

# IMPROVING LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

SUMMARY OF A FORUM

April 2010

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### Introduction

On December 7, 2009, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) held a forum in Washington, D.C. to discuss its five-year study of schools in restructuring under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The forum included four sessions:

1. A synthesis of CEP's research on schools in restructuring under NCLB in six geographically diverse states—California, Georgia, Maryland, Michigan, New York, and Ohio—and in 23 districts and 48 schools within those states
2. A response to CEP's research from the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and a discussion of federal policies for turning around low-performing schools
3. A panel of education leaders from the six states who talked about state and federal policies for turning around low-performing schools
4. A panel of leaders of successfully restructured schools who shared their first-hand experiences with turning around low-performing schools

The forum sought to stimulate conversations about the impact of past federal, state, and local policies and future policies for school improvement at all levels. This document summarizes the presentations and discussions that took place during the forum.

CEP's 2009 report, *Improving Low-Performing Schools: Lessons from Five Years of Studying School Restructuring under No Child Left Behind*, along with the Power Point synthesis delivered at the forum, can be downloaded from CEP's Web site ([www.cep-dc.org](http://www.cep-dc.org)).

### Synthesis of CEP's Research on School Restructuring

Caitlin Scott, a CEP consultant from Portland, Oregon, described key findings and recommendations from CEP's five years of studying schools in NCLB restructuring. This research began in Michigan in the summer and fall of 2004 and gradually expanded to include California, Georgia, Maryland, New York, and Ohio, as well as 23 districts and 48 schools in the six states. More than 260 state officials, local administrators, teachers, and other school staff were interviewed for these studies.

### Findings about Local Strategies

Several common findings about improving low-performing schools emerged from CEP's state research and local case studies of school restructuring:

- No single strategy is guaranteed to improve a struggling school; instead, all of the case study schools that raised achievement enough to exit restructuring used multiple, coordinated strategies, which they revised over time.
- All case study schools that exited restructuring used data frequently to make decisions about instruction and regroup students by skill level.
- Replacing staff helped improve many schools but sometimes had unintended negative consequences.
- Most case study schools that did not exit restructuring used similar strategies to those that did exit, but the schools that did not exit experienced setbacks or needed more time or information.

### Findings about the Impact of NCLB and Related State Policies

CEP's state-level research also revealed common findings about the impact of NCLB and related state policies on state efforts to improve low-performing schools:

- Differences in state accountability systems have led to uneven and sometimes unmanageable numbers of schools in restructuring.
- Federal restructuring strategies have not shown promise, and all six states studied have moved away from these options.
- All six states have begun targeting supports to the most academically needy schools or districts.
- All six states have leveraged additional support for schools in improvement by relying on partnerships with other agencies and organizations.
- All six states have increased their use of needs assessments to diagnose challenges in restructuring schools.
- All six states have increased on-site monitoring or visits to restructuring schools.
- Funding increases for school improvement grants under the Title I program for disadvantaged children may help schools improve.

### Recommendations

CEP offered the following recommendations based on its research on school improvement and NCLB restructuring:

- Federal policymakers should consider raising or waiving the 5% cap on the amount of Title I improvement funds states can reserve for state activities to help schools in improvement, but should allow flexibility in the actions states take to assist schools.
- States should consider using their portion of federal school improvement funds to experiment with promising practices identified in CEP studies.
- Schools and districts should tailor their improvement efforts to individual school needs.

- Local, state, and federal support of schools that exit restructuring should continue for several years afterward.

Local, state, and federal officials should join forces to evaluate improvement strategies.

Additional topics were discussed during a question-and-answer period after Scott's presentation. One of these was the impact on student achievement of out-of-school factors, such as community problems or the myriad challenges faced by low-income families. Although some of the schools studied by CEP had ongoing efforts to improve community and parent involvement, these were not often a major focus of school restructuring, in part because school leaders and staff did not want to be perceived as making excuses for low student achievement.

Another topic focused on the difficulties of replacing staff in restructuring schools plagued by persistent staff shortages. These types of shortages did complicate staff replacement in several, though not all, schools in CEP's studies, in part because restructuring schools were perceived as less appealing places to work than higher-performing schools in the same district. In some districts, closing schools made it easier to restaff the remaining schools.

Another discussion topic dealt with curriculum content—specifically, the need to align classroom curriculum to state content standards and to include content instruction as well as pedagogy in math and science professional development. While CEP's studies show that successful schools focused closely on aligning curriculum to content standards, they also did much more, such as using data for make instructional decisions, increasing professional development and planning time for staff, and providing tutoring and other supports for struggling students.

## ED Response

Judy Wurtzel, deputy assistant secretary for planning, evaluation and policy development at ED, responded to CEP's research and provided information about ED's plans for turning around low-performing schools, funding and revising federal School Improvement Grants, and reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.<sup>1</sup>

Wurtzel emphasized that turning around low-performing schools "should be the core of what we think our mission as educators is." That is why, she said, the Obama Administration has substantially increased funding for federal School Improvement Grants from \$500 million in last school year to \$3.5 billion in this school year.

