

“School Turnarounds and School Improvement for the ESEA
Reauthorization: Focusing on What Works”*

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Thank you, Reggie. ***

Introduction and Background

While the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization has been delayed more than four years already, and reauthorization does not seem likely this year, a justification on Capitol Hill has been that it is more important to “get it right” than to do it quickly. One of the most critical areas in which Congress needs to “get it right” goes to the heart of the purpose of Title I: offering a high quality education to all children, especially disadvantaged and minority children. Specifically, Congress needs to “get it right” in determining how the federal government can best help low-achieving schools improve.

Since the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) became law ten years ago, we not only have much stronger evidence that it is possible to turn around low-achieving schools, but we also know that there are common strategies and practices that successful school turnarounds typically adopt.

a. Key Research and Testimony

A profoundly important work on this subject is the 2010 book by Anthony Bryk, *et al.*, Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago. It studied more than 200 low income schools in Chicago over 7 years, with massive amounts of detailed data on comprehensive factors affecting schooling. It separated those schools which stagnated from those that improved and examined to what extent various factors were present in schools that did well versus those that did not.

Bryk *et al.* concluded that schools that improved showed a number of common strategies, which the researchers grouped into “five essential supports.” They found that it was very important for a school to engage in all five. Specifically, they found that “a sustained weakness in any one of [the five essential supports] undermined virtually all attempts at improving student learning.”

Taking a very different research approach than the intensely data-based, statistical and scientific approach by Bryk, Karin Chenoweth did in-depth, on-site inspections, interviews, and data collection on 16 disparate schools nationwide - urban, rural and suburban, that served many poor and minority students - where the students had unexpectedly high student achievement. She reported in each chapter what each school had done to succeed.

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Chenoweth found that “all [these schools] share ...some characteristics.” Moreover, when you look at the characteristics she found were shared and those found by Bryk, they overlap to a great extent. Her book is: [It’s Being Done: Academic Success in Unexpected Schools](#) (2007).

Further, the House education committee itself, on May 19, 2010, held a particularly significant hearing on this very subject, “Research and Best Practices on Successful School Turnarounds,” 111th Congress, Serial No. 111-63, <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/congress/house/education/index.html>, “111th Congress , Serial No. 111-63”. The committee had witnesses selected by the Democrats and some by the Republicans, witnesses knowledgeable about urban schools and rural schools, practitioners, consultants and researchers. Moreover, there was a high degree of agreement among them about what works to turn around low-achieving schools and much overlap with what was found by Bryk and Chenoweth.

b. Overview and Definition

What I’d like to do this morning is first give you a brief overview of the Forum on Educational Accountability (FEA) recommendations as to what ESEA should do to help the lowest achieving schools “turn around.” By “turn around,” I mean significantly improve the quality and level of education schools are offering their students. (This would be reflected in a new, positive school culture of shared expectations that all students will learn to a high level, stakeholder cooperation with each other in promoting this goal, and improved teaching and learning.) As I am using the term, “turnaround” cannot be measured simply by standardized test scores. It requires judgment to evaluate what happens in the school, how it operates, its culture. So, likewise, “school turnaround,” as used here, does not refer to the four “turnaround models” used in Race To The Top or School Improvement Grants. Those will be referred to as “turnaround models.”

Second, I’d like to describe briefly an approach to “school improvement,” i.e., how ESEA should help schools that are not in the Senate education committee’s definition of the lowest-achieving 5%. This approach grows out of the work FEA has endorsed on school turnarounds, and is consistent with it, but has not been formally endorsed by FEA.

In discussing “turnarounds,” I’d like to focus chiefly on two documents, both of which have been available on tables outside the “Gold Room” and are on the Internet as well. One, “Common Elements of Successful School Turnarounds: Research and Experience,” (May 13, 2010), <http://www.citizenseffectiveschools.org/successfulschoolturnarounds.pdf> , is by myself, with Monty Neill. The second, “A Research - and Experience-Based Turnaround Process,” (June 17, 2010), <http://www.edaccountability.org/pdf/FEA-TurnaroundStatementJune2010.pdf> , was issued by FEA. It was first vetted with the more than 140 national organizations that had signed FEA’s “Joint Organizational Statement on NCLB” as of that time.

I. Common Elements of Successful School Turnarounds

Turning initially to the “Turnaround Process” paper, FEA notes in it that research shows that there are “common elements” to significant school improvement. Then, it recommends that in the ESEA reauthorization Congress should require the lowest-achieving schools, defined by the U.S. Department of Education as “turnaround schools,” to implement those “common elements” (in their own way) through a several step “process” that FEA identifies.

So, what are the “common elements”? While the common elements could be categorized other ways, we think the most easily understandable to Congress and the public, and consistent with research and experience, is to categorize them into the five following elements: 1) Leadership; 2) Instruction; 3) Curriculum; 4) School Climate; and 5) Parent, Caregiver and Community Engagement and Support.

