



## YOUR ACCESS TO THE REGION

### FEATURE ARTICLE:

## TURNING AROUND LOW-PERFORMING HIGH SCHOOLS

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Accountability requirements of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, talk of national standards, and recent U.S. Department of Education policies have brought one aspect of education reform to the forefront in many states: turnaround of low-performing schools. States in the region served by Great Lakes West Comprehensive Center are clearly invested in this issue. For example, Great Lakes West recently provided technical assistance and support to the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) in its efforts to turn around chronically low-performing high schools in the state and to establish policies and initiatives to support them. Recent national policy and activity related to school turnaround indicate that this topic is of interest to educators, researchers, and policymakers in other states as well. This feature article summarizes the current national dialogue and policy on high school turnaround and describes relevant resources to support Illinois, Wisconsin, and other states that are working to improve low-performing schools.

### ***Why Support Low-Performing High Schools?***

Low-performing high schools present a significant challenge to states that are attempting to meet the needs of their students. The importance of turning these schools around is reflected in the fact that 40 percent of schools currently in restructuring under NCLB are high schools, even though only approximately 20 percent of all public schools are secondary schools.<sup>1</sup> Initiatives to tackle school improvement cannot be accomplished in a vacuum, however. High school reform is intrinsically connected to other policy areas such as core standards, graduation requirements, assessments, and teacher quality and distribution. Improvements also must be accomplished within the framework of national concerns, including federal policy, education research, and the efforts of national organizations with an interest in school reform.

### ***National High School Center Discussion on School Turnaround***

Support to struggling schools is central to the four assurances of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009. In addition, although Race to the Top and Section 1003(g) School Improvement Fund grants are not specific to high schools, both are contingent upon state plans to support and improve low-performing schools. National awareness of this issue is reflected in the September edition of the National High School Center's [Ask the Expert](#) series, which focused on school turnaround. Two of the three questions

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<sup>1</sup> The different grade configurations of secondary schools make citing an exact number difficult. Vocational, charter, and alternative schools must also be accounted for (Keigher & Gruber, 2009).

posed to Mel Riddile of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, who facilitated the session, were related to ARRA regulations, as follows:

- What information should people include in their Race to the Top proposal that will help their applications be most competitive?
- How can the new Section 1003(g) School Improvement Fund regulations be best utilized to turn around challenged high schools?

Although final regulations for the Race to the Top program are still being written, Riddile describes possible changes to the draft guidance and addresses recommended revisions that could affect the regulations. He also discusses the new School Improvement Grants and describes how the lowest performing schools are identified.

The third question for Riddile relates closely to efforts in Illinois to identify research and resources for supporting low-performing high schools, as follows:

- From research and your experience, what are the most prevalent and most pressing problems for chronically low-performing schools?

In response to this query, Riddile addresses the need to understand the context of the current educational system and school turnaround programs and the culture of schools that are looking to improve. Riddile argues that districts and schools in the United States are struggling to improve in an environment that has been shifting for the last 30 years and that all schools—not just the lowest performing ones—need to improve. Low-performing schools face the same challenges as other schools, just more of them. According to Riddile, before a school can improve, changes (e.g., in ways of thinking) must come from within; only then should the focus shift to external influences.

The National High School Center's decision to feature high school turnaround as a topic in its Ask the Expert series demonstrates the national prominence of the issue. Recent discussions between the Department of Education and other national organizations and policy leaders also have focused on school turnaround and the importance of supporting struggling schools as they work to improve.

## **National Policy Dialogue**

At the national level, the Department of Education and Secretary Arne Duncan have been active in shaping the dialogue concerning the needs of low-performing schools. In fact, since January 2009, the Department of Education, under Duncan's leadership, has made turning around low-performing schools one of its top priorities. Duncan has focused on the challenges of the lowest performing 5 percent of schools in the country—approximately 5,000 schools undergoing restructuring under NCLB (Duncan, 2009c). With regard to high schools, Secretary Duncan has sought to focus specific attention on 2,000 "dropout factories,"<sup>2</sup> where 40 percent of freshmen traditionally fail to become seniors three years later (Duncan, 2009b). In a speech at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools conference, Duncan (2009d) outlined the following methods for turning around low-performing schools:

- New leadership takes over the school and replaces at least half the staff.
- The school is converted to a charter school.
- The staff remains, but the school culture is changed by implementing a new performance-based evaluation system, a new curriculum, increased learning time, and greater flexibility for leadership.
- The school is closed, and the students are enrolled in better-performing schools.

The following policy initiatives are key to the Department of Education's efforts to find remedies for the lowest performing schools:

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<sup>2</sup> The term *dropout factories* is attributed to Robert Balfanz in his work on the high school dropout crisis for Johns Hopkins University's Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk.

- Turning around low-performing schools is one of the four assurances state education agencies must make when applying for State Fiscal Stabilization Funds (SFSF) from ARRA.
- Race to the Top grants under ARRA will be awarded based on leadership and innovation in meeting the four assurances required for SFSF (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).
- Title I School Improvement Grants under NCLB totaled \$3.5 billion for 2009: \$545 million from NCLB and \$3 billion from ARRA. Secretary Duncan has requested that NCLB school improvement funds be tripled to \$1.5 billion in the 2010 budget (Duncan, 2009a).

In addition to the U.S. Department of Education, many policy and research institutes—including the Center on Education Policy, the Alliance for Excellent Education, the National Governors Association, and The National High School Center—have played important roles in shaping policy on school reform and developing strategies for improving low-performing schools. These organizations all seek to provide the critical information that policymakers and educators need in order to improve high school student achievement and postgraduation success. On a larger scale, they seek to improve U.S. competitiveness on the international scene while also preparing students for 21st century jobs. Common themes in their work include dropout prevention, addressing the needs of English language learners, and improving teacher quality.

