

The Federal Role in Transforming Struggling Schools

“We do not have to close a school, fire most or all of its teachers, or turn it into a charter school to ‘improve’ it. There is a better way. Successful and innovative models of public education that involve partnerships among government, parents, community organizations, education unions, businesses, and foundations are happening around the country. For long-term, sustainable school transformation, shared responsibility and collaboration are essential.”

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

No one is sure exactly how best to transform struggling schools—those with high rates of students who struggle academically or drop out of school—into successful centers for teaching and learning. Recently, the federal government has adopted a prescriptive approach that reflects a growing frustration with the lack of progress in “turning around” these schools. However, a more comprehensive and transformative approach to school improvement that follows a deliberate and collaborative process would have clear advantages. Such an approach would be based on reliable evidence of effective strategies that are locally determined and implemented.

Background

Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, Title I schools that do not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) based on annual standardized test scores for two or more consecutive years are subject to one or more required actions: school improvement, mandatory corrective actions, and mandatory restructuring. If school improvement efforts don’t result in AYP for two consecutive years, then corrective action is required. If a school fails to make AYP for three consecutive years despite

school improvement efforts and corrective action, then restructuring is required.

Mandatory corrective action may involve any of the following: replacing school staff, implementing new curricula and professional development programs, changing administrators, bringing in consultants, extending the school day or school year, or restructuring the school voluntarily.

Mandatory restructuring may involve one or more further actions: reopening the school as a public charter school, replacing most or all of the school staff, turning over school operations to a private management company or to the state, or making other significant changes to staffing and governance.¹

In August 2009, the Obama Administration announced its goal to “turn around the 5,000 lowest-performing schools over the next five years.” In March 2010, the Administration published *A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, which proposes a new classification, Challenge Schools, as part of a new school accountability framework. The *Blueprint* defines three categories of Challenge Schools:

1. The lowest-performing 5 percent of schools in each state, based on student academic achievement, student growth, and graduation rates.

2. The next lowest-performing 5 percent of schools.
3. Additional schools that have not managed to close significant, persistent achievement gaps.²

The *Blueprint* directs states and districts to implement research-based, locally-determined strategies to help schools in the second and third categories to improve. Schools in the first category would be required to adopt one of the following four intervention models:

1. **Transformation:** Replace the principal, strengthen staffing, implement a research-based instructional program, provide extended learning time, and initiate new governance and flexibility.
2. **Turnaround:** Replace the principal and rehire no more than 50 percent of the school staff, implement a research-based instructional program, provide extended learning time, and implement a new governance structure.
3. **Restart:** Convert or close the school and reopen it under the management of an effective charter school operator, a charter school management organization, or an education management organization.
4. **School closure:** Close the school and enroll its students in higher-performing schools within the same school district.³

These models are identical to those advanced by the U.S. Department of Education through its Title I School Improvement Grants (SIG) program. In 2009, SIG was expanded and significantly revised, following passage of the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA). By the end of 2010, more than 730 schools receiving SIG funds had begun to implement one of the four turnaround models.⁴

Analysis

A number of educators have found the four proposed intervention models to be specious and unhelpful in addressing the root causes of poor academic performance in certain schools.⁵ Many Members of Congress, particularly from rural states, have not embraced the Administration's turnaround policy.⁶

Two of the models, restart and school closure, are not really models for school intervention so much as prescriptive forms of upheaval. They assume that simply closing a school or changing its management would benefit students in the lowest-performing schools, regardless of what other actions may follow. But there is no way to be certain that changing school governance alone would lead to improvement. The SIG guidelines do not explain what a school must do to improve student performance after reopening under a charter operator, charter management organization (CMO), or education management organization (EMO).

The SIG guidelines encourage school districts to engage with the public prior to closing a school, but they fail to address the possible impact of school closure on students, staff, and the surrounding community. They also overlook the impact of school closure on public schools that would receive the students and staff of closed schools. Receiving schools are not given SIG funds to educate students from closed schools, nor are they required to do anything in particular to improve the academic achievement of students from closed schools.

