

The State Education

May 2018

# Standard

*The Journal of the National Association of State Boards of Education*

## FRESH START ON SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT



**A Systems Approach**

**Massachusetts, New Mexico, and  
Washington's Tales of Turnaround**

**What Are the Options?**

**10 Principles to Help High Schools**

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Washington State Board of Education

# Standard

VOLUME 18 ■ ISSUE 2

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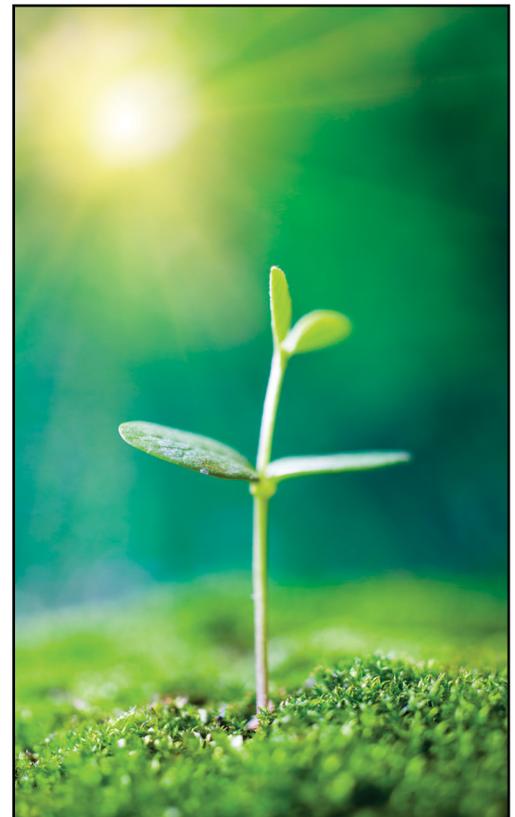
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National Association of  
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# Editor's Note

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. ■

The State Education

# Standard

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# News & Notes

Before the Easter recess, the Senate (65-32) and House (256-167) approved a massive \$1.3 trillion spending bill to bring the fiscal year 2018 spending process to a close. The compromise bill provides a \$2.6 billion increase for the U.S. Department of Education (see table). Given that the omnibus spending bill may be the last major legislation Congress will approve before the midterms, the measure also included notable new policy provisions with implications for school districts:

- **Stop School Violence Act:** The Bureau of Justice Assistance in the Department of Justice is authorized to make grants to states, units of local government, and Indian tribes to support evidence-based programs, violence prevention efforts, and anonymous reporting systems. Funds may also be used to support physical security upgrades for schools like metal detectors, locks, lighting, and other deterrents. Subawards may be made to school districts, nonprofits, and other units of local government or tribal organizations. The bill reallocates \$75 million from the Comprehensive School Safety Initiative.
- **Secure Rural Schools Program:** Congress provided two years of support for the lapsed Secure Rural Schools

program, which offers formula payments to qualified “forest counties.” SRS payments go to counties nationwide, but they mainly go to rural, Western counties with high presence of Bureau of Land Management or National Forest System lands.

- **Rural Utility Service Broadband Pilot:** The bill authorizes the Rural Utility Service in the Department of Agriculture to launch a \$600 million distance learning, telemedicine broadband program. The bill notes that funding should be prioritized to areas lacking access to broadband service.

The Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee voted March 14 to approve Frank Brogan to serve as assistant secretary for elementary and secondary education and Mark Schneider to serve as director of the Institute for Education Sciences. Schneider has since been confirmed by the full Senate, but Senate leaders had not at press time established a date for the full body to consider Brogan nomination. President Trump in March announced his intent to nominate Mark Schultz of Nebraska to be commissioner of the Department of Education’s

Rehabilitation Services Administration. Diane Auer Jones has joined the Department of Education as a senior policy advisor to the secretary of education.

■  
The Department of Agriculture released a proposed rule to add flexibility to the hiring standards for new school nutrition program directors in small school districts. Under the rule, food service experience rather than school nutrition program experience would be required, with volunteer work in food service counting toward this experience, and the number of years of required experience is reduced in very small districts where other qualifications are met.

■  
Four school districts and the Puerto Rico Department of Education have applied for a new pilot program for experimenting with weighted-student funding formulas. The four for the coming school year are Wilsona School District (CA), Indianapolis Public Schools (IN), Salem-Keizer School District 24J (OR), and Upper Adams School District (PA). School districts interested in applying for flexibility in the 2019–20 school year must file applications on or before July 15, 2018. ■

**Table 1. Funding for Child-Related Programs in Fiscal 2018 Budget**

	Budget Item	Funding	Change
<b>Major K-12 Formula Programs</b>	ESSA, Title I	\$15.7 billion	+\$300 million
	ESSA, Title II	\$2.0 billion	level funding
	ESSA, Title IV	\$1.1 billion	+\$700 million
	IDEA State Grants	\$12.2 billion	+\$275 million
	Perkins Career and Technical Education	\$1.19 billion	+\$75 million
<b>Other Key K-12 Programs</b>	Teacher Quality Partnerships	\$43.09 million	level funding
	21st Century Community Learning Centers	\$1.212 billion	+\$20 million
	State Assessments	\$378 million	+\$8.9 million
	Education, Innovation, and Research Grants	\$120 million	+\$20 million
	Supporting Effective Educator Development	\$75 million	+\$10 million
	School Safety National Activities	\$90 million	+\$22 million
	Office for Civil Rights	\$117 million	+\$8.5 million
	Statewide Family Engagement Centers	\$10 million	new funding
	Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems	\$32.28 million	level funding

# On the Agenda

In 2017, nine in ten state boards explored ways to give all students a well-rounded education. Their efforts spanned extracurricular options, innovative instructional strategies, and unique curricular offerings from state history to financial literacy.

Whether they considered advanced electives or extracurriculars, boards often took time to discuss related issues of access and equity. Frequently, board members involved stakeholders in their deliberations. In four states, student representatives shaped state board conversations, raising issues such as unequal access to advanced learning opportunities and setting the stage for deeper board discussions. For example, Connecticut student advisors in June encouraged their board to expand access to extracurricular options to combat what they called the “experience gap.”

Financial literacy, computer science education, and technology-related extracurriculars came up frequently in 2017. Financial literacy initiatives appeared on the agendas of one in seven state boards last year, while more than a third of all state boards considered courses and extracurricular opportunities in computer science and technology.

Other boards approached academic enrichment and electives in highly individual ways. In Tennessee, the board approved a permanent state history elective course in August 2017, with an expedited timeline so schools could begin offering it in January 2018. In Arkansas, the board was updated in July 2017 on the Arkansas Declaration of Learning program, which supports teachers and school librarians over the course of a year as they develop curricula and civic engagement projects for their students that are inspired by historic objects, works of art, and oral histories. Teachers gain access to these resources through partner organizations such as the Butler Center for Arkansas Studies and the

Clinton Foundation. In one Declaration of Learning project, students created a 100-foot mural to raise awareness of the impact of rising sea levels on the U.S. Marshall Islands.

Extracurricular offerings often come with a hefty price tag for districts and schools. To avoid passing all costs for extracurriculars off to families through fees and thus creating barriers to access for students from low-income families, states look for other ways to fund these programs. The federal government’s 21st Century Community Learning Center program supports enrichment opportunities during nonschool hours for students attending high-poverty schools. In Nebraska, a new two-year opportunity grant program is providing supplemental funding through competitive grant awards. The Nebraska State Board of Education voted to approve grant funding recommendations in May and later approved a position statement in support of community-school partnerships that advance extracurricular learning.

State boards can help elevate and advance enrichment opportunities for all students through action, advocacy, and efforts to involve stakeholders in supporting engaging electives and extracurriculars. To find more examples of diverse state board initiatives, browse the Academic Enrichment category on State Board Insight. How is your state board emphasizing equitable access to enriching opportunities? ■

## Nebraska’s Two-Year Opportunity

**Grant:** <https://www.education.ne.gov/elo/two-year-opportunity-grant/>

## Arkansas’ Declaration of Learning

**Program:** <http://www.arkansased.gov/divisions/learning-services/curriculum-and-instruction/library-media-services>

## State Board Insight:

<https://stateboardinsight.nasbe.org/>



**Sarah-Jane Lorenzo**  
Research Associate



**Scott Summers**  
President, National Council of  
State Education Attorneys, Nebraska

## NCOSEA Voice

### *Leave No Parent Behind*

If I had a nickel for every time over the 20+ years that I have been a state education attorney when a person on the other end of a call said, “I want to know my rights as a parent,” I would have a lot of nickels. I usually end up referring the parent to state statutes on school districts and parental involvement policies. According to National Parent-Teacher Association’s “State Laws on Family Engagement in Education Reference Guide,” 39 states have such statutes concerning “family engagement” in K-12.

The legal landscape in this area has evolved gradually. Oft-cited Supreme Court cases assert the “fundamental right” of parental control over their child’s education (*Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205 [1972]; *Pierce v. Soc. of Sisters*, 268 U.S. 510 [1925]; *Meyer v. Nebraska*, 262 U.S. 390 [1923]).

But nothing is absolute. As a corollary, public school educational requirements or actions that are not “aimed” at “interfering” with the parent-child relationship were found not to violate that fundamental right. Moreover, the state stood *parens patriae* to its resident children, and it could mandate school attendance, curriculum, and other academic matters even in the face of parental objections. The area is a case study in how legislatures and courts attempt to balance state authority and individual rights.

Over the last 50 years, the U.S. Congress has passed, and presidents have signed, a number of laws that wade into parental involvement and rights: the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA, 1974); the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA, 1974); the Individuals with Disabilities

Education Act (IDEA, 1975); No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001); and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015).

Most people think FERPA mainly requires confidentiality of personally identifiable student information. It does that. But it also requires schools receiving any federal educational funding to give a student’s parent or guardian the opportunity to “inspect and review” their child’s education records. And if parents find something objectionable during that inspection and review, they have a right under FERPA to challenge the content of records and request that they be amended (and they can insist upon a hearing for review of their objections). This right does not apply to subjective or professional evaluative entries like grades, but it does apply to items alleged to be “inaccurate, misleading, or in violation of the student’s rights of privacy.”

Beginning with NCLB, authorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act have included extensive provisions regarding parental involvement. As currently constituted, any school district receiving federal funding must have a written policy—developed jointly with and distributed to parents—that addresses matters of parental involvement, including involvement in the “activities of the school.”

States, districts, and schools may well feel a burden of responsibility for closing gaps in educational opportunity and achievement. But these federal laws recognize that the gaps will only be fully remedied when those closest to the affected students—parents and families—are full partners in educational decision making. ■



# A Systems Approach to Rapid School Improvement

*Turnaround requires a framework, not a quick fix.*

by **Carlas McCauley**

School reform has a long history. Numerous well-intentioned efforts to improve low-performing schools have been rolled out over the decades, with the laudable goals of increasing academic achievement and otherwise equipping all students for the future. Perhaps no effort was so sweeping and ambitious as the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. In 2009, the Obama administration extended that effort by making rapid school improvement, commonly referred to as turnaround, a top priority under the U.S. Department of Education's School Improvement Grant program and its Elementary and Secondary Education Act waiver process. Yet despite intense local, state, and federal focus, these efforts yielded at best mixed results. Individual model turnaround schools appeared as islands of excellence in a sea of frustrated expectations.

Nonetheless, much has been learned. Reform efforts over the past two decades focused on increasing the rigor of instruction, graduation rates, and academic achievement, as well as ensuring these good outcomes were available to all children, so that the nation would be globally competitive. However, efforts focused on a given area often lacked a systems approach, and thus success was not sustainable. The education community has learned the importance of considering all levels of the education system, understanding that the system within which a school operates—encompassing both the district and the state education system—can bolster or stall rapid improvement.

To support systemic thinking about school improvement, the Center on School Turnaround at WestEd developed a framework to assist states, districts, and schools in leading and managing

rapid improvement efforts (figure 1). The framework has four domains that have proved central to rapid, significant improvement: turnaround leadership, talent development, instructional transformation, and culture shift.

Within each domain, the framework offers examples of practices to be put into action at each level: the state education system, the local education system, and the school. Strategic and collective enactment of these practices is more likely to produce progress across all the areas than piecemeal efforts will. That is, the domains are not meant to be considered in isolation or to be approached step by step. The domains and practices overlap, with some consistent threads tying them together, including the need for clear goals and expectations. Implemented well, the practices assist students assigned to failing schools but also have a cascading effect that improves the whole system.

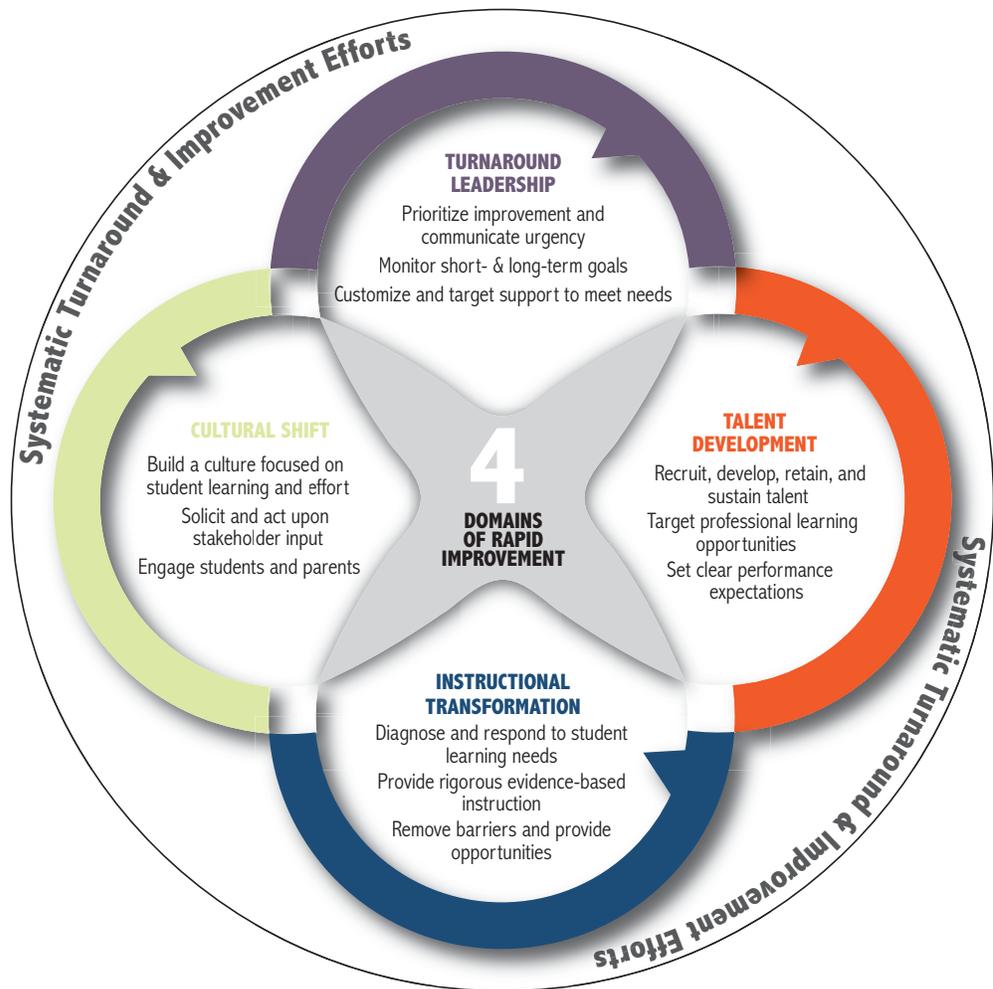
Local context and implementation influence the outcomes of any improvement initiative. Thus the framework is not a magic bullet. Instead, it organizes the issues that state, district, and school leaders must consider when planning a turnaround. Local needs and contexts drive decisions about what practices to implement, when, and how.

## Turnaround Leadership

The research on school turnaround commonly identifies high-quality school leaders as a central factor in successful school turnaround.<sup>1</sup> In a comprehensive literature review, Leithwood and colleagues found that school leadership quality is second only to teacher quality in its impact on student achievement.<sup>2</sup> Other research has established school leadership as a prerequisite for other aspects of school turnaround to take

**Strategic and collective enactment of these practices is more likely to produce progress than piecemeal efforts will.**

Figure 1.



**Establish an office or core cadre of personnel responsible for supporting policy, programmatic, and implementation efforts to lead turnaround.**

hold, such as improved instruction and school climate.<sup>3</sup> The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) reinforces these findings by allowing states and districts to use federal funding more flexibly to improve and support their school leaders.

Turnaround leaders at the state, local district, and school levels must drive initiatives to facilitate rapid, significant improvement for low-performing schools. The practices within the leadership domain that research highlights are as follows:

- prioritize improvement and communicate its urgency;
- monitor short- and long-term goals; and
- customize and target support to meet needs.

Turnaround leaders at all levels must prioritize elevating improvement at low-achieving schools and must communicate to all stakeholders the urgent need for turnaround so that all students can receive the high-quality education they deserve. Moreover, turnaround leaders at all levels must be catalysts for change and must organize the coordinated work of the staff charged with implementing efforts to rapidly improve schools.

One example of an activity undertaken at the state level to prioritize improvement is to establish an office or core cadre of personnel responsible for supporting policy, programmatic, and implementation efforts to lead turnaround initiatives.<sup>4</sup>

## Talent Development

School turnaround requires competent, committed personnel at each level and in every position.<sup>5</sup> The research-informed practices in this domain are as follows:

- recruit, develop, retain, and sustain talent;
- target professional learning opportunities; and
- set clear performance expectations.

Recruiting and retaining staff pose a challenge across a number of low-performing schools.

