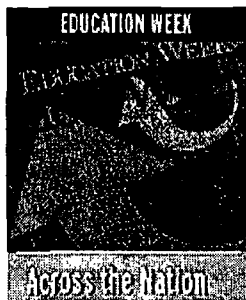


MARCH 25, 1998

EDUCATION WEEK on the WEB


[IN CONTEXT](#) | [THE ARCHIVES](#) | [TEACHER MAGAZINE](#) | [THE DAILY NEWS](#) | [SPECIAL REPORTS](#) | [PRODUCTS & SERVICES](#)

Failing Schools Challenge Accountability Goals

By Lynn Olson

Third in an occasional series

New York



When Thandiwe Peebles came to Intermediate School 193 in the Bronx last March, trash littered the halls, discipline had collapsed, and teachers routinely called in sick on Mondays and Fridays.



Read a related story, "In Troubled Schools, Policy and Reality Collide," in This Week's News.

The new principal quickly divided the school into academic "houses," restored discipline, and gave parents a list of curriculum goals and objectives. She personally grades midterm exams to keep tabs on how students are doing.

The 580-student middle school is not out of the woods yet, but it's a lot better than it was.

"For years, it was like the storming of the Bastille every day," said Christopher Horan, an 8th grade language arts teacher, who has been here since 1987. "Now, it feels like a school."

IS 193 is one of a dozen chronically low-performing New York City schools that Chancellor Rudy F. Crew has taken under his wing since 1996 with the mission of improving them or shutting them down.

About This Series

This is the third in an occasional series that will explore the push for accountability in public education.

The series so far:

Feb. 11, 1998: "The Push for Accountability Gathers Steam."

March 4, 1998: "Tenured Principals: An Endangered Species."

His is one of many attempts by states and districts to identify their worst schools and spend millions of dollars to fix them, based on the recognition that failing schools must not be allowed to languish indefinitely.

But while it's clear that in many cases such efforts have brought a sense of order and calm, and that test

scores are inching up, it is less certain whether such gains will prove to be permanent or deep.

"Nobody really knows how you turn a school around," said Carol Ascher, a senior research scientist at New York University, who is conducting a study of New York state's strategy for identifying and intervening in low-performing schools.

"People have an idea of what the components of a successful school are," she said. "But how you move an unsuccessful school into being

successful is not just dropping in the components of a successful school."

The lack of consensus is reflected in the variety of state and district strategies. In San Diego, schools receive \$16,500 and are required to draw up a new plan.

Kentucky sends in a team of distinguished educators to work with a troubled school. Chicago hooks schools up with an outside service provider and assigns a "probation manager" to monitor performance.

'Very, Very Prescriptive'

New York City's extremely aggressive design for its most troubled schools represents one end of the continuum. Here, failing schools receive heavy doses of both direction and support.

Most states and districts require educators in low-achieving schools to devise some sort of improvement plan, either by themselves or with outside help. But some argue that if these schools could have planned their way out of failure, they would have done so long ago.

New York state has had a system for monitoring troubled schools since 1989, known as "Schools Under Registration Review." Revisions in 1996 give schools with the lowest test scores three years to improve or face closure by the state. Districts also must develop plans for how they will support such schools.

In April 1996, Mr. Crew plucked 10 such schools out from under the control of their community school districts, which he said lacked the will or the capacity to assist them. The 1.1 million-student district has 32 subdistricts with jurisdiction over elementary and middle schools. The city's central board of education governs high schools.

Bypassing the subdistricts, Mr. Crew created a special "chancellor's district" to provide direct oversight for the 10 schools.

One high school was subsequently closed and reorganized into several smaller schools. And last year, three more schools joined the special district, for a total of 12: six elementary schools and six middle schools.

By most accounts, the schools were a mess, with rundown facilities, a high proportion of uncertified teachers, out-of-date textbooks, bare libraries, and an absence of standard procedures, from policies for discipline to grade-level objectives.

Each school underwent a structured review, based on the widely agreed-upon characteristics of effective schools, that examined their practices in nine areas, including curriculum and instruction, school climate, professional development, and parent involvement.

The schools also were required to adopt specific practices that administrators had identified as successful. Among the elements are a 90-minute period devoted to literacy, strategies for test preparation, a longer school day for the neediest students, prekindergarten wherever possible, an integrated arts program, and an emphasis on involving parents. All of the elementary schools have adopted Success for All, a nationally recognized school reform approach. ("Will Success Spoil

Success for All?, Feb. 4, 1998.)

"These are proven things that work for inner-city schools," said Barbara Byrd-Bennett, the superintendent of the chancellor's district. But making them work is expensive, and unlike some efforts to reshape failing schools, the chancellor's district has been able to back its requirements with cash.

"There is a real serious monetary commitment that has to be made to schools that are low-performing," Mr. Crew said in a speech earlier this year.

In fiscal years 1997 and 1998, his administration has spent approximately \$7.79 million in special allocations for the chancellor's district. That includes \$5.21 million to support the district's work with low-performing schools throughout the city, \$1.75 million for staff development, and \$829,219 for libraries, textbooks, and furniture.

Class sizes have dropped to an average of 25. Libraries have new books. Technology has been upgraded. At each school, specialists in literacy, math, and technology help coordinate staff development. Most principals have a mentor. And each school is assigned a liaison from the district office to run interference and monitor performance.

Margaret Hill, principal of the Mother Hale Academy, an elementary school in one of the poorest neighborhoods of the Bronx, said she likes the structure. What's more, "the level of support is incredible."

A Firm Hand

Other districts around the country have also taken a firm hand in shaping how low-performing schools should improve. The Miami-Dade County district, for example, created "Operation Safety Net" to assist 45 elementary schools identified by the state as low-performing. Each of the schools adopted the same basal reading textbooks as well as Success for All. And each received a big infusion of technology.

But not everyone thinks so much direction is a good idea. Ms. Ascher of NYU cautions that it could discourage talented, veteran teachers from working in such schools.

Chicago gives its low-achieving schools more choice. In 1996-97, administrators placed 109 schools--about one-fourth of all those in the district--on probation because fewer than 15 percent of their students were reading at or above grade level.

The district helps pay for the schools to select from an approved list of partners such as universities and nonprofit organizations that can help them with curriculum, instruction, and testing.

Paul T. Hill, the director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington in Seattle, says intervention should occur in stages, with more structure provided over time if schools fail to improve. Low-performing schools also need many forms of assistance from many sources, he argues. "The last thing you want is for struggling schools to have a menu only of what the central office can offer," he said.

Changing Staff

One of the most contentious issues in efforts to turn around troubled schools is whether to replace the teachers and administrators in them.

In New York, the chancellor's district may replace up to half the teachers in a school, under an agreement with the United Federation of Teachers, the city's American Federation of Teachers affiliate. All the new teachers must be certified, and they are selected by a personnel committee that includes two union representatives.

Other districts, notably San Francisco, practice large-scale overhauls of a school's staff, known as "reconstitution." But a recent trend--often prompted by opposition from teachers' unions--is to intervene before such drastic action is necessary.

Tom Mooney, the president of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers and the chairman of an aft task force on redesigning schools, says union-district partnerships are crucial if teachers are to buy in to the procedures. In both Miami and New York, the unions have played a central role in crafting the intervention policy.

The issue of replacing faculty members is a tricky one for another reason: Administrators want the authority to clean house, but replacing bad teachers with inexperienced ones has its own problems.

Most schools in the chancellor's district have a high proportion of rookie teachers who are charged with turning around some of the most troubled schools in the system.

In retrospect, Ms. Byrd-Bennett questions whether that was a good idea. "I would really rethink this if I had to do this again," she said. "I think for schools that are this fragile, this needy, the culture shock is not always healthy."

The Mother Hale Academy, for instance, started the 1996-97 school year with 28 first-year teachers out of a staff of 50. At the end of the year, 14 of the 28 left.

Few states or districts have provided incentives for the best educators to work in the toughest schools. More often, the stigma attached to schools labeled as failing, and the risk of losing one's job, have discouraged people from applying.

Help or Hindrance?

In New York City, the district has taken responsibility for fixing struggling schools, but is doing so under the watchful eye of the state education department. Such an approach acknowledges that states often lack the expertise or the manpower to help poorly performing schools directly.

Yet often, districts themselves are perceived as a factor in the downward spiral. "A district can go through a series of superintendents," said Ms. Peebles, IS 193's principal. "And as the superintendents change, things at the school may or may not change."

Kentucky essentially bypasses local districts. The state identifies which schools are low-performing, trains and assigns distinguished educators to work in them, and monitors the results.

But Robert Lumsden, an associate commissioner of education in Kentucky, said that in retrospect, it might have helped to clarify the role of districts. "For a school to grow continuously," he said, "it's going to take an alignment of all the resources in a district."

In New York, many of the schools in the chancellor's district aren't eager to return to the community districts that allowed them to deteriorate in the first place.

"We don't want to leave," said Stuart Auerbach, a dean at IS 193 and the school's UFT representative, who was initially skeptical of Mr. Crew's initiative. "We're out of the politics of District 12, the corruption and lack of services."

Despite such reservations, Ms. Byrd-Bennett anticipates that by the 1999-2000 school year, all the schools will be returned to their districts, although with a lot of shared responsibility initially. "The goal of the chancellor's district is to put itself out of business," she said.

Is It Working?

The real test will come later this year, when the state determines whether schools in the chancellor's district have improved enough to come off the Schools Under Registration Review list or should be shut down. To date, two schools have met their improvement targets and are no longer under registration review, although they remain in the chancellor's district.

Reading scores on state tests rose last year among SURR schools in New York City. But compared with other SURR schools, those in the chancellor's district made the smallest gains.

Ms. Byrd-Bennett argues that comparing the chancellor's district with other subdistricts, which have a range of high- and low-performing schools, is unfair. "These were the schools that had the greatest upheaval and the farthest to go," she said.

Across the country, an increasing number of low-performing schools are improving enough to come off watch lists--although it's not clear what combination of factors is causing the change. In Kentucky, all but 17 of the original 53 schools identified as "in decline" in 1994 have met their benchmarks.

Houston identified 68 low-performing schools in 1992-93, the first year of its accountability system. Now, it has none. In Miami-Dade County, the list of critically low-performing schools is down to 11.

But while the results are encouraging, few are ready to declare victory. For one thing, the standards to get off most lists remain low. In addition, while some schools have improved substantially, others have merely squeaked by.

Policymakers worry that such schools will slide back once a different group of students is tested.

In Chicago, a majority of schools on probation saw an increase in reading and math scores last spring. The process is working, said Michael K. Klonsky, the director of the Small Schools Workshop at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "But there's a debate about what working means," he added. "Getting less than a quarter of the kids reading at or above grade level is not anything to write home about."

And in some cases, Ms. Byrd-Bennett admitted, no amount of outside assistance can help. Some schools simply have to be shut down and started anew. "Some kitchens," she said, "have to be totally destroyed and reconfigured, not just remodeled."

PHOTO: Clockwise from left, since becoming principal last March, Thandiwe Peebles is credited with making order out of chaos at IS 193 in the Bronx. Superintendent Barbara Byrd-Bennett is in charge of turning around the 12 underperforming schools in New York City's chancellor's district. Margaret Hill, right, principal of the Mother Hale Academy, can count on guidance from her mentor, Sylvia Simon.

-- Benjamin Tice Smith

SUBSCRIBE	ABOUT THIS SITE	FEEDBACK	SEARCH THE SITE	JOBS	HOME
---------------------------	---------------------------------	--------------------------	---------------------------------	----------------------	----------------------

© 1998 Editorial Projects in Education

SEPTEMBER 24, 1997

EDUCATION WEEK on the WEB

EDUCATION WEEK

IN CONTEXT

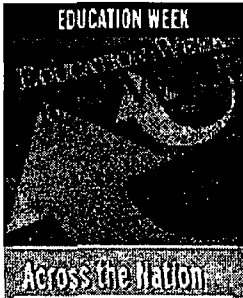
THE ARCHIVES

TEACHER MAGAZINE

THE DAILY NEWS

SPECIAL REPORTS

PRODUCTS & SERVICES



Reconstitution Gaining New Momentum

By Caroline Hendrie

Once considered an act of near desperation, the practice of ousting most of a school's staff and starting over--known as reconstitution--is gaining currency as a means of resuscitating public schools deemed to be chronic failures.



ducast
download now!

Read the accompanying story, "At Two Cleveland Schools, Overhauls Mark a Dramatic Response to 'Desperate Times'," in This Week's News.

Newly reconstituted schools opened this year in Cleveland, Chicago, Denver, Prince George's County, Md., and San Francisco. In Philadelphia, the district tried to reconstitute two high schools this summer, only to be foiled in a bitter dispute with the teachers' union. And in New York City, officials used their own less-drastring version of reconstitution to shake up 20 schools over the summer--on top of 10 last year.

The overhauls are coming at a time of growing demands from politicians, reformers, and the public for solutions to the seemingly incurable ills of many urban schools. These pressures are prompting more superintendents--whose own job security, especially in urban districts, is often precarious--to look for accountability measures with a capital A. Few fit the bill as well as reconstitution.

"Here are these schools that have not only not reformed, but they haven't even met traditional standards," said Frank L. Smith, a professor of educational administration at Teachers College, Columbia University. "I think people are just losing patience and saying these kids can't wait."

All Jobs Posted

As patience wore out in these districts, the entire staffs at targeted schools--including teachers, custodians, support workers, and administrators--were required this summer to reapply for their jobs. The number of teachers who wound up staying at the affected schools ranged from only a handful to as many as two-thirds, depending on the city.

In Cleveland, the state-appointed superintendent announced he was cleaning house at two elementary schools just three weeks before the start of school. Despite protests from parents and labor grievances by the teachers' union, more than two-thirds of the teachers at the schools were replaced when classes resumed in the 72,000-student system late last month. ("At Two Cleveland Schools, Overhauls Mark A Dramatic Response to 'Desperate Times'," in This Week's News.)

Chicago school officials announced in June that seven of the city's most poorly performing high schools would be reconstituted over the summer. In addition, leaders of the 424,000-student district scaled back the job protections of teachers who lose their positions. It was this move, more than the shake-ups themselves, that led to the worst breach to date in the largely amicable relationship the district had enjoyed with the teachers'

Read our story, "In S.F. Reconstitutions, Rojas Softens the Blow," June 25, 1997.

"Staffs at 7 Chicago Schools To Be Overhauled," June 18, 1997.

"Six Suburban
Schools in Md. To Be
'Reconstituted'," June
11, 1997.

union since Mayor Richard M. Daley installed the current administration in 1995. Nearly two-thirds of the affected teachers were rehired by their old schools.

In Denver, the whole staffs of two elementary schools were ousted, with only a handful of teachers being rehired at each school.

Although the teachers' union initially balked when news of the possible overhauls broke last winter, union leaders then took the unusual step of cooperating closely with administrators of the 62,000-student district. Still, all but a handful of teachers at each school were required to find positions elsewhere in the district.

"Denver Board Backs
'Reconstituting'
Schools," Feb. 26,
1997.

Administrators in Prince George's County, a suburban Washington district of 125,000 students, in June ordered the staffs of four elementary schools and two middle schools to reapply for their jobs. In the end, slightly more than a third of the teachers and administrators returned to their original schools. Officials said they were trying to boost achievement at the schools before they became candidates for reconstitution by the state, which has put 50 schools in Baltimore on notice that they may be reconstituted.

In San Francisco, the district last spring agreed with the teachers' union on a tentative plan for modifying the district's reconstitution policy. But as talks continued, Superintendent Waldemar Rojas reconstituted one high school and an elementary school over the summer. Still, the shake-ups were less sweeping than those at eight other schools in the district since 1994. ("S.F. Mulls Retreat From 'Reconstituting' Schools," May 28, 1997.)

At the high school, for example, 45 percent of the teachers were allowed to remain, and teachers are being given more say in charting the school's new course.

San Francisco Sets Trend

In all of these districts, school leaders are betting that reconstitution will foster a new, student-focused culture in schools where failure had come to be accepted. "It's a drastic and dramatic tool," Mr. Rojas said. "But if you've got cancer, you've got to get it all."

San Francisco officials have revamped 10 schools since 1994 under their district's court-ordered desegregation plan, despite fierce objections from the teachers' union. The court ordered the overhauls based on studies showing major improvements in some schools that the district reconstituted in the 1980s. ("S.F. Reforms Put on the Line in Legal Battle," Dec. 11, 1996.)

Over the past five years, San Francisco has seen standardized-test scores districtwide edge upward every year, gains that officials attribute in part to reconstitution. Although experts say the jury is still out on the technique's effectiveness, Mr. Rojas believes this track record is emboldening other educators to take the plunge.



**Waldemar
Rojas**

"When somebody finds something that has a glimmer of hope and success," he said, "they're going to try it."

But now that the idea has caught on, Mr. Rojas and other supporters of San Francisco's brand of reconstitution are worried.

"I'm concerned that it will be picked up as a panacea and done incorrectly," Mr. Rojas said.

Robert L. Green, a Michigan State University professor who has been involved in San Francisco's desegregation case, said educators with experience in the practice should get together soon to trade notes on what enhances and detracts from its effectiveness. He believes they should discuss the importance of using defensible criteria for identifying targeted schools and of giving schools a reasonable chance to correct their problems before being hit with reconstitution. Both issues have given rise to controversy nearly everywhere reconstitution has been tried.

"My fear is that school districts will jump on the reconstitution bandwagon without seriously considering the issues," Mr. Green said.

Union on the Warpath

Teachers' unions share his concerns. San Francisco teachers have long battled the practice, and Sandra Feldman, the New York City union chief who also became president of the American Federation of Teachers last spring, recently weighed in on the issue.

While seeking to position the 940,000-member AFT as a proponent of fixing failing schools, Ms. Feldman argues that reconstitution, at least the way it is playing out in most cities, is not the way to go about it.

"In most cases, they do it crudely--getting rid of people instead of bad practices," she wrote this month in the AFT's paid newspaper commentary, "Where We Stand." "This strategy, which goes by the ugly name of reconstitution, offers a simplistic response to a complicated problem."

Ms. Feldman holds up New York City as a model for how unions and districts can work together on troubled schools. There, administrators and union officials negotiated a process for redesigning schools that have been identified by the state as unacceptable. Under the agreement, such schools can replace roughly half of their teachers with newcomers. Teachers who choose to leave such schools are given priority in seeking other posts.

New Yorkers studiously avoid the term reconstitution, as do educators in

Denver, preferring to call their shake-ups redesigns.

Mr. Rojas bristles at the unions' criticisms, saying he has always aimed to change school practices--not just personnel. Still, he sees the ability to clean house and rebuild school cultures from the ground up as a crucial factor in his district's recent gains.

"Without that variable, I haven't seen it occur," he said.

Strains in Chicago

School officials in Chicago--where two years of labor peace has been shaken by the fallout from reconstitution--also consider the union's charges off base. Paul G. Vallas, the district's chief executive officer, said this summer's seven reconstitutions were part of a broader strategy to revitalize education citywide.

The schools were among more than 100 put on probation last fall. Many others are in remediation, a step short of probation in which they are required to draw up improvement plans.

"If we had done reconstitution without remediation and probation, then it would be crude," Mr. Vallas said. "But sometimes you just simply have to start over."

In none of the schools reconstituted in various districts this summer were teachers summarily thrown out of a job. For the most part, the displaced teachers ended up elsewhere in the systems.

Still, with the exception of Denver, the overhauls are being fiercely resisted by teachers' unions, even in places where labor-management relations have been calm.

That is certainly the case in Chicago, where reconstitution comes closest to threatening displaced teachers with unemployment. Teachers who are not rehired will have 10 months to find another job in the system before being taken off the payroll. Moreover, they will be expected to work as substitutes during that time, with one day off a week for job hunting.

Until the school board changed its policy this summer, teachers who lost their posts went into a reserve teacher pool for two school years and were not required to substitute.

Pamelyn Massarsky, the recording secretary for the Chicago Teachers Union, said the 33,000-member union has filed grievances on behalf of the affected teachers. She characterized the events this summer as a betrayal by the district leadership.

"We had believed there was a cooperative working relationship, and we have fostered and supported that," she said. "But they spit in our face, and we know it's not raining."

Mr. Vallas, for his part, downplays the rift with the union. "There are certainly many union activists who are going to grandstand on this," he said, "but the bottom line is, we have 27,000 teachers and we respect their collective bargaining rights."

Ousters Blocked

In Philadelphia, district officials were tripped up by teachers' bargaining rights this summer in their bid to reconstitute two troubled high schools.

After Superintendent David W. Hornbeck announced in February that he would transfer up to 75 percent of the staff at the schools, the union went to court. In July, an arbitrator ruled that the district had not followed the process spelled out in the teachers' contract and voided the plan. ("Arbitrator Rejects Overhaul Plan for 2 Philadelphia Schools," Aug. 6, 1997.)

Despite the ruling, the principals at the two schools began wide-ranging reforms anyway--including some that have drawn the ire of the union--and many staff members took voluntary transfers. So Mr. Hornbeck said he does not consider his plan to have been entirely thwarted.

Since the arbitrator's ruling, there has been a partial thaw in the chilly relationship between Mr. Hornbeck and the union. But both sides report that they have made little progress in talks on the process to be used in the future to reconstitute schools.

Though he would rather not resort to reconstitution again, Mr. Hornbeck said, he is still "perfectly prepared to use it again if necessary."

Other Districts Interested

Despite union resistance, there are few signs that reconstitution is going away.

In Detroit, a clause in the new contract the district reached with teachers this month allows reconstitution of schools that have lost state accreditation and failed to improve despite extra help.

Christine Johnson, the director of the urban initiative of the Denver-based Education Commission of the States, said she has received several requests recently from states and districts interested in reconstitution.

"There is a public outcry for accountability with teeth," she said.