Not surprisingly, many legislators and education advocates have criticized the restart and school closure models as impractical and unworkable, especially in states and communities with few viable "restart" operators or nearby schools with the capacity to absorb students from closed schools.⁷

The turnaround and transformation models offer some policy direction or options that arguably could constitute a model for school intervention or improvement. These two models resemble each other in many respects. Both require that the principal be fired in most cases. Governance, restructuring, staffing, and curricular options that are available to transformation model schools are also available to turnaround model schools. There are, however, a few key differences. For example, only turnaround model schools are required to fire at least 50 percent of their staff, and only transformation model schools are required to adopt teacher evaluation systems that tie teacher performance to student test scores.⁸

Both the turnaround and the transformation models require or encourage significant changes in school leadership and staffing. These changes may be considered variations of *reconstitution*—the term generally used for a school restructuring approach focused on removing incumbent administrators and teachers and replacing them with educators deemed more capable of improving school performance.⁹

Researchers have cautioned against the widespread use of reconstitution as a reform strategy. One 2003 study concludes, “The more scarce the resources in a district, the more likely that reconstitution will make matters worse. If a district is struggling to recruit and retain highly qualified

teachers before reconstitution, it will find recruitment and retention even more difficult after reconstitution.”¹⁰

The few existing studies of reconstitution are inconclusive and raise a variety of concerns. One 2008 study asserts the following:

- Reconstitution represents an “enormously complex and difficult process of school reform — perhaps more difficult than initially was thought.”
- “Simple replication of a particular reconstitution approach is inadvisable.”
- “Outcomes in terms of student achievement are quite varied ... Reconstitution does not guarantee student learning.”
- “Reconstitution often comes with unintended consequences: political conflict, lowered teacher morale, and a flood of inexperienced teachers into reconstituted schools.”¹¹

Recent research also suggests that reconstitution does not necessarily lead to academic progress. A 2008 study found that reconstituted schools have “no greater likelihood of a school making AYP overall or in reading or math alone.”¹²

The Federal Role in Transforming Struggling Schools

To bridge the gap in achievement between successful and struggling schools, policymakers must abandon the notion that there is a single best model—or even a limited number of effective models—for school intervention.¹³

One study concludes, “Schools fail for a variety of reasons, and [turnaround] strategies need to be tailored to fit the needs of individual schools.”¹⁴ According to the Center on Education Policy, “No single strategy is guaranteed to improve a struggling school; instead, all of the case study schools that raised achievement enough to exit restructuring used multiple, coordinated strategies, which they revised over time.”¹⁵

A 2008 study by Murphy and Meyers concludes the following:

*Of the various turnaround initiatives (including school reconstitution), no one intervention appears to be significantly more successful than others. Such interventions are difficult to sustain, especially stronger ones that seem to be more difficult to manage and are more costly. . . . Since turnaround interventions do not always succeed, mixing and matching to develop a comprehensive approach seems promising.*¹⁶

In place of limiting school intervention to particular models, NEA believes that the federal government should require states to develop a comprehensive, collaborative and flexible process leading to varied and unique reform strategies in each school. Ensuring success for all students requires that all professionals and community stakeholders involved in public education work collaboratively to make decisions based on common understandings and agreements. Of the Obama Administration’s four proposed intervention models, NEA supports significant components of the

transformation model as the only model that prioritizes a variety of intervention strategies and refrains from imposing arbitrary decisions about school management and staffing in the absence of a collaborative approach to school improvement.

NEA recognizes that transforming struggling schools presents a complex challenge and that bold action is often warranted. However, NEA believes that the federal government should avoid prescriptive turnaround models that are not based on reliable evidence because using such models would likely produce unintended negative consequences. The role of the federal government should be to support and fund state and local efforts toward a comprehensive, collaborative, and flexible process toward school improvement.

NEA supports the following conclusions from the Murphy and Meyers study:

- Successful schools almost always have good, if not exceptional, principals.
- School improvement initiatives must engage parents and the community.
- Failing schools need ample fiscal resources to turnaround. The resources need to last long enough for full implementation of school improvement strategies.
- School self-assessment is a key ingredient in improving low-performing schools.¹⁷

Researchers have also found that capacity building and school personnel “buy in” are critical in the school improvement process. According to Murphy and Meyers, “Capacity building is an important component of turnaround—this means that cooperation and human development are needed to move forward.” Capacity building means providing teachers with effective induction and mentoring, collaboration, professional

development, and advancement opportunities. Such steps are also likely to contribute to “buy in.” The Murphy and Meyers study concludes, “Teachers must believe in the turnaround intervention being implemented and must be seen as partners and facilitators in the process. When teachers do not buy in, failing schools do not improve.”¹⁸ The researchers note that, both before and during implementation, “teachers’ beliefs that the reform would make a difference for their students are critical to the results of turnaround efforts.”¹⁹

In sum, it may be expedient in the short term to replace many school personnel perceived as obstacles to school improvement. But studies show that, in order to achieve positive long-term results, school administrators and boards must not underestimate the importance of supporting and investing in current staff.

