



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.¹

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.²

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.

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.³

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.⁴

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.⁵

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.⁶

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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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

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. ■

¹Lisa 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>.

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

³Center 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 quasiexperimental—it compares charters to a control group of students in traditional public schools but without the random assignment required for tier 1 status.

⁴Neerav 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/>.

⁵See, 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).

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

⁷Douglas 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).

⁸Whitney 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).

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

¹⁰Education 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>.

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

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

¹³For 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/essasaergrantguid10212016.pdf>.