Wurtzel noted several similarities between CEP's findings and recommendations and ED's thinking on improving low-performing schools. First, she said, ED agrees with CEP's finding that there are uneven and sometimes unmanageable numbers of schools in restructuring and with CEP's recommendation that states should target the bottom performers so as not to overload capacity. For that reason, said Wurtzel, ED is requiring states that receive School Improvement Grants to identify and target extra funds and more intensive interventions on the persistently lowest-performing 5% of schools in NCLB improvement and the lowest-performing 5% of high schools in the state. ED anticipates this will be a much smaller, more manageable number of schools than those currently in restructuring.

Second, Wurtzel noted, ED agrees with CEP that "the current federal restructuring models have not shown as much promise as we would have liked." Unlike CEP, however, ED believes that the current strategies should be replaced with a specific set of intervention models for the lowest-performing schools. ED has responded by revising the requirements for School Improvement Grants and Race to the Top funds under the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA). Schools that receive ARRA School Improvement Grants must choose one of four school turnaround models, which are described in the appendix to this report.

During her presentation and in a question-and-answer period afterward, Wurtzel addressed concerns that ED's models were too prescriptive. She argued that states and districts have not used the flexibility in current federal law and guidance to intervene intensively in very low-performing schools, and that ED's approach would provide an opportunity to test a combination of targeted resources and significant changes in these schools. In addition, she noted, schools that choose to use ED's "restart" and "turnaround" models have significant flexibility in implementation and could also implement any elements of the transformation model that they wanted to. She further emphasized that states would have greater flexibility about how to use School Improvement Grant funding in schools that are identified for improvement but are not in the lowest performance categories.

Third, Wurtzel said, ED agreed with the CEP recommendation that states consider using a portion of their state-level school improvement funds to pursue promising practices for supporting schools in improvement. While she said ED did not have authority to increase or waive the cap on the state set-aside for state-level school improvement activities, "clearly in the ESEA reauthorization we are thinking fundamentally about state capacity and how important it is to strengthen state capacity to carry out this and other reforms."

Fourth, Wurtzel agreed that it will be important to sustain funding to schools in improvement over time, adding that in "an ideal world" she would like to see the grants lengthened to five years. Given current financial capacity, however, this might not be possible, but she said that ED was listening to the views of various groups about the proper duration for School Improvement Grants.

Turning to the reauthorization of ESEA, Wurtzel anticipated that ED would have a reauthorization proposal sometime in the first quarter of 2010. This plan "will definitely build on what's working in No Child Left Behind, and while there's a lot that we hope to improve, we do believe that NCLB got some very important things right," she said.

<sup>1</sup> ED's plans for turning around low-performing schools are laid out in School Improvement Grant applications as well as in the four assurances states must make to receive funding under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. One of these assurances is providing targeted, intensive support and effective interventions to turn around the lowest-performing schools. The others are increasing teacher effectiveness and addressing inequities in the distribution of highly qualified teachers; establishing and using data systems that track students' progress from prekindergarten through college and careers and that foster continuous improvement; and developing and implementing rigorous standards for college and career readiness and high-quality assessments. More information on ED's plans can be found in the appendix to this report.

Wurtzel listed several aspects of NCLB that ED considers successful and will recommend be continued:

- The disaggregation of data by subgroup, which shines a light on the achievement gap and makes very clear that all students deserve to learn to the same standards
- The acknowledgment that adults in a school are ultimately responsible for ensuring that students are learning and that a school needs to change if students aren't learning
- The clear expectation that every child in every school deserves to be taught by a qualified teacher

Wurtzel also listed elements of NCLB that ED will recommend changing:

- A move from the current array of state standards and tests to college- and career-ready standards and more rigorous assessments
- A shift from a focus on absolute test scores toward models that take into account student growth as well as achievement status
- Greater targeting of resources to enable leaders to take steps to achieve the best outcomes for students in schools that are really struggling
- A more carefully considered approach to the role of states and districts and an increase in shared responsibility for school improvement
- Increased flexibility while maintaining accountability for results
- A better approach for identifying and rewarding effective teachers that builds on the work done under NCLB

Wurtzel emphasized that everyone “has a lot to learn about how to improve our lowest-performing schools” and that because “as a nation we have not yet tried in a serious, large-scale way to turnaround our lowest performing schools, we don't have the track record yet on which to build the evidence base.” To help build evidence, ED is asking School Improvement grantees to collect data on what Wurtzel called “leading indicators” of whether schools are effectively implementing

school improvement and are on track toward raising achievement; these will include such measures as student attendance, teacher attendance, and number of instructional minutes. ED will make the data public. “We're really committed to evaluation and to collecting and using data for improvement,” she said, “so I really couldn't agree more with CEP's recommendations about data collection and evaluation.”