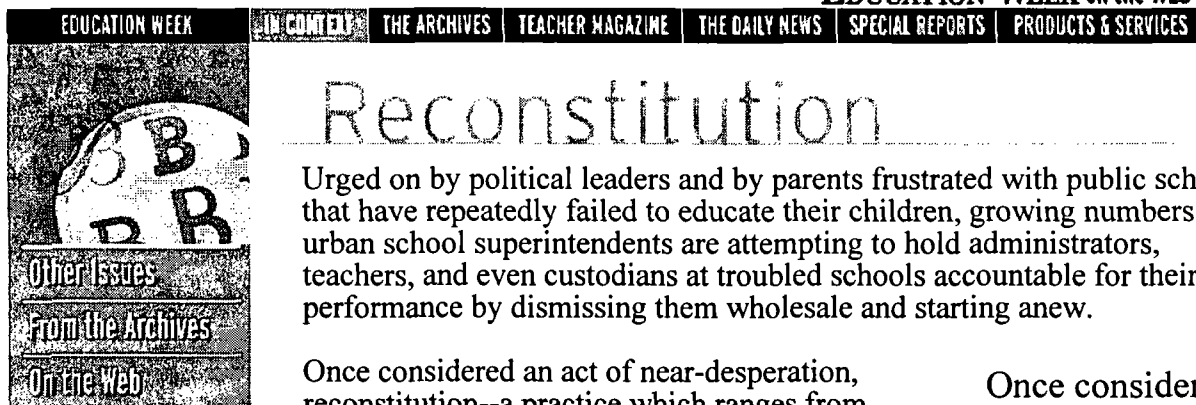
While Ms. Johnson considers reconstitution a reform strategy whose effectiveness has not been fully proven, she said it can put useful pressure on educators to re-evaluate their efforts.

"What has started as a fairly top-down intervention will have a positive effect as the professionals at the local level go about their business," she said, "which is keeping student learning as their bottom line."

PHOTO: San Francisco's Waldemar Rojas views reconstitution as "a drastic and dramatic tool."

--Fred Mertz

Angela Mahoney forms her kindergarten students into line for lunch last week at Cleveland's Paul Revere Elementary School, one of two city schools targeted late this summer for "reconstitution," in which most of the staff was replaced.

EDUCATION WEEK on the WEB

Reconstitution

Urged on by political leaders and by parents frustrated with public schools that have repeatedly failed to educate their children, growing numbers of urban school superintendents are attempting to hold administrators, teachers, and even custodians at troubled schools accountable for their job performance by dismissing them wholesale and starting anew.

Once considered an act of near-desperation, reconstitution--a practice which ranges from ousting most of a school's staff and hiring replacements to simply requiring employees to re-apply for their jobs--has become an increasingly popular tool among policymakers at all levels of the political and education system for tackling the seemingly intractable ills of many urban schools.

Once considered a desperate act, wholesale replacement of faculties at struggling schools is becoming more common.

In October 1997, the White House issued a statement on "Turning Around Low-Performing Public Schools," which quoted President Clinton as saying that reconstitution may well be an effective tool of last resort in some schools.

"No American child deserves to get a second-class education," the statement says. "Instead, state and local education officials must step in and redesign failing schools, or close them down and reopen them with new, more effective leadership and staff."

In February 1997, during his annual address on the state of education, U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley previously had said that schools that aren't performing should be closed or restaffed. And in 1997 alone, schools in Cleveland, Chicago, Denver, Prince George's County, Md., and San Francisco were reconstituted. In New York City, meanwhile, officials used their own, less-drastic version of reconstitution to shake up 20 schools.

Depending on the school, entire staffs --including teachers, custodians, support workers, and administrators--are required to reapply for their jobs. The number of teachers who remained after reconstitution ranged from only a handful to as many as two-thirds.

In all of the districts that have attempted reconstitution, officials are betting that such a dramatic upheaval will cause employees to focus on student success in schools where academic failure has all but been accepted as normal for large numbers of students.

Political pressure from elected officials, reform groups, and parents fuel the reconstitution movement. Their demands for improvement in turn encourage urban superintendents--whose own job security is often precarious--to look for stringent methods to achieve a dramatic turn-around in academic performance. Few methods, some superintendents argue, fit the bill as well as reconstitution.

Critics charge that reconstitution is a "blunt instrument" and is in danger of being overused.

Yet some observers already are questioning whether reconstitution as a reform tool is a blunt instrument that disrupts communities and causes problems of its own. They also argue that it is in danger of being overused as an easy alternative to more sophisticated, long-range reform strategies.

Teachers' unions, most notably in Denver, but also in other cities where schools have been reconstituted have questioned the fairness of the process, arguing in some cases that their members should not be held responsible if they cannot compensate for deficiencies in a student's background or lack of parental involvement in schooling. Others claim the changes wrought by reconstitution are largely cosmetic. And some have questioned whether officials have abused the reconstitution process to further personal agendas or even to carry out private vendettas.

In some cases, union resistance to reconstitution has effectively halted the process. The Philadelphia school system failed in its attempt to reconstitute two high schools, sparking a bitter dispute with the local union along the way. The union filed suit and the plan eventually was dropped.

Sandra Feldman, the New York union chief who now heads the American Federation of Teachers, recently weighed in with her opposition to reconstitution. Though eager to position the 940,000-member union as a proponent of fixing failing schools, she argues that reconstitution, at least as it is currently practiced in most cities, is not the way to go about it.

The AFT's K-12 program and policy council has appointed a task force to help develop a "a full range of last-resort solutions for failing schools," as an alternative to reconstitution.

As the trend toward reconstitution picks up speed, meanwhile, education researchers have begun to advise that superintendents should begin to discuss more seriously among themselves what constitutes the effective and appropriate use of such a dire alternative.

Administrators, they say, should be prepared to discuss the importance of using defensible criteria for identifying targeted schools and of giving schools a reasonable chance to correct their problems before they are reconstituted.

Researchers say that the criteria that prompt reconstitution should be more clearly defined.

Even so, because, on its face at least, reconstitution appears to be a way to "start fresh" in schools with long records of problematic performance and because it also gives superintendents a high-profile way to "get tough" in failing schools, the reconstitution movement shows little sign of abating.

From Education Week's Archives

"Chicago Contract Revises Accountability Program," Dec. 9, 1998. A recently ratified teachers' contract in Chicago promises to make the next several Septembers as forgettable as the last few: no strikes, no heated picket lines, and no delayed school openings.

"A Mixed Record for Reconstitution Flashes a Yellow Light for Districts," July 8, 1998. They call it a reform of last resort, but last year at least half a dozen big districts resorted to it anyway. Reconstitution--the practice of restaffing a troubled school from scratch and starting over--seemed to be catching on. ✓

"Reconstitution Gaining New Momentum," Sept. 24, 1997. Once considered an act of near desperation, the practice of ousting most of a school's staff and starting over--known as reconstitution--is gaining currency. ✓

"At Two Cleveland Schools, Overhauls Mark a Dramatic Response to Desperate Times," Sept. 24, 1997. Parents at two of the first schools to be reconstituted in Cleveland claim that their schools were unfairly singled out for reconstitution and that the faculties were not given the opportunity to compensate for the schools' shortcomings.

"Arbitrator Rejects Overhaul Plan for 2 Philadelphia Schools," Aug. 6, 1997. The Philadelphia school district announced that it would move at least 75 percent of the faculty at two high schools to other jobs in an attempt to improve their flagging performance. The plan was rejected.

"In S.F. Reconstitutions, Rojas Softens the Blow," June 25, 1997. Every spring since 1994, the San Francisco school district has identified two or three schools for reconstitution. But this year, in contrast to earlier overhauls, the district gave the existing staffs a role in crafting the schools' blueprints for boosting achievement. The gambit was designed to partially blunt the intense anger that the radical restructuring process has aroused among rank-and-file teachers in the past.

"Staffs at 7 Chicago Schools To Be Overhauled," June 18, 1997. Hoping to breathe new life into chronically low-performing schools, Chicago education chief Paul G. Vallas announced that the school system would overhaul seven troubled high schools by requiring employees to reapply for their jobs.

"Six Suburban Schools in Md. To Be 'Reconstituted,'" June 11, 1997. Jerome Clark, the superintendent of the Prince George's County, Md., public schools this summer dramatically reorganized six schools and told employees--from principals to custodians--that they would have to reapply for their jobs in hopes of jump-starting their flagging schools' academic performance.

"S.F. Mulls Retreat From 'Reconstituting' Schools," May 28, 1997. In San Francisco, a pioneer in overhauling troubled schools by transferring their entire staffs, Superintendent Waldemar Rojas agreed to stop reconstituting schools for two years in exchange for an unusual promise from the local teachers' union: not to interfere with the forced transfers of teachers who impede school improvement plans.

"Denver Board Backs 'Reconstituting' Schools," Feb. 26, 1997. The Denver school board approved a plan to turn around poorly performing elementary schools by allowing Superintendent Irv Moskowitz to transfer teachers and administrators who don't pass muster. The plan quickly raised the ire of the local teachers' union.

On the Web

President Clinton, in an October 1997 statement on strategies for "Turning Around Low-Performing Public Schools," advocated reconstitution when other reform tactics fail. ✓

In her September 1997 syndicated newspaper column "Where We Stand," headlined "When a School Fails," Sandra Feldman, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, denounced reconstitution as "a simplistic response to a complicated problem." ✓

In his February 1997 State of American Education Address, "Putting Standards of Excellence into Action," U.S. Education Secretary Richard W. Riley argued that policymakers should consider reconstitution a possible alternative for restoring the effectiveness of troubled schools. ✓

Read the AFT's "Resolution on Redesigning Low-Performing Schools," in which Albert Shanker, the union's late president, called reconstitution "politically expedient, but educationally bankrupt." He argues instead that the steps needed to improve low-performing schools include establishing clear standards for academic performance; enforcing high standards of behavior; devising unambiguous criteria for identifying low-performing schools; addressing schools' needs individually; and involving the staff fully in any effort to improve performance.

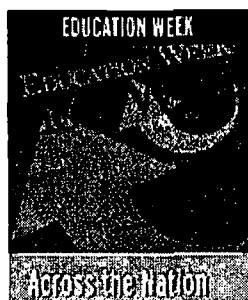
SUBSCRIBE	ABOUT THIS SITE	FEEDBACK	SEARCH THE SITE	JOBS	HOME
---------------------------	---------------------------------	--------------------------	---------------------------------	----------------------	----------------------

© 1999 Editorial Projects in Education

HRC Involvement/
Events and Columns

JULY 8, 1998

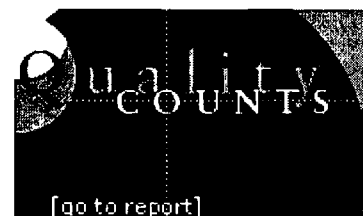
EDUCATION WEEK on the WEB


[IN CONTEXT](#) | [THE ARCHIVES](#) | [TEACHER MAGAZINE](#) | [THE DAILY NEWS](#) | [SPECIAL REPORTS](#) | [PRODUCTS & SERVICES](#)

A Mixed Record for Reconstitution Flashes a Yellow Light for Districts

By Caroline Hendrie

They call it a reform of last resort, but last year at least half a dozen big districts resorted to it anyway. Reconstitution--the practice of restaffing a troubled school from scratch and starting over--seemed to be catching on.



ducast
download now!

Read our story, "[Six Suburban Schools in Md. To Be 'Reconstituted,'](#)" June 11, 1997.

But this year, almost none of those districts is planning an encore. Even San Francisco, which has reconstituted 10 schools in the past four years, has returned the powerful accountability tool to the toolbox.

"Reconstitution can always come back, but the district and union are going to try a different way," said John R. Flores, San Francisco's coordinator of school intervention.

In Chicago, Cleveland, Denver, Philadelphia, and Prince George's County, Md., school and teachers' union leaders are singing a similar tune. All those districts reconstituted schools last year, or in Philadelphia's case, tried to. Now all are pursuing other strategies to shake up their low-performing schools--at least for the time being.

"[S.F. Mulls Retreat From 'Reconstituting' Schools,](#)" May 28, 1997.

"It's something that sets schools and teachers in such a tizzy," Philadelphia schools spokeswoman Barbara A. Grant said of reconstitution, "that you have to wonder if there's a less painful way to accomplish the same goal."

Outside of San Francisco, the overall effectiveness of such school makeovers has rarely been studied. But state and local policymakers continue to express strong interest in the strategy as they seek solutions to stubbornly poor performance in certain schools. So writing reconstitution off as yesterday's news would clearly be premature.

"[Denver Board Backs 'Reconstituting' Schools,](#)" Feb. 26, 1997.

Still, pressure to rethink the idea--which typically disperses much of a targeted school's staff to other jobs in the district--is coming from several fronts. In some districts, including Chicago and San Francisco, the practice has become a central issue in labor negotiations. In others, such as Cleveland and Philadelphia, adverse rulings in disputes with teachers' unions have forced school leaders to retrench. And the rocky time districts such as Prince George's County have had during their foray into reconstitution has sent them back to the drawing board.

But whatever the reasons for putting the practice on ice, no one is happier about it than local teachers' unions.

For background, previous stories, and Web links, see our [Issues Page on Reconstitution](#).

"Reconstitution is the Clint Eastwood approach to reforming schools," said Kent Mitchell, the president of the United Educators of San Francisco. "You just pull out a gun and blow them away."

Fresh Start Sought

Fresh Start Sought

The theory behind reconstitution is that some schools have been so dysfunctional for so long that the best hope for turning them around is to clean house and start over.

In practice, how districts have taken on that housecleaning process--and how well it seems to have worked--has varied widely. In some cases, virtually all employees have been reassigned, while in others the majority have successfully reapplied for their jobs after agreeing to cooperate in the turnaround effort.

Over the past decade, Atlanta, Houston, Milwaukee, Paterson, N.J., and San Antonio, among others, have resorted to some version of reconstitution. In San Francisco, the practice became institutionalized in recent years as part of a desegregation case.

As the hunger for high-impact accountability measures grew and the visibility of San Francisco's strategy rose, last year saw a spate of first-ever reconstitutions in cities around the country. ("Reconstitution Gaining New Momentum," Sept. 24, 1997.)

That officials in some of those districts are now having second thoughts should come as no surprise, said Gary A. Orfield, a Harvard University scholar who has studied San Francisco's reconstituted schools.

One problem, he said, is that some districts may have rushed into reconstitution as a seemingly straightforward--if radical--reform, without committing the proper time and resources to making it work. Another, he said, is that the negative effects--such as a loss of seasoned staff members to help mentor new recruits--are often quickly and painfully apparent.

"Your benefits don't come until three or four years down the road, but the costs are immediate, so it's very difficult politically," Mr. Orfield said. "What seems like a simple idea turns out when you do it to be a lot more complicated."

In Chicago, administrators used reconstitution for the first time last year, overhauling seven high schools as part of a broad crackdown on failing schools. This year, district leaders decided to hold off on any more, even though an advisory council urged them to shake up 15 more schools, either through reconstitution or similarly aggressive means.

"Last year, we felt very strongly that we had some schools that were showing continuous decline and that we had to do something radical," said Cozette Buckney, Chicago's chief academic officer. "Now we have an opportunity to look at what we did. Closing and opening so rapidly, to us, is not the best way to do it."

Ms. Buckney said the 430,000-student district is now negotiating with the city's affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers on an interim step between putting schools on probation and reconstituting them.

"There are many things we can do to address the deficiencies of students and staff without totally closing a school and starting all over again," she said.

Thomas H. Reece, the president of the Chicago Teachers Union, couldn't agree more.

"I do give them credit for, if not admitting publicly the mistakes that were done before, at least not doing them again," he said of the district's leadership.

Union Pushes Alternatives

Galvanized by reconstitution's rise in popularity, Mr. Reece's parent organization, the AFT, has launched a counteroffensive. It is portraying the practice, in the words of union President Sandra Feldman, as "a simplistic response to a complicated problem."

As part of that effort, the union last year produced a policy guide on redesigning failing schools that took sharp aim at San Francisco's brand of reconstitution. At the same time, it urged strong action against chronically low-performing schools and laid out the union's vision of how such intervention should take place.

The guide urged local unions "to ensure that teachers and other school staff are treated professionally, are involved in decisionmaking, and are part of the solution."

It also stressed the need to give schools support to improve on their own. And it said any intervention strategies should be based on solid measures of performance; provide thorough analysis of individual schools' problems; involve proven, research-based reforms; and commit sufficient resources for retooling teachers.

Some local union leaders are drawing on the AFT policy as they seek to influence intervention plans in their districts. Tom Mooney, a vice president of the national union and the chief of its Cincinnati affiliate, used the policy as a basis for a plan he is now discussing with officials there even though that city has yet to reconstitute any schools.

"I think this AFT policy is making sense to a lot of people," said Mr. Mooney, who was the chairman of the task force that produced the national union's policy. "It's very aggressive but more sensible and educationally sound than reconstitution."

In January, the AFT held a workshop in Miami for union and district officials from eight cities where intervention in failing schools had become a key issue.

For the Cleveland contingent, that retreat gave both sides a needed chance to air their differences, said Livesteen E. Carter, the district's chief academic officer. The experience helped lay the groundwork for an intervention plan agreed to last month that will give union officials a voice in identifying schools for potential reconstitution.

As a model for how unions and districts can collaborate to improve beleaguered schools, AFT leaders point to New York City.

Under New York's version of reconstitution, known as redesign, the protections afforded staff members are generally greater than in other districts where such shake-ups have taken place.

For example, half the staff at a redesigned school in New York must be drawn whenever possible from employees already in the school, with preference being given by seniority. Union members sit on the school-based committee that selects the new staff, and teachers who do wind up transferring out are given first priority elsewhere.

Interestingly, New York is the only one of last year's crop of districts engaged in some form of reconstitution that is doing so again this year.

Threat of Shake-ups Persists

But even as union leaders come forward with alternatives, some school officials are continuing to propose new accountability schemes that feature reconstitution. In recent months, for example, administrators in St. Louis; Columbus, Ohio; and Santa Ana, Calif., have put forward plans that feature reconstitution as a possible sanction for schools that fail to improve over time.

In other districts, including Los Angeles, Seattle, and the District of Columbia, administrators have launched high-profile efforts to improve low-performing schools that could end in reconstitution in the years ahead.

And among those districts that have resorted to reconstitution in the past, but have held off this year, the watchword is never say never. Philadelphia officials, for example, say they intend to keep a close eye on the performance data from the 13 schools on their watch list to make sure that forgoing reconstitution continues to make sense.

S.F. Shifts Gears

In San Francisco, the district most closely associated with reconstitution, no one is writing the policy off just yet.

But for the first time in five years, Superintendent Waldemar Rojas has no plans to reconstitute any schools.

Instead, union and school leaders are nearing final agreement on a plan to give schools more time to reform themselves before reconstitution would become an option. The plan draws liberally from the principles laid down in the AFT policy, said Mr. Mitchell, the head of the local union, a united affiliate of the AFT and the National Education Association.

San Francisco's first foray into reconstitution came in the 1980s in response to a federal desegregation case.

Then, in 1992, a court-approved agreement in the case actually required the 63,500-student district to reconstitute schools each year. That directive followed a report from a monitoring panel headed by Mr. Orfield that found higher achievement among black and Hispanic students in schools that had been reconstituted in the 1980s.

Critics say that those gains were due primarily to factors other than the restaffing and maintain that the 10 schools overhauled since 1994 have only a mixed record of improvement.

Nonetheless, some have shown strong signs of success, such as Visitation Valley Middle School, where Mr. Flores is principal. Since being reconstituted in 1994, the school's climate has improved markedly and test scores have risen consistently.

But now, Mr. Rojas said, "the focus is to spend a lot of time and energy revisiting the original reconstituted schools to ensure that they are building strong and solid academic bases."

The new approach being negotiated with the union would require local school councils made up of staff members, parents, and others to formulate improvement plans with measurable goals for student achievement.

At present, questions surrounding staff transfers remain under discussion.

Any final plan to put the brakes on reconstitution needs approval from the federal judge. Moreover, even Mr. Mitchell said he could envision times when its use would be justified "as a tool of absolute last resort."

Still, both he and Mr. Rojas seem convinced that the city is entering a new chapter in its push to improve schools.

"Reconstitution is not an event," Mr. Rojas said. "It is the beginning stage of a building process."

On the Web

In "When a School Fails," Sandra Feldman, American Federation of Teachers president, denounces reconstitution as "a simplistic response to a complicated problem."

Read "Turning Around Low-Performing Schools: A Guide for State and Local Leaders," from the Department of Education.

PHOTO: Students head for class last fall at Paul Revere Elementary School, one of the first schools in Cleveland to be reconstituted.

--Tony Dejak

SUBSCRIBE	ABOUT THIS SITE	FEEDBACK	SEARCH THE SITE	JOBS	HOME
---------------------------	---------------------------------	--------------------------	---------------------------------	----------------------	----------------------

© 1998 Editorial Projects in Education

Vol. 17, number 42, page 1, 17

The Educational Excellence for All Children Act of 1999

Title XI: General Provisions, Definitions, and Accountability

Title XI, Part A — General Provisions and Definitions

What's New

The Educational Excellence for All Children Act of 1999:

- Expands the authority of states and districts to consolidate administrative funds;
- Promotes continuing standards-based education reform by (1) encouraging the coordination of resources through the consolidated planning authority under which states and school districts may submit a single plan for ESEA and other formula grant programs and (2) ensuring that consolidated plans include the information needed to administer the programs they cover;
- Authorizes a consolidated state annual performance report to encourage the integration and coordination of resources, simplify reporting requirements, and hold states accountable for program performance;
- Clarifies that states must monitor school districts to ensure compliance with the requirements of ESEA programs;
- Expands the Secretary's authority to waive statutory requirements that obstruct reform;
- Authorizes the Secretary to develop performance indicators for ESEA programs, in consultation with states and consistent with the Results Act;
- Help states develop information management systems to improve the quality of data collected and use for program improvement and for reporting to the federal government under the Results Act;
- Promotes greater consultation among public and private school officials;
- Authorizes states to approve coordinated services applications under Title XI, rather than requiring these applications to be sent to the Secretary; and
- Updates the Education Flexibility Partnership Act of 1999 to conform to provisions of the Educational Excellence for All Children Act of 1999.

