
Testimony to the Aspen Institute's NCLB Commission

September 2 , 2009

Losing Patience with Chronically Low-Performing Schools: How to Improve School Improvement

My remarks today focus on the recommendation by the Commission calling for more aggressive and effective interventions for chronically low-performing schools. We, at Mass Insight, are convinced that turning around chronically underperforming schools presents a series of challenges that require new solutions, with increased and enhanced capacity to develop and implement those solutions.

We believe that USED is on the right track in determining what needs to be done to support these chronically low-performing schools. We fully endorse many of the recommendations in the Race to the Top initiative and in the School Improvement Grant draft guidance released last week. Specific recommendations that we would like to note our support on, and that we hope are included in the reauthorization of NCLB, include:

- Providing funds to only those districts and states that have the political will and commitment to fully implement transformation;
- Mandating that SEAs prioritize the needs of their schools;
- Providing SEAs and LEAs with a variety of intervention models, but closing the “any other” loophole, by also mandating specific criteria and practices for implementation;
- Supporting only the most rigorous interventions, and noting that what we’ve been doing has not produced sufficient results;
- While targeting funds, also ensuring that Title I eligible secondary schools (who are not labeled as Title I schools) are still able to receive funds and support;
- Ensuring that funds are provided for at least three years;
- Recognizing that state agencies have limited capacity and need the 5% allocation to provide support (while also recognizing that SEAs could provide additional services to LEAs through fee-for-service); and,
- Mandating regular evaluations of efforts.

Historically, states and districts have attempted to help low-performing schools by providing "light-touch" strategies that have failed over time because they too often focus on only one aspect of the problem, rather than addressing underlying system failures and operating conditions. These interventions are usually partial or incremental, involve multiple organizations which provide an array of services and activities that are disconnected and include multiple assessment frameworks that lead to confusion and a lack of coherence throughout the school building.

Most chronically underperforming schools enroll a high percentage of students in poverty, resulting in learning deficits and a great range and variability in student needs. Individual and family risk factors are compounded by the effects of poor community environments and resource inequities, resulting in significant challenges in how students are able to learn. In addition, most state and district strategies, organizational structures, and processes tend to inhibit, rather than support, transformational change in these schools.

NCLB has served a useful purpose in monitoring public school performance and identifying schools in need of intervention. However, its provisions for helping struggling schools improve have produced neither major changes nor positive outcomes. Reauthorization needs to address three central issues in order to maximize NCLB's impact:

- **Too Much Time in the Timeline:** A chronically failing middle school could “graduate” *two entire generations* of students through grades 6-8 before NCLB's most intensive forms of intervention are introduced.
- **Too Big a Loophole:** One of the five NCLB options for school restructuring (the most extreme category of response to chronic under-performance) has become widely adopted by schools and districts because it is the least intrusive choice. The option – “other major restructuring” – is too open to interpretation to galvanize the major changes that its framers intended, and should be eliminated.
- **Too Many Schools in the Pipeline:** In some states, NCLB has propelled so many schools through the accountability pipeline (because they are identified for student subgroups) that policymakers have begun watering down restructuring plans. The sheer number of schools on the watch lists has obscured the dramatic needs of the most chronically dysfunctional schools. An increasing number of states are creating differentiated accountability systems (i.e. MD, MA, MS) to cope with this problem, and this type of program should be continued.

NCLB provides a foundation for determining which schools and school districts are meeting the needs of their students and which are not. But in the absence of adequate follow-up support and the political will to undertake major change, the law in fact has a negative impact. It categorizes and labels schools, but fails to catalyze improvement. States, districts, and schools need federal law to recognize the urgency of the problem, require intensity in the solutions, close “light-touch” loopholes, and provide funds to create incentive to undertake dramatic, comprehensive change.

Some schools are “Beating the Odds”

Despite the current limitations of NCLB, a small number of existing schools are defying the odds and surpassing peer schools with students of similar demographic profiles. These so called “high-performing high-poverty” schools most often combine three essential elements into - what we call - the *Readiness Triangle*.

- The first piece is termed *Readiness to Learn*, which means that students are in a safe and inspired environment and have close relationships with teachers and other adult mentors. Many supporting partner organizations and community based organizations work in schools to enhance this arm of the triangle.

- *Readiness to Teach* means that there is a visionary zeal among staff to boost student achievement, to use data to inform instruction, create professional learning communities, and to work on continuous professional development. Most Comprehensive School Reform efforts focus on this area.
- The third element, *Readiness to Act*, provides school leaders with increased flexibility to make mission-driven decisions on student and staff schedules, budget, staffing, curriculum, and all decisions related to school operations. This is the piece that is too often missing in school intervention efforts.

Schools adopting these three elements are reinventing what schools do and how they do it. This new model of schooling evokes the operations of a medical team rallying around each student, backed by an entire system of support of skilled professionals, processes and technologies organized and ready to analyze, diagnose, and serve the goal of learning. These schools reflect the characteristics of highly entrepreneurial organizations. They succeed either by working outside of traditional public education structures, by working around these structures internally, or by operating against the system.

Lessons from these schools indicate a need for the following elements in any school turnaround effort: clearly defined authority to act based on what's best for children (i.e. flexibility and control over staffing, scheduling, budget and curriculum); a relentless focus on high-quality hiring and staff development; highly capable, distributed school leadership teams; additional time in the school day and across the school year; performance-based expectations for all stakeholders; and integrated, research-based programs with related socio-emotional services.