Policies and procedures to identify, select, place, and retain and sustain personnel—especially teachers and school-level leaders—enable turnaround efforts to succeed. For example, a board may allow low-performing schools priority in hiring teachers and leaders by modifying hiring dates for those schools. Turnaround competencies are identified by district leaders and used to select and develop turnaround teachers, model teachers, and leaders.<sup>6</sup>

One example of an activity undertaken at the state level to promote targeted professional learning opportunities in this domain is training districts on how to develop and implement a teacher professional learning model with individualization and job-embedded processes as the focus.<sup>7</sup>

## Instructional Transformation

Improving student learning outcomes depends on systemwide support for changing classroom instruction. The practices in this domain are as follows:

- diagnose and respond to student learning needs;
- provide rigorous evidence-based instruction; and
- remove barriers and provide opportunities.

Effective instructional practice—including strong standards-based instruction, data-based planning, pedagogical approaches such as differentiation and personalization, and classroom management—must be identified and supported at each level of the system. Schools cultivate an environment of high expectations and support for student academic accomplishment.<sup>8</sup> While districts and schools focus their attention on in-school factors affecting student

performance, they also attempt to address those traditionally considered to be out-of-school factors so that every student is ready for the task of learning.

One example of a state-level activity to support diagnosing and responding to student learning needs is to provide funding incentives and support to districts and schools that seek to ensure teachers have the time and capacity to carry out this work.

## Culture Shift

Successful turnaround depends upon many people working together to achieve extraordinary results.<sup>9</sup> Practices in this domain are as follows:

- build a strong community intensely focused on student learning;
- solicit and act upon stakeholder input; and
- engage students and families in pursuing education goals.

Mustering the necessary commitment to achieve results requires a dramatic culture shift toward raised academic expectations.<sup>10</sup> A turnaround culture fuses community cohesion with academic press; one without the other is insufficient.<sup>11</sup> Leadership establishes the structures and opportunities for faculty and staff to work together around common goals, engendering a culture of mutual respect, shared responsibility, and focused attention on student learning.<sup>12</sup> A strong school community attends to the culture both inside and outside the school, gathering input from stakeholders and gauging perceptions about the school and its turnaround efforts.

One example of a state-level activity to support such community building is to provide districts with tools for tracking, analyzing, and sharing data on school performance, professional practice, and student opportunities.<sup>13</sup>

To the extent that educators across all levels of the system are able to implement practices across the four domain areas, a state's education ecosystem will be strengthened, with the system bolstering rather than hindering school improvement. In this supportive ecosystem, dramatic improvement is no longer manifested in islands of excellence. Instead, these routinized practices help low-performing schools across the board, making excellence the norm

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**A turnaround culture fuses community cohesion with academic press; one without the other is insufficient.**

**Carlos McCauley is director of WestEd's Center on School Turnaround.**



## Putting ESSA's Evidence Standards to Work for Your State

*Schools receiving federal improvement dollars need to pick programs that line up with one of three top evidence tiers.*

by Robert E. Slavin

What matters most in education is what teachers do in the classroom to enhance student achievement. For this reason, state and district leaders must take steps to ensure that principals and teachers have effective textbooks, software, professional development, and programs. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) moves away from the compliance-oriented approach of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and gives states great authority to decide which programs and practices they will implement, especially in low-performing schools.

NCLB tried to nudge states, districts, and schools toward using programs and materials that were proven to be effective. The law promoted the use of programs “based on scientifically based research.” But that definition did not spark much

change. The problem is that just about anything in education can be said to be “based on” some study that qualifies in some sense as scientifically based research.

### The Three Tiers

In contrast, ESSA has much more specifically defined what constitutes proof of effectiveness for students. ESSA focuses on three main levels of evidence. At each level, a program must have at least one study with a significant positive outcome and no studies with significant negative outcomes. For a “strong” rating, at least one study must have compared an experimental group using the program to a control group using ordinary methods, with schools,

teachers, or students assigned at random to the experimental or control groups. For a “moderate” rating the requirements are the same, except that the experimental and control groups can be matched rather than assigned at random. For a “promising” rating, a correlational design can be used. There is also a fourth category—“demonstrates a rationale based on high-quality research”—which does not require any actual evidence and should therefore be considered evidence building rather than proven.<sup>1</sup>

Finding programs that meet ESSA’s evidence standards is not difficult. At [evidenceforessa.org](http://evidenceforessa.org), made by my colleagues and me at Johns Hopkins University, you can find reading, math, and (soon) science programs listed by their strong,

moderate, or promising evidence levels. The programs can also be searched and filtered to find programs that suit specific needs. This website was created in partnership with several national education organizations, including NASBE.

Programs that meet ESSA evidence standards represent a wide array of approaches and usually differ markedly from ordinary textbooks or traditional professional development. Several are one-to-one or one-to-small group tutoring programs, using either teachers or paraprofessionals as tutors. Others are whole-school reform approaches, such as Building Assets, Reducing Risk (BARR) for high schools and our own Success for All elementary/middle school model (see box).

### **Box 1. Examples of Evidence-Based Whole-School Approaches**

Struggling schools are eligible under ESSA for school improvement funding and for other federal or state funds. These schools need help in all aspects of their functioning—curriculum, professional development, student services, assessment, classroom management, and more. Such schools usually benefit most from coordinated, comprehensive approaches that deal with all aspects of school improvement and provide experienced coaches to work with schools over time. BARR and Success for All are two examples of such whole-school reform approaches.

#### ***Building Assets, Reducing Risk***

BARR focuses on ensuring that students in low-performing high schools succeed in the crucial ninth grade year. BARR seeks to improve students’ social-emotional skills, build positive teacher-student relationships, and overcome nonacademic barriers to learning, such as truancy and misbehavior. BARR schools closely monitor student achievement and behavior using real-time data analysis. Teacher teams and block scheduling are used to build connections among teachers and students. Teachers of all subjects meet regularly to review progress of at-risk students and make plans to deal with academic or behavioral issues. Two randomized studies found positive effects of BARR on reading and math achievement, qualifying it for the ESSA “strong” category.

#### ***Success for All***

Success for All provides schools whose students are in prekindergarten to grade 8 with extensive materials, software, and coaching to help all staff use proven teaching strategies, especially cooperative learning. Struggling students receive computer-assisted small-group or one-to-one tutoring. Programs for parent involvement, integrated social services, social-emotional learning, attendance, school climate, and other elements are also provided. A building facilitator helps all teachers implement with quality, and principals, facilitators, and teacher teams learn leadership strategies. Implementation is phased in over time, with standards for quality implementation at the classroom and school levels. Two large randomized evaluations, as well as several matched studies in many parts of the United States, have found positive effects of the approach, qualifying it for ESSA’s “strong” category.

## How Can States Ensure Proven Programs Really Work?

Just as buying a Stradivarius will not make someone a concert violinist, adopting an evidence-based program will not magically transform struggling schools. Successful implementation of even the best, most proven program requires time, effort, and a strong commitment from education leaders at all levels. Here are a few pointers on how to maximize the odds of getting good results.

- **Be tough.** Change is hard, and educators may try to use new initiatives to obtain more funding to support what they have always done. Do not let this happen. Staff of struggling schools should have input in selecting programs from off the evidence-based menu, and they should participate in all phases of planning and implementation of those they select. However, the ESSA evidence standards are intended to provide incentives for schools to adopt and implement new approaches proven in rigorous evaluations. ESSA gives states an opportunity to introduce their lowest-achieving schools to proven programs, provided by capable national leaders in school transformation. Staff of struggling schools need to put their energies and talents into implementing transformational programs known to be effective, not minor variations of what has failed in the past.
- **Start with needs assessments.** School and district leaders should do needs assessments to determine what their children need most and then look for programs that meet those needs. In evaluating district plans, state leaders should look for well-thought-out strategies for assessing school needs.
- **Get buy-in.** Educators will do a much better job of implementing programs if they have had a role in selecting them. States should help eligible schools find out about all the proven programs that serve their subjects and grade levels. State leaders can encourage district and school staff to examine websites of proven models, call or visit staff in similar places who have used the programs, and so on. Then school staffs should vote on what they think will most benefit their students. State leaders should look for effective

These approaches can make big differences in struggling schools. For example, nonprofit Success for All has worked for many years with the Steubenville, Ohio, school district, a disadvantaged district (81 percent free and reduced price lunch, 61 percent white, 25 percent African American) that now routinely outperforms middle-class suburban districts across Ohio and the nation.<sup>2</sup> Some programs make effective use of technology, such as READ 180. Others are based on cooperative learning.

There are proven programs for every type of school: urban, rural, or suburban, serving white, African American, Hispanic, or English learners, and in all parts of the nation. The best programs provide extensive, high-quality professional development.

### Why Do ESSA Evidence Levels Matter?

ESSA mentions evidence levels frequently, but they are particularly important for a few federal funding sources that states administer:

**School improvement.** School improvement has changed since NCLB. Under ESSA, states have to set aside 7 percent of their Title I, Part A funds (which altogether total roughly \$1 billion annually) for struggling schools, which include the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools, high schools with graduation rates below 67 percent, and schools with consistently underperforming subgroups. ESSA provides far more flexibility than NCLB in how to improve these schools, and decision making has been shifted to the states and local education agencies to design, implement, approve, and monitor improvement plans. But one thing the law makes clear: In order to receive these funds, schools must commit to implementing programs that meet one of the top three ESSA evidence categories, and states' departments of education must review proposals to be sure that schools receiving school improvement funding are using proven programs that meet the ESSA definitions.

**Other federal funding.** In seven other federal competitive grant programs, ESSA awards competitive preference points for grant applicants who propose using programs that meet one of the top three evidence categories. The largest of these is Title II, for professional development.

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Just as buying a Stradivarius will not make someone a concert violinist, adopting an evidence-based program will not magically transform struggling schools.

strategies for ensuring buy-in in district plans. They should encourage district leaders to let school staff make informed choices of proven programs, since local staff will implement them and thus ought to be vested in making them succeed.

■ **Plan for quality implementation.** Extensive professional development accompanies every proven program, and such programs have staff to help schools plan and carry out top-quality implementation. States should encourage district and school leaders to arrange for high-quality training, on-site coaching, and effective uses of materials and software, and they should ensure there is adequate funding for these purposes. Most proven programs have standards of implementation to be sure that schools are on track. Program providers and school leaders should work closely to plan implementation, set quality standards, and make timelines for phasing in program components.

■ **Continually assess and improve.** On a regular basis—usually quarterly and annually—schools using proven programs need to take stock and be sure students are making expected progress toward school goals. If there are gaps in implementation or outcomes, school staff need to make immediate changes. State leaders should look for plans that ensure ongoing assessment of program implementation and may arrange to offer schools technical assistance to continuously assess and improve implementation and outcomes.

States should not be satisfied with a few pilot programs. Once they begin to find out what works in their own contexts, they can scale up successful school models over time and, if necessary, shift funds away from less-promising approaches. State leaders may host or encourage schools implementing a given program to join statewide, regional, or national networks of schools implementing the same programs, where they can learn from others, share best practices, address challenges, and discuss problems and solutions.

## More Cost-Effective Spending, Benefiting More Students

ESSA only requires use of programs that meet

the top three evidence standards for school improvement grants, and it provides incentives for using them in other federal funding applications. But why restrict use of evidence to only these? States make their own grants and administer federal flow-through money in areas beyond what ESSA mentions. State boards of education have the right and responsibility to set guidelines for any form of funding related to improving education practices and outcomes, so it makes sense for them to require or at least incentivize use of programs and practices with evidence of effectiveness. That evidence gives state boards and states' departments of education objective information with which to guide district and school leaders toward programs and practices that work, are ready for immediate use, and are provided by capable organizations.

The number of proven programs is growing and will continue to grow as demand increases, and states and districts are participating in their development and evaluation. ESSA requires that only schools receiving school improvement funding use programs that have been proven effective. Other schools can and should participate in development and evaluation of new programs that may one day meet ESSA evidence standards. But there is no reason to wait. Why not use what is known to work now, as widely as possible, while additional programs are added to the list?

State education agencies and state boards of education have more autonomy than ever before under ESSA, and they have a central role in helping their districts and schools learn about and use programs whose effectiveness is supported by evidence. The national evidence movement in public education—and the ESSA evidence standards specifically—provide tools and assistance that states can use to improve outcomes for their students. But a tool left in the shed does not improve anything. It is time for states to step up and put these opportunities to work. ■

<sup>1</sup>Results for America, “ESSA Leverage Points: 50-State Report on Promising Practices for Using Evidence to Improve Student Outcomes,” 2018, <https://results4america.org/tools/essa-leverage-points-50-state-report-promising-practices-using-evidence-improve-student-outcomes>.

<sup>2</sup>“ExtraOrdinary Districts: Episode 3: Steubenville, Ohio,” Education Trust, <https://edtrust.org/extraordinary-districts-episode-3-steubenville-ohio/>.

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**State boards of education have the right and responsibility to set guidelines for any form of funding related to improving education practices and outcomes.**

**Robert E. Slavin is director of the Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University.**



# What Are the Options?

Turning around low-performing schools is hard. Strategies financed by federal dollars have shown disappointing results, and states have avoided fundamental reforms even as they hired specialists and retrained school staff.<sup>1</sup>

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) creates opportunities to do something different. It allows states to try creative strategies but also places the onus on local districts to act first. It is a huge chance to fix some of the nation's worst schools—and state boards of education should be asking whether state and local officials are taking advantage of it.

Under the law, states must identify and take action on two types of troubled schools: those requiring *comprehensive support and improvement* (the lowest achieving 5 percent of Title I schools, plus high schools with low graduation rates) and those that need *targeted improvement* because they routinely fail a particular group such as low-income, minority, or special education students.

ESSA criteria can help states sort schools into these two buckets, but it is intentionally silent on what states should do about the schools—even when they require “rigorous intervention” because more timid correctives have not worked. States can decide when to pull that trigger but are allowed no more than four years. In practice, local districts may thus be on a fairly slack leash before states must intervene. State boards should be looking for evidence of determined local action in the interim.

In both timing and substance, this broad deference to states is a major change from the No Child Left Behind Act, as is ESSA's scrapping of NCLB's School Improvement Grants. States are instead required to set aside 7 percent of their Title I funds to turn around low-performing schools using “evidence-based improvements” of their choosing. It opens the door to a wide variety

of strategies and specifically authorizes funding to flow through innovative governance structures—not just traditional districts—en route to schools.

All 50 states and the District of Columbia have now submitted plans to the U.S. Department of Education to meet these and other ESSA obligations. Partly because the agency did not ask for many specifics on how states would handle turnarounds, however, most avoided tipping their hands. An external review by Bellwether Education Partners and the Collaborative for Student Success said most plans were “vague and noncommittal” on this front and noted that only 12 of the 34 plans submitted in fall 2017 disclosed how states would spend their school improvement funds.<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately, state ESSA plans are not the last word. Every new state budget, every state superintendent's contract negotiations, and every annual list of state board priorities is an opportunity for state boards to review progress and fill gaps. Because ESSA frontloads responsibility on local officials, the challenge for state policymakers is to achieve the right sequence of carrot and stick. They must persuade, cajole, and challenge districts into taking effective action, but they also need local leaders to know they will use those “rigorous interventions” if failures persist.

State leaders can adopt or adapt three approaches already in use if they want to go beyond cosmetic remedies for troubled schools.

The first is charter expansion, wherein schools identified for comprehensive or targeted support are replaced by or converted into charter schools. Second are state turnaround districts, in which the state withdraws control of struggling schools from their home districts and creates a state-managed entity that assumes responsibility for getting those schools to an acceptable level of performance over some period. Third are

*Charters, turnaround districts, receivership, and empowerment zones are on the menu.*

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by Nelson Smith and Brandon L. Wright \*

*\*The background for this article emerged from a joint project of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and Chiefs for Change, which explored state-led, governance-based strategies for school improvement with a group of state and district leaders. Chiefs for Change recently released a monograph summarizing this work: “The Hidden Equation in School Improvement: Lessons Learned about Governance-Based Strategies.”*

**No state should try to cut and paste a method that worked elsewhere without careful consideration of local context. Moreover, these methods are not mutually exclusive.**

state-led but district-based solutions, where a state-appointed individual or entity essentially assumes plenary power over a district (or subdistrict) and decides what solutions fit each individual school.

To be clear, rigorous evaluations show that these efforts can improve student outcomes, but no single approach is the clear “winner.” Each has advantages and drawbacks, and no state should try to cut and paste a method that worked elsewhere without careful consideration of local context. Moreover, these methods are not mutually exclusive, and smart policymakers may adopt more than one approach to suit schools in different corners of their states.

## Charter Expansion

There’s no magic in the word “charter.” Getting the best out of this model requires vigilant authorizers, adequate resources, and diligent management. But charters can achieve powerful results by innovating in areas of talent, professional development, curriculum, school structure, schedules, and beyond. And they seem to have the strongest comparative advantage in the distressed urban areas where the needs for a fresh start are greatest.<sup>3</sup>

But chartering, despite serving hundreds of thousands of students who moved from troubled district schools, has been little studied as a “turnaround” initiative, which in common parlance usually means taking a single school and keeping the students in place while rebooting leadership and staff. Evaluating it in this manner is tricky because it is not a program as such but rather results from thousands of parents’ individual decisions.

