

# SCHOOLS TO WATCH<sup>®</sup>

## STATE PROGRAM (2010)

### REQUEST FOR APPLICATIONS

An initiative of the  
National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform

Developed in collaboration with the  
National Middle School Association (NMSA),  
National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP),  
National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP),  
National Staff Development Council (NSDC)  
and 18 State Schools to Watch Programs

“Our Schools to Watch represent small, large, urban, and suburban schools in a variety of socio-economic communities and student populations. We recognize their challenges and applaud their accomplishments. Clearly, we can learn from them what it takes to become, sustain, and grow as a high-performing middle school.”

-Jack O'Connell, California State Superintendent

**Posting Date:** September 15, 2009  
**Application Due Date:** December 15, 2009  
**Announcement Date:** January 8, 2010

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# Schools to Watch<sup>®</sup> State Program Request for Applications

## ***Purpose of the Announcement***

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, NMSA, NASSP, NAESP, NSDC, and the 18 State Schools to Watch<sup>®</sup> efforts would like to invite state middle-grades associations, state departments of education, post-secondary institutions, and other collaborating organizations to join us in expanding our state-level “Schools to Watch” (STW) program. Through this program, we seek to provide state and local leaders in selected states with a unique professional learning opportunity, while at the same time identifying and honoring publicly funded middle-grades schools that are on a solid trajectory toward reform. The National Forum will provide training and technical assistance to selected state-level partners who will then identify Schools to Watch—middle-grades schools that are making much greater progress than others toward providing an academically excellent, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable education for young adolescents.

Teams from interested states are invited to respond to this Request for Applications by **December 15, 2009**. The National Forum will select up to **five state teams** with which to work in the implementation of an STW State Program. This Request for Applications outlines the nature, scope, and objectives of this initiative and describes the application process.

## ***Description of the National Forum***

The National Forum is a small, distinguished group of educators, researchers, state and regional school leaders, and representatives of national education associations and foundations that came together in 1997 to focus on improving education for students in the middle grades. Through regional forums, national meetings, ongoing networking, and public communications, members of the National Forum promote their collective vision of effective schools for young adolescents. Current and past funders of the National Forum include the College Board, the Lumina Foundation for Education, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, JP Morgan Chase and the United States Department of Education (Comprehensive School Reform Quality Initiative). Executives from NMSA, NASSP, NAESP, and NSDC are all active members of the National Forum.

The National Forum is committed to dramatically improving the education of all young adolescents, regardless of the grade configurations of the schools they attend. Forum members developed and embrace a vision statement that emphasizes the need for schools serving children ages 10-14 to provide an education that is academically excellent, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable. The National Forum believes that when educators simultaneously focus their attention and effort on all three of these elements, the result can be high-performing middle-grades students and schools. For more information on the Forum and its vision, please visit its web site at <http://www.mgforum.org>.

### ***The National Forum's Schools To Watch Program***

Eight years ago, the National Forum set out to identify a small number of public schools that were well on their way toward fulfilling the Forum's vision. Before starting their search, National Forum members developed criteria for determining whether and to what extent a school provides an academically excellent, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable education. Subsequently, Forum members nominated schools that they believed met those criteria. A team of Forum representatives then reviewed and ranked applications, visited the highest-ranked schools, and used the criteria to assess the schools' organization, climate, and classroom practices. The Forum ultimately identified four schools in large urban, small urban, and rural communities that it designated as Schools to Watch<sup>®</sup>. The STW criteria are included in Appendix A. The Forum believes that many schools across the country are making significant progress in realizing the Forum's vision, and it has only scratched the surface in identifying Schools to Watch.

In 2002, the Forum selected teams from California, Georgia, and North Carolina to pilot its STW program at the state level. The following year, it selected Colorado, Illinois, Kentucky, and Virginia to join the STW state cohort. In 2004, New York and Ohio joined the program and Arkansas and Michigan became Schools to Watch states in 2005. In 2006, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Utah began Schools to Watch. New Jersey and Oregon became Schools to Watch states in 2007. In 2008, Florida joined the STW effort, and Indiana joined the effort in 2009.

With the addition of these states, over half of the nation's middle level students are in states involved in Schools to Watch. There are currently 200 schools across the nation identified as Schools to Watch. In 2010, the Forum will expand its program to include *up to five additional* state teams.