When pressed during a question-and-answer session about the evidence supporting the Administration's proposals, Wurtzel said that ED believes that “for the small number of schools it's really essential to do something that has a likelihood—obviously, not a proven likelihood, but a likelihood—of making significant difference.” In a related point about the research base for the model of converting to a charter school, she said that some charter schools have good track records of achievement gains, and that ED is commissioning additional research on charters and turnarounds but that it will be a while until data are available.

## State Panel

Participants on the state panel included the following representatives from five of the states in CEP's studies. A representative from California could not attend due to a scheduling conflict.

### **Linda Forward**

Supervisor of School Improvement Support  
Office of Education, Improvement, and  
Innovation  
Michigan Department of Education

### **Linda Hecker**

AYP and NCLB Consultant for High Priority  
Schools  
Michigan Department of Education

### **Bob Glascock**

Executive Director of the Breakthrough Center  
Maryland State Department of Education

### **Cynthia Lemmerman**

Associate Superintendent for the Center for  
School Improvement  
Ohio Department of Education

**Diane Bradford**

Deputy Superintendent  
Office of Education Support and Improvement  
Georgia Department of Education

**Ira Schwartz**

Coordinator for Accountability, Policy and  
Administration  
New York State Education Department

State panelists were asked two questions:

1. In school year 2009-10, what is your state's primary strategy for improving low-performing schools? This could include newly developed strategies or deepening of past strategies.
2. What is the primary federal policy change you would like to see regarding improving low-performing schools?

**Michigan**

Michigan started with “a smorgasbord approach to school improvement and restructuring and discovered very quickly that that was not making much of an impact,” said Linda Forward, the state's supervisor of school improvement support. The state then moved to a more prescriptive, “sit-down dinner” approach to restructuring, which called on schools to participate in certain state-required activities. While this approach has been successful for many Michigan schools, Forward and Hecker noted, the state is now moving toward a more diagnostic approach. “For instance,” Forward said, “a restructuring building currently gets 100 days of a principal fellowship coach to help with the leadership. More experienced and effective principals might not need that. There might be some others who could benefit from 150 days. So we're trying to figure out something that will be based more diagnostically on the needs of the building.”

Hecker observed that when a school improves enough to exit restructuring, it is very difficult to see which of the various strategies used had the most impact on that improvement. She also pointed out that principal and teacher replacement and mobility have affected state efforts to support schools. “[W]e tell schools you must do this and you must do that that . . . but then we send principals or teachers back to their schools and they're transferred,” she explained.

Forward and Hecker described several changes they would like to see in federal policies for low-performing schools. Hecker said she would like federal assistance to be available to improve schools that do not receive federal Title I funds. She and Forward agreed that federal improvement efforts should strengthen accountability and support at the district level and address what Hecker called “dysfunctional” central offices in some districts with restructuring schools.

Forward also recommended tightening the federal “safe harbor” provision, which allows schools to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) if they decrease by 10% the share of students performing below the proficient level. “Safe harbor can protect some of our lowest-performing schools for a long time, and we'd like to see some changes there at our state level but also nationally,” she said.

**Maryland**

Bob Glascock of Maryland's Breakthrough Center described Maryland's differentiated accountability system, which includes different types of supports depending on whether a school failed to make AYP because of the performance of one or two student subgroups or because of the performance of more subgroups or the “all students” category. The state now concentrates its supports in the lowest-performing schools.

As another major strategy for school improvement, Maryland has created a Breakthrough Center with the help of Mass Insight, a technical assistance provider, and Brown University. One goal of this center is to move the state from compliance monitoring to capacity building. To do this, Glascock said, the state is “streamlining and differentiating services” and better coordinating services provided by different “silos” of the state department of education.

The first step of bringing services to districts, Glascock explained, is to assess the districts' capacity to respond to and sustain reforms in schools identified for improvement. Then, the state develops a partnership agreement that defines the state and district roles in school improvement. Finally, the Breakthrough Center is working to identify policies and conditions throughout the state that need to change to enable principals of low-performing schools to implement and sustain reform efforts.

Glascock discussed two changes at the federal level that would make Maryland's work to improve schools more effective. First, he said he was pleased to hear Wurtzel say ED was moving toward growth models rather than status achievement models to judge school improvement. Second, Maryland would benefit greatly from funding to expand the role of the state in school improvement. "We can't build the capacity of districts if we don't have resources to do that in a collaborative fashion," said Glascock.

### Ohio

Cynthia Lemmerman, associate superintendent for Ohio's Center for School Improvement, explained that the state's primary strategy for improving low-performing schools is the Ohio Improvement Process. In this process, begun in 2007, districts use a decision framework to examine student achievement data and other school and district data and plan school improvement based on this data analysis.

In school year 2009-10, Lemmerman said, the state has added a management monitoring tool that districts can use to better monitor student and school data and to track resource allocation.

Two changes are in the future for Ohio, according to Lemmerman. First, the state is interested in increasing community and parent engagement as well as cross-agency work in support of schools. Second, House Bill 1 in Ohio created a center for educational reform and strategic initiatives, currently in the development stage. This center is expected to work closely with the Ohio Department of Education's Center for School Improvement.