Making charter expansion a conscious turnaround strategy requires some “holistic” thinking and planning between charter and district sectors. Once it is clear that a given set of schools requires aggressive improvement strategies, districts must be willing to ask whether they alone can fix the problem. If not, they might consider collaborating with nearby charter schools. This strategy may seem implausible in places where charters and districts feud, but it is not out of the question. Superintendents in Atlanta, Memphis, Indianapolis, San Antonio, and other cities are already pursuing or contemplating such solutions.<sup>4</sup>

In the 18 states that are direct authorizers of charter schools, state boards play the most important role in this work by approving high-quality operators capable of taking on turnarounds. They (and other authorizers) can signal to operators that there is a need and opportunity by doing the kind of “quality seat” analyses pioneered by the nonprofit IFF. These analyses illustrate which neighborhoods have the most acute need for better-performing schools.<sup>5</sup>

State boards can also move the needle in their broader policy and oversight roles by, for example, pushing for set-aside money to be used for a charter-based turnaround program or making sure that federal Charter School Program grants are well aligned with strategies for creating spaces in high-need areas.

And, of course, where state boards evaluate the state’s charter authorizers, they should be playing close attention to how well their school portfolios are providing opportunities for students stuck in deeply troubled schools.<sup>6</sup>

## State Turnaround Districts

At last count, six states have created turnaround districts, wherein the state removes struggling schools from their home districts and places them under a state-run entity. These include Louisiana, Tennessee, North Carolina, Nevada, Mississippi, and Michigan—although Michigan’s went out of business in 2017. Bills have been dropped in several other states, but, as might be expected with any plan to supplant local rule, they have faced tough odds.

Louisiana created the nation’s first statewide turnaround district in 2003, called the Recovery School District (RSD). After the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, it was put in charge of all but 16 of New Orleans’s 128 public schools.

A comprehensive 2016 study by the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans found strongly positive effects, even while accounting for demographic changes as the city recovered.<sup>7</sup> But there are major caveats. “The effects of school closure and charter takeover on student outcomes depended substantially on whether students ended up in higher-quality schools, as well as, perhaps, how much disruption they experienced,” said the report. The results were also not particularly strong when charters took over an existing school because charter operators

are more accustomed to—and often more successful at—starting schools from scratch.<sup>8</sup> And few other states will ever experience the tragic conditions that propelled the RSD into near-total oversight of New Orleans's schools.

More recently created turnaround districts, including those in Mississippi and North Carolina, have tended to move the state-district balance toward greater local ownership. And, although turnaround districts generally require legislative approval, Mississippi's state education agency convened a task force to formulate the state's approach.

If state boards are interested in forming turnaround districts, they should pay close attention to outcome data in the existing zones—but also observe the catalytic effect zones can have beyond their immediate jurisdiction. Although the Tennessee district's direct results have been mixed, the floor for “low performance” statewide has ratcheted up. Memphis in particular has stepped up to the competition. And North Carolina has seen a spurt in district applications to use a “restart” option allowing charter-like flexibility, in part a bid to keep schools out of the state district.<sup>9</sup>

## State-Led, District-Based Solutions

States have long taken over districts that were financially unsound or academically deficient. Notable examples include Newark, New Jersey; Oakland, California; and Roosevelt, New York. But state education agencies are generally ill equipped to manage local schools directly, and a few states have introduced receivers to wield plenary powers in pursuit of fast improvement—without involving the state bureaucracy.

The most prominent current model is found in Lawrence, Massachusetts. In 2011, the city's long-troubled public schools were in the bottom 1 percent of Massachusetts's district performance in both reading and math and had a high school graduation rate of 52 percent.<sup>10</sup> So the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approved a turnaround plan in 2012 that included the appointment of a receiver, as well as numerous partnerships.

Massachusetts was also prepared to install a similar receiver in Springfield. But wanting to keep the reins in local hands, leaders there came up with their own innovation: an empowerment

zone managed by an external nonprofit. The zone encompasses six middle schools, and its board includes the district superintendent and members of the Springfield school board—which remains in place with authority over nonzone schools. The state's presence is largely one of support, helping to marshal technical assistance resources.

Legislators in Indiana recently floated another variation on the theme: allowing Ball State University to take over the chronically underperforming Muncie Community Schools, which have been under emergency state management since last summer. The university would bring two notable strengths to the table: It is a teacher training institution and a statewide charter authorizer.<sup>11</sup>

Apart from routine monitoring and oversight of these state-local hybrids, state boards can take a “bully pulpit” role, encouraging state officials to look for solutions that respect local voice and urging locals to step up and be open to creative solutions. There may be opportunities in rulemaking, for example, to define equitable processes for collaboration or to clarify that funds may be used more creatively than may have been the case previously.

## General Pointers for State Boards of Education

If yours is one of the many states that submitted an ESSA plan with enough detail to earn U.S. Department of Education approval but skipped prescribing bold, specific actions to attack the root causes of school dysfunction, you now have a chance to push for the real thing. Apart from the strategies outlined above, state board members ought to keep a few basics in mind while contemplating school-improvement strategies.

**1. Follow the money, in three respects.** In a January 2018 letter to state education chiefs, the department said that states with existing School Improvement Grants could either keep current plans and reporting in place or use those funds to support the range of possibilities afforded by ESSA's more wide-open rules. State boards should monitor how old and new funding streams for school improvement are being used for maximum impact.

A second financial consideration is whether

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**State boards can take a “bully pulpit” role, encouraging state officials to look for solutions that respect local voice and urging locals to step up and be open to creative solutions.**

State boards should also ask whether officials are forming partnerships with organizations that specialize in human capital development.

state education agencies are creatively leveraging the mandated 7 percent Title I set-aside with two other discretionary funding streams: a voluntary 3 percent set-aside that can be used for “direct student services” and a Title IV block grant for student support and academic enrichment.

Third, set-aside funds may also be available to create program infrastructure for charter expansions. “May” is the operative word because the Department of Education has yet to rule on whether this is a permissible use of funds. But states should be on firm footing if (a) they clearly link charter authorization to turning around failing schools, whether by directly converting them or by offering their students a higher performing option, and (b) the charter offering, whether a network-based replication or an expansion of grades or enrollment at an existing school, has the kind of track record that meets ESSA’s requirements for evidence.

**2. Address the supply side.** All these models require extraordinary commitment to recruiting, hiring, and cultivating talent. Whether a state opts for chartering, a turnaround zone, or a partnership, schools need to be ably led and staffed with terrific teachers. And because schools in need of turnaround often cluster in particular cities and regions, it is important to build the whole talent pool and not just the district or charter portions of it. State boards should query how these plans are coming along. They should also ask whether officials are forming partnerships with organizations that specialize in human capital development—starting with local colleges and universities but also including reform-focused nonprofits such as New Schools for New Orleans, the Mind Trust in Indianapolis, and the Tennessee Charter School Center.

**3. Use the power of the question.** This term, familiar to NASBE members, is of key importance here. Because state-led turnarounds inevitably disrupt the usual hierarchies of accountability and power, they can get mired in turf battles. State boards can not only hold their own direct reports accountable—demanding honest answers about expectations and results—they can give district leaders and stakeholders a forum for input and advice. Periodically, they can also put tough questions to all parties: Is this thing working? Is it producing results for children? Is it being run in a fair and equitable manner?

Even if ESSA does not provide a road map for turning around struggling schools, there are numerous ways state boards can be a voice for students who need better options fast. ■

<sup>1</sup>Lisa Dragoset et al., “School Improvement Grants: Implementation and Effectiveness” NCEE 2017- 4013 (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2017); “School Improvement Grant National Summary School Year 2012–13,” (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education), <http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/SIG%20cohort%20three%20report.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup>Chad Aldeman et al., “An Independent Review of ESSA State Plans” (Washington, DC: Bellwether Education Partners, 2017).

<sup>3</sup>Center for Research on Education Outcomes, “Urban Charter School Study: Report on 41 Regions” (Stanford, CA: Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2015). As for ESSA’s evidence tiers, this important study fits well under tier 2 as moderate evidence because it is quasixperimental—it compares charters to a control group of students in traditional public schools but without the random assignment required for tier 1 status.

<sup>4</sup>Neerav Kingsland, “What Will Be Normal for Superintendents in 2028?” *relinquishment* (blog), 2018, <https://relinquishment.org/2018/01/22/what-will-be-normal-for-superintendents-in-2028/>.

<sup>5</sup>See, e.g., “Raising Quality, Promoting Equity: An Analysis of Location, Performance, and Investment in Illinois Public Schools” (Chicago: IFF, 2017); “The Shared Challenge of Quality Schools: A Place-Based Analysis of School Performance in Indianapolis” (Indianapolis: IFF, 2013).

<sup>6</sup>See also Nelson Smith, “Who Watches the Watchers?” *State Education Standard* 17, no. 1 (Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Boards of Education, January 2017).

<sup>7</sup>Douglas N. Harris and Matthew Larsen, “The Effects of the New Orleans Post-Katrina School Reforms on Student Academic Outcomes” (New Orleans: Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, February 2016).

<sup>8</sup>Whitney Bross, Douglas N. Harris, and Lihan Liu, “Extreme Measures: When and How School Closures and Charter Takeovers Benefit Students,” policy brief (New Orleans: Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, October 2016).

<sup>9</sup>T. Keung Hui, “NC Allows 19 Struggling Schools to Operate More Like Charters,” *The News & Observer* (December 1, 2016).

<sup>10</sup>Education Resource Strategies, “Executive Summary: Back from the Brink: How a Bold Vision and a Focus on Resources Can Drive System Improvement” (Watertown, MA: Education Resource Strategies, April 2015), <https://www.erstrategies.org/cms/files/2500-lawrence-case-study-back-from-the-brink---executive-summary.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup>Arika Herron, “Ball State Would Take Over Muncie Community Schools in New Proposal,” *Indianapolis Star* (January 17, 2018).

<sup>12</sup>Alyson Klein, “Trump Education Dept. Advises States on Leftover School Turnaround Money,” *Education Week* (blog), January 10, 2018.

<sup>13</sup>For a comprehensive discussion of “direct services” options, see “Expanding Equity: Leveraging the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to Provide Direct Student Services” (Washington, DC: Chiefs for Change, 2016). For U.S. Department of Education guidance on the Title IV block grant, see U.S. Department of Education, “Non-Regulatory Guidance: Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants” (Washington, DC, 2016), <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essassaegrantguid10212016.pdf>.



## School Improvement: New Mexico's Recipe

*In the mix are supports for principals and teachers, accountability, and school choice.*

As anyone would readily agree, no child should be trapped in a persistently failing school. When Governor Susana Martinez appointed me New Mexico's secretary of education in 2011, we committed to never settle for failure and never stop pursuing equity and opportunity for all students. Many of New Mexico's students live in poverty or are students of color and attending low-performing schools, but demographics must not be destiny. A great education cannot be reserved for the "lucky ones."

To serve all students well, state leaders must be able to measure progress. Said another way, you have to know where you are to get to where you want to go. As a result, one of our first priorities in New Mexico was to establish a strong

foundation: implementing high standards, adopting an assessment aligned to those standards, and revamping the school accountability system. New Mexico adopted a school grading system that measured growth and proficiency so everyone in the state could understand and compare school performance, with honest conversations about where we were and clear targets to help move forward.

Before diving into the details of how New Mexico turned around its low-performing schools, I want to be clear: State leadership matters. It was an absolute prerequisite to the success of this work. If that commitment is not firmly entrenched at the top, school improvement strategies are bound to fail. But where leaders are true believers,

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**by Hanna Skandera**

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## Schools that are failing can select from three options for intensive supports.

remarkable things can happen—whether the governor, state education chief, or the state board of education is leading the charge or all are of one mind and actively working together with their districts and schools.<sup>1</sup>

By the time Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December 2015, New Mexico had already entered its fifth year of using college- and career-ready standards in English language arts and math and its fourth year of giving schools A–F letter grades. Rather than viewing ESSA as a burdensome new federal requirement, New Mexico saw an opportunity to build on strong foundations already laid and strategic goals already developed with stakeholders. In its review of the state’s ESSA plan for Bellwether Education Partners, the Collaborative for Student Success gave New Mexico’s plan high marks for its commitment to high-quality standards and assessments, its accountability system, and its articulation of how it will address its low-performing schools.

New Mexico’s school grades, published annually, enable the state to identify schools that have been consistently struggling and need intensive support as well as those that are excelling and should be replicated. Schools that are failing can select from three options for intensive supports:

- implement state-sponsored, school-based interventions (such as Principals Pursuing Excellence);
- apply for competitive grants for district-chosen and state-approved evidence-based strategies; or
- construct a transformation plan for the school in partnership with New Mexico’s Public Education Department.

Since New Mexico began using letter grades for schools, the number of A and B schools has increased by 25 percent, and 30,000 more students are attending A and B schools now than were in 2011.<sup>2</sup> Further, students in schools that earned an F in any two of the last four years can choose to attend a better-performing school.

New Mexico education leaders believe that investments in four areas were key to this result: 1) high-quality school choice options for parents and students, 2) school leaders, 3) educators, and 4) data and evidence.

## High-Quality School Choice

New Mexico received a \$22 million grant in 2017 from the U.S. Department of Education to expand its charter sector and replicate excellent schools. New Mexico plans to use the grant to implement high-quality systems of choice that ensure equity of access for all students, equitable funding across sectors, and transparent markers of quality. Charter schools receive the same letter grades as traditional public schools so that families can make apples-to-apples comparisons. Choice is part and parcel of the state’s accountability system—a means to ensure that students in persistently struggling schools have options.

## School Leaders

Participation in the state’s Principals Pursuing Excellence (PPE) program is one of the turnaround options underperforming schools can choose (see box).<sup>3</sup> Launched in 2013, the program recognizes school leaders’ role in driving student success and seeks to shape leadership capacity through professional development and mentorship. If a school has earned a C, D, or F, its principal can opt in to intensive supports that include coaching from successful turnaround leaders in the state and on-site visits. The program aims to enable school leaders to make bold, calculated decisions to improve the conditions for effective teaching and learning and thus increase student engagement and learning.<sup>4</sup>

Four cohorts of principals, who together lead 124 schools with more than 28,000 students, have participated in PPE so far. Between 2015 and 2017, students in these schools have seen their scores on the PARCC assessment rise by 7.2 percent in English language arts and 4 percent in math—double and triple the average improvements statewide.<sup>5</sup> Notably, the schools whose principals have participated in PPE are serving students that many say are the most challenging: 83 percent of students are economically disadvantaged, compared with 71 percent statewide; 23 percent are Native American, compared with 11 percent statewide; and 16 percent are English language learners versus 12 percent statewide. These leaders are proving every day what is possible in New Mexico schools.

### Box 1. PPE Theory of Action

- If we strengthen the competencies of leaders to transform districts and schools, then they will have the capacity to take bold and purposeful action.
- If leaders take bold, purposeful action, then they will establish the conditions for effective teaching and learning.
- If the conditions for effective teaching and learning are established, then teachers will be able to improve instructional practice.
- If teachers improve instructional practice, then student learning will increase.

## Educators

New Mexico has been equipping, empowering, and championing its teachers with tools they need to support their students. In its review of state ESSA plans, the National Council on Teaching Quality highlighted the state as an exemplar because it set a clear, ambitious timeline for eliminating its educator equity gaps by August 2020.<sup>6</sup>

New Mexico has recognized the need to invest in its teachers and the enormous challenges in recruiting and retaining the most talented ones. Key to New Mexico's teacher engagement and empowerment strategy is its Teachers Pursuing Excellence (TPE) program, a two-year program in which minimally effective and ineffective teachers receive mentorship from highly effective peers. These teachers are identified through the state's robust educator evaluation system. Data from this system reveal that spending just one year with an exemplary teacher translates into 25.1 months of learning for students. The first cohort of TPE teachers saw their students' math proficiency overall increase by 10.6 percent and English proficiency by 10.3 percent.

TPE has just launched its third cohort. Gil Sanchez Elementary School in Belen Consolidated Schools, a district outside of Albuquerque, moved from a C to an A just one year after its teachers began participating in TPE. As the superintendent of this district said, there are "no magic ingredients, just hard work."<sup>7</sup>

## Data and Evidence

New Mexico has also committed to gathering and reporting accurate data, which it uses to drive decision making. Robust data allow the New Mexico Public Education Department to set up systems and structures that are customized to schools' contexts and to help them plan and make informed resource allocations.

Results for America recently cited New Mexico for making good use of ESSA's opportunities for leveraging evidence and evaluation in its efforts to improve its schools; it found that the state employed 9 of its 13 recommended best practices.<sup>8</sup> One example is the state's partnership with Khan Academy to accelerate learning. In a single year, New Mexico moved from just 1 percent of its students using the online Khan Academy to more than 30 percent. New Mexico's education department expects that more than 50 percent of its students, a majority of whom attend rural schools, will be taking advantage of this free resource within the next year.

New Mexico is also using data on school performance to allocate resources to the state's highest-need schools through ESSA's Direct Student Services (DSS) provision, one of only a handful of states to do so.<sup>9</sup> DSS allows districts to apply for additional funding to provide customized supports—extended learning time, high-quality online courses, or tutoring, for instance—to students who need them the most.

The state's DSS initiatives build on several years of effort to expand access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses for New Mexico students and schools who historically have not had the opportunity to take rigorous classes and to reimburse them for AP test fees. The nearly 20,000 students who took AP courses in 2017 represented nearly a doubling of AP course-taking students since 2010 and an 11 percent increase since 2015. Those students took about 17,000 AP tests in 2017, an increase of 62.6 percent since 2010 and 23.5 percent since 2015 (table 1).

Even more encouraging than these totals are the steady annual gains in the numbers of Hispanic, low-income, and Native American students enrolling in AP courses and taking the exams. For example, the number of Hispanic students taking AP exams more than doubled in two years, from 2,700 in 2015 to 6,000 in

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**Spending just one year with an exemplary teacher translates into 25.1 months of learning for students.**

**Table 1. AP Course and Test Taking in New Mexico, 2010–17**

	2010	2015	2017	2010–17 Growth (percent)
<b>Students taking AP exams</b>	6,799	8,625	10,541	55.0
<b>AP exams taken</b>	10,499	13,829	17,073	62.6
<b>AP exams passed</b>	4,373	5,186	6,028	37.9
<b>AP courses taken</b>	20,496	28,343	32,140	56.8
<b>Students taking AP courses</b>	9,970	17,529	19,526	95.9

Source: College Board, *Integrated Report, 2017*; STARS, *AP Students with Course Counts*.

