

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

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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. 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.

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 entail a high risk of unintended negative consequences. The role of the federal government should be limited to supporting and funding state and local efforts toward a comprehensive, collaborative, and flexible process toward school improvement. 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 ESEA reauthorization, 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 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.

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.neapriorityschools.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.*