As for federal policy changes, Lemmerman would like to see more funding at the state level to support school and district improvement. Ohio would be in favor of raising or eliminating the 5% cap on the funds states can reserve for this work, she said, because "our schools and our districts need that support."

### Georgia<sup>2</sup>

Georgia's Deputy Superintendent Diane Bradford described her state's approach to improving schools as "very specific." Restructuring schools have to teach the Georgia Performance Standards to students. They have to analyze their data, and, with their Title I funding, they must hire instructional coaches for the academic areas that need improvement. They must also adopt state-created learning frameworks, which give them a curriculum base for what they do. Finally, these schools must create corrective action plans that the state monitors every 45 and 60 days.

The state also offers a number of supports to academically needy schools and their staff. Restructuring schools are assigned a state director who has been hired and trained by the state to assist with restructuring; Bradford referred to these positions as "warriors on the ground."

In addition, the state provides ongoing professional development for 10-member district and school teams for each restructuring school. The professional development begins with a weekend retreat at a remote location; this approach allows the teams time to learn to work together and start planning before the school year begins.

This combination of requirements and supports appeared to be working in Georgia, according to Bradford. "We had 49 state-directed schools this year, [which are] needs improvement year 5 and above," she said. "Fifteen of those schools made AYP for the first time, and I credit that to the state department getting smarter in what we're doing and getting well trained, so we offered the support we needed to offer. Also, 17 of those schools made AYP for the second consecutive year and were removed from NI [needs improvement] status."

### New York

Ira Schwartz, New York's coordinator for accountability, policy and administration, noted that his state's work on improving schools began more than 20 years ago. Over those 20 years, he said, the state identified a number of reasons why schools have low academic achievement. These schools may lack high expectations for students, alignment between the curriculum used in a school and state learning standards, use of

<sup>2</sup> Since the CEP forum was held, the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement has launched an investigation of spring 2009 test administration practices in a large number of Georgia schools.

data to inform decisions and instruction, alignment between professional development and staff needs, instructional leadership, and positive classroom management and student discipline.

New York's newest response to these challenges in schools is its differentiated accountability system. Schwartz explained that in reviewing data on schools with these challenges, the state decided that districts needed "both more and less flexibility." New York now divides the schools in need of improvement into three distinct phases. Schools with fewer challenges, those in the lowest phase, get more flexibility while schools with more challenges have less flexibility. For example, all schools must complete needs assessments, but these assessments are more demanding at each phase. Schools in the first phase participate in a school quality review, which is essentially a self-assessment. Schools in the second phase complete a school curriculum audit. In the third phase, schools are visited by a joint intervention team that evaluates all aspects of the school and makes recommendations.

These assessments allow the state to differentiate the supports schools receive and address the particular challenges at each school "There's that adage that if you have a hammer every problem is a nail," Schwartz said. "Well, in terms of school improvement, what we've found over these 20 years is that some of the problems in schools are nails but some of them are screws. Some of them are clamps. Some of them are pincushions."

### Questions and Discussion

During the question-and-answer session following the state panel, one discussion topic was the need for states to build positive relationships with districts to overcome the mistrust that may carry over from the state's historic role as a compliance monitor. "The thing that I've found that works the best is action," said Maryland's Bob Glascock. "[W]hen they see the state responding to the district's needs, coming forth with an action and following through, then you begin to build the credibility."

## Principals' Panel

Principals of schools in CEP's study that successfully exited restructuring were invited to represent their school in a panel discussion at the forum.<sup>3</sup> Seven principals and one district administrator representing all six states in CEP's restructuring studies participated:

**Barbara Elliot**, Principal  
Hillside Elementary  
Harrison Community Schools  
Harrison, MI

**Alicia R. Hinson**, Principal  
Newman Elementary School  
Mansfield City Public Schools  
Mansfield, OH

**Elizabeth Harris**, Principal  
Long Middle School  
Atlanta Public Schools  
Atlanta, GA

**Christopher Brown**, Principal  
Ralph Reed Middle School  
Central Islip District  
Central Islip, NY

**Marco Franco**, Principal  
Sobrante Park Elementary  
Oakland Unified School District  
Oakland, CA

**Don Lilley**, Principal  
Annapolis High School  
Anne Arundel Public Schools  
Annapolis, MD

**Sean Conley**, Principal  
Morrell Park Elementary/Middle  
Baltimore Public Schools  
Baltimore, MD

**Sharon Davis Williams**, Executive Director  
SRT 1  
Atlanta Public Schools  
Atlanta, GA

<sup>3</sup> Since the CEP forum was held, the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement has launched an investigation of spring 2009 test administration practices in a large number of Georgia schools, including many in Atlanta. While Long Middle School's exit from restructuring has not been disputed, Long was identified as an Atlanta school in which there were 'moderate concerns' about testing procedures. See [www.atlantapublicschools.us/186110215104457543/blank/browse.asp?A=383&BMDRN=2000&BCOB=0&C=55873](http://www.atlantapublicschools.us/186110215104457543/blank/browse.asp?A=383&BMDRN=2000&BCOB=0&C=55873).