**The nearly 20,000 students who took AP courses in 2017 represented nearly a doubling of AP course-taking students since 2010.**

2017. New Mexico’s students are also passing more AP exams than ever before and as a result are earning college credit that could save New Mexico families as much as \$3.5 million in tuition.<sup>10</sup>

### The National Lens

Federal, state, and local authorities have worked hard over two decades to develop and implement turnaround strategies. Yet these approaches lacked vertical cohesion and rarely allowed for the flexibility necessary to develop interventions and improvement plans that met individual schools’ needs. Whereas many states were previously doling out resources to struggling schools and districts, the funds were disconnected from robust, contextualized plans for improvement and failed to leverage standards, assessments, and clear accountability for students, educators, and schools.

Recently, some education advocates and analysts have urged a move away from these foundational elements and toward models grounded in something other than rigorous expectations and measurements. But New Mexico’s leaders have stayed the course, agreeing with NCTQ’s Kate Walsh that “achieving

a complex, ambitious goal—like providing all children in this nation with a strong education—requires laser focus, determination, abundant resources, an ability to measure progress, exceptional expertise, and a strong research basis.” Or as Louisiana’s state superintendent, John White, notes in a recent op-ed, “Walking away from the principles underlying that progress would be a foolish disservice to our children, our communities, and our economy.”<sup>11</sup>

Money alone will not improve student outcomes. This ultimate goal depends on educators and leaders developing a shared understanding of the commitments necessary to turn a school around and a flexible state framework that takes context and community needs into account.

ESSA substantially adjusts the federal approach to supporting school turnaround. States now can set aside 7 percent of their Title I dollars for school improvement and face few federal restrictions in how they allocate those funds, so long as they can demonstrate their interventions meet federal evidence standards.<sup>12</sup>

Augmented by the provisions in ESSA, New Mexico is raising the bar on what is expected of districts in school improvement. It is making the application for school improvement funds

competitive and ensuring that the improvement plans that get funding are high quality and likely to produce sustained progress. Louisiana, Nevada, and Tennessee are also taking this approach to encourage strong planning and facilitate partnerships.

## Implications for State Boards of Education

New Mexico remains committed to school improvement. While New Mexico does not have a state board of education, state boards elsewhere can certainly draw implications from its experience. State boards can play a number of roles in fostering strong school improvement strategies and in partnering with their state education agencies and state chiefs to produce better outcomes for students in persistently struggling schools:

- providing clear information to parents and stakeholders about the performance of schools;
- focusing on the capacity of teachers and leaders in supporting sustained school improvement;
- promoting the use of data and evidence-based practices, now that there are models across several states that have generated results;
- changing the false narratives that bedevil school improvement strategies—that they are either “silver bullets” or that “nothing works”; and
- encouraging their states to consider multiple paths to school improvement, with careful consideration of levers such as high-quality school choice, competitive use of funds, and more rigorous interventions for schools that are persistently low performing.

New Mexico’s approach illustrates the much greater latitude states have now than they did before ESSA. But it is up to states to leverage this opportunity and explore the strategies—in partnership with schools and districts—that can dramatically change outcomes for students in schools that need it the most. Failure is not an option. Children and their families are counting on education leaders to be relentless in their pursuit of equity and opportunity for all. ■

<sup>1</sup>“Check State Plans,” website, Collaborative for Student Success, 2017, <https://checkstateplans.org/states/new-mexico/>.

<sup>2</sup>New Mexico Public Education Department, “New Mexico Rising: New Mexico’s State Plan for the Every Student Succeeds Act,” [http://ped.state.nm.us/ped/ESSA\\_docs/NMStatePlan.pdf](http://ped.state.nm.us/ped/ESSA_docs/NMStatePlan.pdf).

<sup>3</sup>New Mexico Public Education Department, “Principals Pursuing Excellence,” <http://ped.state.nm.us/ped/PrioSchoolsDocs/CPMP/PPE%201%20paper%203.2016.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup>Chiefs for Change, “ESSA Title II-A: Preparing, Training, and Recruiting High-Quality Teachers, Principals, and Other School Leaders” (Washington, DC, September 2016), <http://chiefsforchange.org/policy-paper/3108/>.

<sup>5</sup>“Teach Reach New Mexico,” website, <http://teachreachnm.us/2017/07/>.

<sup>6</sup>National Council on Teacher Quality, “ESSA Educator Equity Best Practices Guide,” [https://www.nctq.org/dmsView/NCTQ\\_ESSA\\_Educator\\_Equity\\_Best\\_Practices\\_Guide-Round\\_1](https://www.nctq.org/dmsView/NCTQ_ESSA_Educator_Equity_Best_Practices_Guide-Round_1).

<sup>7</sup>Kim Burgess, “‘The Right Way’: Jarales Elementary School Rises from C to A,” *Albuquerque Journal* (August 30, 2017).

<sup>8</sup>Results for America, “ESSA Leverage Points: 64 Promising Practices from States for Using Evidence to Improve Student Outcomes,” 2017, [http://results4america.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/ESSA-Leverage-Points-\\_July-24.pdf](http://results4america.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/ESSA-Leverage-Points-_July-24.pdf).

<sup>9</sup>Chiefs for Change, “Expanding Equity: Leveraging the Every Student Succeeds Act to Provide Direct Student Services,” policy paper (Washington, DC, April 19, 2016).

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>John White, “Critics Say Nothing in Education Is Working. That’s Wrong,” *Washington Post* (February 8, 2018).

<sup>12</sup>ESSA lays out four tiers of evidence, which Bob Slavin describes in his article in this issue. Chiefs for Change offers recommendations and emerging best practices for administering the set-aside in “The Hidden Equation in School Improvement: Lessons Learned about Governance-Based Strategies,” policy paper (Washington, DC, January 31, 2018).

**Hanna Skandera was New Mexico’s secretary of education from 2011 to 2017 and is a member of Chiefs for Change.**

*A laser focus on data enables the state to identify common threads among schools making rapid gains.*

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**by Erica Champagne  
and Susan Bowles Therriault**

# Leveraging Research to Improve Massachusetts's Schools

Consider two studies on school turnaround. In 2017, a national study from the U.S. Department of Education showed no significant effect on students' academic outcomes from the substantial federal investment in School Improvement Grant (SIG) funding.<sup>1</sup> The second study, from 2016, shows that students at all grade levels significantly improved their performance in reading/English language arts (ELA) and mathematics for all three years that their low-performing schools in Massachusetts received SIG funding when compared with students in similar schools that did not receive this funding.<sup>2</sup>

After the three years of federal funding, the achievement gains in both ELA and math at these Massachusetts schools equaled an additional year of schooling (figure 1). Furthermore, researchers LiCalsi and colleagues found that the schools that received SIG funding significantly reduced the achievement gap between English learners and non-English learners when compared with similar schools.

State boards of education might well ask what led to these significant improvements in student and school outcomes in Massachusetts and why the national study failed to find similar effects. While further research must be conducted to establish whether there are any causal relationships between the funding and student outcomes, it is still worth taking a look at the Massachusetts policies and strategies that created the conditions in which these positive results were achieved.

At the heart of the state's efforts has been a focus on using research to improve practice at the school, district, and state levels. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) and the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education are deeply committed to ensuring that

every student in the state has access to a high-quality education, and they have combined this commitment with an openness to innovation (box 1).

After just one year of SIG implementation in the state's turnaround schools, Education Commissioner Mitchell Chester in 2011 asked his team to document what was working in the state's lowest performing schools that had engaged in redesign efforts. While hard to answer with early quantitative data, this simple request set the stage for qualitative annual monitoring of the effectiveness of turnaround strategies. After four years of this monitoring, researchers identified consistent trends in schools that were making rapid gains in student achievement.<sup>3</sup> In 2014, they distilled their findings into a set of turnaround best practices (box 2).

Supported by this research, ESE began to align its assistance efforts with these turnaround practices. The department took four key steps:

- It revised the required turnaround planning template to allow schools and districts to choose evidence-based strategies that fit their contexts, so long as they were aligned with the framework of practices.
- It aligned its application and scoring rubric for competitive federal SIG funding with the revised turnaround plan and the research results from successful schools and in so doing raised the bar for all SIG-funded schools, which could no longer focus on only one or two strategies of varying quality.
- It changed its process for monitoring progress, adding a turnaround practices and indicators rubric to assess implementation of each of the best practices at its turnaround schools.<sup>4</sup> This rubric

gives schools better formative data with which to continuously improve.

- It focused its direct assistance toward supporting better implementation of the turnaround practices in the field, aligned with the needs identified through the monitoring process. Disseminating information about its discoveries of strategies and actions that are working in its turnaround schools is a key component of these efforts. It develops field guides, videos, and self-assessment tools that are aligned to the turnaround practices.

## Coupling Monitoring and Research

A monitoring function is often embedded in federal and state legislation around school improvement. ESE, like other state education agencies (SEAs), collects a warehouse of data that can be used to aid its understanding of the improvement process, identify schools and districts that share particular challenges, and discover areas of need.

How SEAs design this monitoring function varies from state to state. Some maintain it internally; others contract out. Regardless, SEAs typically tailor their monitoring to the specific needs of individual low-performing schools—for example, assessing how well a school is implementing a school-specific curriculum. But such an approach inhibits collection of consistent data that allows for comparison over time

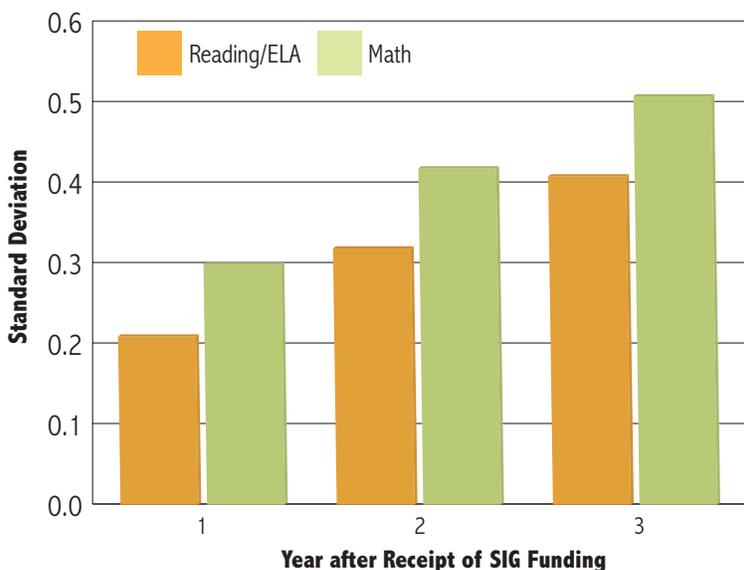
and across schools.<sup>5</sup> This lack of consistency in turn makes it difficult for SEAs to learn from their monitoring what is working across all schools in the state and curtails the possibility of replication of a successful school strategy at other schools with similar challenges.

With its partner, the American Institutes for Research, ESE has developed a different approach in which research drives monitoring. The practices and indicators rubric mentioned above is the centerpiece of these efforts.<sup>6</sup> The rubric frames and focuses Massachusetts' improvement and support efforts on those activities that research has shown are most essential, yet it is flexible enough to cover the range of configurations and options available to Massachusetts's schools. Rather than being a list of prescriptive, detailed requirements, the rubric teases out conditions at schools and looks for evidence that best practices are in place.

The rubric is designed to provide maximal information with minimal data collection burden on schools. Data include instructional observations; a 10-minute, online staff survey; and interviews and focus groups with key district and school stakeholders. These data are collected and analyzed using methodologies that ensure findings' reliability and validity. Each school receives a report within a month of the monitoring visit, and the school and its district are expected to integrate the findings into their annual school turnaround plan.

**Because the data are consistently collected annually and across schools, the ratings on the rubric can be compared over time and across districts and across the state.**

**Figure 1. Scores on Massachusetts's State Assessment at Schools Receiving SIG Funding (Effect Sizes in Years 1-3)**



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**The trove of data can be mined—for example, to compare and contrast strategies in place to turn around low-performing high schools.**

Because the data are consistently collected annually and across schools, the ratings on the rubric, along with results from schoolwide instructional observations, can be compared over time and across districts (that have more than one low-performing school) and across the state. This analysis lets districts and the state identify common areas of struggle within low-performing schools and consider targeted strategies or supports to address them. When solutions are not immediately apparent, ESE can draw on its monitoring data to identify outlier schools that are not struggling in the problem area and focus research on strategies that the outliers are applying. ESE can then offer practitioners and school leaders detailed information about how similar schools have addressed the issues they face.

State boards of education can leverage this opportunity by encouraging their SEA to report information about trends in the needs of struggling schools and by supporting broader statewide efforts to focus resources on targeting these needs. They can also be a voice for continuity, urging consistent measurement of school systems over time.

A research-driven monitoring approach allows ESE to ask and answer questions of policy and practice.<sup>7</sup> The trove of data can be mined—for example, to compare and contrast strategies in place to turn around low-performing high schools.<sup>8</sup> Such research must do the following: 1) answer pertinent, practical questions of policy or practice; 2) inform continuous improvement at the state level; 3) provide feedback and information to schools and districts; 4) highlight innovations and solutions that practitioners in high-need areas can use.

## Prescription versus Flexibility

There are challenges. ESE wrestles in particular with the tension between being prescriptive versus being focused on specific student needs. For example, some states limit schools' options to a particular program or strategy, such as a given reading curriculum or other intervention that may match neither the underlying needs of students nor the capacity of the district or school. This level of prescription removes decision making from the leaders and teachers who are closest to the students.

ESE is committed to allowing for the innovation and flexibility necessary to realize improvements in student outcomes. And it gives districts and schools the flexibility to adapt strategies based on data-informed decisions, thus sending a clear message to them about the importance of engaging in a continuous improvement process. In turn, ESE models continuous improvement through its system of support and by continuously soliciting feedback from schools and districts on how it can improve.

State boards can support state agencies in these efforts by ensuring there is room for innovation and adaptation. This support entails a commitment to providing cover for this type of flexibility as well as holding the SEA accountable for monitoring and adapting to the needs of schools.

Finally, the tension between monitoring and supporting improvement is significant. It is difficult to do both well, as school and district stakeholders have difficulty distinguishing between the roles the state is playing. ESE has circumvented this challenge by outsourcing monitoring to its research partner while ESE staff handle support for districts and schools.

This separation in who handles the functions does not mean that monitoring does not

### Box 1. Conditions That Supported Results in Massachusetts

- State law was supported by the School Improvement Grant.
- State education agency's turnaround office focused on building district capacity.
- The agency's research agenda was tied to consistent, long-term monitoring of turnaround schools.
- Education leaders committed to using innovations to increase autonomy for school leaders, alternative school management options in Lawrence, and alternative governance structures in the Springfield Empowerment Zone (SEZP), as well as SEA receivership for both districts and schools.

## Box 2. Turnaround Practices

**1 Leadership, Shared Responsibility, and Professional Collaboration**  
The school has established a community of practice through leadership, shared responsibility, and professional collaboration.

**2 Intentional Practices for Improving Instruction**  
The school employs intentional practices for improving teacher-specific and student-responsive instruction.

**3 Student-Specific Instruction and Supports to All Students**  
The school is able to provide student-specific supports and interventions informed by data and the identification of student-specific needs.

**4 School Climate and Culture**  
The school has established a climate and culture that provides a safe, orderly, and respectful environment for students and a collegial, collaborative, and professional culture among teachers that supports the school's focus on increasing student achievement.

inform direct assistance, however. ESE takes this research partnership one step further: All staff are expected to use relevant research and resources to inform practice. Thus the data from the monitoring of low-performing schools, as well as branches of commissioned research focused on collectively identified problems of practice, drive decisions about how to provide support. State boards of education can support these efforts by encouraging the use of research to provide evidence for continuing, adjusting, or deviating from practices and asking for information about current evidence or plans for establishing evidence for endeavors that SEAs use.

ESE cannot wait for academia to conduct and publish research to meet the particular needs of its struggling schools. Rather, ESE and AIR themselves are amassing the evidence to determine the practices that can help Massachusetts's schools. Ultimately, ESE is using research and research partners to strengthen the quality and impact of supports for its lowest performing schools and districts—really digging into what works and what does not work. It is through these efforts, in partnership with a state board that is committed

to using research to drive decision making, that ESE hopes to build an evidence base for strategies that lead to school improvement. ■

<sup>1</sup>Lisa Dragoset et al., “School Improvement Grants: Implementation and Effectiveness (Final Report)” (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2017).

<sup>2</sup>Christina LiCalsi et al., “Evaluation of Massachusetts District and School Turnaround Assistance: Impact of School Redesign Grants” (Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, 2015); Christina LiCalsi and Dionisio Garcia Piriz, “Evaluation of Level 4 School Turnaround Efforts in Massachusetts—Part 2: Impact of School Redesign Grants” (Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, 2016).

<sup>3</sup>Brett Lane et al., “Turnaround Practices in Action: A Practice Guide and Policy Analysis” (Baltimore, MD: Institute for Strategic Leadership and Learning, 2014).

<sup>4</sup>American Institutes for Research and Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Massachusetts Monitoring Site Visits Turnaround Practices Indicators and Continuum” (September 2015), [www.doe.mass.edu/turnaround/howitworks/monitor-site-visits-turnaround-indicators.pdf](http://www.doe.mass.edu/turnaround/howitworks/monitor-site-visits-turnaround-indicators.pdf).

<sup>5</sup>Andrea Boyle et al., “State Systems of Support under NCLB: Design Components and Quality Considerations” (Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, 2008).