But, while those five categories are useful headings for key strategies that low-achieving schools use to get better, the categories themselves are much too vague to help other schools improve. The latter would understandably want to know, for example, what about “leadership” or “instruction” should we be doing differently? “What works?”

Fortunately, research and experience provide concrete answers at a level that would give valuable guidance to schools. Thus, within each of the five common elements, there are specific components, or what could be called “sub-elements.” These sub-elements include, but are not limited to, the following:

1) **Leadership** - a skilled and committed leader or leaders, typically the principal, who: acts as the “catalyst” for positive change by leading development of a new vision for the school and working collaboratively with staff, parents and community to develop, buy into and cooperatively implement this vision; provides instructional leadership for teachers; manages the school’s non-academic functions; and distributes leadership roles and responsibilities to other staff, and sometimes other stakeholders. We’ll hear later from principal Kevin Lowndes and teacher Heather Carias of Wheaton High School, Silver Spring, Maryland, how important distributing leadership is to successful turnarounds.

2) **Instruction** - peer collaboration time among staff to analyze student work, adjust instruction, plan lessons and how to improve the instructional program; mentoring, especially for beginning teachers; professional development that meets the specific subject matter knowledge and pedagogical needs of the school’s own teachers; a coherent system for collecting and analyzing multiple sources of evidence on each student’s learning, including classroom-based formative assessments, and adjusting instruction accordingly; and specialized instructional support personnel providing services directly to students with behavioral and other non-academic barriers to learning.

3) **Curriculum** - an intellectually challenging, rich curriculum that: includes not only reading/language arts and math, but also art, music, physical fitness, history and science; is relevant to students’ culture and experiences and engages their interests; is aligned across the grades to ensure a coherent learning progression; and needs to be, FEA believes, supported by a fully staffed, up-to-date school library.

4) **School Climate** - a safe and orderly climate, with a norm of high expectations that all students will achieve academically and behave properly; a supportive and collegial atmosphere among staff; positive behavioral supports and disciplinary practices that encourage students to remain in school; and staff taking shared responsibility for all students’ learning,

5) **Parent, Caregiver and Community Engagement and Support** - programs for effectively engaging parents with the school, such as participating in parent-teacher conferences and in school improvement planning; programs to strengthen parents’ support for the children’s learning at home, including enhancing parenting skills and adult literacy; extensive engagement of community members as volunteer tutors, adult mentors and providers of enrichment programs for students; and effective and responsive coordination with community-based institutions that provide health, recreation, youth safety and other services to address external obstacles to students’ learning.

II. Process for Implementing the Common Elements

FEA's Turnaround Process paper identifies several major steps that a school turnaround process should go through, including roles for the local districts, the States and the U.S. Department of Education.

The process starts with an initial evaluation of the school's needs, both a self-evaluation by the school and local educational agency (LEA) and, if possible, an independent evaluation by an appropriate outside entity. One way to do an independent examination would be through a "school quality review," aka "inspectories." (This is a subject that FEA Chair Monty Neill and I have been quite interested in and on which we have written several papers, which we'd be glad to make available.) While FEA has not explicitly endorsed school quality reviews as the way to do independent evaluations, they are fully consistent with FEA's positions. I will be very interested to hear Peter McWalters, former Rhode Island Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, talk about school quality reviews later from his extensive experience implementing them in Rhode Island.

After the evaluation stage, there should be a collaborative planning stage designing the school turnaround initiative with representatives of all the stakeholders. While the lowest-achieving schools may generally be weak in all the common elements, they may have strengths in certain areas. An LEA's plan should focus on improving the school's weaknesses, including identifying needed additional resources.

The next stage would be initial implementation.

Full implementation can be expected to take about 5 years. By that time, the school should not only have strongly implemented the common elements and their components, but also established a clear trajectory of major improvement in student learning.

The LEA should be required to publicly report annually on what substantial steps the school has taken to implement the elements, successes, obstacles and proposed modifications. This would not only help induce the LEA to concentrate on implementing the common elements, rather than just raising test scores. It would also help community members to pinpoint where they could provide the most effective help, and enable states to pinpoint where they can best provide technical assistance.

The State should review and approve LEAs' proposed plans for turnaround. It should provide technical assistance and supplementary financial support, as appropriate, with some federal turnaround funds reserved for this purpose. The State would monitor implementation of the plan by the school and LEA.

The U.S. Department of Education would monitor the States. But each State would have great leeway in carrying out its own turnaround programs, consistent with such common elements/sub-elements and turnaround process as Congress may specify.