### ***Benefits of Engaging in the STW State Program***

For the national associations and their state affiliates, the STW State Program represents a unique opportunity to work together to identify publicly funded schools serving young adolescents aged 10-14 that meet strict and carefully developed criteria for excellence, including significant improvement in student performance over time. Through this enterprise, the participating associations have a chance not only to "speak with one voice" about effective middle-level education, but also to work together to identify and acknowledge best practices in various states.

The administrators, teachers, parents, and community members who have participated in the Forum's STW selection process have found it to be a powerful form of professional development. Members of the selection team gain a common understanding of the critical elements of high-performing middle-grades schools and a new and powerful lens with which to look at schools and classrooms. For example, rather than focus on either school climate and organization or the quality of classroom curriculum and instruction, the STW criteria encompass both. Recognizing that no school can be considered effective if some students are left behind, the criteria also set a high standard for social equity. Finally, the STW criteria consider what it takes to create and sustain an effective school for young adolescents: a shared vision; effective leadership; ongoing and intensive professional development; use of data for decision-making; ongoing planning, action, and reflection; and other organizational supports.

The National Forum has a particular interest in promoting the dual principles of equity and excellence through the STW State Program. The Forum is especially eager to work with state teams to identify middle schools that have high levels of diversity and have demonstrated a commitment to academic excellence and developmental responsiveness among all of their students. High-performing schools with these characteristics typically have had to overcome significant barriers to achieve quality, and their road to success truly bears watching—and modeling.

Because the STW criteria were developed by middle-grades experts specifically for middle-grades schools, they represent the best thinking about what it takes to accelerate learning, promote the healthy development of young adolescents, and demonstrate significant improvement in student achievement over time. Thus, the STW selection process is more tailored to effective middle-grades education than other school recognition programs, such as Blue Ribbon schools, the Baldrige Awards, and award programs designed for elementary or secondary schools.

STW schools have also found the external review process to be an invaluable experience. The process provides teachers and administrators with a new vision of effective middle-grades education and a useful set of benchmarks against which to judge their own performance. It affirms teachers' and administrators' hard work to improve their schools, validates the schools' strengths and accomplishments, identifies gaps between the schools' practices and the Forum's criteria, and provides an opportunity for feedback and reflection. In addition, those selected as Schools to Watch<sup>®</sup> receive a great deal of local, state, and national recognition, as well as suggestions for further improvement. Even schools that were not selected say they have learned a great deal from participating in the application and selection process.

“Becoming a Lighthouse School to Watch was a much-needed validation for the hard work done by the staff and students of Upson-Lee Middle School over the recent years. School improvement is an ongoing process that is often challenging, yet deeply rewarding when educators like those associated with the Georgia Lighthouse program find a school to be exemplary. The Lighthouse award illuminates not only our school, but also our entire community. The prestige associated with this award has encouraged an even greater desire to carry the standard for the middle school concept as we model best practices for others.”

Patsy Dean, Principal, Upson Lee Middle School  
Georgia Lighthouse School to Watch

### ***The Invitation***

We invite applications from state teams that are interested in replicating the National Forum's STW process in order to identify and learn from schools that are making good progress toward achieving the Forum's vision. We plan to select up to five states to collaborate with the Forum, NMSA, NASSP, NAESP, NSDC, and other state Schools to Watch efforts, in implementing a STW program at the state level. Through this partnership, we hope to accomplish the following:

- Deepen the collective understanding of what it takes to promote high-performing middle-grades schools

- Strengthen the capacity of individuals and institutions involved in middle-grades education
- Create new collaborations and strategic alliances among middle-grades organizations, thereby heightening their collective impact
- Mobilize the larger middle-grades community in participating states so that key stakeholders take the necessary steps to create high-performing middle-grades schools
- Develop and disseminate models that other states can follow

We envision this effort as a partnership between the selected states, the National Forum, and the collaborating associations, and other current Schools to Watch states, with responsibilities and opportunities on all sides.