<sup>6</sup>AIR and ESE, “Massachusetts Monitoring Site Visits.”

<sup>7</sup>For example, see Laura Stein et al., “Evaluation of Level 4 School Turnaround Efforts in Massachusetts—Part 1: Implementation Study” (Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, 2016); LiCalsi et al., “Evaluation of Level 4 School Turnaround—Part 2.”

<sup>8</sup>Alexandra Kistner et al., “Lessons Learned in Massachusetts High School Turnaround: A Resource for High School Leaders” (Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, 2017).

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*The change is palpable  
at Sunnyside  
High School—in the  
ethos as well as in  
graduation rates.*

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**by Suzann Girtz, Chuck Salina,  
and Joanie Eppinga**

# Washington District Keeps Culture of Learning at Center

Sunnyside High School in Washington State, a school of more than 1,600 students, had a graduation rate below 50 percent in 2010. More than 80 percent of the students were Hispanic/Latino, and 94 percent qualified for free and reduced lunch. The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) had repeatedly identified Sunnyside as a low-performing school—that is, in the bottom 5 percent of the state’s high schools and therefore qualifying for support. Yet five years later, the graduation rate reached 90 percent (figure 1). Disproportionality in graduation rates—the opportunity gap between economic or racial/ethnic groups—disappeared altogether.<sup>1</sup>

During the 2009–10 school year, Sunnyside received a federally funded School Improvement Grant (SIG) and chose the transformation model, one of four models on the federal menu. The model, among other things, required the school board to hire a new principal to facilitate school improvement. In April 2010, the school was awarded a Title I grant of \$1.5 million for each of the successive three years to improve its graduation rate.

Many schools that received the SIG took a traditional approach of using it to hire outside consultants to improve curricula and implement program-based activities. In contrast, leaders at Sunnyside sought to change school culture, and so they used the funds to highlight problems and to create systems of support for everyone in the school that leveraged resources that were already available—teachers, counselors, administrators, and coaches.

Another difference between SIG schools that have not succeeded and Sunnyside was that Sunnyside had a higher education partner: Gonzaga

University. The university offered a full-time professor as the new principal, as well as research support and a liaison with its counseling department to further the high school’s turnaround efforts.

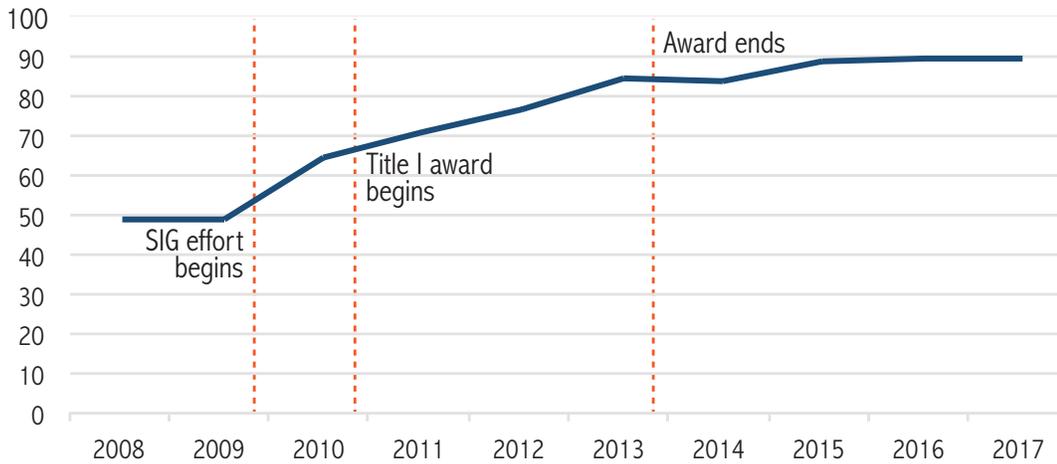
Clearly, something sparked change at Sunnyside, and that change had a meaningful impact on students. As Assistant Principal David Martinez said, “If we would have stayed at a 60 percent [graduation rate] starting in 2011, 727 students would not have graduated over the last seven years.”

The foundational element that allowed leaders at Sunnyside to improve graduation rates was the development and implementation of a conceptual framework. This framework shows the relationship between academic press and social support, held together and enlivened by relational trust (figure 2). Graduation rates and grades increased with an increase in relational trust, as measured by the Center for Educational Effectiveness.

This approach has since been identified in other Washington schools that reduced disproportionality across underachieving subgroups while improving graduation rates. In all, 11 districts shared stories, resources, and data with each other, the state, and researchers via the state’s Graduation Equity Initiative. OSPI’s goal for the initiative was to identify common frameworks, components, and practices in districts that are seeing improvements, particularly in higher graduation rates with improved equity for low-income students.

The common “why” among these institutions has been a commitment to excellence through equity. The “what” of the work is clarified in the conceptual framework, and the “how” of the work is the action framework.<sup>2</sup> These frameworks

**Figure 1. Sunnyside School District Graduation Rates, 2008–17 (percent)**



were developed, in part, out of the collaboration between Gonzaga University and Sunnyside School District. The turnaround principal, effectively “loaned” from the university, was able to apply the lens of a scholarly practitioner with a team of researchers alongside him. The principal was able to bring previous research to bear in a new, applied setting but developed the frameworks organically based on experiences in the school.<sup>3</sup>

By focusing on a shift in culture rather than increased test scores, scores improved. Too often, the outcome is seen as the goal instead of as a byproduct of reaching the larger goal. The frameworks used at Sunnyside highlight the benefits of this different focus—something policy language tends to overlook when it conflates outcomes with goals and can doom it when educators conclude that their work is focused on the outcome measure.

Because schools are not static, their status needs to be observed and questioned daily if they are to improve. Underlying principles in the conceptual framework guide leaders in asking the right questions and putting the answers to work. Yet even as leaders adhere to those principles, they must be light on their feet, ready to adjust to shifting circumstances and to let the principles manifest in new ways. One example from Sunnyside High Schools was the use of a school-level dashboard—a simple, user-friendly data system—to communicate data formatively so that staff could make real-time changes in

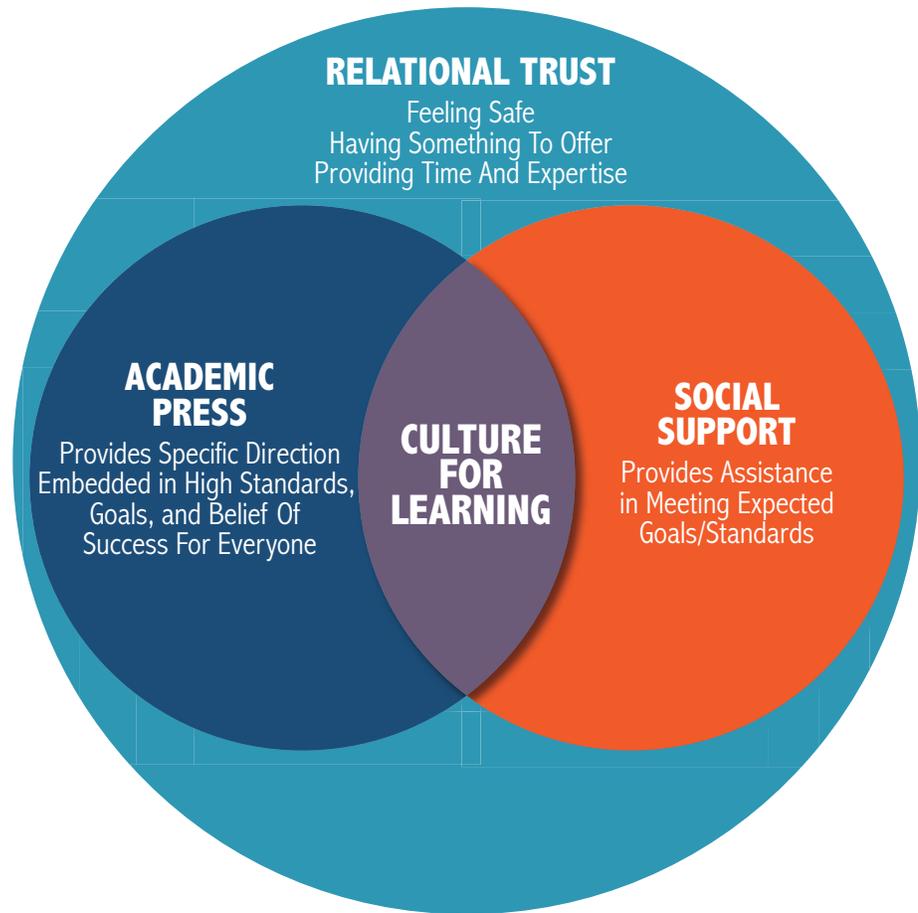
supports for a student proactively, rather than waiting for a crisis. A conceptual framework that guides school turnaround has to be flexible enough to enable practitioners to respond to present difficulties while maintaining alignment with a vision for the school—always with the understanding that there is no perfection in a school, only movement toward an ideal.

The conceptual framework that Sunnyside uses applies to everyone in the school district. It is supported by research from the Consortium on Chicago School Research showing that students respond well to a combination of academic press—in which adults have high expectations of students and demonstrate their belief that students can meet those expectations—and social support—in which the school ensures that students feel supported by and connected to the school.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, when the focus is solely on academic press, the outcomes are different: “For students who do not have much social support to draw on, attending a school with high levels of academic press does not help them learn.”<sup>5</sup>

Academic press and social support are widely understood, important concepts, but they are insufficient without the powerful, actuating factor that helps create a culture for learning—relational trust. Relational trust is a group’s sense that they can rely on one another, both to do their own jobs and to support others in doing theirs.<sup>6</sup> It is foundational to school change efforts. If relational trust is to be jump-started

**By focusing on a shift in culture rather than increased test scores, scores improved.**

**Figure 2. Focus on Culture for Learning**



**Students indicated that once they realized the adults were truly invested, they too became invested—for example, going to lunchtime and after-school tutoring sessions.**

in a school whose students and teachers feel powerless, three factors need to emerge from the formal leaders' behaviors: Staff must feel safe, perceive that the leaders have something to offer, and believe that the leaders will put in the time to help them be successful.

### **Students Notice the Difference**

Improving a school district's culture for learning requires that formal leadership demonstrate new behaviors that show staff they are serious about change. When that happens, staff beliefs change in turn—a necessary precursor for changing a school culture. When beliefs and behaviors align, leaders send a message of professional integrity regarding the mission of the district, and staff become willing to follow.

Students also note the difference. After Sunnyside implemented the framework, Gonzaga University researchers conducted follow-up interviews with students, teachers,

and administrators to get information about why graduation rates were rising. One student said, "They [teachers] used to tell us we could do it, but now they are putting in the time to help you. Now they are really doing it." And another said, "They take the time to show us that we are doing better."

Students appeared to correlate teachers' investment of time with caring, which inspired them to try harder and behave better. In the follow-up interviews, they indicated that once they realized the adults were truly invested, they too became invested—for example, going to lunchtime and after-school tutoring sessions to improve their grades. Data were used intentionally to inform and take action rather than to punish students, and students responded positively, viewing the new data use as a form of caring. When data showed a student failing a class, for example, a counselor would go to the classroom and talk with the teacher and the student about how the student could catch up.

Once students began to feel cared for, they began to show that they also cared. Their ostensible initial indifference to graduation requirements shifted toward excitement as progress toward graduation became a group activity supported by everyone from teachers to custodians to administrators, and most importantly, to their peers. The valedictorian of the first year of the turnaround summed up the new attitudes in her graduation speech, saying, “We as an entire high school started to care about our attendance, grades, and graduation. Not only that, but we started to care about other people too. You could hear people say, ‘Come to class.’ ‘We want off-campus lunch.’ ‘Get your grades up. You can graduate!’ These kinds of changes are what was really important this year.”

This approach may appear commonsensical or unremarkable on its face; yet school turnaround efforts across the country do not reflect it. Teachers still look for a one-size solution to problems that will not distract them from their day-to-day challenges. Leaders adopt the latest fix rather than developing an overarching vision and plan driven by systemic goals. State and federal policymakers mandate requirements and reporting to ensure compliance. Working on policy as issues arise can lead to regulations being developed in isolation, unintended consequences, trendy inclinations, and teacher and leader burnout as a school hops from one initiative to the next.

In situations like this, policy distracts from the real work of schools, and implementation is not generally aligned with policy intent. Educators are “so busy trying to keep up with and implement state and federal mandates that they have very little time for reading, reflecting, sense-making, and applying research-driven practices.”<sup>7</sup> Such approaches will not feed educators’ sense of connection with one another or enable them to harness their strengths to the school’s mission.

## Leadership, School Change, and Policy

The kind of cultural shift we witnessed in the Washington state schools is most powerful when pursued districtwide, and it must arise through systems and processes that support all stakeholders’ success. Giving everyone a voice, expecting them to take responsibility, and encouraging them to take considered risks

minimizes the propensity to blame others when something goes wrong. Leadership will “send a message to the teachers: ‘I recognize the importance of your work, and I trust in your ability to do it.’”<sup>8</sup>

Once systems based on behavioral, social-emotional, and achievement goals are highlighted and receive board-level support, leadership can pursue systemic change by increasing building-level autonomy with accountability. That accountability has to be examined through all three lenses—academic press, social support, and relational trust—coupled with consistent leadership planning based on a data dashboard that can inform stakeholders about their progress toward goals. For example, building leadership decided to connect off-campus privileges to the cleanliness of the school, grades of C+ or better, and a collective attendance rate of 95 percent. Once the public goal was set, data were shared and available to all—including students—on a week-to-week basis. If goals were not met within the week, everyone stayed on campus. All students were responsible for group and individual goals and often would remind each other. Behaviors and expectations shifted correspondingly, and students regained the privilege of leaving campus for lunch.

Leaders constantly readjust to ensure alignment across the district, school, department/grade, and classroom. The day-to-day needs of the classroom level will drive these shifts, but each level influences the others. And when board, district, school, and department/grade-level alignment is achieved, then “rapid change will take place in the classrooms because individual teachers will see the collective whole working together to support their efforts.”<sup>9</sup>

In effective districts, formal leaders analyze the health of their institutions and foster a culture for learning in which people believe in and trust each other, solve problems collaboratively, and put systemic supports in place to enable all students and staff to succeed. The leader begins by asking, “What will I do differently to have an effective school?” Additionally, when it is safe and people are supported, they begin to engage with the question, “What am I willing to be held accountable for?” Shifting to personal accountability versus compliance-driven accountability changes the culture of the school.

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**Initial indifference to graduation requirements shifted toward excitement as progress toward graduation became a group activity supported by everyone.**

In time, such a shift in thinking and behaving brings about improved teaching and learning. When policy is implemented effectively, collaborative schoolwide systems follow, and those shifts foster individual growth and teachers' ability to self-supervise at the classroom level.

## Role for State Boards

We know state and federal policy has far-reaching capacity to influence school practices—but not always for the better. For example, No Child Left Behind had a beneficent intent but not an entirely beneficial impact. The Every Student Succeeds Act holds the promise of shifting the spotlight to new indicators that can promote the right work in schools, but the compliance-oriented focus centered on outcome measures should also change. For example, if high stakes are attached to attendance as an indicator of school quality, schools will focus on attendance. If leadership instead is free to improve school culture, increased attendance will follow.

As MJ Bolt, an elected member of the Washington State Board of Education and NASBE board member, said, “We must be open to working differently with each other instead of doubling down on the same practices that have shown limited improvement, and perhaps some harm, over the last decades. How we can create policy that capitalizes on the strengths and talents of educators instead of encouraging a fear-based compliance mentality?”

Elegant policy enables trusted professionals to contextualize their work. By building feedback loops and tracking results on relevant items, school leadership can monitor and adjust implementation at the building level to ensure that they are living within a framework that supports the state's educational vision. State boards of education can provide a foundation for the work at the school and district level by asking the following:

- What conceptual framework guides the board's change efforts, and how do we use it to systematize, focus, and prioritize our work?
- What are the implications for the factors that states measure? Are state agencies and the board tracking the right things while simultaneously promoting accountability and allowing for flexibility?

- How does the board help ensure that regulatory bodies and implementation maintains fidelity to the intent of policy?

Like schools and districts, boards also must have a framework from which to develop policies, as they have long been counseled to do by NASBE. Putting such a framework in place will promote alignment and coherence while promoting a process that supports the state's vision for its education system. Likewise, policies developed within a framework likely will have a longer lifespan, without needing to be revisited annually. However, if the frameworks put outcomes at the center rather than principles that shape a culture for learning, they will be rolling the rock uphill, as Sisyphus of old.

Sunnyside School District has demonstrated that a district that combines academic press, social support, and relational trust is vibrant and responsive. When boards at the national, state, and local levels align their work and ground it in an effective conceptual framework that includes these elements, policies are more likely to be not only more effective—but also to make learning part of a joyous, lifelong endeavor. ■

<sup>1</sup>Washington State, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, “K–12 Data and Reports: OSPI Performance Indicators—Data and Analytics,” <http://www.k12.wa.us/DataAdmin/PerformanceIndicators/DataAnalytics.aspx#graduation>.

<sup>2</sup>Both are available via OSPI's website and are also detailed in our books, available at [powerless2powerful.com](http://powerless2powerful.com).

<sup>3</sup>Such research includes, e.g., Anthony S. Bryk and Barbara Schneider, “Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for School Reform,” *Educational Leadership* 60, no. 6 (2003): 40–45; G. Sue Shannon and Pete Bylsma, “Nine Characteristics of High-Performing Schools” (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, June 2007), <http://www.k12.wa.us/research/pubdocs/NineCharacteristics.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup>Valerie E. Lee et al., “Social Support, Academic Press, and Student Achievement: A View from the Middle Grades in Chicago” (Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 1999).

