

# Strengthening Our Schools: A New Framework and Principles for Revising School Improvement Grants

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## THE WRITING ON THE CHALKBOARD

Current School Improvement Grant (SIG) models are available to improve our country's lowest performing schools. While the purpose of this program is admirable in theory, it fails in practice. Instead of providing teachers and administrators with the tools necessary to build better schools, the models deprive schools with the flexibility necessary to respond to the specific needs of their students. As Congress begins the work of reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), it must not continue these broken models. Now is the time for Congress to rethink school improvement and imagine new way of strengthening our schools for the neediest students.

There are four models available for school districts to use to turn around our nation's lowest achieving public schools.

**Turnaround model:** Replace the principal and rehire no more than 50 percent of the staff and grant the principal sufficient operational flexibility (including in staffing, calendars/time, and budgeting) to implement fully a comprehensive approach to substantially improve student outcomes.

**Restart model:** Convert a school or close and reopen it under a charter school operator, a charter management organization, or an education management organization that has been selected through a rigorous review process.

**School closure:** Close a school and enroll the students who attended that school in other schools in the LEA that are higher achieving.

**Transformation model:** Implement each of the following strategies: (1) replace the principal and take steps to increase teacher and school leader effectiveness; (2) institute comprehensive instructional reforms; (3) increase learning time and create community-oriented schools; and (4) provide operational flexibility and sustained support (Department of Education, 2009).

### SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT MODELS

1. Box In Schools
2. Ignore Student Needs
3. Tie the Hands of Teachers and Leaders

#### **SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANTS BOX IN SCHOOLS**

The models for SIG impose heavy burdens and do not give schools the flexibility they need to find a pathway to success. The strategies and work that go into turning around a school are highly dependent on the unique mix of factors on the ground. As Tom Loveless from the Brookings Institution has pointed out, “people who say we know how to make failing schools into successful ones but merely lack the will to do so are selling snake oil. In fact, successful turnaround stories are marked by idiosyncratic circumstances,” (Brookings Institution, 2010).

The most flexible model, the transformation model has been limited in the current school improvement grant program. Many school districts like the flexibility, but the current school improvement grants limit the use of the model. There is no empirical justification for the limitation, which forces school districts to have to adopt the other three models even when the circumstances do not justify it.

The restart model is flawed as well. The charter schools that are created with SIG cannot guarantee that they will improve education. In fact, a Stanford University study of 2,403 charter schools in 16 states found that only 17% of charter schools created better educational outcomes for students than regular public schools would have, while a staggering 37% produced outcomes below that of regular public schools. (CREDO, 2009).

# Strengthening Our Schools

## **SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANTS IGNORE STUDENT NEEDS**

The central problem of the Department of Education's models is that it does not allow for tailored, effective programs that base reform on the realities of their school and school population. Instead, it offers a pre-fabricated critique of teachers and principals and it imposes competition and incentives into education without trying to understand the underlying problems in public schools (Ravitch, 2010).

And for students in many of our nation's priority schools, going to a great school and having the best teacher may not be enough to help them reach the level they will need to succeed in this world. These students are not able to focus on learning because their stomachs are growling in hunger, they are distraught from abuse at home, or they can't understand their teacher. These students make up the population of our most struggling schools. Are these schools failing their students because their teachers and schools are bad? Perhaps, but it's more likely that we aren't addressing the underlying problems facing our students each day. Whether it is poverty, lack of parental involvement, language challenges, or any other factor, we cannot help all of our children succeed, regardless of race, national origin, or economic background, without tackling these fundamental social problems head on (Mass Insight, 2007; Economic Policy Institute, 2008).

Finally, simply switching out principals and staff will not directly lead to student achievement. Changing the personnel makes a big impact, but is a blunt measure for a school that might need tutoring services in math or additional resources to address a migrant population. Disregarding the clear link between socio-economic status and low achievement will only continue to deny children in priority schools a quality education.

## **SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANTS TIE THE HANDS OF TEACHERS AND LEADERS**

While the transformation and turnaround models do allow schools to design new instructional programs and extend learning time, they also force significant staffing changes. The two models determine at the outset that the problem at a low-performing school is the personnel and successful change can only be achieved by a change in management. This approach provides no guarantee children will start to succeed (Klein, 2010; Department of Education, 2010).