### ***Details of State Commitment***

The states selected for participation in the program, in response to this RFA, will be asked to:

1. Assemble a state-level STW team comprised of members of the state affiliates of such associations as NMSA, NASSP, NAESP, or NSDC; representatives from a state education agency, where appropriate; and other middle-grades leaders. Each member of this team must agree to participate in training offered by the National Forum, solicit and review school applications, and visit at least two finalists for STW recognition in the state.
2. Designate at least four team leaders who will attend a two-day training session at a central location (to be announced), along with representatives of other state teams. This training is tentatively scheduled for April 2010.
3. Implement a nomination, application, and screening process for selecting Schools to Watch<sup>®</sup>, using tools and technical assistance provided by Forum members. This process should include the requirement that schools who apply must be able to meet the needs of their diverse learners.
4. Solicit applications from a variety of publicly funded schools with at least two grades serving students aged 10-14—representing urban, suburban, and rural communities, and select schools that reflect the demographic diversity of the state. Applications must require schools to provide long-term student achievement data.
5. Conduct an in-state training event for potential application reviewers and site visitors. This training will be modeled after the training received by state leaders from the National Forum.
6. Make site visits to finalists and apply the Forum's criteria and scoring matrix to designate the selected Schools to Watch.
7. Provide immediate and continuing support to schools designated as Schools to Watch.
8. Implement a system for monitoring and sustaining the effort at the state level, and work with the National Forum to ensure consistency among states by sharing with other state leaders and the Forum's oversight committee.

9. Implement a system to infuse the STW criteria into other schools in the state, via principal leadership development, mentoring schools, state conferences where the STW criteria and schools are featured, and other options the state so chooses.
10. Promote the state STW schools on websites, such as the State Department of Education's website, affiliates' websites, or other websites associated with the STW team.

To cover costs associated with training and technical assistance, selected states will be required to commit funds to cover the national training for state team leaders. Based on previous trainings, program implementation costs will include the following:

***National Forum's Two-Day Training – Up to \$5500***

- Travel and lodging expenses for four state team members
- Travel and lodging expenses for National Forum trainers and staff
- Meeting space, food, and materials

***In-State Training for Potential Application Reviewers and Site Visitors – Up to \$2500***

- Participants' travel and lodging expenses
- Meeting space, food, and materials

***Coaching and Individualized Support from a National Forum Liaison – Up to \$3000***

- Travel, lodging, and consulting expenses associated with attending the in-state training
- Travel, lodging, and consulting expenses associated with attending an initial school site visit and debriefing with the visitation team

In addition, states should budget for their own labor and for materials required to administer the program. These costs include, but are not restricted to:

- time for team members to attend follow-up planning or selection meetings and participate in conference calls
- time for team members to conduct an in-state training for potential application reviewers and site visitors
- copying and mailing costs associated with soliciting school applications, training potential site visitors, reviewing applications, and notifying schools of their status
- time for team members to conduct one- to two-day school evaluation visits
- travel expenses associated with visiting a number of schools across the state

***Details of National Forum Commitment***

In return for the commitment shown to the program by selected states, the National Forum will provide the following:

1. A two-day off-site training for team leaders, including tools and materials that state teams can use for the school selection process
2. A National Forum mentor to assist with the state-level STW selection and to provide a link between the Forum and the state teams

3. Assistance with the nomination, application and screening process for state-level STW
4. Assistance with the design of an in-state training event for potential application reviewers and site visitors
5. A site visit protocol and scoring matrix
6. On-site training, technical assistance, and quality assurance for at least one initial site visit
7. Distance coaching via e-mail and telephone with mentor, Schools to Watch<sup>®</sup> oversight committee, and the National Forum
8. Assistance with local, state, and national publicity for STW schools
9. Assistance with documenting school successes around the STW criteria, using real school data.

Individuals and teams interested in their state applying to participate in Schools to Watch are strongly encouraged to contact a member of the National Forum's Schools to Watch Oversight Committee to discuss their state's interest and to learn more about the selection process. Members of the committee are available to meet with prospective state teams to discuss their efforts and to ensure that their application addresses the selection criteria in the best possible manner. Please feel free to contact any of the state leaders on the committee:

Sandy Dutemple-Virginia STW	msdu@mac.com
John Harrison-North Carolina STW	harrison@ncmsa.net
Gail Hilliard-Nelson, New Jersey STW	gail.hilliardnelson@gmail.com
Linda Hopping-Georgia STW	lhopping43@yahoo.com
Irv Howard-California STW	stwcal@aol.com

### ***Selection Criteria and Narrative for This Application***

In January 2010, the Forum plans to select up to five state teams to implement this initiative. To be considered, each applicant must submit a narrative of no more than 15 single-spaced pages (excluding charts, tables, and attachments) that addresses the selection criteria below. Reviewers will use these criteria to evaluate individual applications. The maximum score for an application is 100 points. The application narrative should include the following sections, in order.