Title XI contains general provisions that govern the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) programs to facilitate program implementation and administration. These provisions include definitions, fiscal requirements, consolidated planning and reporting requirements, and authority for the Secretary to grant waivers.

What We've Learned

The Improving America's Schools Act, which reauthorized the ESEA in 1994, expanded the flexibility of states, districts, and schools in administering the ESEA programs. States, districts, and schools are taking advantage of this flexibility.¹

First, every state but one chose to submit a single, consolidated plan instead of separate plans for the majority of ESEA programs. In fiscal year 1996, administrative changes, including the consolidated plan, reduced paperwork requirements for states by more than 85 percent.²

Second, states, school districts, and schools are requesting waivers of statutory and regulatory requirements that hinder innovative education reform. As of September 1998, the U.S. Department of Education had received 630 waiver requests under the 1994 law from states, districts, and schools across the country. Roughly 85 percent of these waivers were either approved or withdrawn because applicants learned they had sufficient flexibility under the law to proceed without a waiver.³

The most popular waiver requests are for relief from the minimum poverty threshold to designate a schoolwide program under Title I and from the Title I targeting requirements (although the number of the latter waiver requests has declined steadily since 1994).⁴

Twelve states currently participate in the Ed-Flex Demonstration Program. A GAO study found that participating states varied in how frequently they used this authority, and in how effectively they monitored the effect of the waivers they provided.⁵

The Results Act of 1993 requires the Department of Education to provide annual performance indicators for each of its programs. However, the General Accounting Office and the Department of Education's Office of Inspector General have stressed the need for more accurate data from states.⁶

What We Propose

The Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 encouraged program coordination and increased local flexibility. The law now allows the consolidation of state and local administrative funds, the consolidation of program plans at the state and local levels, and waivers of statutory or regulatory requirements that might inhibit effective program operations.

To continue the successes of these reforms, the Educational Excellence for All Children Act of 1999 would:

- Maintain and expand the authority of states and school districts to consolidate administrative funds. To promote coordination among the ESEA programs, administrative funds under the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program and the Class-Size Reduction initiative would be added to the list of programs for which administrative funds may be consolidated. The proposal would also clarify that consolidated administrative funds may be used to carry out state activities under the Education Accountability Act, to implement the Cooperative Audit Resolution and Oversight Initiative, and to train personnel engaged in audit and monitoring.
- Update the recently enacted Education Flexibility Partnership Act of 1999 which permits states to waive selected requirements of ESEA programs. In order to ensure that expanded flexibility is accompanied by strong accountability, states would be required to meet the requirements of the Education Accountability Act in ESEA, as well as the Title I requirements regarding content and performance standards, assessments, and accountability.
- Strengthen the consolidated planning authority under which states may submit a single, consolidated plan for the ESEA and other formula grant programs by clarifying that the consolidated plan should be used to promote continuing standards-based education reform and to encourage the integration and coordination of resources. The consolidated plans are reducing states' administrative burdens and encouraging collaboration among state education programs. However, according to an early evaluation, state administrators are just beginning to learn how to

work together to maximize the consolidated plan's potential.⁷

To further promote effective consolidated planning, the proposal would clarify that:

- A key purpose of consolidated plans is to further standards-based reform and encourage the integration and coordination of ESEA resources within a state;
- The plan must describe how funds are integrated with those of other specified programs;
- States choosing to submit consolidated plans must comply with all legal requirements applicable to the programs covered by the consolidated plans;
- A new consolidated plan must be submitted for the new reauthorization cycle; and
- Both state and local consolidated plans must contain the information the Secretary needs to ensure the effective administration of programs included in the plan.

The proposal would also authorize the Secretary to use a peer review process to assist in the review of consolidated plans and require plan amendments to reflect changes identified in the review process.

- Provide for a consolidated state annual performance report to encourage the integration and coordination of resources, simplify reporting requirements, and obtain annual data on program performance. To further promote program coordination and ease of administration, states would include all programs in an annual consolidated performance report, instead of making separate reports for each program. The report would provide information on program operation and progress toward meeting performance indicators that can be used at both the state and federal level to continually improve the programs.
- Clarify that states must monitor the performance of school districts to ensure compliance with the requirements of ESEA programs. As the recipient of ESEA formula grants, states are responsible for ensuring that programs are carried out in accordance with the law. However, a review of state and school district audits by the Department of Education's Office of the Inspector General raised questions about whether states are carrying out this responsibility.⁸

The proposal would clarify that state educational agencies must monitor how school districts use ESEA funds. Monitoring would include proper documentation of oversight activities, technical assistance when necessary, and the examination of findings to identify trends and develop strategies for correcting problems.

- Expand the Secretary's waiver authority to include waivers of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act of 1998 and Title VII-B of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act. Under current law, the Secretary does not have the authority to waive the requirements of the McKinney Act. Although the Secretary has the authority to waive provisions of the Perkins Act under the Goals 2000: Educate America Act and the School-To-Work Opportunities Act, both of these laws expire soon. Our proposal would enable the Secretary to grant waivers for these two programs using the ESEA waiver authority, the authority under which waivers are most often requested.
- Authorize the Secretary to develop indicators of program performance, in consultation with states and consistent with the Government Performance and Results Act. The Results Act requires the Department of Education to provide annual performance indicators of progress for each of its programs. However, only three ESEA programs — Title I, Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities, and the Eisenhower grant program — currently require states and districts to develop and report performance indicators to the federal government.
- Improve the quality of program data available at the federal, state, and local level. Our proposal

would enable the Department of Education to help states develop information management systems. These systems would promote the integrity of the data to use for their own planning purposes and to report to the federal government under the Results Act. Our proposal also requires states to ensure that the data used to measure progress on program indicators are complete, reliable, and valid.

- Clarify the requirement for consultation among public and private school officials. Our proposal would clarify that the consultation must include meetings between school district and private school officials throughout the implementation and assessment of services. The meetings would take into account:
 - The amount of federal funds generated by low-income students who attend private schools; and
 - How and when the school district would decide the delivery of services to eligible students attending private schools.
- Authorize states to approve applications for Title XI coordinated services, rather than requiring these applications to be sent to the Secretary. If states choose not to review these applications, school districts would be able to operate coordinated services projects without submitting an application.

Title XI permits school districts to apply to the Secretary to use up to 5 percent of their ESEA funds to develop, implement, or expand a coordinated services project. Coordinated services projects improve the access of elementary and secondary school students and their families to comprehensive social, health, and education services to help students succeed in school.

Two states now have waivers to approve coordinated services applications. Our proposal would extend this authority to all states, without requiring waivers.

Title XI, Part B — The Education Accountability Act

What's New

The Education Accountability Act:

- Helps states and school districts turn around low-performing schools by encouraging states to develop a statewide accountability system to hold school districts and schools accountable for improved student performance;
- Holds states accountable for having student progress and promotion policy to ensure that students progress through school on a timely basis, master challenging state standards, and the practices of social promotion and traditional grade retention are ended;
- Helps ensure that classroom teachers are qualified and prepared to teach to high standards by requiring states to include, as part of its certification process for new teachers, an assessment of both subject-matter knowledge and teaching skills and by phasing out the use of teachers with emergency certificates and the practice of assigning teachers to teach subjects for which they lack adequate preparation;
- Ensures that all schools have sound school discipline policies that are focused on prevention and foster safe and orderly environments for learning; and
- Helps ensure that parents in all states have access to the information they need to evaluate the quality of their schools by requiring annual state, district, and school report cards that are distributed to all parents and the public. The report cards would include information on student achievement, teacher professional qualifications, class size, school safety, and, where appropriate, the academic achievement of ethnic and racial subgroups, to ensure accountability for helping all students achieve to high standards.

The Education Accountability Act builds on the foundation and purpose of standards-based reform: to improve academic achievement and help all students reach high standards by incorporating challenging state content and student performance standards into teacher practice and by enhancing school and student accountability for performance.

What We've Learned

About school accountability:

There is evidence that accountability tied to consequences is a motivating force in improving student achievement. Texas and North Carolina — two states recently recognized by the National Education Goals Panel for the most significant gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) as well as for progress on 33 indicators related to improving education — are also considered by *Education Week* to have the two most comprehensive state accountability systems in the nation. A recent study by Rand researchers concludes that the most plausible explanation for test score gains is the states' aligned system of standards, curriculum, and assessments, in combination with the states' efforts to hold schools accountable for improvement of *all* students. The accountability systems in both Texas and North Carolina assign ratings to schools and identify low-performing schools, reward successful schools, provide assistance to low-performing schools, and sanction for persistently failing schools.²

Identifying Low-Performing Schools

Procedures and standards for identifying low-performing schools are central to the state and district accountability systems mandated by Title I. For example:

- The Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS) established a baseline and academic goals for every Kentucky school through the year 2010. Schools that exceed the goals are eligible for financial awards. The lowest-performing schools, designated as "schools in crisis," are those where student performance declines by more than 5 percent of their baseline for two consecutive assessment cycles.
- San Francisco Unified School District uses nine performance indicators to identify low-performing schools, including the percentage of students who score below the 25th percentile on the district assessment; the numbers of suspensions, dropouts, and student absences in schools; the percentage of teachers who are long-term substitutes; and the number of students requesting open enrollment transfers out of certain schools.

Source: U.S. Department of Education. (May 1998). *Turning Around Low-Performing Schools*.

On social promotion and retention:

The problem of social promotion — the promotion of students from grade to grade when they are unprepared and have not yet met challenging academic standards — is a hidden but potentially large problem. Research indicates that 10 to 15 percent of 340,000 young adults who graduate from high school but have no further formal education cannot balance a checkbook or write a letter to a credit card company to complain about a bill.¹⁰ Although most teachers agree that promoting students who are unprepared is a burden for teachers and classmates and lowers standards, over half of teachers surveyed in a recent poll indicate that, in the past year, unprepared students in their school have been promoted.¹¹

Research evidence indicates that the most common alternative to social promotion — retention, or holding students back in grade — is often both ineffective and harmful. Studies of retention show that the achievement of retained students still lags behind that of their peers after repeating a grade. Retention in grade also greatly increases the likelihood that a student will drop out of school, and being held back twice makes dropping out a virtual certainty. Retention is more than twice as prevalent among boys as among girls, and more than twice as prevalent among African-American students as among white students.¹²

Research indicates that neither social promotion nor retention improves failing students' chances for educational success. Low-achieving students continue to be low achievers after being promoted, but most retained students never catch up with their peers. Social promotion and retention often have other serious effects on students. The National Association of School Psychologists has reported that unprepared and retained children tend to have low self-esteem, get into trouble, and dislike school. Retention can be a particularly traumatic experience for children who view it as punishment and a highly stressful event.¹³

While a growing number of states and local school districts are implementing new promotion policies designed to end social promotion, greater attention must be paid to ways of helping educators and students avoid confronting two clearly unsound options: promoting or retaining and unqualified student. This requires a comprehensive approach that includes clear standards for performance, well-prepared teachers, early identification and intervention for students who need extra assistance, after-school and summer programs for students who are not making progress to meet the standards, and intensive intervention with appropriate instructional strategies for students who do not meet promotion standards on time.

Boston's Policy to End Social Promotion

- Beginning in summer 1999, summer school is available for students who have not met promotion requirements by the end of grades 2, 5, and 8.
- Students in grades 5 and 8 who have already been retained for one year and who do not meet promotion requirements to grades 6 and 9 must attend a special transition program to boost skills.
- Students can only have three unexcused absences per marking period or they will receive no credit, unless they pass the final exam for the course.
- Starting with the class of 2002, all students must take and pass advanced algebra.

On interventions for students at-risk of failing to meet standards:

Participation in high-quality learning environments that build on the regular school day, such as after-school extended learning programs, can improve children's academic and social development. Research has shown that students who participate in after-school programs exhibit higher achievement in reading, math, and other subjects compared with their own past performance and with the performance of comparable students who did not participate in such a program.¹⁴

Summer Bridge Program: The Chicago Public Schools

Chicago has adopted a rigorous student promotion policy that requires underachieving students in grades 3, 6, 8, and 9 to complete a summer school program before being promoted to the next grade. Students who do not meet designated minimum scores on the district's standardized tests or who fail reading or math must successfully complete a six or seven week summer remediation program. All ninth-graders who miss more than 20 days of school or fail to earn the required core credits also are required to attend the summer-school programs. Students who fail the summer programs are held back and required to participate in the district's Lighthouse program, which provides students with academic assistance after school. Eighth-graders over the age of 15 who fail to reach grade level after the summer program are assigned to an alternative school.

On teacher quality:

Good teaching matters. A recent report released by the Education Trust presents research that substantiates the belief that teachers make a difference in student achievement and that the effects of good teachers on student performance are long-lived. Findings from studies in Tennessee, Dallas, and Boston reveal that, whatever their background or disadvantages, students taught by effective teachers achieved substantially larger gains than students taught by less effective teachers. For example, the average reading scores of a group of fourth-graders in Dallas assigned to three highly effective teachers rose from the 59th percentile to the 76th percentile by grade 6. A slightly higher achieving group taught by less effective teachers fell from the 60th percentile in grade 4 to the 42nd percentile in grade 6.¹⁵

Research also reveals a troubling picture of the state of our nation's teaching force. According to the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, one of the most important factors in improving student achievement is the knowledge and skills that teachers bring to the classroom. Yet every year, approximately 50,000 individuals teach on "emergency" certificates, which means they do not meet the standards the state has set for certification. In addition, numerous teachers teach subjects for which they lack adequate preparation, with fully one quarter of secondary school teachers lacking even a minor in their main teaching field. Students in schools with the highest concentrations of poverty - those

who often need the most help from the best teachers - are most likely to be in classrooms with teachers who are not fully qualified. For example, in schools with the highest minority enrollment, students have a less than 50 percent chance of having a math or science teacher with a license and degree in the field.¹⁶

On discipline policies:

While recent data show a declining school crime rate, school disruption remains an important issue for educators. Between 1991 and 1997, significantly more school principals identified student tardiness, absenteeism, class cutting, drug use, sale of drugs on school grounds, and verbal abuse of teachers as serious or moderate problems in their schools. Surveys of the American public reveal that citizens are concerned about teaching children values and discipline, and keeping drugs away from schools.¹⁷

Effective Discipline Policies Marshall Middle School, Texas

Marshall Middle School in Houston, Texas, turned its undisciplined environment around using a program called Consistency Management and Cooperative Discipline, which seeks to improve instruction by building self-discipline among students. The idea is that as students become citizens of their schools, they begin to take responsibility for their actions and the actions of others. As the discipline referral and absenteeism rates at Marshall declined, student achievement and instructional time increased. By not having to respond to so many disciplinary problems, each teacher gained an average of 30 extra minutes a day - the equivalent of an extra 15 days of instruction per year. In 1995-96 Marshall Middle School was removed from district and state lists of low-performing schools.

Research suggests that discipline policies that protect students and staff from disruptive behavior, promote pride and respect, and hold students accountable without being oppressive or unfair can contribute to feelings of self-worth and high morale.¹⁸ Safe, orderly classrooms mean fewer distractions for teachers and students so that more time can be spent on academic tasks.

On public reporting on school performance:

Thirty-six states now issue school-level report cards. Yet a recent Education Week report indicates that the information included in school report cards varies widely across states and districts. Most report cards do not clearly indicate the relationship between various indicators and achievement scores. The report also found that report cards are being used to a limited extent to rate low-performing schools, compare school performance to other schools in the state, or inform parents and the public about school performance.¹⁹ Another analysis of early school report cards indicates that they tend to include "input measures" that described the characteristics of schools, rather than measures of quality or performance.²⁰

Research shows that report cards on state, district, and school performance may not be distributed widely enough. In focus groups held around the country, most parents and taxpayers said they had never seen a report card on individual public schools in their communities. Many school report cards do not include information that parents and the public say they need to evaluate schools.²¹

School Report Cards: What Do Parents Really Want to Know?

A recent study on school report cards by *Education Week* examined what parents, taxpayers, and educators say they need to know to make schools more accountable for results. Parents rated the following as the top 10:

- School safety
- Teacher qualifications
- Class sizes
- Graduation rates
- Dropout rates
- Statewide test scores
- Parent survey data
- SAT scores
- Percentage of students promoted to the next grade
- Attendance rates

What We Propose

The Education Accountability Act would:

- Help states and districts turn-around low-performing schools. Each state would be required to set aside 2.5 percent of its Title I allocation to strengthen state and local capacity to turn around low-performing schools. This set-aside would increase to 3.5 percent in the 2003-04 school year. At least 70 percent of these funds would go to districts to turn around low-performing schools. The remainder would be used to fund a state support system to improve schools and districts.

This set-aside would provide more funds for swift, intensive intervention such as expert consultation and in-depth teacher training in schools and districts identified as being in need of improvement, and for stronger corrective actions in schools and districts that fail to show improvement after initial interventions.

Funds would first be used in consistently low-performing schools and school districts to implement strong corrective actions that dramatically alter the structure of schools and the instructional strategies to help students in the school or school district. Districts would take at least one of the following corrective actions: (1) implementing a new curriculum that is research-based and offers substantial promise of improving student achievement; (2) redesigning or reconstituting the school, including reopening it as a charter school; or (3) closing the school and allowing its students to transfer. In all instances of corrective action, districts may also allow students the option of transferring to a new school.

Funds would then be used in low-performing schools or districts that have been identified as being in need of improvement where funds would be used to provide swift, intensive intervention such as expert consultation and in-depth teacher training.

- Assist all students in meeting challenging state standards. Our proposal would hold states and school districts accountable for helping all students progress through school and graduate having mastered the challenging material needed for them to meet high standards. States will be required

to put policies in place that require school districts to (1) implement research-based prevention and early intervention strategies to identify and support students who might need additional help meeting challenging standards; (2) provide all students with learning opportunities in classrooms with qualified teachers who use proven instructional practices tied to challenging state standards; and, (3) provide continuing, intensive and comprehensive educational interventions to students who are not meeting standards on a timely basis.

- Develop first-rate student progress and promotion policies to end the practices of social promotion and traditional grade retention. With educational supports in place to help students meet high standards, our proposal would require states to implement policies to end practices of social promotion and grade retention within four years. States would hold school districts accountable for ensuring that all students meet challenging standards at key transition points or graduating from high school. States would define the three key transition points (e.g., fourth grade and eighth grade), but would be required to include high school graduation as one of the transition points. States would be held accountable for ensuring that assessments used for purposes of promotion are aligned with the state's standards; use multiple measures, including teacher evaluations; offer multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate that they can meet the standards; are valid and reliable for the purposes for which they are being used; and provide reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities and limited English proficient students.
- Place qualified teachers in all classrooms by ending the practices of hiring emergency certified teachers and asking teachers to teach classes out of their subject expertise. Our proposal would help ensure that classroom teachers are qualified and prepared to teach to high standards by requiring states to include as part of its certification process for new teachers, an assessment of both subject-matter knowledge and teaching skills. In addition, it would phase out the use of teachers with emergency certificates and the practice of assigning teachers to subjects for which they lack adequate preparation.

Our proposal would require states to ensure that, within four years, at least 95 percent of their teachers are (1) fully-certified, (2) working toward full certification through an alternative route, or (3) are fully-certified in another state and working toward meeting any state-specific requirements. In addition, states would be required to ensure that at least 95 percent of secondary school teachers have had academic training or demonstrated competence in the subject area in which they teach.

- Implement sound discipline policies to ensure a safe, orderly, and drug-free learning environment in every school. Our proposal would require states to hold school districts and schools accountable for discipline policies that focus on prevention, are consistent and fair, and were developed with the participation of the school community. States would also be required to ensure that schools have a plan to help students who are expelled or suspended continue to meet the challenging state standards.
- Promote public awareness and accountability through school, district, and state report cards. Our proposal would help ensure that parents in all states have access to the information they need to evaluate the quality of their schools by requiring state, district, and school-level annual report cards that go to parents and the public. The report cards would include information on student achievement, teacher professional qualifications, class size, school safety, and, where appropriate, the academic achievement of subgroups of students — including ethnic and racial subgroups, students with limited English proficiency, and students with disabilities — to ensure accountability for helping all students achieve to high academic standards. States, school districts, and schools would be required to have these policies in place within one year.
- Provide support for states to meet these requirements and implement sanctions for states that persistently fail. If a state does not meet the requirements under the Education Accountability Act, the Secretary of Education could provide assistance and require an alternative action plan. If states continue to fail to implement these accountability provisions, the Secretary would have the authority to take actions such as terminating the states' administrative flexibility or withholding

administrative funds.

Notes

¹ U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary. (1999). *Federal education legislation enacted in 1994: An evaluation of implementation and impact*. Washington, DC: Author.

² U.S. Department of Education. (April, 1997). *Unpublished tabulation*.

³ U.S. Department of Education. (1998). *Waivers: Flexibility to Achieve High Standards Report to Congress on Waivers Granted Under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act*. Washington, DC: Author.

⁴ U.S. Department of Education. (1998). *Waivers: Flexibility to Achieve High Standards Report to Congress on Waivers Granted Under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act*. Washington, DC: Author.

⁵ General Accounting Office (1998). *Ed Flex States Vary in Implementation of Waiver Process*, Report to the Chairman, Committee on Education and the Workforce, U.S. House of Representatives. Washington, DC: Author.

⁶ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Inspector General. (1998). *Moving towards a results-oriented organization*. Washington, DC: Author. General Accounting Office. (1998, June 9). *The Results Act: Observations on the Department of Education's fiscal year 1999 annual performance plan*. Washington, DC: Author.

⁷ U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary. (1999). *Federal education legislation enacted in 1994: An evaluation of implementation and impact*. Washington, DC: Author.

⁸ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Inspector General. (February, 1999). *An OIG Perspective on the Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act*.

⁹ Grissmer, D., & Flanagan, A. (1998). *Exploring rapid achievement gains in North Carolina and Texas*. Washington DC: National Education Goals Panel. Quality counts 1999: Rewarding results, punishing failure. (1999, January 11). *Education Week*, 18, p. 17.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (1992). *National adult literacy survey*. Washington DC: Author.