It is also troubling that not all communities have the labor pool of teachers and principals that can replace those that are fired. It can force the firing of good people who have been brought on to do the very work SIG purports to support. The Association of California School Administrators conducted a survey of 188 schools and found that many "exemplary principals" were removed from their positions just after having been placed in struggling schools to do the work of turning around or transforming a school (ACSA, 2010). The Commission on No Child Left Behind

# Strengthening Our Schools

recommended that only the staff “relevant” to the school’s low performance be up for replacement-- not automatically firing personnel before understanding the causes of a school’s decline (Commission on NCLB, 2007).

The most successful school improvements come about when teachers, parents, administrators and the community all come to the table (Westmoreland, Rosenberg, Lopez & Weiss, 2009). In 1996, school administrators and teachers were able to come together in New York City to create a Chancellor’s District to improve struggling schools. This approach was hugely successful, as it focused on increased learning time and afterschool programs for students, professional development for teachers, and robust, constantly updated benchmarks that alerted teachers to progress (AFT, 2010). When blame is off the table, it is clear that all parties can work together and the result is a school on the pathway to success.

## STRENGTHENING OUR SCHOOLS FRAMEWORK

What is the alternative to the current school improvement grants? Researchers at UCLA describe a systematic framework for turning around, transforming, and improving schools. ESEA Reauthorization should incorporate a framework to promote flexibility and collaboration, remove barriers to student success and foster teachers and school leaders. By revising school improvement grants to choose from a menu of research-driven options, we can comprehensively rebuild for learning and put priority schools on a pathway to achievement.

definition of a pri-or-i-ty school (noun)

1. A school that has been chronically underperforming
2. Schools in the bottom five percent that are identified by the state
3. Schools performing in the lower quartile of their state

## PROMOTES FLEXIBILITY AND COLLABORATION

### *Governance and Resource Management Component*

Systemic rebuilding cannot be done with school personnel alone. Parents, community leaders, businesses, and other stakeholders represent essential human and social capital that needs to be brought in and leveraged. Greater flexibility must be given to districts and schools to maximize their effective use of resources. It is essential to:

- ensure schools can use allocated funds flexibly
- enhance administrator recruitment, induction, mentoring, professional development and retention
- foster a sense of collaborative ownership by prioritizing buy-in from teachers, specialized instruction support personnel, principals, parents, and the community
- ensure multi-year investments to fully fund and sustain real reform

# Strengthening Our Schools

- enhance coordination and capitalize on economies of scale by facilitating linkages among pre-schools, elementary schools, secondary schools, and higher education institutions
- establish community and family engagement and leverage funds allocated for overlapping concerns

## REMOVES BARRIERS TO STUDENT SUCCESS

### *Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching*

Students from disadvantaged groups are more likely to be a significant population of our lowest performing schools. Research shows that two-thirds of the achievement gap is still due to factors outside school. Our education system has failed to provide an equal opportunity for these students to learn. The current school improvement strategy largely ignores these fundamental problems. Without tackling environmental barriers to learning and teaching head on, our priority schools will always be doomed to fail.



There must be a shift towards recognizing that a student's life outside of the classroom plays a significant role on their and their classmates' academic success. Once this concept is recognized, schools can begin to devise strategies to make sure that students are motivationally ready and available to learn when they are in the classroom. An approach that maximizes flexibility will allow all stakeholders in a school to come together and design a program for success that actually addresses the school's circumstances. By tackling the environmental barriers to learning, we can get to the root of the problems that our schools face.

While most schools devote significant resources to addressing barriers to learning and teaching, the work is not conceived as a whole, is developed piecemeal, and implementation is fragmented. Examples of supports to address barriers include: positive behavioral supports, a system of response to intervention, assistance for students with special needs, programs for safe schools, resources for ELL students, extended learning time, expanding school meals, well-rounded curriculums, wraparound services, mental health services, and much more. These student and learning supports need to be organized into a comprehensive system for a full continuum of interventions to enable every school to better:

- train teachers to re-engage disconnected students and maintain their engagement
- support teachers as they learn how to maintain student engagement and re-engage disconnected students
- provide support for the full range of transitions that students and families encounter as they negotiate school and grade changes
- respond to, and where feasible, prevent behavioral and emotion crises
- increase community and family involvement and support
- facilitate student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed.

