

*States must chart their own road to turning around low-performing schools, but they also need to draw their own maps, given the complicated picture research gives on what works best.*

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by Dan Aladjem

# The Future of Low-Performing Schools

Over the past eight years, the School Improvement Grants program (SIG) grew from a relatively small federal program to one of the most substantial direct federal investments in turning around low-performing schools. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) provided \$5 billion for SIG from 2009 to 2012 alone.<sup>1</sup> In total, five cohorts of grantees—almost 2,000 schools nationwide—received three-year infusions of support.

Turning around low-performing schools has been a constant theme in education policy for decades. Although called by other names over the years, the fundamental objective has remained constant: changing schools that historically have not well served their students into ones that provide effective, equitable learning opportunities. The focal point of policy attention and action has shifted over time from the child (e.g., compensatory education) to schools (e.g., effective schools, “New American” schools, turnaround schools) to teachers (e.g., teacher evaluation systems), and to school leaders. With the recent reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the focus shifted substantially to what states can and should do.

There is more than a little irony here: States have always been the locus of education policymaking—even when the federal government ignored that fact. Yet the shift in ESSA is hardly rhetorical. ESSA’s explicit reliance on states presents an opportunity for states to craft solutions based not only on what has been learned nationally but on *states’* own expertise and accumulated institutional knowledge.

As remarkable as the SIG investment was—and as was the national commitment to school improvement it represented—states’ choices in how to turn around low-performing schools were rather restricted.<sup>2</sup> In the lowest 5 percent of chronically

low-performing schools, states had the choice of four aggressive interventions:

- restart, in which the low-performing school was converted to a charter school or given to an external management organization;
- turnaround, in which staff were replaced and major instructional and governance changes made;
- transformation, in which both the principal and many staff were replaced, as well as major instructional and governance changes made; and
- closure, in which the low-performing school was closed and students sent elsewhere.

## What Have We Learned?

Congress and the administration recognized the singular nature of this investment and the potential to learn from it. Consequently, the US Department of Education devoted over \$30 million across multiple, long-term implementation and impact studies to studying SIG turnaround efforts. The final report of the impact evaluation is due in September 2016. Thus far, the findings are remarkably consistent with prior research:

- School improvement is challenging and fragile.
- What principals and teachers do (e.g., establish safe and secure schools, change patterns of teaching and learning, use data to guide improvement) is more important than how they do it (e.g., principals can be strong, charismatic leaders or more managerial in style).
- Implementation quality matters and can be improved through external technical assistance.
- Districts and states play important roles in incentivizing improvement through supports and sanctions.

■ There are multiple ways of combining these and other reform strategies and practices.

■ Change takes time.<sup>3</sup>

Even before the latest studies, analysts and education leaders have recognized the implementation challenges schools and districts face. Impact findings from the SIG evaluation will likely be tentative at best and perhaps controversial. Undoubtedly, they will be heavily qualified and replete with limitations and disclaimers. This is not a criticism of ED's research investment nor the quality of the work. Rather, it is a recognition of the inherent challenges to understanding how to improve the nation's lowest performing schools.

State boards of education and state education agencies (SEAs) hoping to improve student learning using the best possible evidence face an intractable problem as they contemplate policies affecting low-performing schools. It is virtually impossible to have high levels of confidence in our understanding of the causes of school failure or in the likelihood that policy and programmatic interventions will succeed.

Such a claim requires explanation. The twin curse plaguing those of us who try to understand school failure and school improvement interventions lies in the very nature of those failures and interventions. School failure has myriad causes: in-school factors, out-of-school factors, observable factors, and unobservable factors. They have to do with the child, the child's family, teachers, schools, and systems. Many of these factors *alone* are significant enough to explain the failure of any given school. For example, high poverty rates, high proportions of English language learners, high proportions of students with disabilities, high student mobility, high teacher turnover, or poor reading instruction each can explain school failure by itself. This makes trying to understand the relative roles of different factors and how they interact next to, if not completely, impossible. In technical terms, we face a problem of overdetermination. Because so many factors cause school failure, interact in too many ways, and all depend on a multitude of contextual factors, a comprehensive, valid, reliable explanation of school failure is simply beyond our current grasp. Yet such understanding is vital for

policymaking, as the best policies are predicated upon understanding the problem to be solved.

The opposite problem confronts those looking at remedies for school failure. We know too little about most policy interventions to start teasing out how well they work, for whom, and under what circumstances. There is not enough evidence to understand the multiplicity of relationships between the factors that cause school failure, the factors interventions attempt to manipulate, and implementation fidelity. In technical terms, we face a problem of underdetermination. While researchers can sketch some ways a given intervention works, they generally cannot yet understand how it works, how well it works, whether it works best in conjunction with other interventions, or how it works for different schools, teachers, or students.

## Evidence-Based Solutions

Where does this leave state policymakers? First, states can spend more of their Title I funds on turnaround: up to 7 percent from 4 percent. Because states no longer have to comply with the strictures of No Child Left Behind's accountability regime nor ARRA's equally arbitrary mandates, states get to do what they do best: experiment by attending to their particular priorities and values while building on what research does say about turning around low-performing schools.