¹¹ American Federation of Teachers. (1997). *Passing on failure: District promotion policies and practices*. Washington DC: Author.

¹² For more on the effects of retention see Woodward, S., & Kimmey, T. (1997). *The impact of repeating a grade: A review of research in the 90's*. Occasional Paper No. 25, 1997. University of Maine, Center for Research and Evaluation.

¹³ National Association of School Psychologists. (1996). *Should my child repeat a grade?* Bethesda, MD: Author. National Association of School Psychologists (1988). *Position statement: Student grade retention*. Bethesda, MD: Author.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Justice. (1998). *Safe and smart: Making after-school hours work for kids*. Washington, DC: Author.

¹⁵ Haycock, K. (1998). *Good teaching matters*. Washington DC: Education Trust.

¹⁶ Darling-Hammond, L. (1997). *Doing what matters most: Investing in quality teaching*. Kutztown, PA: National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Justice. (1999). *Annual Report on School Safety: 1998*. Washington DC: Author. Barton, P., Coley, R., & Wenglinsky, H. (1998). *Order in the classroom: Violence, discipline and student achievement*. Princeton: Educational Testing Service. *U.S. News and World Report*. (1997).

¹⁸ Moles, O. (1999). *Effective discipline policies: What research shows*. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education. Duke, D., & Canady, R. (1991). *School policy*. New York: McGraw-Hill. Cooperman, S. (1990). *Commissioner's report to the Education Committee of the Senate and General Assembly on violence and vandalism in the public schools*. Trenton: New Jersey Department of Education.

¹⁹ Quality counts 1999: Rewarding results, punishing failure. (1999, January 11). *Education Week*, 18.

²⁰ Southern Regional Education Board. (1998). *Getting results: A fresh look at school accountability*. Atlanta: Author. P. 16.

²¹ Quality counts 1999: Rewarding results, punishing failure. (1999, January 11). *Education Week*, 18. -###-

[Title X, Part J — National Writing Project]



[Stewart B. McKinney Homeless

Assistance Act

Education for Homeless Children and Youth]

This page last modified May 26, 1999 (pjk)

NEA/AFT



HOME
SEARCH
FEEDBACK

QUICK CLICKS

* PUBLIC EDUCATION * STUDENTS * TEACHING * SCHOOLS
* PARTNERSHIPS * ABOUT NEA * PARENTS * NEWS * ISSUES

[Table of Contents](#)

[Archives](#)

[Submit a Letter to
the Editor](#)

[Share a Story Idea](#)

[Change Your
Address](#)

[Join Our Mailing
List](#)

[Meet the Editorial
Advisory Board](#)

[About NEATO](#)

[NEA Home Page](#)

NEAToday Online ^{TOPIC}

Inside Scoop Can Reconstitution Fix Failing Schools?

Fueled by a widespread get-tough attitude toward chronically low-performing schools, states and districts across the country are taking a drastic step in an attempt to turn these schools around. It's called "reconstitution."

A definition.

At its most drastic, "reconstitution" means disbanding a school's faculty and reopening the building with a new staff, structure, and curriculum. This final, radical step is often—but not always—preceded by a phased-in process that offers time and resources for improvement.

Most often, when schools reach the last stage, teachers can reapply for their jobs or seek positions elsewhere in the district.

At least 23 states have policies for intervening and requiring major changes in low-performing schools. Seventeen states have handed down this authority to the districts.

How's a school targeted for reconstitution?

Policies differ from state to state, but schools are usually targeted based on poor student performance on large-scale assessment tests.

An NEA survey of educators in the midst of reconstitution indicates strong sentiment for the criteria to include "multiple measures of school performance, not a single test score." Survey results also show that criteria should be well defined and communicated to staff, students, and parents far in advance of any state or district action.

What's the verdict on reconstitution?

In the NEA survey, the majority of educators felt that reconstitution could help ailing schools under some

circumstances. But just as many were angry with its implementation.

More than one-quarter of the educators surveyed who've experienced reconstitution were unaware their schools had been pinpointed as low-performing—and 22 percent said their school shake-up came as “a complete shock.”

Teachers in schools reconstituted by districts, as opposed to states, were much more likely to characterize the process as “arbitrary, chaotic, and irrational.”

Cay Spitzer, a third grade teacher at John Adams Elementary in Colorado Springs, Colorado, would agree with that assessment. The staff at Adams had developed a school improvement plan and had just returned from a productive day-long writing workshop in 1997 when word came from district officials that all staff—from the crossing guards to the principal—had to reapply for their jobs.

“None of us had quarrels with the fact that there needed to be changes,” says Spitzer. “But I’d have thought the district would have found out what we were doing before they came in and said, ‘You’re doing it wrong and we’re going to change it.’”

Only three out of 30 staff members returned to Adams. Most didn’t even bother to reapply.

So, what's a good alternative to reconstitution?

In Kentucky, the process for improving schools concentrates on building the “capacity” for success among teachers, students, and administrators.

The state has allocated millions to make this work. And the money and expert guidance that have flowed into schools can make a dramatic difference, says Steve Moats, a veteran teacher and Kentucky Education Association board member.

For two years, Moats has worked as a “distinguished educator,” trained to help schools in crisis put themselves back on the road to success.

These schools get at least two years of full-time assistance and as much as \$100,000. And all teachers and administrators undergo extensive evaluations.

“No one has ever lost their job because of their evaluation,” says Moats, and Kentucky hasn’t resorted to completely restaffing any school.

“It’s punitive to split up a staff,” Moats adds. “It makes more sense to work with what you’ve got and improve the teaching.”

Moats has found that “in most schools, the problem is a lack of focus.” He helps staff develop strategies and long-term

plans to figure out how to get where they want to be.

One key is "making sure teachers are teaching what the kids are being tested on," says Moats. This means emphasizing writing skills—critical to success on the open-ended questions on state assessments.

What are the results so far?

In Kentucky, test scores are improving—a success that Moats attributes to the state's alternative approach to low-performing schools.

In the NEA survey, most members reported that reconstitution brought extra assistance and professional development opportunities. But only 46 percent said their schools saw improvement in achievement.

In Colorado Springs, reconstitution hasn't brought lots of resources, new programs, or even benchmark goals from the district, says Cay Spitzer. She believes student achievement is on the rise—but credits a "determined" staff and a community that became more involved after being shut out of the reconstitution decision.

According to the Education Commission of the States, evidence is definitely lacking on the effects of reconstitution. One study calls academic progress—at least as measured by standardized test scores—"uneven" in reconstituted schools.

But reconstitution "can send a message that state and district policy makers will not tolerate chronic student failure," the study notes. "In so doing, reconstitutions may put pressure on educators to re-evaluate their efforts."

Where does NEA stand?

Educators want to be sure that the process has validity—that there's some chance of helping the schools to improve," says NEA staffer Jacques Nacson.

NEA's approach includes focusing on resources and programs to keep low-performing schools from sinking to the point of total reconstitution.

Nacson adds that states need to set benchmarks that recognize a school's steady and continuous improvement. "If the benchmarks aren't realistic," he notes, "what's the point?"

Some states and districts consider reconstitution a "magic bullet," he warns. "They say, 'Just get tough, and education is going to improve.'"

"Reconstitution won't work unless the process is used judiciously—as a way to offer technical and other assistance—to improve schools," says Nacson. "It's not a matter of passing the legislation and then moving on to something else."

Going, Going, Gone

School districts and states nationwide are using rewards and sanctions—including the threat of reconstitution—to turn around low-performing schools. Reconstitution typically is introduced through three stages:

Stage 1:
A notice

A low-performing school is given notice that it's eligible for reconstitution.

Stage 2:
A warning with consequences

A school is given a deadline for improvement.

Stage 3:
Reconstitution

A school district or state decides to disband a school and replace all staff.

For More Information

- *Reconstituting Low-Performing Schools and the Role of the Union in School Improvement*, a new report from NEA, is now available in PDF format at www.nea.org/teaching/trends07.pdf.
- *Turning Around Low-Performing Schools: A Guide for State and Local Leaders*, a free publication from the U.S. Department of Education, is available by calling 877/433-7827. Or visit the Web at www.ed.gov/pubs/turning.
- *State Takeovers and Reconstitutions*, a policy brief from the Education Commission of the States, is available on the Web at www.ecs.org.

nea

1201 16TH STREET, NW
WASHINGTON, DC 20036
202.833.4000



HOME
SEARCH
FEEDBACK

QUICK
CLICKS

* PUBLIC EDUCATION * STUDENTS * TEACHING * SCHOOLS
* PARTNERSHIPS * ABOUT NEA * PARENTS * NEWS * ISSUES

Table of Contents

Stepping Forward - Redesigning Schools Reconstituting Low-Performing Schools

Arkansas

Statewide. The Arkansas Education Association's Academic Distress Task Force is preparing a workshop and other materials to help teachers understand the school reconstitution process. Focusing on student achievement and teacher quality, the task force aims to help educators recognize the warning signs so they can help prevent their school from becoming a reconstitution target.

California

San Diego. The San Diego Education Association helped create a district accountability report to assess school performance. The system identifies low-performing schools and establishes procedures and resources to help them improve. The report covers all levels and all schools. Teachers appointed by the Association and administrators named by the district developed the criteria for judging school performance. They are both involved in evaluations and recommendations.

Colorado

Colorado Springs. In 1996, the Colorado Springs Education Association joined with the school district in reconstituting two local elementary schools with poor academic performance. District officials closed the schools, then reopened them with a new staff and a new focus on student achievement. Teachers at the two schools were given the option of reapplying for their jobs or transferring to another school in the district. To ensure student success at the reconstituted schools, CSEA is working with the school district to provide funding, supplies, and additional staff.

Denver. The Denver Classroom Teachers Association is working alongside the school district to set up a reconstitution process for struggling schools. The two groups have formed an Effective Schools Committee to identify schools that need help-and are working together to find the best ways to phase

in a redesign and improvement plan. Two elementary schools in Denver already have undergone the process; a report on their progress is due in March 1999.

North Carolina

Statewide. The North Carolina Association of Educators' Center for Teaching and Learning works with assistance teams assigned to 11 low-performing schools in the state. Each team is made up of a liaison from the state department of public instruction and NCAE members from the area. Each team helps its school conduct appraisals and needs assessments, then works with local teachers, administrators, and school boards to recommend, help implement, and monitor improvement plans covering everything from discipline to school-based management.

nea

1201 16TH STREET, NW
WASHINGTON, DC 20036
202.833.4000



TRENDS

ISSUES IN URBAN EDUCATION

Number 7, November 1998

THIS TRENDS—our seventh issue—summarizes an intense three-hour roundtable discussion about the national tendency to “fix” low-performing schools by reconstitution (formally closing a school and reopening it with largely new staff), as well as the union’s evolving role in fostering school improvement. The roundtable was held on June 29, 1998, as part of the annual NCUEA meeting in New Orleans.

This issue of TRENDS grows naturally out of several previous issues that described roundtables on school and educator accountability. As in previous TRENDS roundtables, participants drew on their experiences in their local districts to advocate new roles and responsibilities for the union. Two questions shaped the discussion:

How does the Association play a proactive role in improving school quality, even when this conflicts with traditional advocacy norms, such as ensuring the best assignments for the most experienced teachers?

How does the Association strengthen the capacity of members to analyze the performance of their own schools, and to evaluate school improvement models, as well as help generate their own strategies for turning schools around?

RECONSTITUTING LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS, AND THE ROLE OF THE UNION

To raise academic achievement in American public schools, states across the nation are raising course requirements and developing standards for student achievement. They have also begun to identify those schools and districts that either meet and surpass state achievement standards, or are considered inadequate or failing.

Some states offer rewards to schools whose performance is at the high end. North Carolina, for example, awards \$1,000 per professional in those schools that exceed the state’s goals by 10 percent.

Other states simply identify and sanction those schools with declining or chronically low test scores. In Florida, for example, a school is identified as “critically low performing” if a third of the 4th grade students fail to score above the 30th percentile in reading and math. While state or district announcements of low-performing schools are themselves meant to bootstrap improvement, identification is often accompanied by assistance and support. New York State places those schools that are farthest from state standards under Registration Review; during the next three years, after which they may be closed, the schools receive a variety of supports to help create stronger instructional programming. In North Carolina, if a school has less than 50 percent of the students operating at grade level, it is deemed to be low-performing, and the 15 lowest

performing schools in the state receive visiting assistance teams.

Where schools fail to improve (as in New York, this is generally after a specified period), reconstitution—that is, formally closing the school and reopening it with a largely new staff—has become a popular but politically charged policy. Reconstitution offers state education departments and/or district superintendents a dramatic “quick fix.” As a roundtable participant described it, the officials “clean house from top to bottom, from administration all the way down to the teachers.” In fact, in some schools, the reconstitution process has included changing custodial and kitchen staff.

DEVELOPING COMMON AGREEMENT ABOUT THE STANDARDS FOR IDENTIFICATION, AS WELL AS THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROCESS

The identification of schools as low-performing, assistance in school turnaround, and school reconstitution are all occurring with varied degrees of understanding and participation by school staff, parents, and the school community. While in some districts, the standards for identification are generally clear, in others school staff and parents neither fully understand how well or

poorly their school is performing or the basis upon which it is being evaluated. Similarly, although state or district pressure to improve a school can be prompted by concerned parents and other citizens, this concern does not always ensure that the school improvement intervention will be one they choose. A participant whose school had recently been reconstituted described the process in her district. "Well, the test scores came out, and my principal went to a meeting, and when she came in the next morning, she held an emergency staff meeting to let us know that it was going to be on the news that morning. Until then, she hadn't even known it was going to be reconstituted. And two days later we got a visit from the state." Teachers in the building were told the last day of school that they were "unassigned" and should look for another job, and the union was informed after the fact.

However, in a number of districts, active union involvement has helped to create a more rational process in which there is a good deal of advance discussion by all stakeholders. In San Diego, an accountability plan was developed collaboratively by the San Diego Teachers Association, the school board, and the community over a two-year period. Identification of low-performing schools is now based on lack of progress, not absolute scores. Moreover, the district uses a variety of accountability measures to assess every school at two-year intervals and gives schools eight years to reach an agreed-upon standard. As important, the SDTA has helped shift the accountability focus from sanctions to supporting the schools in their attempts to improve student achievement.

THE PERILS OF RECONSTITUTION

"There is little or no research support for the variations in reconstitution that have been practiced. Yet it seems to be on everybody's table."

School reconstitution is a dramatic step, meant to reassure the public that the state and district are ready to take serious measures to raise student achievement. For a superintendent, reconstitution offers the chance to remove those teachers and administrators assumed to be causing the problem. And for the general public, reopening a school, with a new principal and a largely new teaching staff, provides the reassuring image of a fresh start.

The reality of reconstitution, however, is both more complicated and less positive. Most important, when a school is reconstituted all the teachers are stigmatized, regardless of their quality or how well their own classrooms achieve. At the same time, the newly reconstituted school is likely to suffer from the same inadequate resources (including curriculum) and poor professional development, while being staffed with less experienced teachers and administrators. Not surprisingly, school performance is often worse the year after reconstitution, and schools continue to

struggle for a couple of years after that as they regain their balance from the trauma of reconstitution.

San Francisco, where reconstitution was first practiced 15 years ago, provides an interesting example of how the strategy can fare quite differently, depending on available resources. In 1983, as part of a desegregation plan, the city reconstituted six schools. The schools received 32 million dollars, a mix of new and experienced teachers was hired, and instructional programs were carefully developed through an enormous amount of planning. Although the schools were not immediately excellent, they were places students wanted to attend, and by 1992, they were high-performing. That year, when the courts revisited the consent decree, they gave the district permission to reconstitute up to three schools a year—except that this time there was no 32 million dollars and no planning. Over the next several years, seven schools were reconstituted. And by 1997, when it had become clear to the district that reconstituted schools were "marginally worse off," the union and district entered into an agreement to rethink the district's school improvement strategy.

The problem of reconstituted schools opening with inexperienced teachers is universal. Obviously, districts would like to staff these schools with certified and experienced teachers. However, the more senior teachers previously in the school generally do not reapply, either out of exhaustion or because they are not interested in working under the extreme tension and surveillance that reconstitution implies. For example, in Hillsborough, Florida, where teachers could choose to stay in a reconstituted school, the more active and senior teachers had been involved in developing a curriculum that was being abandoned. Thus, only 6 out of 70 teachers stayed. In Prince George's County, Maryland, teachers and administrators had to reapply to work in six reconstituted schools, called "Twenty-First Century Schools." Although only one administrator and no teachers were allowed to return, the school was unable to find other staff until the last minute, and then the teachers hired were largely new and uncertified.

Finally, it is important to notice that, so far, the only schools that have been reconstituted are those serving low-income children of color. That is, the reconstitution experiment is being tried on the very students who are most vulnerable and who have already suffered from inadequate schooling.

MOVING THE FOCUS FROM SANCTION TO SUPPORT

"We have to make sure that any schools that get selected are schools that are in trouble, yes, but the whole model is built on providing support for those schools so there is no, 'Got ya!'"

Most state and district strategies to improve low-performing schools have focused on the teaching and adminis-

trative staff, and many have been quite punitive. For example, in North Carolina, principals who have been at the helm for more than two years prior to their schools being identified as low-performing are automatically suspended; they must go before the state board of education to explain the school's performance. Teachers are threatened with a test of general knowledge at the end of the year.

However, schools identified as low-performing have generally been languishing for some time, in part because they haven't received the necessary resources and assistance. As a roundtable participant argued, "Our teachers are not getting the support they need to be successful. And if teachers aren't successful, there's no way in the world the children are going to succeed."

Clearly, the new and inexperienced teachers who staff low-performing schools need both training and support. But more experienced teachers also need both incentives and assistance, if they are to agree to help improve these distressed schools. Understanding this, the unions have moved to take greater control of the school improvement process—to shift the process from punishment to incentives and support.

THE ROLE OF THE UNION

"The union ought to be saying just as loud and just as strongly as any other entity—superintendent, legislators, parents, or whatever—that we cannot sit by as professionals and continue to watch certain schools just flounder, whatever the reason."

Union involvement both in the improvement of low-performing schools and the reconstitution process has ranged widely across the country. In some districts, the association has played a traditional role, fighting to keep a particular school off the list, or devoting its energies to assisting faculty displaced by reconstitution. A participant explained the difficulties of the latter position. "The union's role was generally to deal with the horror of vacating the faculty—which was pretty bad news. It could be very traumatic. The trouble was, we were seen by the public as caring only about the welfare of teachers, a pretty bad place to be."

In the belief that public education must be strong if it is to thrive, both the national associations and union locals have begun to play a strong positive role in school improvement. This begins by taking a "tough [stance] in no longer pretending that the problem is less serious than it really is," as one participant put it.

At best, being proactive means becoming part of a collaborative team to develop the district's accountability system, and widening the circle of accountability. As a participant explained it, "When I want something from the district that they don't necessarily want to give up, I always say, 'Take away our excuses! Let us make the decisions, and we'll be held accountable. Because if you don't,

we've still got you to blame.'" In San Francisco, this widened circle of accountability means an agreement between the union and the district that includes three legs: school performance, teacher performance, and student performance. In San Diego, the accountability system involves an external review group consisting of 50 percent non-district personnel. This group rates everyone, including the superintendent, the school board, the principal, the teachers, the students, and the parents. (Despite several San Diego schools being identified failures, of all the groups rated, teachers received the highest and principals the second-highest ratings.)

In Cincinnati, the accountability system involves several key steps:

- Developing objective criteria for identifying schools in distress;
- Creating a guided or facilitated self-assessment and an external, credible, expert audit to get at the causes of the schools' problems;
- Allowing school staff, along with parents and other community representatives, to select or create a self-improvement process.

Association participation on school improvement teams has also meant creating union contracts that give members control over improving the schools—along with helping to provide professional development aimed at giving members the tools they need to improve their practice.

In Seattle, where the union has been increasingly involved in the school improvement process, a Trust Agreement was created between the Seattle Education Association and the Seattle School District. This agreement commits both parties to a collaborative partnership focused on providing "the best possible learning environment for students." It also moves school improvement to the school level, strengthening site-based decision-making. For example, Focus Schools (low-performing schools) have School Leadership teams that develop a plan for action, including a three-year schedule of recommended supports and/or interventions.

GAINING CONTROL OF SCHOOL-BASED DATA

"I don't think when a school is identified as low-performing it comes as a surprise to anyone in the district. But the Association needs to help its members look at the information they have available, either through test scores or self-assessments, to do something proactive rather than reactive."

Union participation in the school improvement process in several cities has also meant beginning to help school staff conduct their own internal reviews and assess their own data. In Seattle, the union has supported the creation of an annual review of every Seattle school on a variety of criteria, including academic achievement, discipline, atten-

dance, attracting and retaining students, survey information, and successful school completion. Because low-performing schools may be camouflaged by generally high-performing districts, and groups of low-performing students may be camouflaged by generally high-performing schools, the San Diego Teachers Association has worked to disaggregate data both within the district and within the school.

CREATING GOOD SCHOOLS AND DRAWING EXPERIENCED TEACHERS

"Until they reach a point where there is some real site-based decision-making—where the teachers really have input into the program, what their needs are and what the children need in those buildings—nothing is going to change."

Traditionally, the union has avoided interfering in teacher assignments. However, involvement in school improvement has prompted some locals to try to give senior teachers the encouragement and support—and even the remuneration and status—they may need to stay in low-performing and reconstituted schools. San Diego, for instance, has a teacher mentor program in which each mentor receives a \$4,500 stipend. But mentors must be willing to work in high-priority schools for three years, after which they can either return to their original school or sign on for an additional three years. In Cincinnati, the union has used site-based management, the prospect of helping to design a new school, and special faculty positions, as draws. "Our approach is, we know we're crazy to ask you to just sign up, to fill a vacancy in a school that's dysfunctional. But we're giving you a chance to become part of a team with a new program, with more lead teachers, and a new principal who is going to try to turn that school around."