# Strengthening Our Schools

## FOSTERS TEACHERS AND SCHOOL LEADERS

### *Improving Learning and Instruction*

Research consistently demonstrates that one of the most important factors in a student's education is their teacher. Additionally, principals are instrumental in navigating the complex process of rebuilding a school, attracting good teachers, and improving instruction. Blanket firings of the entire staff are not a solution. Priority schools need the resources to address their staffing implementing, build capacity, and improve instruction, including strategies for:

- personalizing training to help the teachers reach out to students
- including a strategy for teachers and school leaders to partner with families
- applying data informed instruction
- implementing a system response to intervention for struggling students
- using specialized instructional support like school psychologists or speech pathologists within the classroom
- enhancing staff induction through mentoring and instructional support
- providing leadership training for principals to improve instruction
- continuously enhancing a positive school climate and a culture of rigorous standards and high expectations for students and all school staff.

## **STRENGTHENING OUR SCHOOLS: GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

Strengthening our schools should follow guiding principles to steer school districts and schools in a clear direction, allow time for progress, and keep communities whole.

### **Every priority school must start out by mapping and analyzing needs and assets**

No systemic reform can be wisely undertaken without a proper evaluation of the school needs and school assets. It is a school's unique set of circumstances that determines its performance. The current models do not give sufficient weight to this principle and could lead many schools down a path of false starts with no improvement. Clear understanding of what has worked and what gaps need to be filled should be compulsory (Center for Mental Health, 2010; Center for Education Policy 2009; Council of Great City Schools, 2010).

The Commission on No Child Left Behind (2007) has asserted that it is critical to fully understand and to comprehensively address students' behavioral, social, and emotional needs in addition to their academic needs. In their report, the NCLB Commission cites the comprehensive research indicating that students struggling with mental health concerns achieve at higher rates when schools identify and intervene with these problems early. The Commission links access to mental health services to improved student outcomes and recommends that, when creating their school improvement plan, schools should be required to determine the availability of school and community social and mental health services to support struggling students.

# Strengthening Our Schools

## **Flexibility is key to achieving success**

The current models cap innovation and lock schools into a pathway where they cannot adapt to new needs and situations, which will likely lead to continued failure. But, according to the Center on Education Policy, schools that raise achievement use a flexible menu of tools and strategies to improve their school's performance. When schools are allowed flexibility and choice, they can adapt their plan as needs arise. (Commission on NCLB, 2007; Council on Great City Schools, 2010).

## **Priority schools should be given sufficient time (3-5 years) to show progress**

Quick and dramatic improvement options based on business turnaround models are a hasty and risky approach to systemic school reform. Effectiveness should not be sacrificed for time. The turnaround model celebrates immediate changes in business culture to achieve a "quick win," (National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2008; Hassel & Hassel, 2009).

If there is one thing research supports, it is that school turnaround is difficult and very complex (Commission on NCLB, 2007). The lessons of the corporate sector are not always applicable to education (Kowal & Hassel, 2005). This does not mean schools should not be measured and evaluated to make adjustments in the reform. It means shortchanging effective, long-term solutions in favor of a litany of immediate wins could hamper sustained achievement. Three to five years is the consensus for sufficient evaluation of progress towards building school-wide achievement (Center for Mental Health, 2010; US Department of Education, 2010).

## **School closure should be a last resort**

School closure, the final option in SIG, is the most destructive. Closing a school can disrupt a community and cannot guarantee that the educational alternative is much better. School closure effectively abandons a community and the student, who will have to complete what is often a difficult transition process to a new school.

Dramatic and significant change can be achieved without closing a school. By encouraging school closure we undermine student's communities, impact their self-esteem and sweep under the rug systemic problems in the district or community (Myslinksi, 2010).

Often, the educational alternatives available to the students of closed schools are little or no better than the schools they just left. In rural areas, the closing of a school can cause significant disruption to students because travel time can be greatly extended (NSBA, 2010).

Former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch has pointed out that "schools are often the heart of their community, representing traditions, values and history that help bind the community together." She says they should have the opportunity to

# Strengthening Our Schools

receive all the resources they need to succeed before they are forced to shut the doors (Myslinksi, 2010)

## **ERASING THE CHALKBOARD AND STARTING OVER**

Failure to rethink the current school improvement models would be an injustice to the students in this country with the least opportunities. The heavy-handed imposition of punitive measures in the current models run the risk of impeding long-term success. Congress cannot fear rethinking the current policy and starting from scratch. We cannot afford to lose another generation of children. Our country's success depends on a 21<sup>st</sup> century education. By revising the School Improvement Grants models to include a menu of research driven options within this framework we can enable our schools to comprehensively rebuild for learning and put "priority schools" on a pathway to achievement.



# Strengthening Our Schools

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# Strengthening Our Schools

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