrison,**

State STW Director and Executive Director, North Carolina Middle School Association: He co-directed the North Carolina Turnaround Middle Schools Project, managing instructional coaches and organizing professional development. He is responsible for all aspects of NCMSA including its annual middle school conference and provides feedback and technical assistance to over 100 STW schools to strengthen their programs and practices. ***Deb Schrock, State STW***

Director and Executive Director, Association of Illinois Middle Level Schools (AIMS): She has school coaching experience and coordinated the Turning Points CSR Center which provided technical assistance and support to 32 schools through 2005. She works with 23 STW sites and coordinates the professional development for the Illinois Middle Grades Network (122 schools). She has grant management experience (10-school Carol M. White Physical Education Grant).

Irvin Howard, State STW Director and Director of Professional Development, California League of Middle Schools (CLMS). He oversees the California Schools to Watch-Taking Center Stage model schools program with 27 STW sites statewide and leads the Principals to Watch Program funded by United Way of Greater Los Angeles, which has provides leadership training to 30 low performing schools in 9 districts. He has experience consulting on middle school education both nationally and internationally. ***Patrick Montesano, Vice President and***

Director, Center for School and Community Services, Academy for Educational Development: He is responsible for the development, implementation, scaling and evaluation of initiatives in middle-grades and high school reform, early indicators, postsecondary access and success, youth development, and programs that address educational equity. He directs the Middle Start National Center (8 states, 250 schools). He conducted educational research and development (New York Urban Coalition), and was a developer of an alternative middle school (New York City's Lower East Side, model now in 60 schools). ***Nancy Flowers, Senior Coordinator of Research at the***

Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD) at the University of Illinois. She serves as a co-principal investigator and project director for research and evaluation projects in school reform and after-school evaluation. She has extensive expertise in large-scale data collection (over 1000 schools) and the dissemination of results to improve practice, support data-based decision making, and impact policy. She has written over thirty scholarly publications, reports, and presentations.