The need to create a more successful process for revitalizing low-performing schools, along with the obvious importance of drawing experienced teachers to work in these schools, has made some educators and policy-makers look to Redesign as a replacement for Reconstitution. There are several advantages to instituting a Redesign process. First, many schools, including those that are relatively successful, undergo redesign, and so it is not as stigmatizing as reconstitution. Second, redesign is based on the assumption that instructional programs, as much as individual teachers, may be the cause of school failure, and that implementing a comprehensive and coherent instructional program may be the best way to get a school back on track. Third, a redesigned school has the benefit of offering an instructional program that teachers can join because they have relevant experience and believe in the program's philosophy. A participant put it this way, "As we see it, you start with a new design and then staff your school based on that design."

Recently, the American Federation of Teachers has of-

fered Redesign as the alternate strategy to Reconstitution for those schools that fail to improve within a reasonable time frame. Any school that has been closed—whether or not it is reopened in the same physical plant—"should be designed around a research-based academic improvement plan shaped by stakeholders, including the union(s) and a new administrative team." Staff should be sufficiently informed about the plan to decide whether they wish to apply, and parents and students should receive enough information to decide if they want to transfer to another public school. Although faculty who prefer not to work with the adopted plan should be allowed to transfer with dignity, "a team of master teachers with training and experience in the selected model should be recruited into the school." ¹

CONCLUSION

The shift to active union involvement in school improvement has been accompanied by major changes in the accountability systems of states and cities. These changes widen the circle of accountability and create a more rational process for identifying and assisting low performing schools. Although several districts have experienced an erosion of this process under political pressure, with increasing union involvement in improving low performing schools, the processes will be-

ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS

Brenda Barnes, Prince George's County Educators' Association, MD

Vicky Barrows, Portland Association of Teachers, OR
Janette Bell, Prince George's County Educators' Association, MD

Dean Byers, Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association, FL

Eddie Davis, NEA Executive Committee, NC

Roger Erskine, Seattle Education Association, WA

Richard Garrett, Portland Association of Teachers, OR

Marc Knapp, San Diego Education Association, CA

Kent Mitchell, United Educators of San Francisco, CA

Tom Mooney, Cincinnati Federation of Teachers, OH

Judi Soloway, Portland Association of Teachers, OR

Theresa Turner, Maryland State Teachers Association, MD

Carol Ascher, Institute for Education and Social Policy, New York University

Denise Alston and Jacques Nacson, NEA Teaching and Learning

Warlene Gary, Christine Woods, Sheila Simmons, and Teresa Rankin, NEA Affiliate Capacity Building/Urban Initiatives

For additional copies of *TRENDS*, contact NEA, Urban Initiatives, 1201 Sixteenth St., N.W., Washington, DC 20036. (202) 822-7155. E-mail: Lrobinson@nea.org

come more regularized and routine, with less room for dramatic actions that do not really improve schools for students.

Carol Ascher, November 1998

1. American Federation of Teachers "Redesigning Low Performing Schools" 1997.p. 4.

—Carol Ascher, *Institute for Education and Social Policy*,
New York University

—Denise Alston, *NEA Teaching and Learning*,
Roundtable Facilitator



TRENDS

SUPPLEMENT

November 1998

RECONSTITUTED SCHOOLS: THE COMMUNITY RESPONSE

The 1998 Conference of the National Coalition of Education Activists Conference was held from July 30 to August 2, 1998 in Washington D.C. Language, Race and Power in Schools framed the events of the conference, including a roundtable on "School Reconstitution and the Community Response" attended by 35 education activists. During this three-hour roundtable, public school parents, teachers, staff, and community members described their experiences with school reconstitution, and suggested a variety of ways to intervene more effectively in low-performing schools.

RECONSTITUTION—THE POLITICAL SOLUTION TO LONG-TERM NEGLECT

For years, while the public generally tolerated low-performing schools, public policies colluded in fostering low performance in some schools. Parents and teachers at the roundtable described schools that had been allowed to decline for many years. Parents spoke of no one calling home when the child was absent, and of teachers not informing parents when the child was having difficulty. Teachers recalled staff who saw themselves as having the "bad jobs," meaningless evaluations of tenured teachers, and a general reluctance to engage in reform, expressed as, "This too shall pass." In Portland, Oregon, a coalition of parents of color boycotted a low-performing elementary school eight years ago. Although media attention was briefly brought to the school, very little happened.

Recently, however, states and districts have used standardized test scores to identify schools as low-performing; and many jurisdictions are offering these schools assistance and a limited time to take constructive action. Among the strategies used to intervene in low-performing schools, the most dramatic and harshest has been school reconstitution: the closing down of a school and its reopening with different administrative and teaching staff.

Because reconstitution sends a tough message that state

legislatures, state education departments and local school districts will no longer tolerate failing schools, it has been politically popular. However, participants were mixed in their views toward reconstitution. A teacher, who saw it as positive, reasoned as follows: "I am not even ambivalent about it anymore, because public schools are on the decline, and too many of us have sat around and not gotten out to fight for good quality education for all children."

On the other hand, several roundtable participants argued that reconstitution alone has rarely improved schools. A participant reported on a district where several schools had been reconstituted and teachers switched from building to building. "So you had a wonderful first grade teacher who really knew her stuff, and her test scores were high. She's now teaching fifth grade and has no idea what she's doing." Describing reconstitution in her city, another participant argued, "It was a political decision. It wasn't an act to save children at all. If it were an act to save children, I would say absolutely yes."

THE IDENTIFICATION OF LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

The criticisms leveled at reconstitution by roundtable participants started with the narrow measures on which school failure is based. While some agreed that their classrooms and schools were not good enough, others pointed out that good schools meant more than high test scores, and still others complained that reading and math test scores don't accurately depict what their children can do.

In a number of cases, students, along with their teachers and families, have risen to defend their schools with their own statistics. Jefferson High School students in Portland, for instance, created a press release for the media about what was going well at the high school. The writing scores at Jefferson were among the best in the district.

In Boston, the students in a newly reconstituted school did a research project for their school newspaper comparing their school's resources with those of a nearby suburban school. They found a tenth of the number of books in the library, and a tenth of the number of computers linked to the internet, as well as a mere fraction of the sports and clubs offered in the suburban school.

"BLOWING UP THE SCHOOL"

In many cities, reconstitution has been preceded by little or no public discussion, and the identification of specific schools for reconstitution has been announced on the radio or

in the newspaper. A teacher described her school as it was threatened by reconstitution: "The children were in tears, the teachers were upset. As you came in the door, you'd see the newspaper plastered on the wall to bring you up to date, because if it wasn't for the newspaper you weren't going to hear about it."

A number of participants described the scars that reconstitution has left on students, staff, and the wider community. For elementary school children, it can feel as violent as "blowing up the school." A mother described the effect of reconstitution on her daughter. "She was in the fifth grade at the time, graduation day. It was supposed to be this happy day ceremony, but it wasn't. Children, even young boys, were in the bathrooms crying. They were so confused and hurt by what was going on. Their life was being ripped apart." Nor was this pain limited to one day. "She's ashamed to say what school she came from."

Another participant believed that reconstitution actually works against parents and community members understanding and helping to improve their schools. She explained, "Parents see it as an indictment of their community and the abilities of their children, so they try to cover it up."

Over and over, participants described the feelings of violation and powerlessness created by reconstitution. "No one had a choice in what was going to happen. The parents didn't have a choice, the teachers didn't have a choice, the union fought it. We were even told the school board didn't have a choice."

RECONSTITUTION AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

School staff and communities have reacted to the possibility of reconstitution in a variety of ways. In Portland, while a teacher tried to encourage other teachers to boycott the hiring for the reconstituted school, a small PTO consisting largely of staff tried to shape the school's response to reconstitution. A teacher from this school told the roundtable, "We were not a strong staff. We were not cohesive at all and that allowed it to happen."

Once the school is reconstituted, the pressure that a new principal and largely new staff are under to show improvement often makes these schools quite authoritarian, with little outreach to parents and the community. Roundtable participants described principals who wanted to make all the decisions, teachers turning inward because they believed "most of the weight" was on their shoulders, and design plans made without parental participation.

However, the widespread experience of powerlessness during reconstitution has resulted in teachers and parents becoming more proactive. A parent from New York described a school that was closed over the summer and reopened as two redesigned schools. Three years later, the two schools are not better, and they are once again being redesigned. This time, however, parents and the community are fighting to be part of the redesign team.

The need to involve everyone—to expand the circle of accountability—was expressed by a number of participants. One said, "We have to stop beating up on each other and recognize that we need to come together as communities, families, busi-

ness folks and educators around a common mission of improving teaching and learning."

CREATING GOOD SCHOOLS

While the stories that brought participants to the roundtable were often discouraging, most participants were clear about how to give schools the support and create the environment necessary to improvement.

■ **Leadership.** One participant noted how few teachers or parents are trained to think and act as school change leaders. Yet, if schools are to improve, someone, whose position is institutionalized, must shepherd everyone concerned through the three to five years that it will take for improvement.

■ **Resources.** Reconstitution has rarely solved the inadequate resources plaguing low-performing schools. In some cases, reconstitution has temporarily brought extra money, but this money has usually been pulled out once the school shows improvement. To improve schooling, the necessary resources need to be sustained.

■ **Research.** Schools need research on effective turnaround strategies. This includes research on whole-school models, as well as studies of why some schools may be improving and others not. One participant argued that research answers a motivational need: "You know something works in some places, so you can really say, 'We've got to make this work.'"

■ **Better Communication and More Shared Responsibility among Staff.** Participants described a variety of reforms that end the isolation of the classroom. Cincinnati's team-based schools have decision-making committees that meet monthly to decide the school's focus and set goals that dictate budget priorities. These team-based schools have generated a new sense of community. "We know what goes on in the other classrooms. Everyone has a key to everyone's room and we trade kids and trade rooms and trade responsibilities."

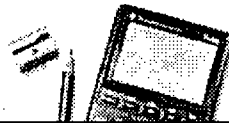
■ **Focusing the School on Student Work.** Several participants argued for a much sharper focus on student work, asking of each assignment, "Is this the quality of work we thought we'd get? If not, what's missing? And what can we do to change that?" When staff and students are more focused on student work, students have more work to share with their parents.

■ **Centering Contact with Parents on Student Work.** Schools can invite parents to exhibitions, projects, and fairs of students' work. Teachers can also write parents at the start of a project saying: This is the project. Expect that we're going to ask your student to go to the library, to watch certain things on television. As a teacher explained, "All this makes parents feel like they know a lot more about what's going on in school."

■ **Helping the Media to Understand the Daily Reality of Public Schooling.** In many districts, the media have played a negative role, fanning flames and decreasing support for schools. Several participants suggested that contacts be developed with the media when things aren't happening, so when something does happen the media understands the school and is an ally. However, another participant argued a different strategy. "We go to the media with the facts. We use the media to say, 'Our children are not failing, the schools are failing our children.'"

K-12 Teachers

Educational Issues Department



AFT Home > K-12/Educational Issues

[About AFT](#) [Contact AFT](#) [Search](#) [Index](#)

- ▼ Welcome
- ▼ What's New
- ▼ Site Map/Table of Contents
- ▼ A Message from President Feldman
- ▼ AFT Task Force on Redesigning Low-Performing Schools
- ▼ AFT Resolution on Redesigning Low-Performing Schools
- ▼ District Profiles
- ▼ Implementing Change
- ▼ Promising Programs
- ▼ Financing School Redesign: The CSRD Program
- ▼ Contract Language
- ▼ Appendices
- ▼ For Further Information: AFT Contacts
- ▼ Additional Resources



A Message from President Feldman

Dear AFT Member:

This publication grew out of the work of the AFT Task Force on Redesigning Low-Performing Schools, established by the 1996 national convention. It is designed to provide information and advice to local union leaders and members about how to fix one of this nation's most persistent problems: schools that don't work.

There is no question that some of our schools are failing. We have seen them, read about them, worked in them -- schools that are dirty and dangerous, with chronically low test scores and students and staff who all would rather be someplace else. In recent years, these schools have begun to cast a long shadow over all public education. According to opinion polls, a sizable and growing proportion of the American public -- especially in urban areas, where many failing schools are located -- has lost faith in public schools and in the government bureaucracies that control them. Politicians have responded with quick-fix reforms, many of which have hurt teachers and changed nothing. Conservative ideologues have responded with proposals to privatize or dismantle the entire system. And parents, given the opportunity, have responded by trying to opt out in droves.

We know that public schools are an irreplaceable linchpin of democracy, and our society could not survive their loss. Our job is to defend them, as well as to protect our members who work in them. But all of us are in education for one reason: to make sure that schools work for all of the nation's children. Our students are what we are about. They are our major concern, our occupation, our preoccupation, our obsession. They are the reason our members continue to wake up every day and walk into crumbling buildings, where chaos and confusion have been allowed to reign. They do this because they know that, no matter how destitute or desperate their students' home lives, these young people can succeed. AFT members know that, no matter how flawed, these schools may be children's only hope.

But we also know that it doesn't have to be this way. Around the country -- in some of the poorest, toughest neighborhoods -- there are schools that work, and work well. There is also research that shows what makes them work. Children achieve when they are taught the basics early; when they are challenged by high standards and a rich curriculum; and when caring, firm adults pay strict attention to the quality of students' work and behavior. Schools that work this way are the ones we want to send our own children to; they are the schools that all of our students deserve.

Any school that does not meet this mark -- any school that is not good enough for our own children -- should be targeted for immediate improvement. Enhanced student achievement, based on high standards and research-proven programs and practices, must be the driving force behind all reform efforts. In many cases, it will be up to school employees and their unions to lead the fight against politically expedient quick-fixes and for educationally sound reform -- including, where necessary, closing schools when they fail to improve and helping to guide and implement their restructuring.

This resource guide is designed to provide information and advice to local union leaders and members in this effort. All over the country, politicians, pundits, school board members, and district officials are promising to fix failing schools, but they have no real clue if or how this will be done. "Improvement" plans aimed at simply shuffling or removing all of the adults in the school building demonstrate a vacuum of ideas. This

has caused many problems but at the same time has given us a rare opportunity. We must fill this vacuum with real ideas for real improvement. Our students deserve no less.

In Solidarity,

Sandra Feldman
President

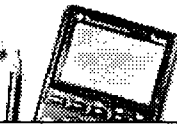
SF:le
opelu2aflcio

American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO - 555 New Jersey Avenue, NW - Washington, DC 20001

Copyright by the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO. All rights reserved. Photographs and illustrations, as well as text, cannot be used without permission from the AFT.

K-12 Teachers

Educational Issues Department



AFT Home > K-12/Educational Issues

[About AFT](#) [Contact AFT](#) [Search](#) [Index](#)

- ❖ [Welcome](#)
- ❖ [What's New](#)
- ❖ [Site Map/Table of Contents](#)
- ❖ [A Message from President Feldman](#)
- ❖ [AFT Task Force on Redesigning Low-Performing Schools](#)
- ❖ [AFT Resolution on Redesigning Low-Performing Schools](#)
- ❖ [District Profiles](#)
- ❖ [Implementing Change](#)
- ❖ [Promising Programs](#)
- ❖ [Financing School Redesign: The CSRD Program](#)
- ❖ [Contract Language](#)
- ❖ [Appendices](#)
- ❖ [For Further Information: AFT Contacts](#)
- ❖ [Additional Resources](#)



Raising Student Achievement

An Internet Resource Guide for
Redesigning Low-Performing Schools

Resolution on Redesigning Low-Performing Schools

It is as much the duty of the union to preserve public education as it is to negotiate a good contract.

-Albert Shanker

I. Why We Are Concerned

America's public school system has always been one of its most important institutions -- charged with preparing all students for responsible citizenship and productive adult lives. To fulfill this mission and defend universal public education, the AFT has dedicated itself to raising the standards of academic achievement and student conduct in all schools. We believe that our students and teachers are as capable as any in the world. Given the standards-based reforms we advocate -- including clear grade-by-grade standards for student achievement, professional development, curricula and assessments aligned to the standards, and promotion policies and other incentives that reward students for working hard and meeting the standards -- our schools can match or surpass the accomplishments of the highest-achieving nations. We also recognize, however, that some schools and some students will need more attention than others. Urgent action must be taken to improve the nation's lowest-performing schools, and we believe that it is the union's responsibility to participate in the development of workable solutions -- including, where necessary, starting all over again.

All children need and deserve good schools -- especially those children who are most vulnerable and who, without a good education, are doomed to a continuous and vicious cycle of poverty and failure. While this is not an easy undertaking, the price of continued inaction is intolerable -- for the students, many of whom emerge from high school unprepared for further education or a skilled trade; for parents, who want the best for their children; for the school staff, many of whom struggle heroically to compensate for the larger failures of the school system; and for the nation, which must bear the burden of lower economic productivity, increased social service funding, higher crime rates, and a less informed citizenry.

In recent years, the very existence of low-performing schools has served to bring the entire system of public education into question. News stories feature schools where few students graduate, and too many of those who do are barely literate -- schools with chronically low test scores and conditions that are so dirty and dangerous that staff and students alike are afraid to walk the halls. In this context, school vouchers and other privatization schemes have begun to gain favor, despite the fact that the abandonment of common public schools would leave the nation more divided, and unequal, than ever. The politically expedient, but educationally bankrupt, policy of "school reconstitution" -- stigmatizing and replacing staff, regardless of competence or quality, and without any specific plans to improve teaching or learning -- is being implemented or advocated by some courts and some federal, state, and district officials. The new faculty in "reconstituted" schools, however, are likely to have the same inadequate resources, poor professional development, and lack of access to research-tested programs that their predecessors had, while having even less classroom experience to fall back upon.

We cannot afford any more political quick-fixes that will inflict additional injury on students, as well as staff. We need educationally sound solutions to the problems of failing schools, and we need them now.

II. What Should Be Done

As the union representing teachers, classroom paraprofessionals, and other school-related personnel in many of the areas plagued by chronic school failure, it is incumbent upon us to advocate and, where possible, negotiate, for improvement -- always insisting that the actions taken are educationally sound and effective. We must take an active role, from the outset, to ensure that teachers and other school staff are treated professionally, are involved in decision making and are part of the solution. While social and economic inequities can be obstacles to the delivery of equal educational opportunity, there are schools around the country where "at-risk" students meet high academic standards. We can and must learn from these schools. The challenge before us is to take the research on programs and pedagogical approaches that have been proven to work, and use it to ensure that children and schools succeed.

As educators, we are eager to embrace this challenge and willing to shoulder a full share of the work that meeting it will require. We have also, however, lived through too many educational fads and ill-conceived improvement ideas to accept all reform proposals on faith. We cannot support yet another round of quick-fix gimmicks or ask our members and students to suffer the consequences of painful remedies that have little chance of improving matters. Instead, we seek to help shape and implement effective intervention policies which:

- Are grounded in high academic standards;

The first essential step in improving low-performing schools -- and the U.S. education system as a whole -- is to establish clear standards for what students are expected to know and be able to do. This would ensure that all students are held to the same high standards and exposed to the same rich curriculum, regardless of social class or neighborhood, and help put an end to the unequal, uninspiring course of study that many disadvantaged students get locked into from an early age. Without clear standards, substandard work is almost impossible to define, making it that much harder for teachers to spot problems early, demand that students get the extra help they might need, and hold students accountable. Pending the implementation of serious standards-based reform at the district, state, and national level, schools should select improvement programs in which clear and challenging student achievement standards are embedded.

- Enforce high standards of behavior;

Without clear standards of conduct, a small number of unruly students can disrupt an entire school and impede the learning of all students. The consequences for misbehavior must be fairly and consistently enforced. Students who cannot or will not abide by these guidelines should be placed in an appropriate alternative setting until they demonstrate that they can meet the expected standards of behavior.

- Use criteria for the identification of low-performing schools that are clear and understood by all stakeholders;

Just as academic standards help students understand -- and meet -- academic expectations, schools with clear performance standards have a better chance of catching and correcting problems before intervention becomes necessary. The use of widely accepted criteria for low school performance -- valid and reliable assessments that show widespread student failure, high levels of violence and disruption, poor management, etc. -- will reduce the risk that any school will be misidentified for unfair or arbitrary reasons, and will also give staff, students, and parents a framework by which to gauge the school's progress.

- Address the particular needs of the individual school;

To ensure that intervention and assistance plans are targeted effectively -- and that states' and districts' limited resources are used efficiently -- school systems must not only identify which schools are failing, but also *why*. Thus, the initial identification of low-performing schools isn't enough;

it must be followed by comprehensive internal (staff-driven) and external (state- or district-driven) evaluations which can help pinpoint the reasons for failure. Internal factors, such as poor management, staff turnover, unfocused curriculum, or the lack of an effective discipline policy may be critical. Obstacles and challenges, such as high student mobility rates, an influx of non-English-speaking students, inadequate funding, limited access to high-quality professional development, neighborhood crime, or lack of social services in the community, also must be taken into account. Such findings do not change the imperative for corrective action, but their recognition and analysis help form the basis for the development of solutions.

- Are backed by solid research;

While each low-performing school will have a somewhat different set of needs and priorities, no school -- especially one that is already floundering -- should be expected to find success by reinventing the wheel. Instead, once the school's most pressing problems have been identified, the improvement process should focus on enabling teachers to choose those programs and instructional practices that have a solid base of research to demonstrate their effectiveness. Facilitation is crucial to this process.

- Involve staff and provide them with the professional development, time, and resources they will need to be effective.

Research and common sense tell us that a committed and supportive staff is vital to the success of any school improvement plan. Therefore, to the greatest possible extent, school staff should be given an active role in diagnosing the school's weaknesses and selecting the plans for improvement. It has also been demonstrated that the successful replication of any research-based reform program is largely dependent on the faithfulness of the implementation. Thus, adequate time and resources must be committed to providing all instructional staff (i.e. teachers and classroom paraprofessionals) with the professional development, tools, and materials they need to get the best results.

III. Implementing Change

Just as each school's specific problems will vary, so will their level of severity and intractability. Therefore, we recommend that each state or district intervention policy include a continuum of intervention options.

