

Editor's Note

Valerie Norville
Editorial Director

There is no one secret sauce to turning around the lowest performing schools in the nation. With the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), neither is there any longer a prescriptive menu of four recipes. Yet states and districts need to cook up something.

Many already are. Submitted for the consideration of state boards of education and their colleagues in state education agencies, this issue of the *Standard* is replete with ideas for approaches to school improvement.

Although readers may detect common themes, the approaches vary. Susan Bowles Therriault and Erica Champagne detail the encouraging outcomes that emerged from a focus on research linked to school monitoring in Massachusetts. Described in a recent *Education Next* profile as someone who “dug in fast, set an ambitious agenda, and broke a lot of china,” former public education secretary Hanna Skandera lays out the approach she led in New Mexico. “State leadership matters,” writes Skandera. “If that commitment is not firmly entrenched at the top, school improvement strategies are bound to fail.” Gonzaga University researchers discuss a framework used in a Washington State district that focuses on changing the culture of learning. And in an interview this spring, Chief Turnaround Officer Eric Thomas and Chairman Scott Johnson discuss the role the Georgia state board is playing in guiding the state’s new approach to turnaround. As Thomas puts it, “Doing nothing is not an option.”

A number of other experts harness research and experience in their articles about key ingredients to successful school improvement. Carlas McCauley of

WestEd’s Center on School Turnaround urges a systemic approach that simultaneously embraces leadership, talent development, instructional transformation, and culture shift. Otherwise, McCauley writes, states will continue to see only “islands of excellence in a sea of frustrated expectations.”

The Institute for Student Achievement’s Stephanie Wood-Garnett and Betty Greene-Bryant list 10 research-backed principles for state boards to follow to guide turnaround of high schools. One such: “Effective schools create a safety net for students within their walls.” While other pieces in the issue acknowledge the important role of school leadership in improving schools, New America’s Roxanne Garza and Melissa Tooley recognize that turnaround likely requires leaders to take on new tasks and delegate others. They describe district models for turnaround leadership that have freed up principals to focus on instructional improvement while devolving some of their administrative tasks.

And while the federal government is no longer in the business of spelling out a particular turnaround approach for states to adopt, ESSA still requires that there be an evidence base to support whatever approaches states do choose. So did its precursor, explains Robert E. Slavin of the Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University. What’s new is ESSA’s specificity on what constitutes evidence. Slavin offers guidance to state boards looking for assurance that the recipes their states concoct for school turnaround might really work—and that underserved students in struggling schools will finally have access to opportunities for an excellent education. ■

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