<sup>5</sup>Valerie E. Lee and Julia B. Smith, “Social Support and Achievement for Young Adolescents in Chicago: The Role of School Academic Press,” *American Education Research Journal* 5, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 907–45.

<sup>6</sup>Bryk and Schneider, “Trust in Schools.”

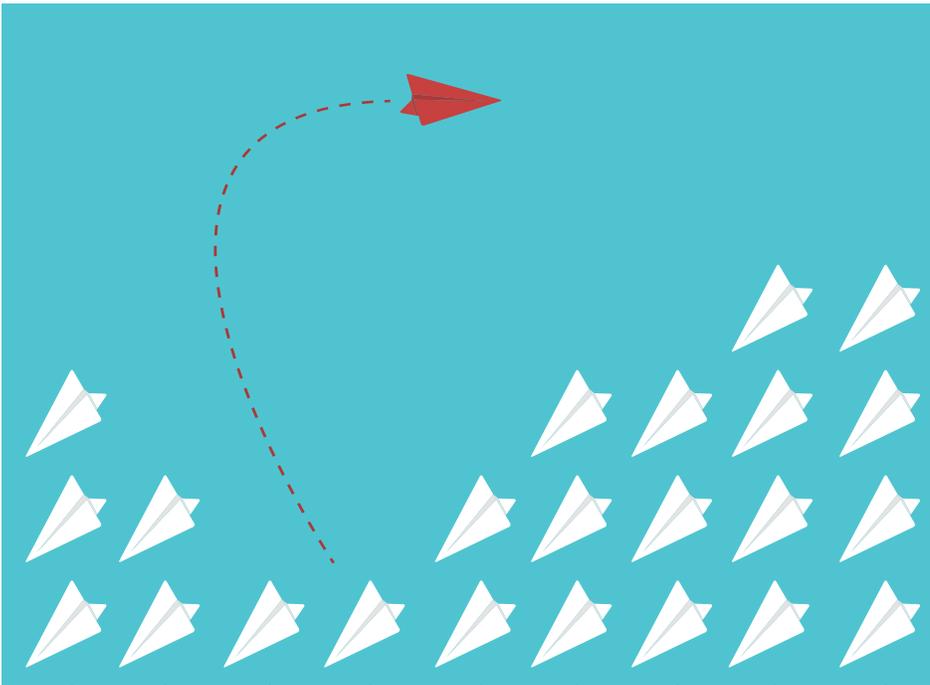
<sup>7</sup>Charles Salina, Suzann Girtz, and Joanie Eppinga, *Powerless to Powerful: Leadership for School Change* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 1.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>9</sup>Charles Salina, Suzann Girtz, and Joanie Eppinga, *Transforming Schools through Systems Change* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 66.

**If the frameworks put outcomes at the center rather than principles that shape a culture for learning, they will be rolling the rock uphill, as Sisyphus of old.**

Suzann Girtz, Ph.D., and Chuck Salina, Ph.D., are associate professors of education at Gonzaga University, and Joanie Eppinga, M.A., is a Spokane-based editor. Together they have written *Powerless to Powerful: Leadership for School Change and Transforming Schools through Systems Change*, published by Rowman & Littlefield.



# Ten Principles for Changing a High School's Trajectory

Not much that state boards of education will undertake is harder than transforming low-performing high schools. Yet what they do is pivotal. First, they will adopt policies on graduation requirements, how funding is distributed, how schools are rated, and how low-performing schools themselves are identified and supported. But second, they are uniquely positioned to ensure that schools are tapping into research-based, comprehensive frameworks to improve academic and social outcomes for their students.<sup>1</sup>

It is critical that state boards do this work. While graduation rates are on the rise—reaching 84 percent in 2016—significant gaps in academic achievement and graduation persist for diverse and low-income students. The dropout rate for Hispanic students was 10.6 percent in 2016, 7.4 percent for black students, and 5.2 percent for white students.<sup>2</sup> The measures of high school completion that state education agencies

most widely use—the average freshman graduation rate and adjusted cohort graduation rate—mask these subgroup differences and cannot signify whether schools are providing their students an excellent education.

State board members should keep 10 key principles in mind when they are working to transform low-performing high schools.

## **1. The school is the unit of change.**

Turning around low-performing, underperforming, chronically failing high schools requires strong systems and relationships within the school, its feeder schools, and the school community. Reform efforts that address only one or two areas of dysfunction within a school will fail. Only a comprehensive approach that seeks to change the school's whole culture has a chance. And schools that change their culture become places in which all students have access to an excellent, equitable education.

*State boards play a key supporting role in turning struggling schools into high-achieving ones.*

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**by Stephanie Wood-Garnett  
and Betty Greene-Bryant**

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**Leadership teams facilitate change that is more rapid and sustained than the most dynamic leader could do alone.**

**2. Leadership matters most.** There are very few instances in which a school has improved without a strong leader. In 2010, a Wallace Foundation study confirmed that leadership ranks just behind classroom instruction as having the greatest school-based impact on student achievement.<sup>3</sup> The school principal, as the keeper of the instructional vision, must guide staff in identifying and implementing the instructional priorities that will lead to desired student outcomes. This means that the principal is not only managing school operations, but taking on the responsibility of maintaining the instructional focus.

**3. Strong leadership teams are essential.**

Strong leaders burn out without strong teams. Leadership must be distributed so that all members of the school community take ownership of the school's mission and pursue it urgently. Teacher and administrative leaders must together build a healthy, college-going and career-ready school culture and develop a cadre of effective teachers. Leadership teams facilitate change that is more rapid and sustained than the most dynamic leader could do alone, providing continuity when the top leader changes and raising future school leaders organically.<sup>4</sup>

**4. Effective high schools offer the coursework and experiences to prepare students for their futures.**

As high schools work to improve outcomes for underserved and underprepared students, a shared vision and agreed upon indicators for student progress must be identified and implemented. Access to a college-preparatory and career-readiness instructional program is at the foundation of this work. Such a program provides all students with rigorous, inquiry-based curriculum and instruction aligned with the state's learning standards. In addition, students who are underperforming need more time to acquire and master content. This additional time could give students more opportunities for enrichment or remediation or both. More time can be programmed as extended day, extended year, and collaborative partnerships with postsecondary institutions or intern/externships with corporate or business entities.

**5. Effective schools set ambitious goals for underserved and underprepared students.**

Effective high schools use data to monitor program implementation and student

performance outcomes and to support continuous organizational improvement.

These are some of the measures that help high schools meaningfully improve:

- grade promotion rates;
- credit accumulation;
- high school dropout rates;
- attendance rates;
- enrollment and persistence in college; and
- enrollment and persistence in work and careers.

**6. Faculty in effective schools that serve large numbers of low-income and diverse students are well prepared and supported.**

In high schools that serve large numbers of underprepared and economically disadvantaged students, it is imperative that the faculty are carefully assigned and well supported. Continuous professional development is essential for establishing a collaborative learning community, where teachers and school leaders participate in individual and team coaching. Good professional development is structured around problems of practice linked to student needs that teachers and school leaders have identified.

**7. Effective schools create a safety net for students within their walls.**

In high-performing schools, counselors and faculty take responsibility for students' academic, social, and emotional development and work to build trusting and caring relationships with students that can be leveraged to increase achievement. Dedicated teachers and counselors together can provide a consistent support network and safety net throughout students' four years of high school. This system of Distributed Counseling™ is implemented most effectively when grade-level teams of teachers who teach the same cohort of students meet regularly to problem solve for students with issues, review student work and teacher assignments together for evidence of readiness for college-ready work and careers, and share effective pedagogical and behavior management strategies.

High-performing schools also distribute the responsibility for addressing students' academic, social, and emotional development equally across the school to ensure that no student falls through the cracks. Counselors support teachers in applying appropriate strategies to create a

### Box 1. A Principal's Story

In 2010, “Dr. Jones” became principal at School Improvement Grant recipient Key High School, its third principal in five years. Of its 400 students, 85 percent qualified for free and reduced-price lunches, 98 percent came from culturally diverse communities, and 35 percent were not yet proficient in English. During her recruitment for the turnaround role, Jones expressed excitement for the opportunity. Yet what she found was a school so “broken” that no one person could meet the needs of the staff, students, and the community in which the school was situated. The constant struggle to gain traction on student achievement had left the school and its community feeling demoralized and hopeless.

However, Jones was able to turn around the performance and culture of Key High School. Specifically, she invested in a leadership coach to help her develop a leadership team. She was then able to distribute and share many of the tasks essential to whole-school reform. She also invested in content coaches to support her teachers in adopting rigorous curriculum, pedagogy that nurtured higher order thinking skills, and strategies to make a college preparatory program accessible to all their students. To ensure that her students' affective needs were also addressed, she brought in experts to help her staff develop structures and strategies to ensure that every child had an adult advocate who knew that student well.

community where students feel they belong and to meet students' affective needs. Counselors also offer individual and group counseling to selected students and develop external relationships (for example, with community-based organizations) to provide additional supports and resources to students and families.

**8. Effective high schools embrace a culture of continuous improvement.** To effect meaningful, lasting change, schools must create a culture that values the use of multiple sources of data to continually assess progress toward collaboratively articulated goals, captured in annual action plans. The sources should include statistical data such as test scores and attendance but also teacher assignments and student work samples. In addition to their own self-assessments, these schools invite organized teams of colleagues from other high-performing, like-minded schools to participate in external assessments of their school's work and use the feedback to improve their own program implementation. These networked schools learn from their own and each other's mistakes and failures as well as from successes.

**9. Improving high schools join networks of schools.** Professional development networks

have been highlighted in several recent articles as a promising approach for states to consider for turning around low-performing high schools. A recent report published by the National Association of State Boards of Education suggests that states can help incubate such networks:

State boards can convene those with knowledge of the social, political, legal, and policy geographies in the state to lead, organize, and operate these networks. Leadership at the state level is critical early on for building a sustainable organizational structure. Networks may be loosely or tightly managed enterprises, they may share a platform, voluntarily associate support services, or share common principles that guide how the members conduct their efforts.<sup>5</sup>

The Every Student Succeeds Act provides state boards with the opportunity to form school networks that are working with a proven provider to address problems of practice and to focus on continuous improvement, says Robert Slavin, director of the Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University School of Education. “The network would have regular meetings among principals,

**Schools must create a culture that values the use of multiple sources of data to continually assess progress toward collaboratively articulated goals.**

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teachers of similar grades, and other job-alike staff members to provide mutual help, share ideas, and interact cost-effectively with representatives of program providers.” Similarly, Allan Golston, president of U.S. Programs at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, promotes the power of school networks working together on problems of practice.

**10. Students are actively, authentically involved in schools’ efforts to improve.**

Schools must establish systems in which students are consistently engaged and consulted in the design of the school and the learning environment. This not only makes for better school redesign and increased student buy-in, solving real world problems also provides students with the opportunity to develop intellectually and to acquire strong higher order thinking skills, habits of work, and mastery of critical skills. In addition, high schools should ensure that there are strong, meaningful connections between students and their teachers and counselor, as well as opportunities for students to experience enrichment and advancement opportunities. The strong relationships generated by this type of school environment work collectively to support students’ success.

State boards of education can make a difference for underserved and underachieving high school students by continual work and collaboration with stakeholders to improve the quality of education through policymaking, standards adoption, and accreditation. We recommend that state boards in their ongoing work with local education agencies highlight the importance of grounding school transformational work in a research-based context.

Local education agencies can ask the following questions when they are looking to foster changes in a high school’s trajectory:

- What is the mission/vision of the school?
- Is the transformation plan informed by a sound research base?
- How is the high school’s transformation plan aligned with the school district’s strategic plan?
- Are all the community stakeholders represented in the turnaround process?

- Are high-performing personnel (teachers, leaders, student services faculty, etc.) distributed equally across each school in the district, including the low-performing schools?
- What is the pattern of placement for involuntary personnel transfers? What evidence is there that it is equitable?
- What percentage of the courses in lower-performing high schools are considered college preparatory? Career-focused?
- Are students who may be underprepared and undercredited offered extra time to learn and master content and successfully move on to the next course? What quality controls are in place to ensure the consistency of course quality of any replacement or supplemental classes?
- Are students offered the opportunity to acquire work-based learning experiences while in high school?
- Are school and community-sponsored events and ongoing mentoring provided to students in lower performing high schools related to college experiences, credentialing programs, and career exploration? What types are offered and with what frequency?
- Are administrators, teachers, and parents given professional learning opportunities that are focused on increasing rigor and relevance in instruction? ■

<sup>1</sup>The U.S. Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse is a great resource for evidence-based transforming school practices and instruction. In addition, Bob Slavin talks more about sources of evidence-based approaches in his article in this issue.  
<sup>2</sup>National Center for Education Statistics, 2015–16; 2017.  
<sup>3</sup>Karen Seashore Louis et al., *Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning* (St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota, Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, 2010), p. 9.  
<sup>4</sup>U.S. Department of Education *What Works Clearinghouse: Standards Handbook*, version 4.0 (2017), [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/referenceresources/wwc\\_standards\\_handbook\\_v4.pdf](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/referenceresources/wwc_standards_handbook_v4.pdf).  
<sup>5</sup>Gary Colletti, “State Role in Incubating School Improvement Networks,” *Policy Update* 24, no. 12 (Alexandria, VA: NASBE, 2017).  
<sup>6</sup>Robert Slavin, “How Networks of Proven Programs Could Help State-Level Reform,” *HuffPost* (October 12, 2017).  
<sup>7</sup>Allan Golston, “What’s Working: The Power of Networks,” *HuffPost* (January 22, 2018).

# Freeing Up School Turnaround Leaders

School leadership is a key factor in school turnarounds.<sup>1</sup> The general prescription for what school leaders should do tends to be this: Set high expectations for staff and students and give strong instructional supports.<sup>2</sup> Most school systems recognize how tall an order this is, given everything else the principal job entails. Even principals who are ready to engage more deeply in curriculum and instruction are still expected to directly manage schedules, finances, facilities, student safety, and discipline, all while creating an engaging school culture and climate.

This bind is acute for all principals, but even more so for those working to change cultures and raise achievement in low-performing and high-need schools. Time management and distribution of tasks are of the essence. Yet many school systems are not set up to help principals use their time effectively. How can school systems make principals' roles more manageable while ensuring that teachers receive the support they need to improve instruction?

Three public school districts have been test driving promising school leadership models that bolster principals' ability to focus on instructional leadership: Council Bluffs Community School District in Iowa; Fitchburg, Massachusetts; and District of Columbia Public Schools. The new school leadership models benefited these districts, even though they were not a panacea. For a variety of reasons, these districts still struggle to build sufficient staff capacity to address the myriad functions necessary to make schools successful.

The three districts are stressed on many levels, and each chose a model that fit its greatest perceived needs. But all sought to support high-quality teaching and learning better. Elements of the three models are compared in table 1.

## School Administration Manager

At the end of the 2006–07 school year, Council Bluffs Community School District, a high-poverty district just across the Missouri River from Omaha, Nebraska, learned that it had the lowest graduation rate in the state of Iowa. District leadership decided to adopt the School Administration Manager project, or SAM®, which had originally been developed for Jefferson County Schools in Kentucky.<sup>3</sup>

As the name suggests, the addition of a school administration manager is key. Participating principals are expected to establish goals for increasing time spent on supporting instruction and to meet with the SAM daily to review how they are spending their time during the school day. Principals also delegate specific duties to the SAM or other members of the school staff so that they are not pulled away every time an issue arises within the building.

Superintendent Martha Bruckner hoped that the SAM model would ease principals' transition from management to instructional leadership.<sup>4</sup> With financial support from the Iowa West Foundation, the district piloted the SAM model with seven schools beginning in the 2007–08 school year. With additional funding from the district's general fund, by 2009–10 every school in the district had a SAM.<sup>5</sup>

Council Bluffs principals choose their SAM's tasks based on their preferences and school needs, as long as the SAM is helping free up time for the principal to focus on instruction. SAMs in the district generally take on noninstructional tasks such as maintaining the principal's calendar and school schedules, helping handle student discipline, supervising and evaluating paraprofessionals, and serving as liaison to parents. Many of the principals of the pilot SAM schools doubled

*Three districts allow for divvying up duties so principals can focus on instructional leadership.*

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by Roxanne Garza and Melissa Tooley

the percentage of time they spent on instructional leadership activities, according to district administrators.<sup>6</sup> These activities included observation of classroom practice; preparation for feedback, evaluations, or instructional meetings; and working with students in the classroom.

During our focus groups, Council Bluffs principals reported a direct, positive impact on not only the quantity but the quality of time they devoted to instructional leadership. Teachers reported that the nature of conversations with their principals changed and that they received more frequent feedback. One teacher, who spends three-quarters of the day as

an instructional coach, indicated that the SAM allows principals time to review and analyze assessment data, thereby allowing school decisions to be more data driven.

The district is further supporting principals' roles as instructional leaders by blending state and district resources in order to contract with the School Administrators of Iowa for SAM-related tools, such as time-tracking software, data housing, and training for SAMs.

While it is difficult with existing analysis to prove that the SAM initiative was responsible for improved student outcomes, several principals thought this was a fair "dotted line" to draw.