Many low-performing schools, once offered the proper resources, support, and technical assistance, will leap to make the necessary changes. After an outside audit and a facilitated self-analysis, the principal, faculty, and support staff should have the opportunity to develop and implement their own improvement plan, based on the principles described above.

In other cases, the staff may have been subjected to so many years of poor management, inadequate resources, and futile improvement fads that the school culture -- including the relationships between and among staff and students -- is so dysfunctional that guided self-improvement is unworkable. For these schools, the internal and external evaluations may indicate a more aggressive intervention strategy. In such cases -- or where, after a predetermined time period, it is found that guided self-improvement is not working -- the district should discuss specific, additional interventions with the union(s) representing the school's staff. For example, the district might require that the administrative team be replaced and that the staff, in collaboration with the new administrators, vote to select a new academic school-improvement program from a menu of research-based options, pre-selected by a joint union(s)-district panel.

Since staff support is crucial for the effective implementation of a successful academic plan, any faculty member who prefers not to work with the adopted model should be allowed to transfer with dignity, and a team of master teachers with training and experience in the selected model should be recruited into the school. Identification and placement of these "lead" teachers could be made by agreement between the union and the district, with negotiated incentives for such service. Since low-performing schools

often suffer from extremely high rates of faculty turnover, it is unlikely that any staff would need to be displaced by this kind of intervention strategy. However, if a limited number of faculty members had to be moved for the academic model to be properly implemented, the dignified treatment of staff should be guaranteed through enhanced or existing contract language (or, in non-bargaining states, policies negotiated between the union(s) and the district) governing involuntary transfers.

If, despite such improvement and intervention efforts, student performance fails to improve within a reasonable time frame and more drastic measures are required (i.e., closing the school), then the union(s) should insist on an educationally sound approach, such as opening a new school with a proven educational program. In no case will "reconstitution" -- simply replacing the adults in the building -- be accepted as a remedy. If a new school is opened to replace the closed school -- whether or not it is located in the same physical plant -- it should be designed around a research-based academic improvement plan shaped by stakeholders, including the union(s) and a new administrative team. Staff should receive enough information to make an informed decision about whether they wish to apply. Parents and students should also receive information about the school's new vision of teaching and learning, allowing them to decide if they want to opt out and transfer to another public school.

For instructional positions, staffing procedures should follow the same or enhanced contract language or district regulations that govern any other school closing or the staffing of any new school or new school model (such as a magnet school). Instructional staff affected by the closing should have the right to apply, based on their certification, training, and/or experience with the new model, seniority rights and other negotiated criteria, and should be given priority consideration by agreement between the district and the union(s). Those not selected by the new school must have transfer rights to other schools, without stigma attached, and be assured of job security. Since school redesign should focus on implementing a proven instructional model, except where justified by exceptional circumstances, school-related (non-instructional) personnel should not automatically be displaced. Instead, the new administrative team should deal with any performance problems individually, using existing evaluation and personnel policies.

Under all circumstances, the union will continue to fight for the high academic standards, rigorous curricula, quality teaching, student accountability and appropriate supports that we believe are needed to ensure that every child succeeds.

AFT Convention Resolution, Adopted July 1998

American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO - 555 New Jersey Avenue, NW - Washington, DC 20001

Copyright by the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO. All rights reserved. Photographs and illustrations, as well as text, cannot be used without permission from the AFT.

Where We Stand

[AFT Home](#) > [Where We Stand](#)[About AFT](#) [Contact AFT](#) [Search](#) [Index](#)

- 1999
- 1998
- 1997
- 1996
- 1995
- 1994
- 1993

When a School Fails

by AFT President Sandra Feldman
September 1997

*We must not try
to perpetuate schools
to which we would
not send our
own children.*

When the late Al Shanker started Where We Stand over 25 years ago, he pledged that he would freely explore and advance ideas, even if they were controversial and were not AFT policy. The new Where We Stand, which begins with this column, will have a different voice, but it carries the same pledge. I've spent my life in urban public schools--and there's probably nothing going on there that I haven't seen. So I'll be able to puncture some myths about how the schools work, confirm others, and raise issues that often get pushed aside. Our schools have plenty of problems; they also have many strengths. I'll be writing about both.

One of the most outrageous things about failing schools is that everyone--including the district administration-- knows which ones they are, but often years go by and no one does anything about them. In some cases, a school's problems are obvious: There is chronic disruption and violence, poor attendance, filthy hallways, and of course, achievement that is consistently below par. But sometimes a failing school is just a dead place where everyone has given up.

What can we do about these schools? Put simply and starkly, I believe that those of us responsible for public education must never defend or try to perpetuate a school to which we would not send our own children. If a district has recognized that a school is in trouble and has given it help over a period of time and if the school has not responded, we must shut that school down and start anew.

A Simplistic Response

The good news is that states and cities are taking steps to shut down failing schools. The bad news is that in most cases they do it crudely--getting rid of people instead of bad practices, putting in new people and keeping the same old programs and practices that didn't work to begin with. This strategy, which often goes by the ugly name of *reconstitution*, offers a simplistic response to a complicated problem.

There are many reasons why schools fail. Poor leadership is one of them, and a shortage of qualified teachers is another. Often administrators have settled for weak, watered-down curricula instead of adopting solid, proven programs, and they are unwilling or unable to maintain school discipline. And often there is an unconscionable lack of books and supplies--a sure sign of terrible management, even when resources are scarce. But if we shut down one of these schools--and do it right--the school *can* come back.

One New York City high school, for example, had incompetent principals for years. Discipline was never enforced. Violence was common. There were assaults on teachers and students, and students rioted in the halls and lunchroom. Many teachers had lost confidence in their ability to do their jobs.

How did this dysfunctional place get turned around? By starting over. Working together, parents, the teachers' union, and an enlightened superintendent were able to close the school and re-open it as four small, theme-based schools in the same building. Today, parents who had forsaken the failing school are sending their children back. There's a waiting list for students--and teachers--at the new school. About half the original teachers stayed; the others were allowed to transfer to schools elsewhere in the district.

No One Group Is To Blame

As the New York experience and similar experiences elsewhere show, no one group is to blame for failing schools and no one group can achieve the necessary change. Boards of education, superintendents, the leaders of local teachers' unions, and school staff have to work together on solutions. On criteria to identify failing schools. On humane and dignified processes for transferring staff if that is deemed useful or necessary. And above all, on bringing in programs and practices that have been proven to work, especially with at-risk kids.

I made this proposal in one of my first speeches as president of the AFT--to an audience of AFT members and teams of school board members and administrators from school districts around the country. I thought that saying we should get out front in support of shutting down failing schools was a bit risky, but my risky proposal got a standing ovation.

Good ideas can be ruined in their execution. It's essential that we shut down failing schools. It's also essential that we do it right. If we have the guts and the patience to work together, we can rebuild these schools into places where teachers can teach and kids can learn and flourish.

American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO - 555 New Jersey Ave, NW - Washington, DC 20001

Copyright by the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO. All rights reserved. Photographs and illustrations, as well as text, cannot be used without permission from the AFT.

Studies



EDUCATIONAL ISSUES POLICY BRIEF

NUMBER 1 / OCTOBER 1997

Survey of State Legislation on School Takeovers

Introduction

There has been growing concern in the field of education over the subject of the takeover of low-performing schools.¹ Although there are many indicators that states and districts use in the process of deciding whether to close, “reconstitute,” “disestablish” or take over a school, student performance on standardized tests is always a criterion. This paper examines the question: What do existing laws say about the use of student test data in terms of state authority to assume responsibility for the governance of schools and/or districts? The approach to answering this question is threefold:

- First, we examine Title I legislation on adequate yearly progress (AYP);
- Second, we present an analysis of existing state laws (as of July 1997) and how states have used these powers; and,
- Finally, we look at proposed legislation regarding school takeovers (as of July 1997).

Legislative Authority

Federal Title I Legislation

Under federal law, states that receive Title I funds *may* reconstitute Title I schools (and/or districts) with chron-

ic patterns of unacceptably low achievement rates. Title I directs states to create an assessment system that can be used to determine whether schools and/or local education agencies are making “adequate yearly progress” (AYP)—that is whether they are improving student achievement at a rate that will ensure that all students in the school meet a proficient standard of competence in at least reading and math by a date certain. These standards-based assessment systems must include student test scores and must be in place by the 2000-01 school year.

According to §1116 (c)(4) of Title I, for each school identified for school improvement for two consecutive years, the local education agency (LEA) “*shall*” provide technical or other assistance. Any time after providing assistance to a school, an LEA “*may*” take corrective action against a school identified as low performing. In the third year following identification as a low-performing school, the LEA “*shall*” take corrective action against any school that fails to make AYP [§1116 (c)(5)]. *Such corrective action “may” include “reconstituting the school staff.”*

Additionally, per §1116 (d)(5), an LEA that fails to meet AYP requirements for two consecutive years “*shall*” receive state assistance upon “request.” Any time after providing assistance to an LEA, a state “*may*” take corrective action against an LEA identified as low performing. In the fourth year following identification as a low-

performing LEA, the state "shall" take corrective action against any LEA that fails to make AYP [§1116 (d)(6)]. Such corrective action "may" include the "reconstitution of the school district personnel."

State Legislation

Methodology: We contacted each state department of education's legislative/legal affairs office and asked:

1. Does the state have the authority to take over a school based on student test scores?
2. Does the state have any pending legislation or policy on takeovers?

Data: This preliminary report has complete information from every state except Alabama. As for the data, there are 23 states with current legal authority to take over schools and/or districts based on student test scores, and 12 states where legislation is pending.

Of the states that have the power to sanction schools and/or districts, eight² have actually gone so far as taking over a school and/or district due to reasons that include student test scores. Please note though, that in some states the reconstitution policy has not existed long enough for a school and/or district to reach the point of takeover. Table 1 presents the data on existing legislation.

Characteristics of Existing School Takeover Powers (Table 1)

Two of the states³ with power to reconstitute low-performing schools derive that power from vague statutory language that was not intended specifically for taking over schools and/or districts.

There are more states that can reconstitute a district than states that can reconstitute a school, including eight states that can reconstitute either a district or a school.

Most states:

- Use a probation or warning system; e.g.,

In 11 states, a low-performing school and/or district is put on probation or a warning list and given at least two years to improve itself before it can be reconstituted.

In three states, low-performing schools and/or dis-

tricts are given less than two years to improve themselves before they can be reconstituted.

In seven states, a time limit for improvement is determined on a case by case basis.

- Require an improvement plan to be developed and implemented; e.g.,

"No more than six months after the determination that a school is under-performing, the district in which the school is located shall present to the board a remedial plan that shall set forth specific goals for improvement, specific means for attaining such goals, and a timetable...." (Massachusetts)

"Such a corrective plan shall include a description of the actions to be taken to correct each deficiency, a designation of the resources which will be applied to these actions, [a timeline], the evaluation procedures to be used..., the technical assistance needed to execute the corrective plan, and anticipated sources of such assistance...." (Georgia)

- Make provisions for assistance; e.g.,

"Means of intervention which may be exercised by the State Board of Education may include but are not necessarily limited to: provision of guidance and assistance to the school and school district...." (Oklahoma)

"The commissioner shall insure that technical assistance is provided to the district in order to implement [corrective] actions." (New Jersey)

- Send in an audit team to evaluate the school and/or district; e.g.,

"The state board shall...appoint a management team of at least 10 persons to conduct any necessary investigations and make any recommendations the team believes are appropriate for the administration and management of the school necessary to promote student achievement and any additional resources which are required." (Missouri)

"The commissioner shall...appoint an independent fact finding team which shall forthwith assess the reasons for the under performance and the prospects for improvement and report its finding to the commission and the district...." (Michigan)

Several states:

■ Dissolve a school and/or district

"If a school district is nonrecognized in its entirety, it shall automatically be dissolved...." (Illinois)

"If the deficiencies have not been corrected, and the conditional accreditation alternatives contained in the report are not mutually acceptable to the local board and the state board, the state board shall merge the territory of the school district with one or more contiguous school districts...." (Iowa)

■ Deny/repeal accreditation

"If...the school under registration review has not demonstrated progress...the commissioner shall recommend to the Board of Regents that the registration be revoked...." (New York)

"If a district does not satisfy the accreditation criteria, the commissioner shall take any of the following actions, listed in order of severity, to the extent the commissioner deems necessary." (Texas)

■ Allow children to go to another school

After a school is put on probation "any student in that school may request and shall be allowed to transfer to a successful school." (Kentucky)

The state board may "allow parents of students in the school to send their children to another district school of their choice." (Florida)

■ Allow for financial sanctions

The state board "may...assign an interim conservator who will be responsible for... approving or disapproving all financial obligations of the district, including, but not limited to, the employment, termination, nonrenewal, and reassignment of all certified and noncertified personnel...." (Mississippi)

"School districts that fail to submit required School Improvement Plans or fail to obtain approval of such plans...may have State funds withheld...." (Illinois)

Only a few of states:

■ Help finance the school improvement plans

"The school shall...be eligible to receive funds from

the school improvement fund." (Kentucky)

"Means of intervention which may be exercised by the State Board of Education may include but are not necessarily limited to: special funding...." (Oklahoma)

Characteristics of Proposed School Takeover Powers (Table 2)

As Table 2 indicates, there are 12 states with new legislation or regulations pending.

Seven of those states already have reconstitution authority.

Four states are proposing authority to take over districts, and four are proposing such authority in regard to schools.

The majority of states with a clear proposal:

- Require a plan;
- Allow for reconstitution.⁴

Several states' proposals include provisions to:

- Send in audit teams to evaluate the school and/or district;
- Provide assistance;
- Allow for financial sanctions;
- Use a probation or warning system;
- Dissolve a school and/or district.

It is important to note that some state legislatures are still in session, and the shape of proposed legislation is changing daily. Moreover, at this point, it is unclear how much of the pending legislation will become law.

¹ Different states refer to various forms of school takeovers as "reconstitution" or "disestablishment." In this paper, the terms are used interchangeably.

² Connecticut, Kentucky, Mississippi, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Texas, and West Virginia.

³ Virginia and New Mexico.

⁴ New Jersey has a variety of proposals, including one to repeal reconstitution.

Table One: States with Reconstitution Powers[†]

	AL	AR	CT	FL	IA	IL	KY	MA	MD	MI	MO	MS	NC	NJ	NM	NY	OH	OK	SC	TN	TX	VA	WV	TOTALS
Vague Power															■							■		2
School Level	■			■		■	■	■	■	■	■		■	■			■				■		■	14
District Level	■	■	■		■	■	■	■				■	■		■		■	■	■	■	■	■	■	17
Plan	■	■		■	■	■	■	■	■		■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■			■		■	18
Improvement Funds							■										■						2	
Funding Loss							■		■	■		■											3	
Probation or Warning				■		■	■	■	■	■		■		■		■	■	■	■	■	■	■		14
Audit Team	■	■	■		■	■		■	■		■	■	■	■		■	■		■		■		■	16
Assistance	■	■	■	■	■		■	■		■		■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■		■		■	18
Reconstitution	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	23
Dissolve					■	■			■	■		■				■		■			■			8
Students Can Go To Another School				■			■			■		■				■		■			■		■	8
Accreditation Loss					■	■				■		■				■							5	
Years on Probation or Warning	3	2		3	varies	4	2-3	2	varies	3	2	varies	varies	varies	varies	3	90 days	½	2	2	2		1.3	
Has Reconstituted a School or District	N	N	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	
Other (see notes)			*	*			*		*	*	*			*	*	*	*			*		*	*	

[†]As of July 1997.

Table Two: States with Proposed Reconstitution Powers[†]

	CA	FL	IN	LA	MA	MI	NJ	OH	OK	RI	TX	VT	Totals
Change To Law		■		■			■	■	■		■		6
Too Soon for Any Details		■	■					■		■			4
Vague Powers				■									1
School Level	■			■	■							■	4
District Level		■		■	■	■							4
Plan	■			■	■	■						■	5
Improvement Funds				■									1
Funding Loss													0
Probation or Warning	■				■							■	3
Audit Team	■				■								2
Assistance	■			■	■							■	4
Reconstitution	■			■	■					■		■	5
Dissolve										■		■	2
Students Can Go To Another School													0
Accreditation Loss													0
Years on Probation or Warning	3				2	0							
Other (see notes)		*		*	*		*	*	*	*	*		

[†]As of July 1997.

Table One Notes

Connecticut

This information pertains to a recent bill that only affects the Hartford school district. Its provisions cannot be used to take over any other district.

Florida

Districts that don't comply with the state board in helping schools to improve can lose funds. Schools that have not made adequate yearly progress for three years can be put under state board control.

Kentucky

"Distinguished educators are assigned to assist schools in 'decline' and schools in 'crisis.' They provide a variety of services and assistance in developing assistance plans for schools after careful evaluation of what needs to be done." (Audrey Carr, Legislative Research Commission)

Maryland

Districts are responsible for the reconstitution of schools, but if the state rejects a district's plan another may be imposed. The state can also close schools that are not performing/deficient. Such schools can be re-opened under contract with a third party. Also, for the past three years, the Maryland General Assembly has appropriated funds for the improvement of reconstitution-eligible schools. This funding is not mandated by law.

Michigan

When a state administrator is appointed to a school, he/she serves at the district's expense. Hence the district loses money. Assistance can be provided to probationary schools, but only by request of the local school board. Unaccredited schools can seek help from a Michigan college/university or utilize a research-based school improvement model.

Missouri

The state can order a recall election to remove a district's school board.

New Mexico

Reconstitution was not the original intent of this legislation; it is possible because the law is so broad. One district was reconstituted many years ago. Academic performance was a factor, but not the primary factor, in this takeover.

New York

The state commissioner of education requires that districts create a corrective action plan for each school identified for registration review (low performance). The district may choose to redesign or reconstitute the school. The commissioner must approve the plan. If, after a probation period not exceeding three years, the school does not improve, the Board of Regents can revoke its registration—effectively closing the school. When this occurs, the commissioner develops a plan to protect the educational welfare of students at the school and requires the district to implement the plan. The Roosevelt district was reconstituted via emergency legislation, and not through the above process.

Ohio

A district that has been designated "educationally deficient" has a 90-day deadline to prepare an improvement plan. If the state

rejects the plan, an "education expert" is assigned to help. If the district refuses to consent, the state can appoint a monitor and reconstitute the district. Experts and monitors "serve at the expense" of the district.

South Carolina

After six months the state can decide whether to continue assistance or reconstitute.

Virginia

When a school board isn't complying with the state, a writ of mandamus is filed. The judge may impose a variety of sanctions, including any of those listed in Table 1.

West Virginia

The statute stipulates that a school can be put on probation, but only districts can be reconstituted.

Table Two Notes

Florida

Apparently there is a proposal for the reconstitution of districts, for which no details were available at the time of this writing.

Louisiana

The bill creates a commission on accountability which will develop and recommend laws and policies, perhaps including reconstitution (although this is not explicit).

Massachusetts

While there is no legislation pending, the state department of education is proposing new regulations for the takeover of schools and districts. The existing statute directs the department to establish these regulations.

New Jersey

Several bills have been proposed, including one to eliminate state takeovers.

Ohio

The Ohio DOE is working to establish a 180-day probationary period, during which the improvement plan would be developed. Also, the superintendent would be relieved of duty and, instead of a monitor, there would be a state-appointed superintendent. There is also talk of appropriating funds for the improvement of low-performing schools. As of this writing, none of the proposals has been attached to a bill.

Oklahoma

The proposal would retain the current criteria and add Oklahoma's criterion-referenced test scores for grade 11.

Rhode Island

There is a one-sentence mention of reconstitution in a blueprint for accountability that has been proposed by the "Rhode Island School Accountability Team" and published by the state department of education.

Texas

A variety of proposals have been made, including changing the decision making committee to an advisory committee and strengthening current statutes that allow students to go to other schools. There are also proposals for administrative changes.

State Takeovers and Reconstitutions Policy Brief

Todd Ziebarth, Policy Analyst, ECS

This policy brief was produced with support from the Joyce Foundation.

INTRODUCTION

Many policymakers, educators and parents are deeply concerned about the performance of the nation's public schools. They cite subpar test scores, unruly student behavior and dilapidated school buildings as evidence that public schools are failing. Although some people question the extent of this failure, there is general agreement that public schools must improve, especially those performing at the lowest levels.

To ensure that districts, schools, teachers and students meet acceptable performance levels, many states and districts have enacted, and begun to enforce, various "accountability" policies. Two of the more recent, and controversial, accountability approaches are "state takeovers" of school districts and "reconstitutions" of schools. For each approach, this policy brief: (1) presents an overview, (2) discusses opposing perspectives, (3) examines effects and (4) offers questions for state policymakers.

STATE TAKEOVERS

Overview of State Takeovers

In 1989, the New Jersey Board of Education "took over" the Jersey City School District. In the process, it became the first state to manage a local district's daily operations because of "academic bankruptcy." In total, 22 states have passed legislation that allows them to take over an academically bankrupt district (for a list of these states, please see Table 1 on page 8). At least 10 of these states (and the federal government) have actually taken control of a low performing district (for a list of these states, please see Table 2 on page 9).

In a **state takeover**, either the state legislature, the state board of education or a federal court charges the state department of education or another designated entity with managing a local district for a certain amount of time (e.g., five years). State takeover decisions are made for a variety of reasons, including poor student performance (i.e., low test scores, low attendance rates, high dropout rates and low graduation rates), crumbling infrastructure, fiscal mismanagement, inept administration and corrupt governance. Most state takeovers do not happen without the state department of education thoroughly documenting a school district's problems. In addition, a state takeover is usually the last step in a lengthy process most often prescribed by state policy; that is, a state takeover is almost always preceded by repeated warnings and less severe interventions by the state department of education.

The level of state control and local influence in takeovers varies from state to state. In some cases, such as New Jersey, state officials relieve local school board members and high-level administrators of their duties and appoint decisionmakers to manage the district in their place. In other cases (e.g., West Virginia), local school board members and high-level administrators remain in place as an advisory group. Local officials advise state-appointed decisionmakers on fiscal and budgetary matters, but still make curricular and instructional decisions.