Panelists were asked to respond to two questions:

1. What advice do you have for other schools in restructuring?
2. What do you think state and federal government should do to help restructuring schools?

All participants said that turning around their low-performing school had not been easy and was sometimes “painful,” according to Alicia Hinson of Mansfield, Ohio. Christopher Brown, principal of the successful Ralph Reed Middle School in Central Islip, New York, noted that “the best thing I can tell people who are going into restructuring is the first thing to do is take a deep breath and relax.” While each participant described challenges particular to his or her own school, several commonalities emerged from their responses, described below.

### Positive School Climate and Trusting Relationships

Each of the principals said that a positive school climate and trusting relationships were essential to turning around low-performing schools. Many of the schools faced difficult conditions, ranging from poor physical conditions and high-poverty communities to mistrust among staff bred by unsuccessful earlier initiatives or staff replacement policies. The following comments illustrate the importance placed on these factors:

- **Barbara Elliot** (Hillside Elementary, Michigan): “I don’t think any initiative can move forward in an atmosphere of negativity and mistrust, and for us professional learning communities were the key. Our staff actually had to learn how to work with one another. In some cases they had to learn how to talk to one another and look at each other in order to sincerely collaborate about student data, instruction practices, assessment, pacing and so on, and over time people learned to trust one another.”
- **Alicia Hinson** (Newman Elementary, Ohio): “My first objective coming into Mansfield was to build a level of trust because that had not been established within the district for quite a number of years, and [restructuring] certainly caused a great level of mistrust because of the restructuring, re-bidding for the jobs, and reduction in force.”
- **Elizabeth Harris** (Long Middle School, Georgia): “I think that creating a climate and a culture of success and high expectation is one [thing] that is paramount. This is one of the things that I had to do when I arrived at Long Middle School.”
- **Christopher Brown** (Ralph Reed Middle School, New York): “When I came into the building, it had been under restructuring for two years already. The former principal was trying to lead through dictatorship: ‘This is what you will do.’ That doesn’t work. You have to go in and build relationships. That is the only way.”
- **Marco Franco** (Sobrante Park Elementary, California): “I’m not big on mottos or things like that ... [W]hat I do is I go to every classroom every day, so if I was to have one [piece of advice for other principals] it would be that the role of the principal is supporter, enabler.”
- **Don Lilley** (Annapolis High School, Maryland): “In restructuring, you are rebuilding, and the very foundation you will need is your relationships—relationships with your faculty, staff, students, parents, and the community. You will need all of these stakeholders to provide help and support, and you need to take ample time to listen and work with them collaboratively to build a school vision and mission.”
- **Sean Conley** (Morrell Park Elementary/Middle, Maryland): “I care about the culture and climate of this building, the attitude, adults to adults, the adults to the students, the students to each other.”

In several of these schools efforts to build trusting relationships extended to parents and students. “We had to take the school ... into the community centers, recreation centers in the neighborhoods to get input from the parents and buy-in from the parents as to what they could do at home to help those students to be successful,” said Alicia Hinson. In Central Islip, New York, many parents were undocumented immigrants who were suspicious of schools. Said Christopher Brown, “We had to convince [parents] that we were not the government ... We actually went and started a center with my bilingual teachers in which we are helping them with the immigration process and by doing that, we now have them on our side.” Atlanta’s Long Middle School created a student focus group that meets

bimonthly to seek students' input and give them a sense of responsibility, said Elizabeth Harris.

### Data-Based Decision Making

More than half of the principals discussed the importance of making decisions based on data, including decisions about classroom instruction, tutoring for struggling students, and other non-academic areas such as staffing and scheduling. For example, Sean Conley of Baltimore explained that using data for planning was very important in his school: "We collected a whole lot of [data], and I just really felt that we would have turned teachers off if all we did was collect it. So when I went to a team meeting I told everyone that I needed to see [that] we're working with the teachers on what to teach or how to teach it; we're working on data, student writing, test scores, whatever. And then what are we going to do with that information? How are we going to provide instruction to the deficiencies of these students?"

### Targeted Interventions for Struggling Students

More than half of the principals mentioned that their schools had emphasized interventions for struggling students, such as extra academic classes in lieu of electives or before- and after-school tutoring programs. Marco Franco described the interventions for English language learners in Sobrante Park Elementary: "We have a level English Language Development program at the beginning of the school day for the first 35 minutes. We do frontloading on the core curriculum in the classroom. Kids go to different classrooms, whatever their levels are. Then, we assess those [students] regularly as well, and as they move up to the next level, then they move to a different group."

### Celebrating Early, Small Successes

More than half of participants spoke to the importance of celebrating small successes as a key to improving staff morale. For example, said Alicia Hinson of Newman Elementary, "We celebrate small successes, [no matter] how little they are, or how big they are. I don't tend to take any credit for the success of the students simply because I want the teachers and the staff members to feel more valued in their profession, in their hard work that they've been doing on a daily basis."