**Table 1. School Leader Models**

Model Element	Council Bluffs Community School District	Fitchburg Public Schools	District of Columbia Public Schools
<b>NSL role/initiative name</b>	School Administration Manager	Student Program Support Administrator	Director or Manager of Strategy and Logistics
<b>Initiative goal(s)</b>	Increase principal focus on instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Increase principal focus on instruction</li> <li>■ Improve special education service delivery</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Increase principal focus on instruction and people management</li> <li>■ Allow teachers to focus more time on instruction</li> <li>■ Provide support/career paths to operations staff</li> <li>■ Increase staff morale and retention</li> </ul>
<b>Key responsibilities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Maintaining principal calendar and school schedules</li> <li>■ Tracking principal time</li> <li>■ Ordering supplies in response to teacher need</li> <li>■ Overseeing building maintenance</li> <li>■ Helping to handle student discipline</li> <li>■ Organizing assemblies and staff meetings</li> <li>■ Serving as liaison to parents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Overseeing special-education-specific work</li> <li>■ Conducting special education teacher and paraprofessional observations, evaluations</li> <li>■ Attending grade-level and data team meetings</li> <li>■ Facilitating teacher PD</li> <li>■ Handling student discipline, as assigned</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Supervising school-based operations staff</li> <li>■ Managing student information systems</li> <li>■ Emergency planning and response</li> <li>■ Handling building maintenance</li> <li>■ Ordering and delivering supplies</li> <li>■ Organizing assemblies, field trips</li> <li>■ Budgeting</li> <li>■ Finding coverage when teachers are absent</li> <li>■ Maintaining school calendar</li> </ul>
<b>Official member of school admin team?</b>	No	Yes	Yes
<b>New role in schools?</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>NSL funding source</b>	District general funds	District general funds	School funds
<b>License required?</b>	Originally not, now SAM license (unique to Iowa)	Originally teacher, now school administrator	No
<b>Salary</b>	Slightly less than first-year teacher (\$~43,000)	Same as assistant principal (~\$80,000)	Varies based on role and experience, generally similar to teacher with a bachelor's degree and 10–20 years' experience (~ \$68,000–\$98,000)
<b>Supervised by</b>	Principal	Principal (and dotted line to district director of pupil services)	Principal
<b>Supervisor of</b>	Front office and facilities staff, paraprofessionals	Special education teachers and paraprofessionals	Front office and custodial staff

One noted that graduation rates have continued to rise over the past 10 years in which SAMs have been in place (figure 1). Another offered, “I think the school is being managed better than when I was trying to do both [instructional leadership and building management] by myself because [my SAM] is so much more able to be responsive to teachers. And when people’s needs are getting met, there’s a direct correlation to morale.”

Principals in Council Bluffs still face many demands. They say it continues to be a challenge to balance the instructional support needs of teachers with student academic needs and other student and family needs, especially when many live in poverty, deal with mental health or substance abuse issues, and face a host of other difficulties. Council Bluffs also struggles to fund its SAM positions even at low salary levels, but it has expressed a commitment to finding resources to continue doing so.

## Student Program Support Administrator

Located in a former mill town 50 miles from Boston, Fitchburg Public Schools was one of the first districts in Massachusetts to pilot new educator evaluation and support systems under the state’s federal Race to the Top grant in 2012–13. As part of negotiations with its teachers union, the district agreed that administrators would assess teacher practice through announced classroom observations, which make up the evaluative component, and other nonevaluative approaches.<sup>7</sup> But significant time was needed to plan and complete this work. And while all schools had at least one assistant principal, that role traditionally handled discipline.

At the same time, schools and parents were pinging the central office for a more transparent, integrated approach to special education. The district had more students in special education relative to other districts in the state, with several group homes in its boundaries. It had struggled to stay in compliance on special education services and documentation.<sup>8</sup> Historically, evaluation team leaders (ETLs)—who were on a teacher contract but based out of the district’s central office—had led the mandatory Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings for students who required special education services. While there were some efficiencies to the ETL role (e.g., one ETL could serve several schools), parents felt

that ETLs did not know their child’s situation, and school staff felt ETLs did not appreciate how each school worked.<sup>9</sup>

The district decided in 2012–13 to use funds that had been designated for the ETLs to create a new role, the student program support administrator (SPSA). Like the former ETLs, the administrators facilitate, coordinate, and supervise delivery of special education services. But the new, school-level role also supports other school management responsibilities. They vary by school but typically include a mix of instructional and noninstructional duties—for example, conducting special education and paraprofessional observations and evaluations and handling student discipline.

Central office administrators in Fitchburg perceive shifts in how principals approach their work compared with five years ago. Assistant Superintendent Paula Giaquinto says principal walkthroughs of teacher classrooms used to be “an event” but is now integral, expected practice. The other big change noted was a clearer, more intentional focus on principals’ data and assessment literacy and on using data to determine what to focus on next.

Fitchburg principals report that the SPSAs enable schools to better manage and integrate special education as well as pitch in elsewhere. They perceive special education staff as more effective because of the support received from SPSAs, and they also indicate that SPSAs are slowing down the rate of referrals to special education by offering general education teachers strategies to help kids before they refer them.

Teachers perceive less of a difference in principal practice from this change. Principals surmised that teachers may not notice “behind-the-scenes” changes in administrative work (e.g., reviewing data with coaches). But many teachers do find the SPSA valuable to their own practice. Some cited using their school’s SPSA as an advisor for working with struggling students, and others found their SPSAs to be proactive in offering information that would help them better serve their students with IEPs. Most of all, special education teachers say having an SPSA in the building improved their ability to strategize and receive constructive feedback about instruction, whether they were lead teachers in pull-out settings or co-teachers in inclusion classrooms.

Principals expressed concern about potential

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**The other big change noted was a clearer, more intentional focus on principals’ data and assessment literacy.**

**The solution was to offer schools a senior-level, operations-focused staff member who had the authority to supervise and evaluate certain staff.**

turnover among SPSAs, as they have administrative licenses and can use this experience to move into leadership roles in more affluent, less demanding districts. And because the best source of new SPSAs is the special education staff, SPSA turnover often means replacing a special education teacher and an SPSA. Fitchburg Public Schools sought to equalize SPSA compensation with that of assistant principals starting in 2016–17.

## Director of Strategy and Logistics

In spring 2013, an Education Resource Strategies report documented the extent to which teachers in District of Columbia Public Schools spent time on noninstructional, non-professional development activities.<sup>10</sup> In follow-up exit surveys, the district found that teachers' frustrations were rooted in not having supplies and operational support, which meant they were spending their own time (and sometimes their own money) to get them.

"We saw clear evidence that having to deal with things like fixing broken copiers, not receiving supplies on time, and so on, had a direct effect on teacher retention," said Scott Thompson, deputy chief for innovation and design in the district's Office of Instructional Practice. As a result, the Office of Human Capital started reviewing staff roles to see how they could be more effective and efficient.<sup>11</sup>

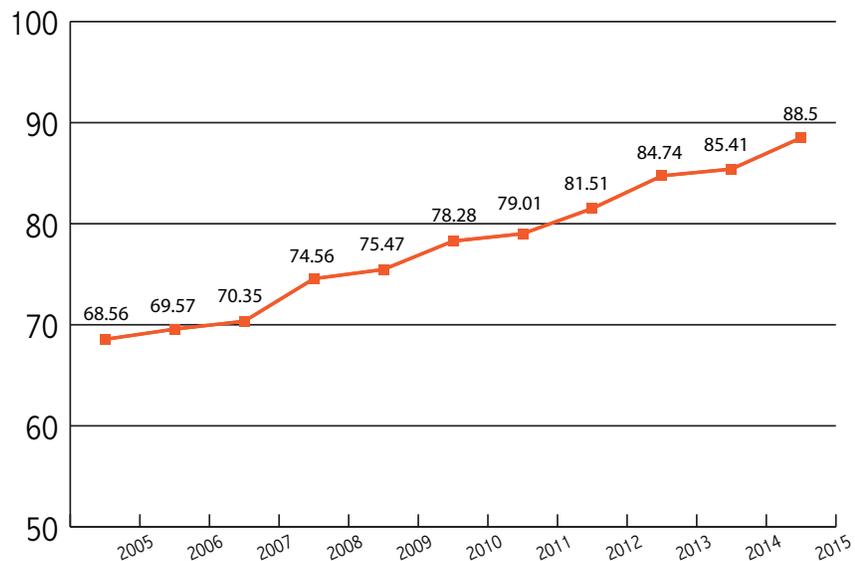
The district was also increasingly focused on distributed school leadership. To streamline the principal's job, the district started to help principals distribute instructional duties. But after finding that most principal time was spent on building management, the district decided to help distribute operational duties as well.

After reviewing examples from the charter sector, the district's human capital team decided the solution was to offer schools a senior-level, operations-focused staff member who had the authority to supervise and evaluate certain staff. They created a director of strategy and logistics role for supervising building management and a manager of strategy and logistics role for smaller schools, with similar qualifications and responsibilities (three years of experience and a bachelor's degree).

These administrators supervise operational functions and operational staff within the building, leaving school leaders and teachers free to focus on instruction and student learning. They handle budgeting, supervising and evaluating front office and custodial staff, school calendars, and building maintenance issues. They do not handle student-facing work, such as school discipline.

The district piloted the new roles in 2014–15 at nine schools. Prior to the pilot, principals reported spending about half their time on building management and operations; after the pilot, they reported spending just a fifth of

**Figure 1. Council Bluffs' Four-Year Graduation Rate, 2005–15 (percent)**



their time in this area.<sup>12</sup> The district made the position available to all interested schools in 2015–16, and as of 2016–17, 60 schools had the new staff in place.

Principals in the district acknowledge they are likely to use the extra time they gained to meet with assistant principals, department chairs, and coaches rather than directly with teachers. Correspondingly, some teachers did not view their lead principal as being more focused on instruction under the new model, but most teachers report that the instructional leadership team was more visible and more likely to offer “hands-on” support: Principals are seen in the halls more, and assistant principals enter classrooms more frequently.

In addition, teachers in a focus group we conducted reported that the red tape that used to characterize virtually any operational or logistics request had largely been eliminated, which they attribute to the new position. Along the same lines, having a staff member designated for all things noninstructional means that building maintenance problems and supply requests have been addressed more quickly.

Yet plugging one hole often means opening another. Because no additional financial resources are offered to schools to fund this position, principals may have to leave other positions unfilled in order to fund it.

## For State Boards' Consideration

The experiences of these three school districts can inform other high-need districts that are considering modifying school leader roles and staffing structures to better support high-quality teaching and learning. It is difficult to draw a clear line from distributed leadership models to improved student achievement. These models cannot, for example, point to immediate higher test scores as a result of new staffing arrangements. But these models do show evidence of improvement in school culture, teacher morale, and various ways of attending to the needs of specific populations of students. As districts consider making such modifications, states should encourage districts to perform needs and resource assessments to ensure that the proposed solution matches their primary goal.

Figuring out how to meet staffing and instructional goals within budgetary constraints can

also be challenging, but fortunately the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) offers states and districts a chance to support school leadership by modifying school leader roles and staffing structures as a lever for school improvement. In addition to Title I funds for school improvement, ESSA offers new flexibilities around using Title II dollars for evidence-based activities, which could include efforts like the ones we have described.<sup>13</sup> While Title I and Title II can support school leadership efforts separately, states can also braid funding sources together for school improvement.

With or without ESSA funds, states and districts that are developing new school leadership roles should also consider the following steps:

- Develop sample school staffing models for meeting varied assessed school needs and goals. States could support districts by providing sample staffing models such as the national SAM model, or they could point to other examples like the SPSA model in Fitchburg or the DSL/MSL model in DCPS.
- Assess whether and how principal job descriptions, expectations, and evaluation systems should change when new school leader roles are added to better reflect expectations for that role. In particular, roles and responsibilities should be clarified through standards and evaluation/development systems for school leaders and district leaders (especially principal supervisors so that they are able to support principals' changing roles).
- Develop tools, guidance, and meaningful professional development for principals and their supervisors to support this work. If districts' primary goal is to improve principal's instructional leadership, principals will also need support in developing their knowledge and skills, including time management, even with additional staff capacity. ■

<sup>1</sup>Kenneth Leithwood et al., *How Leadership Influences Student Learning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004).

<sup>2</sup>Kenneth Leithwood et al., *How Leadership Influences Student Learning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004).

<sup>3</sup>Kenneth Leithwood et al., *Leading School Turnaround: How Successful Leaders Transform Low-Performing Schools* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010), p. 172; Karin Chenoweth and Christina Theokas, *Getting It Done: Leading Academic Success in Unexpected Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard

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**Most teachers report that the instructional leadership team was more visible and more likely to offer “hands-on” support.**

**Roxanne Garza is a policy analyst and Melissa Tooley is director of preK-12 educator quality with the Education Policy program at New America. This article is drawn from Tooley's "From Frenzied to Focused: How School Staffing Models Can Support Principals in Instructional Leaders" (Washington, DC: New America, 2017).**

# The NASBE Interview

*Georgia legislators passed and Governor Nathan Deal signed the First Priority Act in 2017, which, among other things, created a new position of chief turnaround officer. In a novel arrangement, the CTO was to be hired by and report to the Georgia board. NASBE interviewed **Scott Johnson**, current chair of the Georgia board, and Georgia's chief turnaround officer, **Eric Thomas**, during NASBE's March Legislative Conference and about three months after Thomas began his new post in Georgia.*

■

## How did the Georgia state board come to play a hands-on role in school turnaround? How did it begin the conversation?

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**Scott Johnson:** It starts before the conversation even begins. It starts with having a relationship with the legislators and key people that create legislation that allows the board to have input. When we have a state board retreat, we invite the education committees from the House and the Senate to sit with us and listen to staff, to experts, to folks that we think we need to hear from. We do shrimp and grits. And then I, or one of us, often attend the Education Committee meeting. I love the saying “You can pretend to care, but you can't pretend to show up.” By showing up, they know that we're engaged. Those things have built a relationship: We respect them, they respect us, and we have a full-on engagement with almost any legislation that will affect education.

## How did the idea of the state board hiring a chief turnaround officer come up?

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**Johnson:** The board and our state leaders felt that to do this, we needed a specific champion for those schools that need extra help. We decided we'd focus on the lowest performing 5 percent. If we could affect those, we thought that by working together, we could take what we learned and apply that to other schools as well: the 10, 15, then the 20 percent. I don't know at what point we decided we needed a chief turnaround officer, but we did early on decide there had to be an executive that would be responsible. We ended up having a national search to find the very best person we could identify, and we engaged NASBE in that process, which we're very pleased with.

## Was there anything different about the personnel hiring process?

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**Johnson:** This was different from anything I know of, and certainly at the state board level. It required more collaboration than it does to hire a vice president for my company or a senior executive, because we went to great lengths to get buy-in from a broad group of outside stakeholders. And the beautiful thing about it was that the board came to a decision on the best candidate, the group of stakeholders came to a decision separately, and we came to the same conclusion. [NASBE's] Kris [Amundson] and Robert [Hull], by the way, were very objective. They were not saying, “It needs to be A, B, or C of these candidates.” So we were really convinced we came out with the right result.

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**We needed a specific champion for those schools that need extra help.**

**Eric Thomas:** I didn't know how the dynamics were going to play out. I just knew I was meeting with the state board and with this other group, and I didn't know if I had to sell this group, too, or if the state board was going to do whatever it wanted to do. But after the process was over, I walked into the position knowing that the stakeholder group by themselves thought this was the right decision, and it wasn't the state board finessing the process.

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### How did the board decide what characteristics it was looking for?

**Johnson:** Before we interviewed anybody, NASBE folks came to Georgia and asked, "What are the important traits of your ideal candidate?" So we identified those. Everybody got to have input, and there were six flipcharts full around the room. Then everyone voted on the top three traits that would make this chief turnaround officer successful. It was a good exercise.

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### What was interesting about this opportunity, Mr. Thomas, and how did you see your role?

**Thomas:** It sounded similar to work I was doing at the University of Virginia—working with schools and districts across the country to help them turn around their low-performing schools. But at UVA, our footprint in a school or district was limited because we were in Charlottesville. So the opportunity to have more of a hands-on approach where I could engage with schools on a regular basis intrigued me. What we're doing [in Georgia] is honoring the fact that kids walk into the schoolhouse with challenges. That wasn't a lens we leveraged at UVA. Unless you address mental health, nutrition, oral health, it's hard to ask kids to do exceptional work.

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### What did you do first?

**Thomas:** One of the things we attempted to do first is help people appreciate what the work was and what it was not. In Georgia in 2016, this whole idea of an Opportunity School

District [was on the ballot], in which the governor promoted identifying the worst performing schools, pulling them out of their districts, and creating separate districts. It passed the Senate, it passed the House, but it required a constitutional amendment. That had to go in front of voters, and voters did not approve it.

So when I walked into schools and spoke with superintendents and school boards, they remembered the Opportunity School District concept and believed that the state board was taking over their schools. That has been the major challenge: helping people appreciate that whatever happened 18 months ago, that's 18 months ago. We're not coming to take over your school. We're not coming to tell you what to do. We're coming to be a partner to help schools and districts.

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### Whom did you meet, and what was the message?

**Thomas:** Schools, principals, superintendents, boards of education, teacher associations, superintendent associations, school board associations, local media—you name it. Up until Christmas, I spent 60 to 70 percent of my time trying to get a message out, and I think it's worked. People have resonated with the idea that these so called low-performing schools have been in the same situations for decades, and you've got to do something. That has been a really important piece. We've tried to help people appreciate what would happen if we did nothing: We continue to get what we're getting. Doing nothing is not an option.

The number one value proposition is we're here to partner. The second is we've got to do something. And then the third value proposition is that there's an evidence base around the approach we're taking. There are more than a few exemplars around the country on things that you should be doing and things that you shouldn't. As a part of ESSA, all school improvement strategies and ventures have to have some sort of evidence base behind them. The RAND Corporation identified the work at UVA at a tier-two level of evidence, with tier one being the highest.