ESSA mandates that states identify and approve plans for turning around low-performing schools. States must rely on evidence-based solutions in doing so. In the abstract, that makes perfect sense, but given that there is far less practical knowledge than would be ideal, basing policy and programmatic interventions primarily on the research evidence borders on wishful thinking. Building a robust body of evidence-based solutions has been far more difficult than ESSA presumes and yielded far more tentative findings. Even what constitutes so-called Tier I evidence under ESSA often includes interventions that may have very few studies (sometimes as few as one). ESSA's evidence tiers would be far more helpful were there multiple studies of more interventions at each tier. Instead, there are very few rigorous studies of any given policy or programmatic intervention.<sup>4</sup>

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The intent of ESSA clearly is to return some balance to education policymaking by explicitly recognizing the role that states must play in improving schools. It is an invitation to states to innovate and an acknowledgment that, however well-intentioned, NCLB and ARRA mandates created as many challenges as they solved. One of the least appreciated challenges created by ARRA was that the rush to compete for ARRA's largess induced states to make major policy changes such as teacher evaluation systems in ways that left teachers and local administrators often feeling that major shifts were thrust upon them with little or no input and less than complete implementation strategies. As a consequence, the wrath of educators most responsible for running schools and teaching students was directed at state agencies, not the federal government.

One important lesson from the research on improving low-performing schools has been the importance of implementation and the importance of teacher buy-in to implementation fidelity. While commitment to implementing new programs and policies can be achieved by mandate, implementation research favors voluntary choice.<sup>5</sup> One way of not only improving commitment to implementation but also potentially improving policymaking and program design is by involving key stakeholders, especially teachers.

Several initiatives are exploring ways of infusing state policy with teacher perspectives and expertise. Hope Street Group, through its State Teacher Fellows program, provides extensive training, resources, and ongoing support to cohorts of teachers in four states: Hawai'i, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Tennessee. In each state, Hope Street Group partners with the SEA and other relevant policy organizations (often teachers associations and foundations). In each state, teachers gather data from fellow teachers via surveys and focus groups on actionable topics of importance and immediate relevance to the SEA. The state in turn uses the data to improve policy and practice. For example, in Hawai'i, State Teacher Fellows recently collected data to inform the development of the implementation plan for the Next Generation Science Standards that was ultimately adopted by the Hawai'i State Board of Education.

School turnaround cries out for the inclusion of teacher perspectives. Early evaluation findings of Hope Street Group's work suggest that states' reaching out to teachers and then acting on just some recommendations can have a transformative impact on the attitudes and beliefs of many teachers. State boards can play an important role in calling for SEAs to seek input from teachers before formulating policy.

Over recent years, most states have revisited their standards to ensure they remain adequate to prepare students for postsecondary work and education. Concurrently, educators have paid increasing attention to the idea of deeper learning—that is, mastery of core academic content and the development of higher-order thinking skills and dispositions toward learning. Research has documented that high school students in schools emphasizing deeper learning were more likely to graduate on time.<sup>6</sup> While the effects were weaker for higher poverty students, they were still significant. Deeper learning has not yet been a high-priority strategy for turning around low-performing schools. Applying the principles of deeper learning to low-performing schools is exactly the kind of innovative solution ESSA should inspire.

The demise of the SIG program neither ended the expectation nor the commitment to turning around low-performing schools. Rather, it created an opportunity and a challenge for states. Freed from the bonds of federal mandates, freed from the bonds of rigid intervention schemes and limited choices, states can engage in new ways of turning around low-performing schools.

With the opportunity comes the responsibility to get it right. ESSA presumes that the way to do that is by imposing evidence standards. Evidence standards can be helpful, given enough evidence. The challenge for states is to take the guidepost provided by ESSA's evidence standards and build not only innovative solutions to the problem of low-performing schools but also building a knowledge base on how to do so. ■

<sup>1</sup>For a fuller description of programs implemented through ARRA, see A. Webber et al., "State Implementation of Reforms Promoted under the Recovery Act," NCEE 2014-4011 (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, US Department of Education, 2014).

<sup>2</sup>Under ARRA, states were to step up efforts to turn around low-performing schools while also revising standards, improving state data systems, and perhaps most

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digital textbooks and new learning apps could also spur greater educational achievement. No matter what technology a state adopts, “it’s not about advancing tech, it’s about advancing a teaching and learning strategy that is really going to promote deeper learning,” says Becker. Policymakers will want to monitor technological advancements and obtain input from educators to see whether the technology in question is a tool that works for them. ■

<sup>1</sup>“Virtual Reality 101,” Cnet, <http://www.cnet.com/special-reports/vr101/>.

<sup>2</sup>John Gaudiosi, “How This Med School Is Using Virtual Reality to Teach Students,” *Fortune* (October 16, 2015), <http://fortune.com/2015/10/16/western-university-is-using-virtual-reality-to-teach/>.