- |   |                  |
|---|------------------|
| <b>I. Status of Middle-Grades Reform in Your State</b>  | <b>10 points</b> |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The state has made a commitment to middle-level education.</li> <li>2. The state has national, state, or local initiatives to improve middle-level education.</li> <li>3. The state can give concrete evidence that there are a number of potential STW designees within the state and that these schools vary geographically and demographically.</li> </ol> |                  |

**II. State-Level Collaboration****20 points**

1. At least two collaborators on the STW state team are drawn from such organizations as (but not restricted to) state affiliates of NMSA, NASSP, NAESP, or NSDC. The team consists of multiple organizations concerned with middle-level education.
2. The team can show evidence of prior collaboration between and among these organizations.

**III. Focus on Equity****20 points**

1. The team can show evidence that it is committed to developing a plan that fosters the nomination of middle-grades schools with diverse student populations (including schools with diverse ethnicities and schools with a high percentage of students from low-income families).
2. The team has a plan for encouraging applications from schools in urban, suburban, and rural communities.

**IV. Capacity and Commitment****20 points**

1. Leadership exists within the participating state-level organizations to take overall responsibility for making sure that the work is successfully carried out.
2. Participating organizations have the staff and other resources necessary to support this endeavor. They can affirm their collective capacity to undertake the costs associated with this program.
3. The applicants have a plan for assembling a STW team, and they are poised to execute an STW selection process after receiving training from the National Forum.

**V. Long-Term Sustainability****10 points**

1. The team has a plan to help sustain the trajectory of selected schools in subsequent years.
2. The team has a plan for implementing the STW state program over time and for allocating additional resources to ensure sustainability. It has identified sources of funding (e.g., state education agency, private foundation, corporate sponsor) and has a plan for securing those funds to carry out this work.
3. The state team's efforts will accelerate middle-grades reform reflecting the National Forum's STW criteria. The program will positively affect school and classroom practice, new state education policies, and public support for middle-grades reform.

**VI. Acknowledgment/Publicity****10 points**

1. The team has a plan to acknowledge and publicize the schools that are selected.
2. The team has a plan for documenting and sharing the lessons learned from selected schools.
3. The team has a plan for helping the selected Schools to Watch<sup>®</sup> understand and carry out their roles as statewide models of the National Forum's STW criteria. This plan includes working with school officials to minimize the burden of site visitation to the selected schools.
4. The team has a plan for providing selected schools with opportunities to speak at conferences, visit and network with one another, and participate in professional development.

**VII. Overall Quality of the Application****10 points**

## ***Proposal Submission Requirements***

### **Cover Sheet**

- Name of state
- Name of contact person and contact information
- Names of collaborating organizations (please designate the lead organization)

### **Proposal Narrative**

- The proposal narrative should address all areas listed in the selection criteria within this RFA and should not exceed 15 single-spaced pages, excluding charts, tables, and attachments.

### **Attachments**

- One-page letters of support from collaborating organizations
- Resumes of key staff
- Other information that will help the National Forum understand middle-grades education in the state (optional)

### ***Submission Instructions***

- **One (1) electronic copy** of the 15-page narrative must be sent to Debby Kasak (dtkasak@gmail.com) at the National Forum by close of business on Tuesday, **December 15, 2009**. In addition, **one (1) paper copy** of the complete proposal with attachments must be postmarked by December 15, 2009 and addressed to:

**Debby Kasak  
The National Forum  
P O Box 224  
Savoy, IL 61874**

### ***Program Milestones***

- |   |                    |
|---|--------------------|
| • RFA Posted on Schools to Watch <sup>®</sup> website:                                | September 15, 2009 |
| • Submission Deadline:  | December 15, 2009  |
| • Award Announcement:   | January 8, 2010    |
| • Two-Day Training of State Teams by National Forum:                                  | April 2010         |
| • States Issue Invitation to Schools:   | Summer 2010        |
| • States Conduct Training of Reviewers and Site Visitors:                             | Summer-Fall 2010   |
| • States Select and Notify Schools to Watch:  | Winter 2010-2011   |
| • States Announce New Schools to Watch:   | January 2011       |
| • New Schools to Watch Recognized in State:   | Spring 2011        |
| • New Schools Participate in & are Recognized at National Schools to Watch Conference | June 2011          |