March 27, 2014

Deborah S. Delisle
Assistant Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
Office of Elementary and Secondary Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Assistant Secretary Delisle:

The Delaware Department of Education (Department) is respectfully requesting amendments to its ESEA Flexibility Request (Request). These amendments are in addition to and complement the changes proposed in the Extension request submitted to your office on January 28, 2014. As this time, the extension has not been approved by your office; however, we are engaged with your staff on this document.

The Department is requesting the amendments not only to improve the identification of schools for various categories, but also to enhance the ways we provide supports and interventions to facilitate school improvement, especially in our lowest performing schools. We feel strongly our statewide system of accountability and support for our schools and districts needs to evolve through lessons learned as well as through national research.

Based on the current ESEA Flexibility Request, Delaware utilizes closely related but different criteria for accountability/identification of Priority schools, Reward schools, Focus schools, and Recognition schools, which are often based predominantly on “AYP.” Through our work on the state’s Academic Framework, we are creating a more comprehensive and authentic structure for school and district performance that incorporates multiple measures related to college and career readiness for all students, including Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Our goal is to eventually use this single, improved system for all accountability determinations, thereby improving determinations and reducing complexity, with the goal of College- and Career- Readiness for all students.
In this amendment, we outline how the Academic Framework can be used to identify certain required categories of schools (Reward and Priority) and identify state Recognition schools. Because of the multiple measures, the framework provides for nuances in identification, while providing an aligned structure. As a result, no one measure drives a school's category identification.

The Department is also proposing amendments to the Priority school section to enhance how we support and improve student achievement at struggling schools. Delaware has four years of experience with our lowest performing schools. Through this experience and through supports with partnership organizations involved with school turnaround work, we are proposing to make improvements to the processes. This includes not only the method for identification, but also the Memorandum of Understanding and the requirement that a Priority school turnaround strategy is based on solid evidence of critical elements to ensure the school will become high-performing, including the element of strong leadership. We believe that these changes will ensure that we accurately identify and support the lowest performing schools and implement evidence-based strategies to support effective school turnaround.

In addition, the Department proposes to amend the formal accountability processes with our districts to streamline and enhance the effectiveness of SEA supports. Again, this is based on lessons learned and feedback from our districts. We view the process of district performance routines as an opportunity to share what is working, what is not, and determine where attention is needed. The work has become central to the Department and has provided for better cross-agency collaboration. Through this process we are seeing the same type of cross-district collaboration. We view the amendment as refining this process that will allow for increased quality.

To support a robust process of stakeholder engagement, the DDOE also developed the ESEA Flexibility Request Amendment Proposal (Proposal). This is a narrative of the amendments and was shared with our stakeholder groups, including the Delaware Education Support System (DESS) Advisory Council, which is the state’s “committee of practitioners”; superintendents of the school districts; and the State Board of Education. The Proposal and other key supporting documents were posted on the Delaware Department of Education’s website here. There were two informational calls, as well as Academic Framework Overview webinars. I also had conversations with several of the chiefs to discuss the proposed changes. The Department received comment and made changes based on these comments. The Department plans to continue to work with stakeholders, and most importantly, our superintendents and their staff, as the state transitions to a multiple measure performance system.
As Delaware strives to be the best school system in the world, we need to continuously improve what and how we are measuring what we do. The State’s vision, work and policy directives are focused on the four principles outlined in the ESEA Flexibility Request. We view the next few years as a transition period and appreciate the responsiveness and commitment to continual improvement from your office.

Delaware looks forward to our continued partnership in providing the policy structures that support the work of our educators, students, and community. If there are questions or concerns, please contact me directly or my deputy, David Blowman, at david.blowman@doe.k12.de.us.

Sincerely,

Mark T. Murphy
Secretary of Education

Attachments: ESEA Flexibility Extension Request – (Redlined to show changes)  
ESEA Flexibility Request Amendment Proposal – February 25, 2014  
ESEA Flexibility Request Amendment Proposal – REVISED March 26, 2014  
ESEA FLEXIBILITY Amendment Submission Template  
  • Comments received