### **Review of School Improvement Strategies**

Much of the research-based literature on identifying and turning around low-performing schools is not specific to high schools. However, during the last two years, a number of key publications have provided important insights into general research-based practices for turning around low-performing schools as well as specific strategies for improving high schools. Several of these publications are described below. The final two publications are high-school-specific.

The Institute of Education Sciences Practice Guide titled [\*Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools\*](#) (Herman et al., 2008) summarizes the evidence-based practices that have been used for school turnaround. These practices are based on the best available research, which, in this case, consists primarily of case studies. As a result, the level of research supporting the practices is “low,” according to guidelines established by the What Works Clearinghouse. Some of the case studies used in this review were conducted in high schools, so this research is relevant for secondary school turnaround. The Practice Guide makes the following recommendations:

- “Signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership” (p.10).
- “Maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction” (p. 14).
- “Provide visible improvements early in the turnaround process (quick wins)” (p. 22).
- “Build a committed staff” (p. 27).

This report includes a summary of the research supporting the recommendations as well as guidance on how to implement them.

Public Impact (2007) has reviewed the evidence on organizational turnaround and summarized the findings in a report for the Center on Innovation & Improvement titled [\*School Turnarounds: A Review of the Cross-Sector Evidence on Dramatic Organizational Improvement\*](#). This publication addresses turnaround efforts in schools as well as other settings, including the private sector. The following strategies are among those examined in the review:

- “Concentrate on achieving a few tangible wins in Year 1” (p. 15).
- “[Implement] practices even when they deviate from norms to achieve goals” (p. 16).

Mass Insight has produced a widely cited report titled [\*The Turnaround Challenge\*](#) (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007), which was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. This report describes nine

strategies that have emerged from the research on methods used by high-performing, high-poverty schools. The authors call for “bold, comprehensive action” from states and incorporate the following key elements:

- Changing conditions
- Building capacity
- Clustering for support

Scott (2008) and Jennings, Scott, and Kober (2009) claim that the current strategies for restructuring outlined in NCLB are insufficient for turning around schools. The authors offer the following recommendations for states that are supporting schools under restructuring:

- Provide guidance to schools and districts on research-based practices.
- Provide technical assistance and funding to schools undergoing restructuring.
- Support schools that are in danger of entering restructuring or that have recently exited it.
- Monitor schools to ensure that they are implementing their restructuring plans.

In a [brief](#) published by the National High School Center, Herlihy and Quint (2006) summarized the effects of four widely used high school improvement programs: Career Academies, First Things First, Project Graduation Really Achieves Dreams, and Talent Development. The brief identifies the following foundational components of successful reform in high schools:

- Personalization, including small learning communities and faculty advisory systems
- Instructional improvement, including extended class periods, special catch-up courses, high-quality curricula, intensive training on the curricula, and professional learning communities

In addition, Herlihy and Quint (2006) found that intensive support for students who start Grade 9 with significant academic deficits can be quite effective in keeping them in school longer.

Fleischman and Heppen (2009) reviewed studies of school reform models and considered the effectiveness of the interventions in supporting low-performing high schools. The following models were included in their analysis, [“Improving Low-Performing High Schools: Searching for Evidence of Promise”](#):

- “Comprehensive school reform programs
- “Dual enrollment and early college high schools
- “Smaller learning communities
- “Specialty academies
- “Charter high schools
- “Education management organizations” (p. 105)

In general, the evidence suggests that these models hold *promise* for school turnaround, but rigorous evidence supporting *success* in this effort is limited. Fleischman and Heppen (2009) also underscore that simple adoption of a program does not ensure improved outcomes. Reformers need to focus on sustained fidelity of implementation over time in order to allow the programs to work.

### ***What Are States Doing?***

Comparing state progress in the area of high school redesign and turnaround is difficult given the diversity of approaches. Since 2000, more than half of the states have adopted some type of high school redesign or improvement initiative, but they vary in scope and focus. For example, some states have embarked on large-scale, amply funded high school improvement initiatives, whereas others have targeted funds to a small set

of high schools in corrective action or restructuring. In addition, although these state initiatives often include components that are research based, few of the programs under way have been evaluated for efficacy.

Moreover, a single, common definition of *low-performing school* has yet to emerge. In many cases, the designation *low-performing* is related to individual state proficiency levels and state accountability measures. Some states use NCLB requirements as indicators of low performance, but this approach does not capture all of the nuances of measuring achievement.

The following examples illustrate what two states are doing to support and turn around struggling schools:

- Benefiting from an effective public-private partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Texas embarked on a high school improvement program in 2003 (<http://www.thsp.org>). The state was also one of the first to move forward with an early warning system to combat high school dropout rates and is addressing the need for 21st century learning skills with a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics initiative ([http://www.thsp.org/initiatives/t\\_stem/](http://www.thsp.org/initiatives/t_stem/)).
- North Carolina was one of the first states to create a statewide system of support (predating NCLB). The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI) has demonstrated a desire to ensure that its schools effectively teach *all* students. NC DPI is known for its careful and thoughtful development of a theory of action and continues to adjust its turnaround initiative and approach as it learns more, ensuring that low-performing schools are served as effectively as possible (<http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/turnaround/>).

Texas and North Carolina were chosen as examples because of their long history of support to districts on the recommendation of the Gates Foundation. Read [more](#) on the efforts under way in these states

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4054\_10/09