

States to form school coalition

Improvement effort aims to address issues from No Child Left Behind law

By RICK KARLIN, Staff writer

First published: Wednesday, October 26, 2005

New York is attempting to join forces with four other states in order to devise ways to help struggling schools improve.

The effort to create what supporters call a "State-to-District Collaborative" provides a preview of what promises to be an extensive debate in just over a year when Congress reauthorizes the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act.

"We're getting to the point where, under No Child Left Behind, we have to go to the next stage," said Deputy Education Commissioner James Kadamus.

Under NCLB, schools that remain poor performers are supposed to face serious sanctions after a couple of years. Those sanctions can include the firing of superintendents, loss of funding, state takeovers or even dissolution. More than a dozen schools in New York fall into that serious sanction category, but as in other states, education officials believe that many of the measures are unworkable. Cutting funds for schools that are already struggling makes no sense, and state law prevents actions like takeovers or dissolution unless there is legislative approval, Kadamus said.

As a result, the state's worst schools, at least in New York, are being told to redraw their curriculums and make other changes that don't go as far as completely upending the schools.

But even that means a lot of work for state education departments.

Thus the effort to combine forces.

"No state is going to have the capacity or resources to intervene in every school that is underperforming," said William Slotnik, executive director of the Community Training and Assistance Center, a nonprofit group based in Boston that is trying to create the multi-state consortium. In addition to New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Virginia would work together on this effort, said Slotnik.

Currently, Slotnik and state officials like Kadamus are speaking with federal lawmakers to try and raise the about \$4.5 million needed for a three-year pilot program.

NCLB, with its extensive mandates for testing and consequences, has prompted states to work together in other ways as well.

Schools in New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont have teamed up to develop common English and math tests for kids in grades 3-5. Such testing is also a requirement of NCLB.

Rick Karlin can be reached at 454-5758 or by e-mail at rkarlin@timesunion.com.