A few states have enacted a variation to the traditional state takeover policy. In these instances, the state has placed district governance authority with individuals other than state department of education officials. For example:

*The **Illinois** legislature shifted control of the Chicago public schools to the mayor and charged him with appointing school board members, the board president and the district's chief executive officer.

*The **Maryland** legislature entered into a partnership with the city of Baltimore to run the Baltimore public schools. From this partnership, a new, nine-member board of school commissioners was created, with members jointly appointed by the governor and the mayor.

*The *Ohio* legislature shifted control of the Cleveland public schools to the mayor and charged him with appointing the school board and a chief executive officer.

Opposing Perspectives on State Takeovers

According to proponents of this approach, state takeovers:

- *Are a necessary extension of a state's constitutional responsibilities
- *Provide a good opportunity for state and local decisionmakers to combine resources and knowledge to improve children's learning
- *Allow a competent executive staff to guide an uninterrupted and effective implementation of school improvement efforts
- *Are a catalyst for creating the right environment for the community to address a district's problems
- *Allow for more radical, and necessary, changes in low-performing districts
- *Place school boards on notice that personal agendas, nepotism and public bickering have severe consequences
- *Use achievement data collected from districts and school buildings to bolster accountability efforts.

Opponents of this approach, however, assert that state takeovers:

- *Represent a thinly veiled attempt to reduce local school board control and increase state authority over school districts
- *Use narrow learning measures (i.e., standardized test scores) as the primary criterion for takeover decisions
- *Imply that the community has the problems and the state has the answers, and thus falsely assume that states have the ability to effectively run districts
- *Place poorly prepared state-selected officials in charge, with little possibility of any meaningful change occurring in the classroom
- *Usually focus on cleaning up petty corruption and incompetent administration and do not go to the root of the social problems facing disadvantaged students in urban districts
- *Foster negative connotations and impressions that hinder the self-esteem of district board members, administrators, teachers, students and parents
- *Produce showdowns between state and local officials which slow the overhaul of management practices, drain resources from educational reforms and reinforce community resentments.

Effects of State Takeovers

There is a scarcity of research on the effects of state takeovers. For the most part, they seem to be yielding more gains in central office activities than in classroom instructional practices. As evidence, state takeovers are credited with the following:

- *Eliminating nepotism within district decisionmaking processes
- *Improving the district's administrative and financial management practices
- *Removing the threat of teacher's strikes
- *Upgrading schools' physical condition
- *Implementing innovative programs, such as small schools programs and cooperative arrangements between schools and social service agencies.

Despite these positive aspects, student achievement often falls short of expectations. In most cases, academic results are usually mixed at best. For instance, in 1996, the New Jersey board of education voted to extend its control of the Jersey City school district, despite 1995-96 test scores that were the best since the state took control of the district in 1989. The higher test scores came after years of marginal increases, and still remained below state standards in several key areas. Additionally, a 1994 evaluation of the Paterson, New Jersey, school district (three years after the state takeover) found that standardized test scores remained lower than state and community expectations.

Two promising experiences stand out among the state takeovers, however. In Logan County, West Virginia, the state left behind (as a result of the takeover) a state-appointed superintendent in charge of a

system with higher test scores, better management and strengthened local support. According to the state superintendent, West Virginia succeeded in Logan County because it kept the local board in place, albeit with reduced powers. State officials felt that local decisionmakers needed to be a part of the recovery process, largely so they would know what to do when the district regained sole control of operations. Results of the takeover include the following changes:

- *Performance, attendance and dropout rates improved dramatically
- *Administrative difficulties and budget problems were resolved
- *Personnel policies now comply with the law (e.g., all of the district's teachers now have valid teacher licenses).

As already mentioned, in 1995, the Illinois legislature shifted control of the Chicago public schools to the mayor and charged him with appointing school board members, the board president and the district's chief executive officer. According to a 1997 study by the University of Chicago, these changes have improved managerial efficiencies within the district. In addition, according to a 1998 study by the Consortium on Chicago School Research, student achievement indicators (i.e., standardized test scores) strongly suggest that the 1995 changes, along with earlier reforms (i.e., the 1988 Chicago School Reform Act), have precipitated substantial improvements in achievement in a very large number of Chicago public elementary schools.

As with most policies, the implementation of state takeovers has produced unintended consequences. Most dramatically, certain states are facing questions concerning the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965. In essence, the U.S. Department of Justice views state takeovers as potentially violating local voter rights to elect local officials and is requiring certain states to obtain the department's clearance before taking over a district. The state of Texas filed a lawsuit against the department, with the intention of freeing Texas from obtaining department clearance for a state takeover. However, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the suit, primarily because there was no test case for them to review. Thus, this issue remains unresolved.

Questions About State Takeovers for Policymakers

In considering the enactment or enforcement of state takeover policies, state policymakers may want to consider the following questions:

****Criteria***

- *What are the characteristics of high- and low-performing districts? How can these factors be measured?
- *What criteria are used to identify districts eligible for state takeovers? How often is district performance monitored (e.g., every year, every 3-5 years, etc.)? Does a concentration of failing schools suggest problems endemic to the school system or specific to the schools not succeeding?

****Intervention Decisions***

- *Should a state intervene in a low-performing district? If so, what are the grounds for intervention? Does it take a local school district's total collapse to trigger state involvement? Are there other approaches that are more effective and efficient than a state takeover in improving district performance?
- *Do state education departments have the ability (i.e., resources, expertise) to run a local school district? Can the state provide the support or assistance the district needs? Can state takeovers generate and sustain improved instruction? How do state departments of education balance their oversight role with their operating role in a credible and objective manner?
- *If officials in low-performing districts are given the same authority (e.g., ability to change staff, remove collective bargaining agreements, etc.) as state-selected officials, can they improve the district's performance?

****Implementing State Takeovers***

- *How does a state set goals for its takeover efforts? How does a state fund a takeover?
- *Will the state involve district policymakers, administrators, teachers, students and parents in their reform efforts? Within a state takeover, what are the roles of these various groups?
- *Should the state involve other statewide groups, such as the teachers' union, the school boards

association or the administrators association, in its takeover efforts?

***Ending a State Takeover**

- *How do states determine whether students are making sufficient progress to allow control to revert back to local officials?
- *How much time should states give districts to improve? When and under what conditions should a state withdraw from a district?
- *If a state takeover fails to yield sufficient improvement in student achievement in the specified time, what is the next step?
- *How does the state prevent the district from backsliding once a takeover ends?

***Long Term Changes**

- *Beyond the immediate crisis, how does a state improve the ability of local people, from school board members to teachers, to work more effectively?
- *What is the state's role in assisting local districts before they are in crisis?

RECONSTITUTIONS

Overview of Reconstitutions

In 1983, the San Francisco School District implemented a school improvement pilot program, primarily as a result of a court ruling on its desegregation case. This program aimed to improve the performance of some of the district's lowest achieving schools. One of the program's more controversial aspects was a "reconstitution" provision, which allowed the district to replace the principals, teachers and other staff, and create new philosophies and curricula at several schools. Since then, schools in at least seven other states have been reconstituted, *either through state- or district-initiated effort* (for a description of these states and districts, please see Table 3 on page 11).

Generally speaking, a school **reconstitution** involves hiring new staff, creating a new philosophy and developing a new curriculum at a given school. Some states and districts include other components within this approach as well, such as reducing teacher/student ratios. State and district officials cite the following chronic problems as the reasons for reconstitutions:

- *Low attendance rates and graduation rates and high dropout rates
- *Poor performance on standardized tests
- *A failure to show significant improvement in standardized test performance
- *Poor morale among "school community" members (e.g., discouraged staff, disgruntled parents and alienated students)
- *Deteriorating school buildings.

Before a state or district resorts to such a dramatic action, it usually notifies a poorly performing school of the need for improvement. If the school fails to improve its performance after a given time period, the state or district then steps in and "reconstitutes" it. Displaced principals and teachers sometimes may reapply for their old jobs, but they and other candidates have to accept the new school philosophy in order to be hired.

Opposing Perspectives on Reconstitutions

Advocates of this approach believe reconstitutions:

- *Are an indictment of a school's organization and culture (not its individual staff members)
- *Immediately stop "bad education" from happening to kids in low performing schools
- *Bring in a staff eager to take on the challenge of working in chronically unsuccessful schools, and thus can give a fresh start to these schools and their students
- *Can improve the learning environment for students through changing both administrators and teachers in an ineffective school

- * Foster a new, student-focused culture in schools where failure was acceptable
- * Use achievement data collected from districts and school buildings to bolster accountability efforts and redirect instructional practices
- * Are the only remaining solution for schools that face problems of crumbling conditions, discouraged employees and alienated students.

Opponents of this approach, however, contend that reconstitutions:

- * Are implemented within a set of inconsistently enforced standards
- * Too often focus on "bad people" instead of "bad practices," and thus are a simplistic response to a complicated problem
- * Stigmatize and demoralize everybody in a school (including those who are doing a good job)
- * Place a new principal and a mostly new teaching force into a difficult situation
- * Discriminate against poor and minority children by failing to take into account the challenges of their communities
- * Undermine reform efforts already under way
- * Will not make a difference unless the ineffective school's instructional approach is changed as well.

Effects of Reconstitutions

As with state takeovers, there is a dearth of evidence about the effects of reconstitutions. On the one hand, it has brought a much-needed sense of order and stability to some schools, along with an increase in parent and community involvement. It also has allowed state and district officials to remove ineffective staff members (from the school, not the district). The number of teachers who are rehired at a reconstituted school, however, ranges from only a handful to as many as two-thirds, depending on the district.

Again, much like state takeovers, academic progress (as measured by standardized test scores) is uneven in reconstituted schools. For example, a 1992 study of the San Francisco school improvement program of the 1980s found improved student achievement in reconstituted schools with large numbers of poor or minority students. In the eight schools reconstituted since 1994 in San Francisco, however, there has been very little, if any, improvement in standardized test scores.

Although reconstitution's effectiveness has not been fully proven, it can send a message that state and district policymakers will not tolerate chronic student failure. In so doing, reconstitutions may put pressure on educators to reevaluate their efforts. In fact, some argue that the threat of reconstitution has had some impact in motivating school personnel to improve their academic programs. For example, in June 1996, the San Francisco school district announced that out of eight schools put on probation in 1996, four showed sufficient improvement in student performance to be removed from probation.

Questions About Reconstitutions for Policymakers

In considering the enactment or enforcement of reconstitution policies, state policymakers may want to consider the following questions:

****Criteria***

- * What are the characteristics of high- and low-performing schools? How can these factors be measured?
- * What are the criteria for identifying schools eligible for reconstitution? Are clear standards enforced consistently across a state or district? How often is school performance monitored (e.g., every year, every 3-5 years, etc.)?

****Intervention Decisions***

- * Are other steps, such as remediation or probation, necessary before reconstitution? How much time should schools be given to correct their problems before being reconstituted?
- * Can the state or district provide the support or assistance that the schools need? Can reconstitutions generate and sustain improved instruction?

- *Are there different results in state- vs. district-initiated reconstitutions?
- *Are there other approaches that might be more effective and efficient than reconstitutions in improving the performance of distressed schools?

****Implementing Reconstitutions***

- *How are reconstitution efforts financed?
- *Can teachers reapply for their jobs? What happens to displaced teachers? Should they be allowed to work elsewhere in the district?

****Long Term Changes***

- *Beyond the immediate crisis, how do states and districts improve the ability of school staff to work more effectively?
- *How can states and districts attract top quality staff to high need schools?

CONCLUSION

As with many education "solutions," the effects of state takeovers and reconstitutions on student achievement are debatable, partly because of the lack of strong research evidence about this relationship. State and district policymakers are faced with a perplexing situation. They are constitutionally responsible for ensuring that each child receives an "adequate" education, yet two of their more extreme approaches for improving the performance of low-achieving districts and schools often produce marginal results. The tough question remains: What can state and district policymakers do to improve the education of children in low-performing districts and schools?

Although state takeovers and reconstitutions are not the "silver bullet" for answering this question (in part because of the diverse conditions prevailing in troubled districts and schools), these approaches force policymakers, educators and parents to reexamine how they measure "student achievement," how often they monitor district and school performance and at what times (and to what extent) they intervene in a district or school.

In the end, a more effective intervention process may evolve from states' and districts' experiences with state takeovers and reconstitutions, and it may include any number of previously unthinkable solutions (e.g., "performance contracts" between states and districts, district breakups, school closures and student choice). At the minimum, the next phase of accountability policy calls for more effective approaches to improving student performance in troubled districts and schools, and will undoubtedly test the will of policymakers, educators and parents to more consistently meet the needs of the students in these districts and schools.

TABLE 1 ACADEMIC BANKRUPTCY LAWS

The following states have "academic bankruptcy" laws in place. At the extreme, these laws allow states to "take over" local district operations in cases of poor student performance.

State	Citation
Alabama	Ala. Code § 16-6B-3
Arkansas	Ark. Stat. Ann. § 16-15-418
Connecticut	Special Act 97-4 [1997 Regular Session]
Georgia	Ga. Code Ann. § 20-2-282 and § 20-2-283
Illinois	105 Ill. Comp. Stat. Ann. 5/2-3.25f 105 Ill. Comp. Stat. Ann. 5/34-1 (Chicago School District)
Iowa	Iowa Code § 256.11
Kentucky	Ky. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 158.6455
Maryland	Senate Bill 795 [1997 Regular Session]
Massachusetts	House Bill 5436 [1991 Regular Session] (Boston School District) 603 CMR § 69 1J - § 69 1K
Mississippi	Miss. Code Ann. § 37-17-6
Missouri	Mo. Rev. Stat. § 160.538
New Jersey	N.J. Rev. Stat. § 18A: 7A-14 - § 18A: 7A-15
New Mexico	N.M. Stat. Ann. § 22-2-2 (W)
New York	c. 145 of L. 1995 (Roosevelt Union Free School District) N.Y. Educ. Law § 2590-h (New York City Chancellor)
North Carolina	N.C. Gen. Stat. § 115C-105.39, § 115C-325 (q)
Ohio	Ohio Rev. Code Ann. § 3302.01 - § 3302.06 House Bill 269 [1998 Regular Session] (Cleveland School District)
Oklahoma	70 Okla. Stat. § 1210.541 - § 1210.542
Pennsylvania	Act 46 of 1998 [1998 Regular Session] (Philadelphia School District)
South Carolina	S.C. Code Ann. § 59-18-30
Tennessee	Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-601 - § 49-1-602
Texas	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 39.131
West Virginia	W. Va. Code § 18-2E-5

Florida (Fla. Stat. § 229.0535), Michigan (Mich. Stat. Ann. § 380.1280) and New York (8 NYCRR @ 100.2p) have passed laws that allow the state to intervene in a district. However, these laws do not permit the state to alter (on a permanent or temporary basis) the district's governance structure.

TABLE 2

STATE TAKEOVERS*

The following states have "taken over" the following districts for reasons of "academic bankruptcy":

State	District(s)
Connecticut	In 1997, the state legislature enacted a law to abolish the locally elected <i>Hartford</i> school board and empower the governor to appoint a new one.
District of Columbia (U.S. Congress)	In 1995, the U. S. Congress created a financial control board

	to operate the <i>District of Columbia's</i> government. This board appointed a new superintendent of schools and created a board of trustees to oversee the city's school system.
Illinois	In 1994, state officials appointed a three-member panel to "clean up" the financial and academic problems within the <i>East St. Louis</i> school district. In 1995, the state legislature shifted control of the <i>Chicago</i> public schools to the mayor and charged him with appointing school board members, the board president and the district's chief executive officer.
Kentucky	In 1988, the state superintendent of education, with the approval of the state board of education, took control of the <i>Pike County</i> school district due to "educational deficiencies" in the district. In 1994, state officials assumed control of the <i>Letcher County</i> school district. Although the local board remains in place, the state superintendent retains veto power and can initiate actions if the board fails to fulfill its obligations. In 1998, the state superintendent of education appointed three board members to the <i>Floyd County</i> school board, who then voted to accept a takeover by the state because of "educational malpractice" within the district.
Maryland	In 1997, the state legislature entered into a partnership with the city of Baltimore to run the <i>Baltimore</i> public schools. From this partnership, a new, nine-member board of school commissioners was created, with members jointly appointed by the governor and the mayor.
Massachusetts	In 1989, the state legislature enacted a law that allowed Boston University to run the <i>Chelsea</i> school district under a long-term management contract. In 1991, the state legislature enacted a law that abolished the elected <i>Boston</i> School Committee and gave the mayor of Boston the right to appoint school committee members. In 1996, the citizens of Boston voted to maintain the mayorally-appointed school committee. In 1998, state officials intervened in the <i>Lawrence</i> school district. The state entered into a joint selection process with the district for a new superintendent, and opened an office in the district to oversee daily operations and provide technical assistance to school administrators.
New Jersey	In 1989, the New Jersey board of education took over the <i>Jersey City</i> school district, charging district administrators with patronage in hiring, violation of state contract-bidding laws, political interference in the schools and general mismanagement that affected students and their abilities to learn. In 1991, after years of performing poorly in New Jersey Department of Education assessments and reviews, the <i>Paterson</i> school district was taken over by state officials.

	In 1995, the <i>Newark</i> school district was taken over by the state. The New Jersey board of education ruled that the district had failed to give its students a minimum education for decades and would be taken over by a state-supervised management team.
New York	In 1996, the New York Board of Regents voted to approve a state takeover of the <i>Roosevelt</i> school district. As a basis for its actions, the board cited unsafe schools and low-performing students.
Ohio	In 1995, a U.S. federal court charged the state with running the <i>Cleveland</i> public schools through a state-appointed superintendent. In 1997, the state legislature shifted control of the Cleveland public schools to the mayor and charged him with appointing the school board and the chief executive officer of the school system.
Texas	In 1996, the state appointed a management team to run the <i>Wilmer-Hutchins</i> school district.
West Virginia	In 1992, state officials took over the <i>Logan County</i> school district, after many years of poor management and personnel practices and low student achievement records. In 1998, the <i>Mingo County</i> school district was taken over by the state. The West Virginia Board of Education determined that "extraordinary circumstances" existed in the district because of continuing budget deficits, low student achievement and a lack of leadership.

* This is not a comprehensive list.

TABLE 3 RECONSTITUTIONS*

School reconstitutions have occurred in the following states and districts, some initiated by the state and some by the district:

State	District
California	The <i>San Francisco</i> School District began reconstituting schools in 1983, as part of a court order to improve the academic performance of minorities and to desegregate its school system. In 1983-1984, six schools were completely reconstituted. Later, more were reconstituted along less radical lines, including 10 reconstituted schools since 1994.
Colorado	<i>Denver</i> Public Schools (DPS) officials implemented a school evaluation process that will consider student achievement levels, writing samples, suspensions, participation in the gifted and talented program, parent involvement, building maintenance and allocation of resources. A school deemed in need of "redesign" could be placed on probation for a year and given a chance to reform itself, or if the situation is bad enough, be closed over the summer and restaffed for the following fall. In its first drastic step, DPS reconstituted two elementary schools, rehiring only a few original teachers. Although the teachers' union initially balked when news of the possible overhauls broke, union leaders then took the unusual step of cooperating closely with DPS administrators. Still, all but a handful of teachers at each school were required to find positions elsewhere in the district.
Illinois	The <i>Chicago</i> Public Schools chief executive officer ordered the reconstitution of seven poorly performing high schools in the 1997-1998 school year. Reconstitution in Chicago requires all employees - principals, teachers, and classified staff - to reapply for their jobs. Those who receive a poor evaluation will be removed from the schools. Teachers not rehired have 10 months to find another job in the system before being taken off the payroll. They are expected to work as substitutes during that time, with one day off a week for job hunting.
Maryland	<i>Prince George's County</i> administrators ordered the staffs of four elementary schools and two middle schools to reapply for their jobs in June 1997. In the end, new principals were brought in for five of the six schools, and slightly more than a third of the teachers and administrators returned to their original schools. Officials said they were trying to boost achievement at the schools before they became candidates for reconstitution by the state, which has put 50 schools in Baltimore on notice that they may be reconstituted.
New York	State officials told the <i>New York City</i> School District to improve certain schools or risk state takeover. In response, the district assigned these schools to a separate school district directly under the district chancellor's control. Although students were not transferred, the chancellor ordered the redesign of 13 of the district's worst schools, with eight getting new principals.
Ohio	In the <i>Cleveland</i> Public Schools, the state-appointed superintendent announced he was "cleaning house" at two elementary schools just three weeks before the start of school. Despite protests from parents and labor grievances by the teachers' union, more than two-thirds of the teachers at the schools were replaced when classes resumed in August 1997.
Texas	In 1993, the <i>Houston</i> Independent School District reconstituted Rusk Elementary School, and reassigned the school's principal, declared all the teaching positions vacant and told the teachers they would have to reapply for their jobs or transfer elsewhere in the district. Also, the <i>San Antonio</i> School District has reconstituted four schools.

* This is not a comprehensive list.

SOURCES

Berk Anderson, Amy and Anne C. Lewis, "Academic Bankruptcy Policy Brief," Education Commission of the States (ECS), March 1997.

Burr, Richard, "State takeovers display mixed education results," *The Detroit News*, February 9, 1997.

"Chicago Schools Report Progress Since Mayor's Takeover," *Urban Educator*, April 1996.

Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE), "Fixing Failing Schools: Reconstitution and other High-Stakes Strategies Meeting Summary," May 12-13, 1997.

"Denver Shakeup," *School Board News*, February 25, 1997.

DiegmueLLer, Karen, "Progress, Problems Outlined in State-Run N.J. District," *Education Week*, November 16, 1994.

Education Commission of the States (ECS), "Academic Bankruptcy Clearinghouse Note," January 1997.

Education Commission of the States (ECS), "Accountability: State and Community Responsibility," January 1998.

Education Commission of the States (ECS), "Emerging Urban School District Governance Models Policy Brief," March 1997.