<sup>3</sup>Veronica S. Pantelidis, “Reasons to Use Virtual Reality in Education and Training Courses and a Model to Determine When to Use Virtual Reality,” *Themes in Science and Technology Education* 2, vol. 1-2 (2009): 59–70, <http://earthlab.uoi.gr/theste/index.php/theste/issue/view/9>.

<sup>4</sup>Hannes Kaufmann et al., “Construct3D: A Virtual Reality Application for Mathematics and Geometry Education,” *Education and Information Technologies* 5, no. 23 (2000), <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/A:1012049406877>; Daren T Nicholson, et al., “Can Virtual Reality Improve Anatomy Education? A Randomised Controlled Study of a Computer-Generated Three-Dimensional Anatomical Ear Model,” *Medical Education* 40, no. 11 (November 2006): 1081–87, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17054617>.

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controversial of all, revamping teacher evaluation systems.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, D.K. Aladjem et al., “Models Matter: The Final Report of the National Longitudinal Evaluation of Comprehensive School Reform,” (Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, 2006); D.K. Aladjem et al., “Achieving Dramatic School Improvement: An Exploratory Study,” (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, 2010); G.D. Borman et al., “Comprehensive School Reform and Student Achievement: A Meta-Analysis,” *Review of Educational Research* 73, no. 2 (2003): 125–230; A. Kurki et al., “Implementation: Measuring and Explaining the Fidelity of CSR Implementation,” *Journal for Education of Students Placed at Risk* 11, no. 3/4 (2006): 255–278; McLaughlin, 2005; D.B. Tyack, “The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education,” (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974); Y. Zhang et al., “The Implementation of Comprehensive School Reform and Its Impact on Increases in Student Achievement,” *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk* 11, no. 3/4 (2006): 309–29.

<sup>4</sup>This evidence vacuum presents a considerable risk to states and districts. The educational intervention landscape is filled with vendors ready to provide “proven” and “aligned” interventions. Avoiding unscrupulous vendors will remain a constant for states. Equally unfortunate would be the temptation to ignore weak or missing research and create strategies, policies, and interventions without any regard for prior experience and evaluation.

<sup>5</sup>M.W. McLaughlin, “The Rand Change Agent Study Revisited: Macro Perspectives and Micro Realities,”

*Educational Researcher* 19, no. 9 (1990): 11–16.

<sup>6</sup>K. Zeiser et al., “Graduation Advantage Persists for Students in Deeper Learning Network High Schools Updated Findings from the Study of Deeper Learning: Opportunities and Outcomes,” (Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, 2016), <http://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/Graduation-Advantage-Persists-Deeper-Learning-Report-March-2016-rev.pdf>.

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Blended and Online Education and the National Center for Learning Disabilities’ Personalized Learning: Policy & Practice Recommendations for Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities. ■

<sup>1</sup>National Center for Learning Disabilities, “Personalized Learning: Policy & Practice Recommendations for Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities” (Washington, DC, 2015).

<sup>2</sup>A personalized learning plan is not the same thing as an Individualized Education Program, which is required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. IEPs are written statements for each child with a disability that must include information on the student’s academic progress, address how the child will be integrated into and supported in the general classroom, and describe any special instructional needs, services, or accommodations. Although personalized learning plans and IEPs share a focus on the needs of each child, the IEP is designed to ensure that a student who is eligible for special education services receives them and that accommodations and supports level the playing field with their peers and allow them to participate in the general education classroom.

<sup>3</sup>S. Patrick and S. Gentz, “Innovation Zones: Creating Policy Flexibility for Personalized Learning” (Vienna, VA: iNACOL, March 2016).

<sup>4</sup>S. Patrick et al., *Promising State Policies for Personalized Learning* (Vienna, VA: iNACOL, May 2016).

<sup>5</sup>This allows districts and regular public schools flexibility similar to that provided charter schools, though that flexibility will vary depending on the state. For example, Colorado’s Schools of Innovation policy allows traditional public schools some flexibility around budgeting and curriculum, but local collective bargaining still applies, and teachers have to vote annually to remain as a school of innovation.

<sup>6</sup>The grant-funded project is part of the Next Generation Learning Challenges initiative, founded by Educause in partnership with several other organizations, including iNACOL. See <http://nextgenlearning.org/assessment-learning-project>.

<sup>7</sup>See iNACOL, National Standards for Quality Online Courses (v2), (October 2011), <http://www.inacol.org/resource/inacol-national-standards-for-quality-online-courses-v2/>.

<sup>8</sup>R. Rose, *Access and Equity for All Learners in Blended and Online Education*, (Vienna, VA: iNACOL, October 2014).

<sup>9</sup>TJ Bliss, *OER State Policy in K-12 Education: Benefits, Strategies, and Recommendations for Open Access, Open Sharing* (Vienna, VA: iNACOL, June 2013); Council of Chief State School Officers, “OER in Washington State: Identify, Review, Connect,” (Washington, DC: CCSSO, n.d.), [http://www.ccsso.org/Resources/Programs/OER\\_Washington.html](http://www.ccsso.org/Resources/Programs/OER_Washington.html).