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Turning Around the Lowest Performing Schools: A Noble Goal and a Daunting Challenge

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The Center on Education Policy has received dozens of calls from the news media about the Obama administration's effort to improve the schools that rank among lowest-achieving 5 percent of schools in each state. This year, most of those schools in every state received substantial federal School Improvement Grants, often a million dollars over three years, with the expectation that they will be "turned around" or made into much better schools.

Even with that much money, improving these schools will be a tall order. These schools generally enroll students from very poor families, have hard-working but dispirited teachers, have safety problems, and as a result, have had unacceptably low test scores and graduation rates for years.

President Obama stated his purpose in proposing this initiative when he spoke in early March at Miami Central High School in Florida:

Here's what I say. I say I am not willing to give up on any child in America. I say I'm not willing to give up on any school in America. I do not accept failure here in America. I believe the status quo is unacceptable; it is time to change it. And it's time we came together to lift up all of our schools and to prepare students for a 21st century economy. To give every child in America a chance to make the most of their God-given potential.

A noble sentiment, but unfortunately easier said than done.

At Miami Central, the president appeared with former Florida governor Jeb Bush, and both of them touted that school for having been "turned around" because its test scores had improved so much. In fact, there has been improvement. In 2001, only 5 percent of the school's students scored proficient on the state reading test; by 2010, that had grown

to 12 percent. To be sure, it's a big jump. Nevertheless, the other 88 percent of students are less than proficient in reading. In math, the picture is somewhat better: 42 percent are not proficient.

I hope other schools will be able to do at least as well as -- or much better than -- Miami Central. The children in the lowest-achieving schools today are not being adequately educated or prepared for further education after high school -- if they make it that far -- or for decent jobs. So, this extra attention and jolt of funding should make these schools better, at least in the short term. But, sustaining these improvements over the long term is a more difficult task.

For five years, the Center on Education Policy followed efforts in six states to improve schools repeatedly missing state test targets under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). We focused on 48 schools that had to be "restructured" under NCLB, the last phase of consequences for schools not sufficiently raising their test scores. The experiences of those schools helped to shape Obama's latest turnaround program. (Read [CEP's school restructuring reports](#).)

Our research showed that many of these schools could be improved, but no cookie cutter improvement model existed. Each successful school assessed its own needs, fashioned a multi-faceted effort to improve, and made adjustments as the plan unfolded. Often, these schools also needed to replace some teachers but succeeded only if the right conditions existed, such as an adequate supply of qualified teachers. We also found that once success was achieved, often after years of work, it took continued assistance to keep successful schools from slipping back.

A troubling finding was that many schools did all the same things as schools that improved but did not have the same success. Sometimes, teachers had left, or funding was cut, or there simply was not time to work through all the problems. Our research also found that successful schools sometimes lost ground. When test scores dropped, these schools were again labeled as needing improvement.

Thus, we believe that Obama's initiative to improve schools will achieve some success. It will not, however, turn many inner-city schools into high-scoring suburban-like schools. We also believe that some of these schools will not show much success, or that if they do, they may lapse after the special grants are gone.

The sad truth is that our nation has not made a strong enough effort to improve the lowest-achieving schools, and very little research definitively reveals what works for these schools. Obama's initiative gives us a chance to help those schools. But in a broader sense, it affords us the opportunity to closely study why some of those schools will do well and why some won't. What we learn can then be used to help other schools.

The president is to be commended for taking on a hard challenge. But let's be sure that we learn as much as we can from tackling one of the most complex and daunting problems in education.

(Read [CEP's school restructuring reports.](#))