Education Commission of the States (ECS), "State Takeover of Logan County, West Virginia, Has Win-Win Ending," *Commission Connection*, September 1996.

Education Writers Association, "Reconstitution," *Education Reform*, March 1998.

Fuhrman, Susan H. and Richard F. Elmore, *Takeover and Deregulation: Working Models of New State and Local Regulatory Relationships*, April 1992.

Ginsberg, Rick and Barnett Berry, "The Capability for Enhancing Accountability," *Educational Policy*, January-March 1998.

Hendrie, Caroline, "Ill Will Comes With Territory In Takeovers," *Education Week*, June 12, 1996.

Hendrie, Caroline, "A Mixed Record for Reconstitution Flashes a Yellow Light for Districts," *Education Week*, July 8, 1998.

Hendrie, Caroline, "Reconstitution Gaining New Momentum," *Education Week*, September 24, 1997.

Hendrie, Caroline, "S.F. Reforms Put on the Line In Legal Battle," *Education Week*, December 11, 1996.

Hoff, David J., "W.Va. Leaves District Better Than It Found It," *Education Week*, September 18, 1996.

Lewis, Anne. C., "ECS Conference Highlights State Takeovers of Failing Urban Schools," Education Commission of the States, March 1997.

New York State Education Department, *Perform or Perish: Recommendations of the Advisory Council to the New York State Board of Regents Subcommittee on Low-Performing Schools*, January 1996.

Olson, Lynn, "State Takeovers Run Afoul of Voting Rights Act," *Education Week*, September 11, 1996.

Pipho, Chris, "The Changing Governance Scene," *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 1995.

Reinhard, Beth, "Racial Issues Cloud State Takeovers," *Education Week*, January 14, 1998.

Ritter, John, "States stepping in at urban school in crisis," *USA Today*, June 10, 1997.

Schmidt, Peter, "Interest Grows in New Policy Tool: Replacing Staffs of Failing Schools," *Education Week*, June 23, 1993.

"Several urban districts go for the clean sweep," *School Board News*, July 8, 1997.

Sullivan, Joseph F., "Scores Are Said to Lag at State-Run Schools," *The New York Times*, April 25, 1996.

Walsh, Mark, "High Court Takes a Look At Takeovers," *Education Week*, January 21, 1998.

Wilson, Laval S., "Takeover: The Paterson Story," *The American School Board Journal*, December 1994.

Wong, Kenneth K., Robert Dreeben, Laurence E. Lynn, Jr., and Gail L. Sunderman, *Integrated Governance As A Reform Strategy In The Chicago Public Schools*, University of Chicago, 1997.

This policy brief was compiled by Todd Ziebarth, policy analyst, ECS, with financial support from the Joyce Foundation.

COMMENTS

SEARCH

Please note that information issued by ECS strives to combine the best of the most recent and most valuable research available. Should you have questions on any aspect of information provided by ECS, please contact our Information Clearinghouse at 303-299-3675.
Copyright © 1999 by the Education Commission of the States (ECS). All Rights Reserved.

Education Commission of the States ■ 707 17th St., #2700 Denver, CO 80202-3427
303-299-3600 ■ FAX: 303-296-8332 ■ E-mail: ecs@ecs.org ■ Internet: www.ecs.org



State Takeovers of Failing Urban Schools--ECS Conference Highlights

ECS CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS STATE TAKEOVERS OF FAILING URBAN SCHOOLS

By Anne Lewis
March 1997

Moving to protect children enrolled in consistently failing schools, states are intervening in urban school districts at an unprecedented rate. They do so reluctantly. They make policy as they go because there are no road maps that apply to every situation. And so far, state actions to stem the crisis in urban districts, at the most, have plugged the dike but have been unable to stop the flood of student academic failure.

At a conference sponsored by the Education Commission of the States (ECS) in Baltimore on February 3, 1997, officials from states that have intervened in urban districts expressed extreme frustration. On the other hand, some strategies short of takeovers seem to show promise.

Key policymakers from 14 states or about two-thirds of the states with "academic bankruptcy" laws as well as union, association and foundation officials attended the one-day meeting. They cited common problems in the crisis districts: high student failure rates, mismanagement, entrenched special interests, and often too many players with agendas that place the needs of the adults who work in the system above the needs of students.

Shifting the focus of urban districts to a concern for student learning is likely to require new legislation that will create clear standards for all students and new modes of accountability. It also will take skilled politicking, determination and risk-taking leadership on the part of policymakers, according to many of the conference participants.

Research on state interventions often describes lessons learned in scholarly ways; nothing is as compelling as the stories of those state leaders who have been directly involved in interventions in urban districts.

A Tale of Two Cities

Years of litigation, abysmal outcomes for students, money problems and "intractable" leadership forced the Cleveland and Baltimore school districts into the hands of state officials.

At the direction of the courts, Ohio's state Superintendent John Goff took over the Cleveland schools in 1995 with all powers except to levy taxes and close buildings. Goff found a school system with "horrible facilities," heavy debt, a graduation rate of 33% and a senior passing rate on proficiency tests of only 3%.

He also found himself dealing with the third federal judge to rule on the school system's desegregation plan; each judge has dealt with the case in a different style. The plaintiffs in the desegregation suit "play a big role" in whatever actions are taken in the district, Goff said, and his problem as the takeover administrator was to know "how far I could go without risking an appeal that would make us lose what authority we had."

Goff said he has become "very cynical" about the intent of interest groups, who make it almost impossible to get agreement on actions, at least in a reasonable amount of time. "Urban districts are all about money and power," Goff said. Another conference participant, State Representative Mike Fox, who is chairman of the Ohio House Education Committee, expressed similar frustration. Fox said it may be impossible to get rid of busing in Cleveland because \$60 million in desegregation money is at stake.

Predicting that it might take as long as three years to see a change in student academic results, Goff said the takeover has nevertheless had immediate benefits. District residents approved a bond issue, the first

in more than two decades. All-day kindergarten classes were restored, new textbooks were ordered and long-overdue building repairs were started. "For the first time in 20 years, we have got the confidence of the people in the community that things can get better," said Goff.

State Representative Fox said he learned several lessons from the takeover process, and outlined 10 issues that state policymakers are likely to encounter in grappling with the problems of urban districts. They include: reallocation of resources or decisions about what allocations will produce the best results; how to make sure that expectations for students in urban districts are just as high as for students in suburban or rural districts; how to establish customer-centered, market-driven structures; how to assure and fund safe school environments; and how to provide high-quality professional development.

The frustration level was just as high in Baltimore as in Cleveland. The current mayor, Kurt Schmoke, came into office with the power to appoint the school board and to select the superintendent; school district finances are under the city council. From the beginning of his administration in 1988, Schmoke has focused on education, from reorganizing the local community college to campaigning for adult literacy to getting involved in litigation over school funding. This litigation, plus the school district's problems with non-compliance over the education of students with disabilities, "has been the equivalent of trench warfare," according to Schmoke.

Despite a decade of effort, progress in the Baltimore school system was "only incremental and only at some schools," Schmoke said. Meanwhile, the state's academic bankruptcy law calls for the state education agency to designate schools in need of "reconstitution," based on the lack of progress in student achievement. Fifty of the 180 schools in Baltimore are now eligible for reconstitution, and continuing litigation was exhausting time and resources.

The Maryland State Board of Education ruled out takeover as an option. Instead, a consent decree among city, school system and state entities reorganizes the governance of the Baltimore schools so that a new school board will be appointed by the mayor and governor from a list submitted by the state board. Of the nine slots on the board, four must be held by business executives from the private sector. The system will operate under an annual, performance-based plan and agree to other reforms. The state, in turn, will provide the Baltimore schools with additional funding over five years. (The proposed funding increase has yet to be approved by the Maryland General Assembly.)

Schmoke said he agreed to this partnership plan, despite vociferous opposition from the minority community in Baltimore, because he realized the system was "unresponsive" to his leadership and that there were aspects of management he "could not get at." He came into office believing that solving certain problems, such as class size, would improve the situation. He came to realize that "the entire system needed to be reformed."

his emphasis upon systemic reform is the state's goal, too, according to Nancy Grasmick, Maryland state education superintendent. Urban districts, she pointed out, have the ability to initiate good individual projects, "but it is the systemic concerns that never get taken care of." Maryland State Senator Barbara Hoffman described the Baltimore situation more graphically: "We needed to pull the tablecloth away, let everything fall and start all over."

Chicago: Another Governance Approach

The governance of the Chicago public schools is a perennial issue for the Illinois legislature. In the late 1980s, legislators took some control not enough, some reformers say away from the district's school board and central office, and put it in the hands of parents, in the form of local school councils. In 1995, the legislature passed a bill giving Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley sweeping managerial control over the operation of the city's schools, their unions and the district's budget.

The good relationship between the mayor and the CEO he appointed to head the schools is a plus for the schools, as are the prospects for long-term stability. Chicago teachers have agreed to a new four-year contract. State Representative Mary Lou Cowlshaw, the author of the 1995 legislation, said she hopes that the links from the local school councils to the school board to the mayor become so strong "that

progress will continue no matter who is the mayor."

Success with the governance structure in Chicago built upon reforms that began with the 1988 move to local school council control, said Ann Hallett, executive director of the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform in Chicago. Those reforms, she said, "unleashed an enormous amount of community involvement." However, most of the student achievement gains so far have been relatively modest and confined to the elementary schools, she said.

The state has needed to take a more direct role in another failing district, East St. Louis, because the leadership and the resources are not there for a Chicago-style reform, according to State Superintendent Joseph Spagnolo Jr.

What Are the Issues?

Few of the participants at the ECS meeting could identify with the success West Virginia State Superintendent Henry Marockie experienced in the state takeover of the Logan County schools. The action was met with hostility at first, he said, but over a four-year period the problems were ironed out, the public regained confidence and the district was turned back to local control.

For most of the others at the conference, the crises in the urban districts were too complex to be solved, at least in the short run, by state takeovers. The discussion and experiences brought these issues to light:

*** Teacher union positions.** Some players "just have to leave the table" in order for reform planning to go on, said David Bergholz, executive director of the George Gund Foundation in Cleveland, referring especially to teachers' unions. American Federation of Teachers Representative Joan Buckley said, however, that teachers were improperly left out of decisionmaking in Cleveland. In Chicago, while teachers gave up the right to strike for 18 months and signed a four-year contract, "they kept other things out of the agreement," she said. In Spagnolo's opinion, the unions recognized the strong city-school district leadership link and "saw the writing on the wall."

*** Politics on the basis of race.** Maryland State Delegate Howard "Pete" Rawlings said both he and Baltimore Mayor Schmoke had been castigated by minority communities for supposedly "turning the school system over to a white state board and state department of education." However, Rawlings was equally critical of "whites who have tended to be patronizing toward the largely minority school systems and not held them to the same standards.... They are not willing to take on black superintendents even though some of them are ineffective."

*** How to rearrange power.** More than a special-interest group problem, the issue of power includes the judicial system, partisan action and racial politics. State policy, said Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, should help to restore the balance of power: "So often those at the top of a school district are held accountable but they do not have the authority to require accountability." For Ohio State Representative Fox, however, the political infrastructure of many urban districts makes reform impossible; therefore, he is a strong supporter of parental choice. "We have to disperse power to parents if we want the infrastructure to change," he said. Casserly rejected Fox's support of vouchers, saying that charter schools have imposed greater financial burdens on urban districts because of transportation costs.

*** Lack of progress on student achievement.** Improving student achievement takes time, consistency of policies and leadership, and external help in finding what works with urban kids.

How Can States Help?

State interventions are not the only recourse. Efforts to find alternative solutions to the urban school district crisis have been undertaken by the National Conference of Mayors and a coalition of the Institute for Educational Leadership, the U.S. Department of Education and the Council of the Great City Schools.

Participants at the ECS conference agreed that state leaders ought to **encourage coherence and communication across sectors**. Most important to them was the inclusion of economic development initiatives in the broad planning for urban district reform. It is this element, Spagnolo said, that frames restructuring of the East St. Louis schools because the only way for the St. Louis economy to expand is east, "and we need the schools to be ready for that." Coherence also is needed among the various accountability systems at the local, state and federal levels, said Jennifer O'Day of Stanford University's School of Education. Title I requirements, for example, need to be used as a tool at all levels. ECS has a role in "forcing conversations across other parts of state government," said Bergholz, "making the transformation of urban districts even more systemic." If this does not happen, he predicted, "we will all be back at this table again in 10 years."

State leadership also needs to take the next step and **focus all efforts on student learning**. Urban systems that are showing success at higher student achievement, such as Memphis, "ought to be brought in and made part of the discussion on what to do about urban districts," said Cindy Brown, director of the Equity Center for the Council of Chief State School Officers. Decisionmakers at all levels need help with "best policies," such as the use of resources, systemic reforms, the role of courts and the purposes of new governance structures. "Do we want to go back to neighborhood schools, or do we want to focus on achievement?" asked Bergholz.

Another role for ECS and state-level leadership is to **provide access to "best practices" that support higher student learning for students** in urban school systems. In addition, the community needs good information on a consistent basis. The *Catalyst* in Chicago was cited as a good model.

State policies ought to **support stability and capacity-building in urban districts**. Benjamin Dixon, deputy education commissioner in Connecticut, said "there must be a continuity of effort in failing urban districts based upon a data-driven plan." That plan, he said, may have to be initiated from the outside, but it can only be carried out by those who have the right training and background. Leaders must be strong enough, participants pointed out, to get beyond stalemates and make decisions that stick.

Finally, all of these points underscore the conference participants' agreement that state efforts must **support local solutions**. "The state superintendent can't be a school superintendent, too," Goff says of his experience with Cleveland. State intervention may be accepted locally in order to correct mismanagement, but state initiatives that threaten local values and interests in an arbitrary manner, though more likely to be efficient and time-saving, may be viewed as "an invading army."

Participants in the Baltimore conference agreed that state and local actions to date have not produced the kind of transformation in urban districts and the student outcomes that everyone wants. The agenda is open. The only item not on it is inaction.

Anne C. Lewis is a national education writer based in the Washington, D.C. area.

COMMENTS

SEARCH

Please note that information issued by ECS strives to combine the best of the most recent and most valuable research available. Should you have questions on any aspect of information provided by ECS, please contact our Information Clearinghouse at 303-299-3675.
Copyright © 1999 by the Education Commission of the States (ECS). All Rights Reserved.

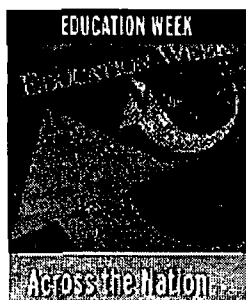
Education Commission of the States ■ 707 17th St., #2700 Denver, CO 80202-3427
303-299-3600 ■ FAX: 303-296-8332 ■ E-mail: ecs@ecs.org ■ Internet: www.ecs.org



General News Articles

NOVEMBER 25, 1998

EDUCATION WEEK on the WEB


[IN CONTEXT](#) | [THE ARCHIVES](#) | [TEACHER MAGAZINE](#) | [THE DAILY NEWS](#) | [SPECIAL REPORTS](#) | [PRODUCTS & SERVICES](#)

State Adds to List Of N.Y.C.'s Low-Performing Schools

By Kerry A. White

New York state's annual compilation of its lowest-performing schools places nearly 10 percent of New York City's schools at risk of being shut down, prompting criticism that too many city schools are being left behind.



The list, unveiled Nov. 13, showed that while 18 New York City schools on last year's list had improved enough to move off this year's, some 21 new city schools were identified as failing.

The latest tally brings the city's total number of failing schools to 97, out of about 1,100 schools there, the highest number since 1989.

The state will release the names of low-performing schools in the rest of the state--typically only a few--in the coming weeks.

After more than a decade of the state process of identifying failing schools, the city's latest number is way too high, some school groups say.

"There's a problem with the whole process," argued Judith Baum, a spokeswoman for the Public Education Association, a local watchdog group. Officials "wait until schools fall into egregious states of disrepair before they take action," she claimed. "They pay attention to one set of schools, while others, schools we call in the dead zone, fall to the wayside."

Randi Weingarten, the president of the United Federation of Teachers, the local union, echoed that statement.

All the system's schools should have the resources to achieve at high levels, she said.

"I'm talking about smaller classes, intensive teacher coaching and professional development, proven reading programs, and insistence on certified teachers in classrooms," she said last week.

But state and local school officials see the new list in decidedly more positive terms.

State Commissioner of Education Richard P. Mills said in an interview that the city's increasing number of low-performing schools--called Schools Under Registration Review, or SURR--is a result of the state's rising standards, not a gauge of the overall success or failure of the 1.1 million-student system or its chancellor, Rudolph F. Crew.

Mr. Mills also noted that the number of city schools removed from this year's list is the highest ever--evidence, he said, that joint efforts to raise academic achievement are working.

Read a related story, "N.Y.C. Educator Is Named Chief in Cleveland," in This Week's News.

Read our story, "Failing Schools Challenge Accountability Goals," March 25, 1998.

"Mills Proposes Broad Urban Policy for N.Y.," March 25, 1998.

Our special report "Quality Counts '98" contains a comprehensive

comprehensive
 overview of the
 challenges facing
 urban school districts
 in New York.

"The 18 schools off the list demonstrates the vigor of city and state efforts to improve schools. The city has gotten better and better at turning schools around, even while we raise the bar, making it easier" for schools to be added to the roster, the state chief said.

"No one feels good about the 21 schools added to the list; it's a painful thing. But if [schools] look at the track record, they can anticipate a high probability of success."

Schools falling furthest from state standards on mathematics and reading tests make up the list.

Two years ago, the state singled out schools if fewer than 30 percent of the students met the state standard. Last year, the threshold level rose to 40 percent, and next year standards will rise again.

SURR schools have up to three years to meet performance targets outlined by the state. If they fail to improve, schools could be closed.

11th-Hour Negotiations

Armed with test data, Chancellor Crew had negotiated with Commissioner Mills until the 11th hour on which of the city's schools the state should single out.

Mr. Crew was trying to persuade Mr. Mills that several schools had come close enough to the latest cutoff scores to be spared the public ignominy, said J.D. LaRock, a spokesman for the chancellor.

The back-and-forth prompted the state to delay the list's release by a week. But the education department stuck to its original compilation, according to Mr. Mills.

In a statement, Mr. Crew lauded the schools that had worked their way off the list and promised to "continue to try to ensure that no schools are undeservedly placed on the SURR list."

The release of the SURR list has been an annual fall rite in the state for more than a decade. Because it has become almost routine, observers say there is less of the finger-pointing and hurt feelings associated with newer lists in other states.

Michael D. Casserly, the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, a Washington-based advocacy group for the nation's largest city school systems, said that with less politicking in New York City schools, state and local officials and teacher groups have been able to work together to focus on student achievement.

"The chancellor is very good at taking side political issues off the table," Mr. Casserly said.

"With less political battles," he added, "there's more time to spend on instruction and raising achievement."

JULY 8, 1998

EDUCATION WEEK on the WEB

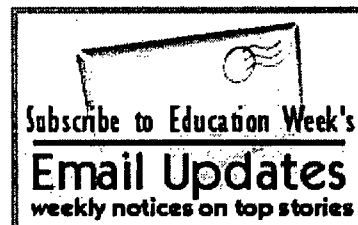


IN CONTEXT | THE ARCHIVES | TEACHER MAGAZINE | THE DAILY NEWS | SPECIAL REPORTS | PRODUCTS & SERVICES

N.Y. Study Advocates Improved Process For Intervention in Schools

By Lynn Olson

New York state's process for intervening in low-performing schools should be strengthened to address many of the systemwide problems that contribute to school failure, a new study suggests.



HP EQUIPPED SCHOOLS

Among those problems are high student-mobility rates and large proportions of inexperienced teachers, concludes the study by the Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York University.

The study looked at the state's Schools Under Registration Review Program, one of the longest-running programs for intervening in failing schools in the nation, and was conducted for the state education department.

After the study's release last month, Commissioner of Education Richard P. Mills announced a series of actions the state will take over the next year to strengthen the SURR program. "These initiatives will make a good program better," he said in a statement. "Last year, I was able to remove 21 schools from Registration Review. With these steps, I expect even greater success in the future."

District Role

The study found that the state's efforts to intervene in failing schools are "among the most comprehensive and rigorous of such efforts" in the country. Yet it outlined several areas where improvement is needed.

Between the 1989-90 school year, when the program began, and 1996-97, the state identified 139 schools whose performance was so dismal that they were at risk of school closure. Of those, 40 improved enough to come off the SURR list or were reorganized or closed, and 99 remained on the list as of 1996-97. Currently, 98 public schools in the state, including 94 in New York City, are under review.

The study found that many SURR schools were deeply affected by district policies that contributed to their difficulties. For example, in some cases, feeder patterns funneled all the students from low-performing elementary schools into one or two middle schools.

And many principals and teachers surveyed viewed their districts as uninvolved or uninterested in their schools' improvement.

Where a school's low performance seems closely linked to district actions, or where a district continues to house a large number of low-performing schools, the study suggests, the state should develop stronger sanctions to motivate districts.

The study also found that despite an array of supports and services available to SURR schools, the state had no comprehensive list of what services each school was receiving. It concluded that "support to SURR schools remains a patchwork whose utility is often diminished by staff turnover."

Carol Ascher, the primary author of the study, said its goal was not to excuse failure, "but to say that if you want these schools to succeed, these community factors have to be taken seriously."

Among the changes outlined by Mr. Mills are better training for the teams sent in to diagnose the causes of a school's failure; greater collaboration with other agencies to address the needs of children and families in SURR schools; and efforts to improve the quality of the teaching staffs at SURR schools.

Since 1995, New York City officials have aggressively targeted the needs of their low-performing schools. The city has created a separate "Chancellor's District" for troubled schools whose districts had been unable or unwilling to help them, and has devised a self-assessment tool for schools.

SUBSCRIBE	ABOUT THIS SITE	FEEDBACK	SEARCH THE SITE	JOBS	HOME
© 1998 Editorial Projects in Education			Vol. 17, number 42, page 22		