### Teacher-Led Professional Development and Collaboration

Professional learning communities and other forms of professional development and collaboration were mentioned as important elements for success in more than half the schools represented on the panel. Often the activities were led by teachers and supported by principals. Ralph Read Middle School has a school literacy team created by the teachers, said Christopher Brown. "They asked if they could do it, and I said, 'Yes, on one condition, that I do not run it. I will support you. I will do what I can for you, but I will not run it.' So it became a teacher-led program. We have 15 teachers on it right now—it originally was 12 and it keeps growing—that started literacy programs throughout the building."

### State and Federal Assistance

Not all participants discussed what they thought state and federal government should do to help restructuring schools. Of those who did address this topic, all appreciated state and federal funding for school improvement and wanted this funding maintained or increased. "I feel very strongly that lasting and effectual school improvement needs reliable state and local governance structures conducive for strong accountability to improve teaching and learning," said Atlanta's Sharon Davis Williams. Don Lilley of Annapolis High School agreed, noting that "the commitment of financial and other government sources is also essential to success, these being most difficult in this latest economic downturn. Programs require funding. A realistic budget and wholehearted support makes all the difference."

Several of the principals wanted continued state visits to their schools, such as audits or needs assessments. "It would help if there were more visits like audits from state and federal government, where they could talk with teachers about the [improvement] plan and what these strategies and activities actually look like in their classroom," said Barbara Elliot of Hillside Elementary. "A lot of times these people talk to us as principals or as the superintendent, but what they really need to do is talk with the teachers about their classroom. I think these visits would reinforce the process of researched-based practice, and I also feel that teachers would put more importance on the content of the school improvement plan rather than just trying to get the best scores."

### Critical Role of the Principal

More than one of the principals spoke to the critical role of effective leadership in school reform. “It is almost impossible to really move schools that are not performing without an effective leader that knows instruction,” said Sharon Davis Williams of Atlanta. A large part of leadership, according to Sean Conley of Baltimore, is setting clear expectations— “this is what we’re going to do and this is how we’re going to do it.” He explained that “if you’re going to do balanced literacy or guided reading groups or shared reading or anything like that, you’d better make sure that you’re working with your teachers on what does that really look like.”

Marco Franco from Oakland, California, also saw the principal’s role as important, but confessed he has a problem with the concept of instructional leader: “I have no idea what it is. I have this vision in my head of this poor soul trying to rally the troops, toilet paper stuck to the shoe, running and everybody staying behind laughing, keeps me up at night. I’m a manager. I make sure things get done.”

### Other Advice

The principals on the panel made additional points that could be useful to other schools in improvement or restructuring.

More than one of the principals emphasized that schools alone cannot do the work of restructuring or sustain improvement. Atlanta, said Sharon Davis Williams, has recognized that “you have to reform from the school and the system level; we call it reforming from the classroom to the boardroom—and I would go even further now and say from the classroom to the state boardroom.”

A few of the principals noted that there is no single, simple formula for improving schools. “I don’t think we can rely on a canned program to raise academic achievement or to ensure that teachers are using best practice instructional strategies,” said Barbara Elliott of Hillside Elementary in Michigan. She emphasized that change must be systemic and cautioned that focusing too much on test scores can lead teacher to rely too much on teaching to the test instead of using sound instructional practices. Don Lilley of Annapolis, Maryland, advised schools to “accept that solutions may come from unusual sources and remain open to all kinds of changes. Be patient and unwavering; change is a slow process.”

### Questions and Discussion

In a question-and-answer session after the panel, several topics were addressed in depth, with more than half of the principals joining in the discussion. First, principals were asked to describe their relationships with their contacts in their state departments of education. Principals’ responses varied a great deal. Marco Franco of Sobrante Park in California said that he did not have direct contact with anyone in California’s department of education. In contrast, Christopher Brown of Ralph Reed Middle School in New York said, “My relationship with the state was very good. Luckily, the man that I worked with had the same vision as I did, and it was very, very cooperative. He gave me an opportunity to fix many of the issues that he saw, so I was very, very pleased with it. I’ve actually kept in contact with him. Now when I’m at a loss or something, I’ll give him a call or an email. So, I was lucky.”

Principals were also asked how much autonomy they had in budgeting and general decision making at the school. More than half of the principals responded to this question, and all said they had a great deal of autonomy. The principals added, however, that they were also held accountable for their decisions and that their decisions had to be based on school data and on school and district goals. For example, explained Alicia Hinson of Newman Elementary in Ohio, “I think in Mansfield City School District, we—the principals—have been given the autonomy to provide meaningful instructional leadership around the district and school’s OIP [Ohio Improvement Process], as long as what we’re doing aligns with the district and state goals.”

Having autonomy was important to these principals. Barbara Elliot of Hillside Elementary in Michigan stressed the importance of school-level decision making: “If you as a whole building look at your data, come up with your areas of need and make a school improvement plan ... and then someone comes in and tells you what to do, then everybody gives up.”