NEA urges the federal government, through reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), to provide states with appropriate federal assistance, resources, and support to accomplish the following:

- Submit comprehensive state plans to ensure that all students have access to a high quality, well-rounded education.
- Accurately identify struggling or “priority” schools by measuring schools’ progress in raising student achievement, closing achievement gaps between student subpopulations, and improving graduation rates.
- Foster improvements in school self-assessment, and assemble diverse teams of educators and stakeholders to gauge the quality of assessment, curriculum, instruction, leadership, and other critical factors. Such factors include, for example, student safety and health, teaching and learning conditions, and parental and community engagement.

- Adopt appropriate intervention strategies based on the results of comprehensive school assessments. The strategies should be locally tailored; designed to improve student learning, close achievement gaps, and increase graduation rates; targeted to specific populations or goals; evidence-based; determined through an inclusive, collaborative and transparent process; respectful of collective bargaining and other management-labor agreements; and accompanied by appropriate resources and supports for educators and students.
- Cultivate excellent school leadership and build capacity and buy-in of educators.
- Focus on recruiting and retaining accomplished educators at priority schools.
- Ensure sustained funding and resources for school improvement.

Through these steps, the federal government can promote successful school transformation by defining the contours of a process governing school reform and by providing vital resources and support. In so doing, the federal government can entrust decisions about particular intervention strategies and details to individual states, school districts, and schools.

NEA Resources

NEA’s Priority Schools Campaign (PSC): In a program that began in 2009 and will continue through 2016, NEA is partnering with state and local affiliates to assist low-performing schools, which the Association calls “priority schools.” The Campaign emphasizes the importance of collaboration between the school district and union, as well as the following evidence-based criteria:

- A strong partnership between the school and students’ families

- An investment in increasing the skills and effectiveness of the school staff
- Community-provided social and health services for students and their families

Highlights of successful school transformation programs are available at www.neaprioritieschools.org.

NEA KEYS Program: Studies show that effective school turnaround strategies focus on process over prescriptive approaches. Through a program called Keys to Excellence in Your Schools (KEYS), NEA has developed a process-oriented system for school self-analysis and reform based on six steps, or “keys”:

Key 1: Shared Understanding and Commitment to High Goals

Key 2: Open Communication and Collaborative Problem Solving

Key 3: Continuous Assessment for Teaching and Learning

Key 4: Personal and Professional Learning

Key 5: Resources to Support Teaching and Learning

Key 6: Curriculum and Instruction

The first three keys focus on process, and the second three involve capacity building. For more information, see www.keysonline.org.

National Education Association (2010): *School Reconstitution as an Education Reform Strategy: A Synopsis of the Evidence*.

National Education Association (2010): *NEA Policy Brief – Staffing Priority Schools: Strategies and Commitments for Changing the Status Quo*.

References

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- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ⁴ www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/sig1210newsltr.pdf.
- ⁵ National Education Policy Center, *The Obama Education Blueprint: Researchers Examine the Evidence (2010)*; reviews available at http://greatlakescenter.org/docs/Think_Twice/blueprint/index.htm.
- ⁶ www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2010/03/17/27congress.h29.html?r=1947245663.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
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- ⁹ National Education Association, *School Reconstitution as an Education Reform Strategy (2010)*, available at <http://neaprioritieschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/School-Reconstitution-as-an-Education-Reform-Strategy.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ LEADS Report, Center for Educational Policy and Leadership, University of Maryland (2003).
- ¹¹ Murphy and Meyers (2008), *Turning Around Failing Schools*.
- ¹² Center on Education Policy (2008), *A Call to Restructure Restructuring: Lessons from the No Child Left Behind Act in Five States*.
- ¹³ Linn, Rothman & White (2001).
- ¹⁴ Murphy and Meyers (2008), *Turning Around Failing Schools* [citing Kirby et al. (2005), Brady (2003), and U.S. Department of Education (2001)].
- ¹⁵ Center on Education Policy (2010), *Improving Low-Performing Schools*.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.* [citing Borman et al. (2000)].