FEA is only recommending that whatever percent of public schools Congress may require to engage in a turnaround process and for which it would provide special federal turnaround funding, e.g., the lowest-achieving 5%, be mandated to implement the common elements. FEA recommends this approach because it is what has been shown to work to help low-achieving schools turn around. As to other low-achieving public schools not subject to turnaround requirements, there should be a much less intensive federal approach to school improvement.

III. School Improvement

While the common elements have been identified in the context of turning around low-achieving schools, the common elements themselves are characteristic of good schools generally. Although there does not seem to be either political will or federal turnaround funding to require a much larger percentage of public schools to engage in a thorough turnaround process, there is strong reason to believe that adopting the common elements is what schools should do to improve.

Moreover, there is a very simple, two-part approach that Congress could, and should, take in the ESEA reauthorization to encourage schools that would not be subjected to turnaround requirements to focus on implementing the elements to the extent that they can. First, Congress should establish that it is a goal of Title I for Title I-funded schools to adopt the common elements. Second, Congress should require such schools to report publicly a small number of statistical indicators that would reflect the extent to which these schools were doing so.

Indicators could include such things as: a) the average amount of time/week teachers spent in peer collaboration; b) what percent of students were being offered courses in art, music, physical education, history and science; and c) the rate of student suspensions. While the vast majority of Title I-funded schools would not be required to implement the common elements, they would have a strong incentive to do so to the extent possible. These schools would want to avoid having to report to the public that, even though their students were still low-achieving, the schools were failing to implement the strategies shown to help other similar schools improve.

IV. How Far Has Congress Gone to Adopt What Works?

The short answer is that the Senate education committee has made some progress. The House committee, virtually none.

Senate

A strength of the October 2011 Senate bi-partisan bill is that it does require all turnaround schools/ bottom 5% to implement certain practices that are also contained in the common elements. These include teacher collaboration time, ongoing professional development, and community services for overcoming students' non-academic obstacles to learning. (In addition, the Senate bill specifies certain components of a turnaround process, including a comprehensive "needs analysis," stakeholder collaboration, implementation, and technical assistance. Unfortunately, these components are required only in the misconceived context, briefly discussed below, of directing turnaround schools to implement one of seven, essentially, staff-replacement options.)

A second major strength of the Senate bill is that it does address a critical turnaround problem: the huge lack of a sufficient number of principals skilled in leading turnarounds. It authorizes creating a school leadership training center to train experienced principals how to effectively lead turnarounds based on a cutting-edge training program the center would develop. The training program would be built on the results of successful turnaround experience and research. The center would include providing skilled mentors for the turnaround leader trainees and would be scaled up through regional training centers.

However, the Senate bill does *not* require turnaround schools to adopt most of the common sub-elements of success *or* specify a multi-stage turnaround process, as FEA recommends. As to the non-

turnaround schools, the Senate bill does *not* even mention that there are **common elements of successful school turnarounds** *nor* state what these elements are. Moreover, the Senate bill does *not* make it a goal of Title I for all Title I-funded schools to implement the elements, *nor* require them to report statistical indicators of implementation.

The Senate bill's seven "school improvement" strategies are in no way comprehensive strategies for improving schools; they are essentially just strategies for staff replacement, conversion to charters/other private management and closure. These "strategies" are largely defective for the same reasons as the four Race To The Top "turnaround models": they are not supported by evidence, impractical, unnecessary and/or harmful. I've written two articles in *Huffington Post* that include discussion of these reasons: "Where's the Evidence? Serious Inadequacy of 'Race To The Top' School Turnaround Models," 5/24/11, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-m-ratner/wheres-the-evidence-serio_b_865955.html ; and "What's Necessary for Congress to 'Get It Right' on School Turnarounds?," 2/8/12, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-m-ratner/whats-necessary-for-congr_b_1260155.html?...

House of Representatives

The February 2012 House education committee bill, in essence, leaves improvement of Title I-funded public schools virtually entirely to the States. States receiving Title I funds must develop a "system for school improvement for low-performing [such] schools ... that ... implements interventions ... that are designed to address such schools' weaknesses [.]" The House committee does nothing to require the lowest-achieving schools to adopt the common elements or any turnaround process, and says nothing about the adoption of the elements as a goal for Title I-funded schools.

This total failure to focus the attention of low-achieving schools, and the public, on doing "what works" invites perpetuating the same phenomenon of "reinventing the wheel" in school reform that has been so destructive to American education for decades!

Conclusion

Former House education committee Chairman George Miller "got it right" at the end of his committee's 2010 hearing on "successful school turnarounds." He said, in effect, that the witnesses had shown that there are common and important elements for successful school turnarounds. Even more, the witnesses had shown, and I quote Congressman Miller: "*If you don't do these things – and you have to more or less do them together – you are not going to turn around much of anything.*" (Emphasis added)

To improve learning for the millions of children in our Title I-funded schools, Congress needs to act on what it knows!

