Lessons Learned From Five States Over Five Years

By Jack Jennings, Caitlin Scott, & Nancy Kober

Soon the Obama administration and Congress will face political battles over revising the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Debate over the law's provisions for improving failing schools may prove especially heated. We owe it to students and educators, however, to cut through the politics and learn from schools, districts, and states that have already implemented such policies. Those with experience "restructuring" the nation's lowest-performing schools may offer particular insight.

Today, nearly 10 percent of all public schools are in restructuring — the ultimate sanction under NCLB — because they've fallen short of test-score targets for six or more years. Under federal law, these schools have five options: replacing all or most of the staff; contracting with an outside organization to operate the school; becoming a charter school; turning the school over to the state; or undertaking any other major restructuring of the school's governance.

For the past five years, the Washington-based Center on Education Policy has studied the strengths and weaknesses of this approach to school improvement. During this time, our study grew to encompass 19 districts and 42 schools in five states: California, Georgia, Maryland, Michigan, and Ohio. We visited schools, analyzed performance data, and conducted interviews with state officials, district and school administrators, and teachers. The results offer important lessons to policymakers as they revise NCLB, and to states as they review efforts to help low-performing schools.

Our first finding was that no single reform guarantees success. The "any other major restructuring" option was by far the most common choice in the states we studied. Some policymakers believe this option is an ineffective loophole or cop-out. Others think it's the only effective choice because it allows schools to tailor reforms to their needs.

Both opinions are probably wrong.
According to our analysis of test results in the five states, none of the five federal restructuring options was statistically more effective than another in helping schools make adequate yearly progress, or AYP.

In schools that raised student achievement enough to exit restructuring, district and school staff members reported using multiple, coordinated restructuring strategies over many years. These strategies had been carefully chosen to address the schools' particular needs. Some were official NCLB strategies; others were not.

Michigan's Willow Run Middle School, in Ypsilanti, is an example of a school that used multiple reforms. After a yearlong planning process, its leaders rehired only those staff members who agreed to carry out its new mission, and then filled vacancies with new employees. It also changed its curriculum, instituted small learning communities, organized teachers to work in teams, and created benchmark assessments in core subjects.

Willow Run didn't stop there. The school revised its daily schedule to allow more time for interventions for struggling students, began a technology initiative, created a school leadership committee that took on many of the principal's traditional tasks, and hired a consultant to coordinate the new reforms. This breathtaking array of strategies paid off: Willow Run exited restructuring based on 2006-07 testing.

The lesson for states, districts, and schools is that hope should not be pinned on a single restructuring plan. Each of the five federal options can succeed, especially when combined with additional effective strategies. But each can also fail.

While there is no guarantee of success, our 42 case-study schools used some common strategies, in addition to their "official" No Child Left Behind restructuring options, to raise achievement. Many educators told us that these additional strategies were as important as, or more important than, the federal options in influencing their schools' improvement.

Teachers and administrators in each school reported that they had increased their use of students' test results and other data when making instructional decisions, to determine which skills had not been learned, how to group students, and which students needed extra help, among other applications.

A majority of the schools provided tutoring to struggling students. For example, Sobrante Park Elementary School in Oakland, Calif., which exited restructuring in 2006-07, pushed back its starting time to allow teachers to work for an hour in small groups with their neediest students.

Most of the schools also employed some type of instructional or leadership coach. At Hillside Elementary in Harrison, Mich., staff members attributed much of the school's improvement to their coach, who helped them develop professional learning communities. Hillside exited restructuring in 2005–06.
Another NCLB option — replacing staff — proved problematic for some of the case-study schools. After trying to restaff, one Oakland, Calif., school started the year with substitutes in several unfilled positions. Schools in Detroit spent so much time over the summer in hiring personnel that they had little or no time to plan for the new school year and got off to a rocky start.

Likewise, some union regulations compromised otherwise-successful restaffing efforts. In Mansfield, Ohio, for example, teachers bid for open positions in order of seniority, as required by contract. But in the restructuring schools, this put some low-seniority teachers into positions for which they were not highly qualified.

Similarly, union contracts had unanticipated effects in Detroit. Several schools restructured by hiring younger (and presumably more energetic) teachers with less seniority. But these new hires were among the first to be let go when districtwide layoffs were necessary.

Restaffing was most effective in schools with large pools of applicants and plans or visions for reform that helped them overcome reputations for failure. In addition, teachers' unions in these schools assisted in resolving stumbling blocks in contracts, and the schools had hiring systems that did not rely on principals alone to recruit and interview applicants.

Unfortunately, good news doesn't always last. In all of the schools we studied that improved enough to exit restructuring, staff members expressed concern about maintaining gains and continuing to make AYP. Often a successful school lost the extra funding and other resources it had received when it had not done well. In several schools, fears about preserving gains were realized: After exiting restructuring and losing some supports, the schools' test scores slipped.

Helping a failing school does not inoculate it from future problems. Many restructured schools will continue to need extra resources and attention to sustain their progress.

While the five states we studied offered different types of support to struggling schools, that support and the role the state played were crucial. Some states placed restrictions on the restructuring strategies schools could undertake. Maryland, for example, decided that "turnaround specialists" could not count as a school's "any other" restructuring strategy. Michigan and Georgia closely defined what schools could do to restructure, regardless of their federal strategies. Ohio and California focused their support on districts as a way of helping low-performing schools. And all five states sponsored extra professional development or technical assistance for school restructuring.

Whatever the specific form of assistance, states play a crucial role in improving struggling schools. Specifically, states can provide:

- Guidance on multiple, state-specific strategies for school improvement that research has found to be effective;
Funding and technical assistance to help districts and schools implement restructuring wisely;

- Special supports aimed at schools that are chronically low-performing or have recently exited restructuring; and

- Monitoring, whether it's done directly by the state or by regional agencies and organizations overseen by the state. Monitoring ensures that schools actually implement their restructuring plans and helps educators learn more about what works in restructuring and what doesn't.

The nation is engaged in a great experiment to improve schools that have been struggling for years. Much remains to be discovered about how to help them. But policymakers and educators can take positive steps now, by implementing lessons learned and examining the experiences of real schools — rather than jumping to theoretical or politically motivated conclusions about what should work.

*Jack Jennings is the president and chief executive officer of the Center on Education Policy, in Washington. Caitlin Scott and Nancy Kober are consultants to the center.*

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