There is promising work in a few big-city districts, but such pioneering efforts are very small and their scale-up paths are painstakingly slow. A balance needs to be struck between a more aggressive scale-up strategy, and moving so broadly on behalf of so many schools that real change is impossible. As the current School Improvement Grant draft guidance suggests, we completely agree that resources should be concentrated in the districts and states that have the political will to act and are willing to mandate fundamental change. The need is great, but encouraging the scale up of the same strategies that we have been using for the last twenty years will produce the same dismal results. The reauthorization of NCLB, the influx of ARRA dollars, and the proposed changes to 1003(g) School Improvement Grant funds give us the opportunity to do something completely different.

Recommendations:

Our research at Mass insight indicates that a coherent, comprehensive state turnaround initiative would incorporate three key elements: changed conditions, increased capacity, and clustering for support. In order to make this happen, we make the following suggestions:

1. Recognize the Nature of the Change Required

There is now a very substantial research base demonstrating that incremental school improvement strategies will not significantly increase achievement in high-poverty, high-challenge, chronically failing schools. The success models – high-performing, high-poverty schools – tend to operate quite differently from traditional public schools. *The goal of public policy on failing-school intervention must be to spur fundamental, dramatic change that*

addresses the dysfunctions of the status quo, produces significant improvement within two years, and readies the school to grow into a high-performance organization.

2. Recognize Turnaround as a Discipline

Turnaround should be viewed within education, as it is in other sectors, as a distinct professional discipline that requires specialized experience, training, resources, and support. The average school principal is not adequately trained to resolve such a multitude of dysfunction, from restructured budgets and service integration with social services to HR re-engineering (not to mention instructional change) in the compressed time frame required for a turnaround. District administrators generally lack skills in organizational strategy, change management, or in effective contracting and procurement. ***Federal policy should support the development and application of specialized turnaround capacity within schools and districts and among external partner organizations.***

3. Change Operating Conditions

Turnaround requires a protected space that offers leaders the authority to make mission-directed decisions (regarding staff, schedule, budget, and program) and dismantles common barriers including inflexible contract and compliance requirements. Chronically under-performing schools offer a politically defensible opportunity to create such a space. A few entrepreneurial school districts (Chicago, Miami-Dade, New York) have created such condition-changing zones for their neediest schools. But most other districts and states need support innovation from the state to mount similar initiatives. States should pass regulations that create sufficient leverage for all district leaders to develop the protected space they need for effective turnaround. The best regulations transform the incentives for local stakeholders, motivating the development of turnaround zones in order to gain their advantages – and avoid “final option” alternatives that greatly diminish district and union control. The current climate of financial hardship, coupled with the federal government’s proactive investment, offers an incredible opportunity to insist on those operating conditions. ***Federal policy should provide incentives – both positive and sanction-oriented – that catalyze such state policy and that encourage union/district/state bargaining on behalf of these specialized zones.***

4. Build the Capacity of Lead Turnaround Partners

Schools don’t turn themselves around, and neither states nor districts nor outside partners have adequate staff and funding to make turnaround successful. But turnaround demands skillful change management at the ground level. States, districts, and foundations must develop a new resource base of external, lead turnaround partners to integrate multiple services in support of clusters of turnaround schools. Lead Partners sign a performance contract with a district and/or state, and in exchange for this increased level of accountability, they are given authority over all school-based decisions. ***Federal policy should provide incentives for states to develop this kind of approach and this type of partner.***

5. Cluster for Support

Turnaround at scale cannot be accomplished one or two schools at a time. States and districts should undertake turnaround in clusters organized around identified needs: by school type (e.g., middle schools or grade 6-12 academies), student characteristics (very high ELL percentages), feeder patterns (elementary to middle to high school) or by region. Clusters should be small enough to operate effectively as networks, but large enough to be an achieve

economies of scale. School turnaround is also expensive. Neither states nor the federal government have the resources to turn around 5,000 schools at once. ***In alignment with Race to the Top, federal policy should provide resources and set criteria for turnaround that prompts more proactive state (and therefore district) responses, beginning with pilot programs of small clusters of schools that are funded on a competitive basis.***

Resources for Turnaround

The average cost of turnaround per school across a cluster of schools ranges from \$500,000 to \$1 million per year for at least three years. If the funds are spread over too many schools, at best, only incremental improvements will occur, because a) significant changes require significant investments, particularly on behalf of high-poverty, high-challenge school populations; and b) state education agencies don't have nearly the capacity to effectively assist all the schools that are in, or are heading towards, restructuring.

As detailed in the draft SIG guidance, innovation and 1003(g) school improvement funds should be targeted towards a select number of schools (and districts) that demonstrate readiness to implement dramatic change. States should be encouraged to invest funds in small clusters of schools to concentrate financial resources and strategic and operating support.

Cost estimates for comprehensive school turnaround range up to \$1 million per school each year and support could come from a variety of sources, including, but not limited to: the reallocation of existing funds; local matches from LEAs, community partners and/or the state; and , additional new funds from the federal government, administered initially on a competitive incentive basis through the state. Turnaround can also be funded by aligning a range of federal and state programs, including extended learning time, early childhood education, Title II staff development programs, and other social service and health initiatives that target at-risk youth.

A Pilot Program

If there are currently 1,000 schools identified as needing turnaround, a pilot group could be created to begin to address the problem and to build turnaround expertise with a relatively limited federal investment. A first cohort of 250 schools with estimated annual costs of \$1 million each, using the allocations provided above, would cost the federal government roughly \$125 million per year. Additional cohorts could be added as capacity, throughout the entire system is increased. Mass Insight is in the process of launching Partnership Zone proof-points in three districts (in three separate states), but if we strive to meet the needs of the 2.5 million students attending these chronically low-performing schools, other organizations need to begin this work simultaneously.

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