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**People have resonated with the idea that these so called low-performing schools have been in the same situations for decades, and you've got to do something.**

## Were there places where you were pushing on an open door?

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**Thomas:** Here's the approach we took. The legislation [Georgia's First Priority Act] speaks to about the lowest 5 percent of the schools in the state—turns out to be about 104 schools. Those schools are represented by about 27 districts. What we decided was, let's not take on a hundred schools in November; let's start small. I looked at data—some quantitative, some qualitative. That led to many of the visits. Of the 27 districts, let's identify maybe five, six, or seven. The districts we're working with seem to be receptive. There were two or three that were not as receptive, and at this point, we're not going to force anyone to marry us. So if you're not exactly ready to partner, other people are, and maybe we'll come back in six months or twelve. That's been the approach. The state board really appreciated that, and we got guidance from them.

## In this first set of schools, what will you be looking for as the early signs of spring?

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**Thomas:** We went through a semitradi-tional approach to needs assessment. We had external teams do the assessment. They spent time in the district and time in the schools that we identified. Based on the needs assessment, we spent another day in each school, helping the school and the district think about potential strengths and weaknesses that would guide a 90-day plan. How do you monitor progress? We talk about leading indicators and lagging indicators. Lagging indicators would be state test scores. We won't see this year's state test scores until sometime late summer. So how do we know what we're doing between now and then is having some positive impact? We can look at student attendance, student discipline matters, teacher attendance. If you've had a culture challenge and you start to see an uptick in teacher attendance, it suggests you're starting to see some positive movement.

One of the things I want to look hard at is teacher retention. That's a strong leading indicator on whether turnaround is starting to have

a positive impact. Just the fact that teachers are leaving isn't necessarily a good or bad sign. If there is a process to identify stronger teachers, and your stronger teachers are staying, that's a good sign. If your weaker teachers are leaving, that's not necessarily a bad sign. Those are some things to take a look at to see if what we're doing in the first two to four months is starting to show signs of change.

In regard to classroom practices, we're working with schools and districts on something foundational: If you walk into any classroom in this school, what are the three or four things you expect to see? You're expecting to see alignment between an academic standard and what's taking place from a structural delivery standpoint. You're expecting to see engagement. You're expecting to see some form of assessment. Is there some strategy, some process, to determine whether kids are learning the material that they should be learning during that 55 minutes?

## Do you have an expectation of the state board?

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**Thomas:** I look to them for the big picture—what are we trying to achieve? Call it vision. I do believe some of this is my task, but they should be the direction setters, and part of my role is to execute that direction. One of the things I've asked for is clarity on what we're trying to accomplish.

I communicate with Scott and [Michael Royal, former chairman] routinely. Then, on a monthly basis the subcommittee meeting is an opportunity for all board members to be a part of the conversation, to share a thought or question. I attempt to not get too far ahead of the board. Having not been in Georgia, there are skeletons and landmines I do not necessarily know about. I normally reach out to Scott, Mike, the board: Here's what I'm thinking. Does this make sense? Does this fly? Because I don't necessarily know the context.

**Johnson:** This is not only Eric's first experience in dealing with a state board, it is our first experience at having someone that reports directly to the board—and that was

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**If you've had a culture challenge and you start to see an uptick in teacher attendance, it suggests you're starting to see some positive movement.**

very much on purpose. We're all feeling our way through this together, and I think we are hitting about the right note. As he said, Eric biweekly or weekly keeps in touch with me or Mike Royal—Mike being the former board chair but also now the chair of the First Priority Committee, which deals with school turnaround. Then we have outside stakeholders, which is really important, because that group was created as a part of the legislation, and it seeks to get buy-in from all areas of educational stakeholders. We wanted to make sure that the group was in place through the hiring process, because that was its purpose. But instead of just saying, "This is how we're going to find our chief turnaround officer," we said, "Let's keep this in place so we keep the buy-in."

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### What does this stakeholder group do now?

**Johnson:** They meet roughly monthly, discuss issues, and get a report from Eric. There are board members on this committee, but there are also people from higher education, teachers, administrators, superintendents, and association groups that are involved in education in Georgia. It is a broad group that can ask any question and engage anybody.

**Thomas:** And they also bring perspective. The group is called the Educational Turnaround Advisory Council. The executive director of the Georgia School Boards Association (GSBA) is on it. So as we're thinking about a district or we're thinking about an approach, she's got a lens that no one else could bring. The executive director of the superintendents' association is on that council. He brings a lens no one else brings to the table. I met with [the GSBA executive director] and her team, and we're talking about partnering with another district to bring the school board to this conversation also. That's not something we did this fall.

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### Do you have advice for state boards on how to start developing an approach to turnaround?

**Johnson:** Fortunately in Georgia, we had some forward-thinking legislators who wrote

this into the law. That is key. It's not the First Priority in Education Act; it's the First Priority Act. It is a top priority in Georgia. Our board was engaged in the writing of that law, and by virtue of being involved in and getting written into the legislation, we got specific guidelines on how to do the work. We didn't have to create this by committee. It's law. The governor was involved, and key legislators were involved.

**Thomas:** That's a powerful piece. We're not talking about policy; we're not talking about rough guidelines. There's a concrete law, and it allows all of us to go back to what the law says.

**Johnson:** And it will hold us accountable. We can measure how are we doing according to the legislation. [State boards should also] get a broad group of stakeholders. Even if you've got a law, you're going to have a problem if people are working against you. Creating this broad group of stakeholders—having their input, their pushback, but allowing them a place at the table—helps greatly.

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### Did the state board get everything right in this process?

**Johnson:** Even though [we had] this advisory group, we were in charge. The smart thing is, we did listen. It wasn't an arbitrary group of folks. We had input on who it would be. These stakeholders helped us set the right characteristics for the chief turnaround officer. We went through an intense process of selection and interviews. We did not rush it. It took us about a month longer than we intended, but that was because we took the process very seriously. If we don't do this well, we don't get another shot. Certainly, our board feels good about what we've seen so far, and now [that Eric has] identified needs for staff, we're going back to get additional funding for the upcoming year.

**Thomas:** This is new for the board. This is new for the state. This is complicated. There are low-performing schools in every state in the Union, so no one can say, "Here's how to do it." We've got an opportunity to create a model that others could replicate, but it is multidimensional. ■

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**Creating this broad group of stakeholders—having their input, their pushback, but allowing them a place at the table—helps greatly.**

## State boards could conduct audits of existing policies that support or hinder systemic school improvement.

*cont'd from page 9...A Systems Approach to Rapid School Improvement*

rather than the exception. Through these practices, systemic improvement becomes “the way we do business” at the state, district, and school levels.

### What the Framework Means for State Boards

Substantial research undergirds the four domains for rapid improvement outlined in this turnaround framework. In an effort to drive systemic reform efforts, state boards of education might consider the following actions to support its recommended practices:

- **Examine current policies that promote practices across the four domains.** State boards may consider better ways to promote sustainable, systemic reforms by first taking the measure of the current landscape of the policies that may be driving what schools and districts, as well as the state education agency,

are currently doing. As a part of this effort, state boards could conduct audits of existing policies that support or hinder systemic school improvement. State boards can usefully seek input from local education agencies and others regarding the impact that a given policy has had on existing school improvement efforts.

- **Identify policy levers that may strengthen areas across the four domains.** State boards may consider new policy opportunities to enhance systemic efforts to support students in low-performing schools, such as those that govern principal preparation programs. As a part of their review of current policies, state boards can highlight gaps. These gaps will point the board toward considering policies that can strengthen systemic efforts across the four domain areas.
- **Create opportunities for ongoing discussions around implementation that can inform policy developments.** To spur ongoing improvement, state boards ought to consider ongoing reviews of identified

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priority areas across the four domains. Through collaborative efforts with stakeholders, state boards could set up an ongoing schedule of briefings with districts that are implementing turnaround efforts. These briefings may help scale school improvement efforts across a state as well as scaling up leading state policymakers' understanding of these efforts. ■

<sup>1</sup>See Mary Klute et al., "Summary of Research on the Association between State Interventions in Chronically Low-Performing Schools and Student Achievement (REL 2016-138)," report (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2016); Charles Thompson et al., "School Turnaround through Scaffolded Craftsmanship," *Teacher College Record* 118, no. 13 (2016): 1–26; Kenneth Leithwood et al., "Leading Data Use in Schools: Organizational Conditions and Practices at the School and District Levels," *Leadership and Policy in Schools* 9, no. 3 (2010): 292–327.

<sup>2</sup>Kenneth Leithwood et al., "Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership" *School Leadership & Management* 28, no. 1 (2008): 27–42.

<sup>3</sup>Thompson et al., "School Turnaround through Scaffolded Craftsmanship."

<sup>4</sup>Center on School Turnaround, "Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement: A Systems Framework" (San Francisco, CA: WestEd, 2017).

<sup>5</sup>Barnett Berry, "Recruiting and Retaining 'Highly Qualified Teachers' for Hard-to- Staff Schools," *NASSP Bulletin* 88, no. 638 (2004): 5–27; Francis Crowther et al., *Developing Teacher Leaders: How Teacher Leadership Enhances School Success* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2009); Linda Darling-Hammond et al., "Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World: Lessons from Exemplary Leadership Development Programs," report (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, Stanford Educational Leadership Institute, 2007).

<sup>6</sup>Lucy Steiner and Sharon Barrett, "Turnaround Principal Competencies," *School Administrator* 69, no. 7 (2012): 26–29; Lucy Steiner and Emily Hassel, "Using competencies to improve school turnaround principal success," report (Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact, 2011).

<sup>7</sup>Center on School Turnaround, "Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement."

<sup>8</sup>Clifford Adelman, "The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion from High School through College," report (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2006); Marcia Masumoto and Sharon Brown-Welty, "Case Study of Leadership Practices and School-Community Interrelationships in High-Performing, High-Poverty, Rural California High Schools," *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 24, no. 1 (2009): 1–18; Kristin Moore and Carol Emig, "Integrated Student Supports: A Summary of the Evidence Base for Policymakers," report (Bethesda, MD: Child Trends, 2014).

<sup>9</sup>Linda Lambert, "A Framework for Shared Leadership," *Educational Leadership* 59 no. 8 (2002): 37–50; Karen Seashore Louis et al., "Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning," report (St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota, 2010); William Saunders et al., "Increasing Achievement by Focusing Grade-Level Teams on Improving Classroom Learning: A Prospective, Quasi-Experimental Study of Title I Schools," *American Educational Research Journal* 46, no. 4 (2009): 1006–1033.

<sup>10</sup>Rebecca Herman et al., "Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools: IES Practice Guide," report (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2008); Marcia Masumoto and

Sharon Brown-Welty, "Case Study of Leadership Practices." <sup>11</sup>Joyce Epstein, *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001); Karen Mapp and Paul Kuttner, "Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships," report (Austin, TX: SEDL, 2013); Sara McAlister, "Why Community Engagement Matters in School Turnaround," *Voices in Urban Education* 36 (2013): 35–42.

<sup>12</sup>Rebecca Herman et al., "Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools"; Marcia Masumoto and Sharon Brown-Welty, "Case Study of Leadership Practices."

<sup>13</sup>Oregon provides such data in its district dashboard, <http://www.ode.state.or.us/data/reportcard/reports.aspx>.

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*cont'd from page 41...Freeing Up School Turnaround Leaders*

Education Press, 2011); Reform Support Network, "Turnaround Leadership: How to Identify Successful School Leaders," December 2012, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/implementation-support-unit/tech-assist/turnaround-leadership.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup>Mark Shellinger, then coordinator of the Wallace Foundation-funded Leading Education Achievement in Districts team in Kentucky's Jefferson County School District, based the SAM role on a position in the Victor Elementary District in Victorville, California, although that position was not part of a larger effort to track principal time use. See National SAM Innovation Project (NSIP), "SAMS Connect," 2015, <http://www.samsconnect.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/SAM-Info.pdf>; and Christina A. Samuels, "Managers Help Principals Balance Time," *Education Week* (February 11, 2008).

<sup>4</sup>Martha Bruckner, superintendent of Council Bluffs Community School District, email exchange with authors, April 2017.

<sup>5</sup>The exceptions are three alternative schools in the district, which do not have a SAM.

<sup>6</sup>While principals are not required to share time-tracking data with the central office, many reported voluntarily to the Iowa West Foundation as evidence of the investment's impact.

<sup>7</sup>Staff perceptions about this model were gathered in conversation with authors by Paula Giaquinto, assistant superintendent of Fitchburg Public Schools; Rowan Demanche, director of pupil services; Alicia Berrospe, director of special education (March 9, 2017); conversation with Andre Ravenelle, superintendent (May 2, 2017); e-mail correspondence with Rick Zeena, administrator of human resources (June 6, 2017).

<sup>8</sup>Fitchburg teacher focus group discussion with authors, March 8, 2017; Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Education, "Re: Onsite Follow-up Monitoring Report: Coordinated Program Review Corrective Action Plan Verification and Special Education Mid-cycle Review," 2005.

<sup>9</sup>Conversations with Giaquinto, Demanche, and Berrospe.

<sup>10</sup>Education Resource Strategies, "A New Vision for Teacher Professional Growth and Support: Six Steps to a More Powerful School System Strategy" (Watertown, MA: ERS, May 2013), 27.

<sup>11</sup>Scott Thompson, deputy chief, innovation and design, Office of Instructional Practice, DCPS, conversation with authors, December 15, 2016.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Rebecca Herman et al., "School Leadership Interventions under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Evidence Review," research report (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017).

# from the President's Pen



**Kristen Amundson**  
President/CEO

## *Five Big Lessons from the NASBE Legislative Conference*

NASBE members spent a fascinating two days in Washington, DC, where they discussed a wide range of policy issues with some of the nation's leading education experts. From the first session—an insider's look at how federal policy gets made—to the Hill conversations with Sen. Johnny Isakson from Georgia and Rep. Bobby Scott from Virginia, we covered a lot of ground!

But there were some big themes that emerged. Here are five key takeaways:

**1. This is a unique moment.** Roberto Rodríguez, who was a member of the White House Domestic Policy Council in the Obama administration, emphasized that this is a unique and opportune time for states that want to lead on issues of excellence and equity. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has given states enormous authority, so they should use it. Otherwise, warns John Bailey, a Domestic Policy Council adviser in the George W. Bush administration, there may be less flexibility in future. “The next reauthorization of ESEA is already being written,” he said.

**2. Don't play small ball.** As we met in DC, teams were gearing up for the NCAA basketball tournament. When better to remember that there are big issues on the horizon! Whether it be resource equity, teacher quality, or principal leadership, state boards of education should not be afraid to accept major challenges. These are not issues that will be resolved in a single year or a single budget cycle. But state boards are uniquely positioned to take the long

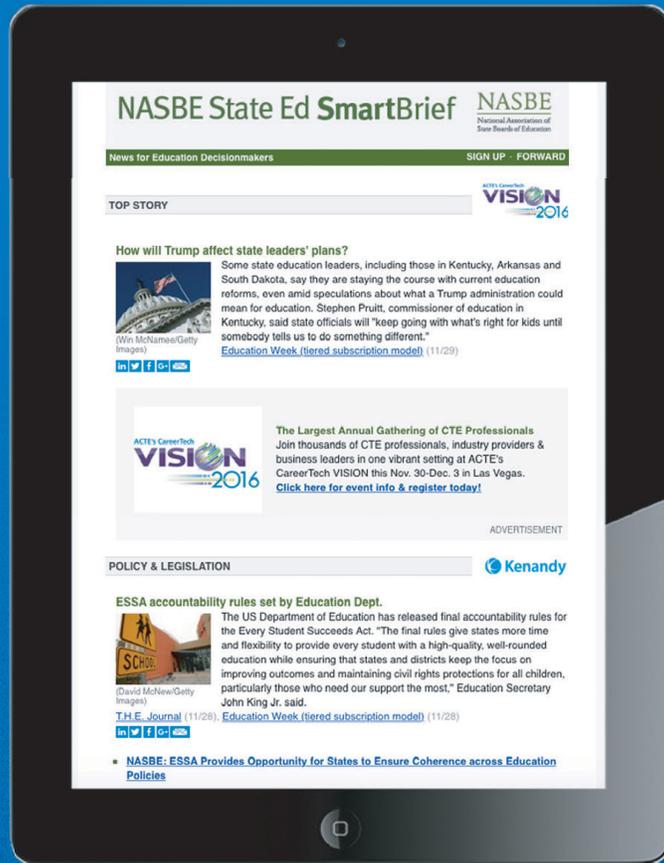
view. Our session on preparing today's students for tomorrow's jobs laid out new research on the skills students will need for tomorrow's workforce. And as Stephen Parker from the National Governors Association pointed out, “Every governor wants to be a jobs governor, but you can't do that unless you are also an education governor.”

**3. Boards cannot do this work alone.**

During the development of state ESSA plans, state boards learned the value of reaching out to stakeholders for insights. Now that the plans are filed, boards can build upon those relationships. When parents, business leaders, teachers, and students all agree on a policy approach, it is more likely to be successful.

**4. “Education is not a partisan issue.** It's the people's issue.” Sen. Isakson, himself a former chair of the Georgia State Board of Education, offered that advice to board members who are addressing tough issues at every meeting. State boards remain one of the only policymaking bodies in the country where members focus less on the politics and more on the policy.

**5. State boards need to keep equity at the heart of everything they do.** Panelists underscored this point in nearly every session. Come up with a list of key equity questions, just as the Washington State Board of Education is doing. Make them part of your strategic plan, as the Mississippi State Board of Education has done. Even write them on your name tags so you will keep them constantly in mind! Then ask those questions as you consider every issue on your agenda. ■



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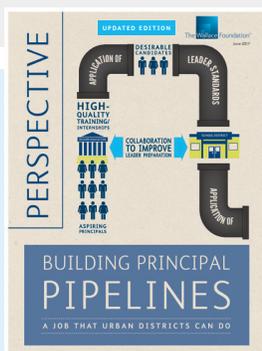
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