May 27, 2008

Dear Chancellor Rhee, Superintendent Gist, and Chairman Bobb:

The Center on Education Policy applauds your desire to improve the 26 D.C. schools in restructuring under the No Child Left Behind Act. We hope that your focus on these schools brings them the attention and resources they need to help students succeed. We are writing to offer some advice as you undertake this effort.

The Center on Education Policy, an independent non-profit advocacy and research organization, has been reporting on the implementation of NCLB since its inception with particular focus on schools in restructuring in California, Maryland, and Michigan. In addition, we will be releasing this summer studies of schools in restructuring in Georgia and Ohio as well as a report that reviews the findings of our restructuring studies across all five states.

The findings we are sharing come from examining data related to restructuring in those five states as well as detailed case studies of 19 districts and 42 restructuring schools within those districts. In this work, we have learned five key lessons.

- **No single restructuring option has been a foolproof way for schools to meet adequate yearly progress targets; instead, successful schools use multiple strategies tailored to schools’ needs.** Our statistical analysis of state testing data in California, Georgia, Maryland, Michigan, and Ohio showed that no federally required restructuring was associated with a greater likelihood of a school making adequate yearly progress on state tests. This runs counter to much of today’s conventional wisdom, such as the notion that replacing staff is more effective than the so-called “any-other” option. In addition, our interviews with district and school staff in restructuring schools that successfully met all state targets showed that these schools engaged in multiple restructuring strategies over a number of years. These strategies were carefully chosen by the staff to address the school’s particular needs.

For example, Willow Run Middle School in Michigan engaged in a year-long planning process, rehired staff who agreed to carry out the school’s newly developed mission as well as hiring some new staff, changed the curriculum, instituted small learning communities, organized the teachers to work in teams, created benchmark assessments in core subjects, revised the 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 tasks
traditionally carried out by the principal, and hired a consultant to coordinate all
the new reforms. The school exited restructuring based on 2006-07 testing.

D.C. schools are likely to also need multiple strategies that take each school’s
particular context into account, and all involved in these decisions should be
careful not to insist on one exclusive way to improve all these schools.

- **Replacing staff can have unintended negative consequences even though this
strategy is sometimes useful in combination with additional strategies.** In our
case study schools, some principals reported being simply unable to re-staff their
restructuring schools with qualified teachers. One Oakland, California school
tried to re-staff but started the year with substitutes in several unfilled positions.
Others in Detroit, Michigan spent so much time over the summer hiring staff that
they had little or no time to plan for the new school year and, therefore, got off to
a rocky start. The threat of yearly re-staffing in Maryland restructuring schools
resulted in many veteran teachers jockeying to transfer to more successful
schools, increasing the turnover of qualified staff.

Finally, union regulations at times compromised successful re-staffing. In
Mansfield, Ohio, teachers bid for open positions in order of seniority as required
by contract. In restructuring schools, this put some low-seniority teachers into
positions for which they were not highly qualified. Also, layoffs due to declining
enrollment adversely effected restructuring schools in Detroit. These schools had
restructured by hiring younger (and they believed more energetic) teachers who
had less seniority with the union. These new hires were among the first to be let
go when district-wide layoffs were necessary.

Schools that did successfully replace staff typically had a number of things in
common. Most were in areas of stable or declining student enrollment where there
were no teacher and principal shortages, so that the pool of applicants was
substantial. Most had a plan or vision for the school that was widely publicized in
the community and that allowed the school to overcome its past reputation as a
“failing school” and attract enthusiastic, highly-qualified applicants. Most districts
negotiated with the union to resolve stumbling blocks in the contract. Finally,
most of these successful districts had an effective hiring system in place and did
not rely on principals alone to recruit and interview applicants.

As D.C. restructuring schools replace staff, they would do well to consider the
lessons from our case study schools—both the successes and failures.

- **Schools and districts tend to find strategies beyond the federal mandates
more useful in helping schools improve.** The majority of district and school
officials in our case studies said their official federal restructuring strategy was
not their primary strategy for improvement. Additional strategies varied based on
school needs, but officials in all 42 schools said their schools relied heavily on using data. This data use typically included using diagnostic assessments to group students based on their needs and using ongoing assessments to regroup students frequently, to determine which students needed re-teaching, and to create additional instructional time before or after school based on students’ assessed needs.

Officials at almost all schools also said staff development and collaboration were essential elements of their reform effort. Many schools instituted joint planning and professional development time for teacher teams by grade level or subject matter. Many schools also employed coaches to work with these teams and with individuals to improve classroom instruction.

 Officials in several schools and districts also emphasized the need to do something very visible early in the school year to signal to staff, students, and community that the school was really changing. For example, Brownell Elementary in Flint, Michigan opened a new library which organized books by reading level so that teachers and students could easily find books at the appropriate skill levels. Sobrante Park in Oakland reopened a media center with enough computers to accommodate most classrooms. Many mentioned cleaning up or repairing the school building. Some renamed their schools. Although some of these strategies are not directly related to student achievement, officials said they were important in improving staff, student, and community morale.

While D.C. restructuring schools must, of course, fulfill federal restructuring requirements, they could also learn from these strategies valued by our case study schools.

- **Factors outside the control of schools and districts can hamper reform efforts.** District and school officials in our case studies were quick to say they did not want to “make excuses” for their students’ low academic performance; however, many said that factors outside the school’s control got in the way of student learning. In Michigan, for example, most district officials said that the state’s declining population and finances were detrimental to school improvement. Several schools did not have the financial means to implement all the reforms they felt were necessary to improve achievement, particularly since some restructuring schools had often experienced years of financial mismanagement and neglect. In California, several district officials noted the challenges of trying to emphasize academics when students had no supervision to do homework after school, were influenced by gangs, and faced other problems often found in low-income communities. A few California district officials also mentioned problems with basic city services such as community policing and trash pick up.
Given these potential barriers to restructuring, the D.C. Public Schools would be wise to court the cooperation and active support of other community, civic, and governmental agencies in D.C.

- **Schools that exit restructuring need continued support.** When schools exit restructuring, many of the supports that helped them succeed may be taken away. For example, schools that exit are no longer required to offer supplemental educational services or to spend specific amounts of Title I funds on professional development. They are also sometimes no longer eligible for additional school improvement funds or special technical assistance from the district and the state. But, taking supports away prematurely could create a revolving door of schools that improve and then continually fail when supports are removed. Educators in our case study schools that have exited restructuring typically express concerns about how the school will maintain student achievement without these supports. Some in schools that fought their way out of restructuring now find themselves reentering school improvement.

Similarly to schools nationwide, restructuring schools in D.C. are likely to need continued supports to maintain student achievement after exiting restructuring.

In sharing the findings of our research, the Center on Education Policy hopes to increase the likelihood of successful school restructuring in D.C. Our research across the nation shows that even with the best intentions, restructuring is a difficult and sometimes painful process. For the sake of the city’s children and communities, restructuring and school improvement are paramount. We again applaud you for taking on this extremely difficult and extremely important challenge. All of our school restructuring reports are posted on our web site at www.cep-dc.org. If you need more information, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Jack Jennings
President and CEO