Passing on their expertise to other principals was also important to participants. More than half of the principals discussed their participation in mentoring and professional development for new principals. “If you’re an aspiring principal, you have to have someone willing to talk to you, willing to answer your call,” said Sean Conley of Morrell Park in Maryland. “If you have a question at 10:00 at night, you have to have some-

where to go to get an answer or to get that support. So, I just think it's very important that we all take somebody underneath our wings, like one person per year, so that we build this pool of effective principals.”

## Conclusion

As CEP's long-term studies of NCLB restructuring have found, and as the forum presentations and discussion have made clear, there is no single or simple strategy that is certain to improve low-performing schools. Rather, restructuring is a complex process that works best with multiple strategies tailored to individual school needs.

Attention to low-performing schools is likely to continue and intensify in light of the additional funding made available for School Improvement Grants, the Obama Administration's new models for turning around schools, and the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The advice that emerged from this forum, as well as the findings of CEP's restructuring studies, should help guide future efforts to improve low-performing schools. Still, there is much more to be learned about effective strategies. As schools, states, and the federal government move forward in this important work to improve the lowest-performing schools, CEP hopes to continue to track the impact of federal policy at the state and local level.

## Appendix: School Improvement Models

Source: U.S. Department of Education, School Improvement Grant Application, with reformatting (i.e., bold and italics) for clarity by the Center on Education Policy.

### Turnaround Model

A turnaround model is one in which an LEA **must**—

1. Replace the principal and grant the principal sufficient operational flexibility (including in staffing, calendars/time, and budgeting) to implement fully a comprehensive approach in order to substantially improve student achievement outcomes and increase high school graduation rates;
2. Using locally adopted competencies to measure the effectiveness of staff who can work within the turnaround environment to meet the needs of students,
  - A. Screen all existing staff and rehire no more than 50 percent; and
  - B. Select new staff;
3. Implement such strategies as financial incentives, increased opportunities for promotion and career growth, and more flexible work conditions that are designed to recruit, place, and retain staff with the skills necessary to meet the needs of the students in the turnaround school;
4. Provide staff ongoing, high-quality, job-embedded professional development that is aligned with the school's comprehensive instructional program and designed with school staff to ensure that they are equipped to facilitate effective teaching and learning and have the capacity to successfully implement school reform strategies;
5. Adopt a new governance structure, which may include, but is not limited to, requiring the school to report to a new "turnaround office" in the LEA or SEA, hire a "turnaround leader" who reports directly to the Superintendent or Chief Academic Officer, or enter into a multi-year contract with the LEA or SEA to obtain added flexibility in exchange for greater accountability;
6. Use data to identify and implement an instructional program that is research-based and vertically aligned from one grade to the next as well as aligned with State academic standards;
7. Promote the continuous use of student data (such as from formative, interim, and summative assessments) to inform and differentiate instruction in order to meet the academic needs of individual students;
8. Establish schedules and implement strategies that provide increased learning time (as defined in this notice); and
9. Provide appropriate social-emotional and community-oriented services and supports for students.

A turnaround model *may* also implement other strategies such as—

1. Any of the required and permissible activities under the transformation model; or
2. A new school model (e.g., themed, dual language academy).

### Restart Model

A restart model is one in which an LEA converts a school or closes and reopens a school under a charter school operator, a charter management organization (CMO), or an education management organization (EMO) that has been selected through a rigorous review process. (A CMO is a non-profit organization that operates or manages charter schools by centralizing or sharing certain functions and resources among schools. An EMO is a for-profit or non-profit organization that provides “whole-school operation” services to an LEA.) A restart model must enroll, within the grades it serves, any former student who wishes to attend the school.

### School Closure

School closure occurs when an LEA closes a school and enrolls the students who attended that school in other schools in the LEA that are higher achieving. These other schools should be within reasonable proximity to the closed school and may include, but are not limited to, charter schools or new schools for which achievement data are not yet available.

### Transformation Model

A transformation model is one in which an LEA implements each of the following strategies:

#### Developing and increasing teacher and school leader effectiveness

*Required activities.* The LEA **must**—

1. Replace the principal who led the school prior to commencement of the transformation model;
2. Use rigorous, transparent, and equitable evaluation systems for teachers and principals that—
  - A. Take into account data on student growth (as defined in this notice) as a significant factor as well as other factors such as multiple observation-based assessments of performance and ongoing collections of professional practice reflective of student achievement and increased high school graduations rates; and
  - B. Are designed and developed with teacher and principal involvement;
3. Identify and reward school leaders, teachers, and other staff who, in implementing this model, have increased student achievement and high school graduation rates and identify and remove those who, after ample opportunities have been provided for them to improve their professional practice, have not done so;
4. Provide staff ongoing, high-quality, job-embedded professional development (e.g., regarding subject-specific pedagogy, instruction that reflects a deeper understanding of the community served by the school, or differentiated instruction) that is aligned with the school’s comprehensive instructional program and designed with school staff to ensure they are equipped to facilitate effective teaching and learning and have the capacity to successfully implement school reform strategies; and
5. Implement such strategies as financial incentives, increased opportunities for promotion and career growth, and more flexible work conditions that are designed to recruit, place, and retain staff with the skills necessary to meet the needs of the students in a transformation school.

*Permissible activities.* An LEA **may** also implement other strategies to develop teachers’ and school leaders’ effectiveness, such as—

1. Providing additional compensation to attract and retain staff with the skills necessary to meet the needs of the students in a transformation school;

2. Instituting a system for measuring changes in instructional practices resulting from professional development; or
3. Ensuring that the school is not required to accept a teacher without the mutual consent of the teacher and principal, regardless of the teacher's seniority.

### Comprehensive instructional reform strategies

*Required activities.* The LEA **must**—

1. Use data to identify and implement an instructional program that is research-based and vertically aligned from one grade to the next as well as aligned with State academic standards; and
2. Promote the continuous use of student data (such as from formative, interim, and summative assessments) to inform and differentiate instruction in order to meet the academic needs of individual students.

*Permissible activities.* An LEA **may** also implement comprehensive instructional reform strategies, such as—

1. Conducting periodic reviews to ensure that the curriculum is being implemented with fidelity, is having the intended impact on student achievement, and is modified if ineffective;
2. Implementing a schoolwide “response-to-intervention” model;
3. Providing additional supports and professional development to teachers and principals in order to implement effective strategies to support students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment and to ensure that limited English proficient students acquire language skills to master academic content;
4. Using and integrating technology-based supports and interventions as part of the instructional program; and
5. In secondary schools—
  - A. Increasing rigor by offering opportunities for students to enroll in advanced coursework (such as Advanced Placement; International Baccalaureate; or science, technology, engineering, and mathematics courses, especially those that incorporate rigorous and relevant project-, inquiry-, or design-based contextual learning opportunities), early-college high schools, dual enrollment programs, or thematic learning academies that prepare students for college and careers, including by providing appropriate supports designed to ensure that low-achieving students can take advantage of these programs and coursework;
  - B. Improving student transition from middle to high school through summer transition programs or freshman academies;
  - C. Increasing graduation rates through, for example, credit-recovery programs, re-engagement strategies, smaller learning communities, competency-based instruction and performance-based assessments, and acceleration of basic reading and mathematics skills; or
  - D. Establishing early-warning systems to identify students who may be at risk of failing to achieve to high standards or graduate.

## Increasing learning time and creating community-oriented schools

Required activities. The LEA **must**—

1. Establish schedules and strategies that provide increased learning time (as defined in this notice); and
2. Provide ongoing mechanisms for family and community engagement.

Permissible activities. An LEA **may** also implement other strategies that extend learning time and create community-oriented schools, such as—

1. Partnering with parents and parent organizations, faith- and community-based organizations, health clinics, other State or local agencies, and others to create safe school environments that meet students' social, emotional, and health needs;
2. Extending or restructuring the school day so as to add time for such strategies as advisory periods that build relationships between students, faculty, and other school staff;
3. Implementing approaches to improve school climate and discipline, such as implementing a system of positive behavioral supports or taking steps to eliminate bullying and student harassment; or
4. Expanding the school program to offer full-day kindergarten or pre-kindergarten.

## Providing operational flexibility and sustained support

Required activities. The LEA **must**—

1. Give the school sufficient operational flexibility (such as staffing, calendars/time, and budgeting) to implement fully a comprehensive approach to substantially improve student achievement outcomes and increase high school graduation rates; and
2. Ensure that the school receives ongoing, intensive technical assistance and related support from the LEA, the SEA, or a designated external lead partner organization (such as a school turnaround organization or an EMO).

Permissible activities. The LEA **may** also implement other strategies for providing operational flexibility and intensive support, such as—

1. Allowing the school to be run under a new governance arrangement, such as a turnaround division within the LEA or SEA; or
2. Implementing a per-pupil school-based budget formula that is weighted based on student needs.

## Credits and Acknowledgments

This forum summary was written by Caitlin Scott, a CEP consultant, and edited by Nancy Kober, a CEP consultant. Consultants Caitlin Scott, Elizabeth Duffrin, Maureen Kelleher, and Brenda Neuman-Sheldon conducted CEP's earlier studies of schools in restructuring and participated in the forum. Jack Jennings, CEP's president and CEO, and Diane Stark Rentner, CEP's director of national programs, provided advice and assistance.

CEP would like to thank all of the forum participants for their thoughtful comments on improving low-performing schools and for their assistance over the multiple years of CEP's studies of school restructuring. Our reports on NCLB restructuring in California, Georgia, Maryland, Michigan, New York, and Ohio would not have been possible without the assistance of these individuals and of their colleagues.

We are also grateful to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which supported this project, and to the George Gund Foundation and the Phi Delta Kappa International Foundation, which provide general support to the Center. The statements made and the views expressed in this report are solely the responsibility of the Center on Education Policy.

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