



Beyond School Closings: Effective Alternatives for Low-Performing Schools

Prepared by the New York City Coalition for Educational Justice

Secretary Duncan has challenged states to turn around their lowest-performing 5 percent of the schools. Arne, we'll see your 5 percent and we're going to double it. Our goal is to turn around the lowest-performing 10 percent of city schools over the next four years by closing them down and bringing in new leadership and holding everyone accountable for success.

— Mayor Michael Bloomberg

Remarks delivered at the Center for American Progress, November 25, 2009

Parents from low-income and working-class communities in New York City have been fighting for years for dramatic improvements in struggling neighborhood schools. Now the Obama administration has focused its education agenda on this challenge and is investing billions of dollars in turning around failing schools. This dramatic increase in political and financial support creates an opportunity for districts to focus on equity and finally get the work of improving low-performing schools right.

Federal funding for school turnaround has already begun to flow. In the next few months, thirty-four NYC schools (thirty-three high schools and one elementary school) will start receiving up to \$2 million each year for three years in School Improvement Grants (SIG) to implement one of the four federal options:

1. **Restart:** Convert the school to charter, or close and reopen it as a charter school
2. **Closure:** Close a school and enroll the students in other higher-achieving schools
3. **Turnaround:** Phase out the existing school and replace it with new schools (NYC version of turnaround)
4. **Transformation:** Replace the principal and redesign the school by increasing learning time, reforming curriculum and instruction, and increasing teaching quality

To take strategic advantage of this opportunity to create sustainable change in our city's most struggling schools, the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ) urges the NYC Department of Education (DOE) to create a *School Transformation Zone* to support these schools in implementing effective school improvement models without collateral damage to other schools. Innovation cannot be reserved only for better performing schools; the Zone will support

comprehensive, innovative plans that will increase student achievement in the lowest-performing schools.

A School Transformation Zone

There has been a component of shock and awe in our reforms, predicated on our confidence in market forces and state interventions and our distrust of local communities as agents of change that has led to the popularity of closing schools, dismissing staff, and shifting displaced students to other buildings. . . . [S]uch models are perfecting unsustainable change —building in instability and competitiveness into our change architecture rather than stability and collaboration.

— Dennis Shirley, *Lynch School of Education, Boston College*
Testimony at Public Hearings on Race to the Top, Los Angeles, November 18, 2009

With more low-performing schools than any other district in the nation, New York City is a unique laboratory for a School Transformation Zone. This Zone would incubate changes that build ongoing school capacity in the city’s lowest-performing schools through implementing evidence-based intervention strategies. It would coordinate and support existing federal initiatives for school turnaround, as well as pilot new change efforts, and would comply with the federal recommendation that districts create a “turnaround division” to provide leadership and support to schools in the turnaround process.

CEJ proposes that the thirty-four schools receiving SIG funds be encouraged to join the Zone, as well as other low-performing schools that will be threatened with closure if they do not significantly raise student achievement in the next few years.

The key features of CEJ’s proposed School Transformation Zone are:

- Schools designated as low-performing by state and federal accountability standards would be eligible to apply to participate by demonstrating a vision and plan for comprehensive improvement. High-performing schools serving similar student populations could also apply, based on their capacity to provide technical assistance to principals, teachers, and school staff.
- Low-performing schools accepted into the Zone would receive additional supports and resources to implement their plan and would be protected from being closed for three years, during which time they would be required to demonstrate steady increases in student achievement. High-performing schools would be compensated for providing hands-on coaching, mentoring, and other supports.
- Participating schools would be organized into networks directed by expert educators with track records of turning around struggling schools.
- Each network will be staffed by a “dream team” of the highest-performing district staff in each program area (scheduling, curriculum, support services, etc.) and will be first in line for resources and assistance from the DOE.

- To ensure meaningful community partnership, each school would create a School Transformation Zone Committee composed of administrators, parents, teachers and community partners. In addition, the Zone would be supported by a coordinating committee of key stakeholders who would play an ongoing role in implementation and monitoring.
- Federal School Improvement Grants would support the “persistently lowest-achieving” schools, as well as fund the infrastructure for the Zone. Additional schools would be funded through an application for federal Innovation Funds, private funds, and redirection of existing monies.

The Zone would be guided by three central principles that research shows, when practiced together, create the best chance for success:

1. A collaborative approach that creates local ownership and accountability

Parents, students, teachers and communities must play a meaningful role in designing and implementing reform in Zone schools. When families and teachers have invested in the school improvement plan, they are more likely to hold the school accountable to it.

2. A focus on instructional change, capacity building and school culture

Structural change alone is not an educational strategy. The focus of school improvement in the Zone must be on instructional change, and it must be comprehensive and research-based, and supported with the necessary resources to provide all students with a robust, well-rounded educational experience.

3. Recognition and coordination of supports for the whole student

Students cannot learn when they are hungry, exhausted or sick; when their parents cannot support them at home, when they feel disrespected in school. A comprehensive improvement plan for Zone schools must assess and address student and family needs and organizes necessary supports.

The Problems with Closing Schools

It is recommended that policymakers refrain from relying on restructuring sanctions (take-overs, private management, charters, and reconstitutions) to effect school improvement. They have produced negative by-products without yielding systemic positive effects.

— *Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice, April 2009*

Of the many available strategies to improve chronically low-performing schools, Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein have prioritized and privileged one: closing these schools down and opening new schools in their place. Since Mayor Bloomberg took office in 2002, NYC has closed 108 schools – almost as many schools as the entire district of Washington, DC. Yet, recent research shows that, while some school closures have resulted in better educational options for students, this strategy has negative ripple effects throughout the system. This mixed record raises several questions: Do school closures really improve the quality of education for

their displaced students? Or do they just duck the DOE's responsibility for educating the highest-needs students by abandoning the schools they attend? School closure can become a shell game that cloaks failure rather than addressing its roots at the school, community and district levels.

While the Obama and Bloomberg administrations have touted data as a major driver of policy decisions, the efficacy of closing schools has an extremely weak evidence base. The largest longitudinal study has been in Chicago, which until 2006 pursued a large-scale strategy of closing failing schools. But a study by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (de la Torre & Gwynne 2009) found that

- the majority of students displaced from closing schools ended up at other schools that were nearly as bad as those they had left; in fact, 40 percent of these students enrolled in schools on probation and 42 percent enrolled in schools in the bottom quartile of standardized test performance;
- the displaced students' standardized achievement test results, after one year in their new schools, were not statistically different from their expected achievement had they remained in their original schools; and
- the displaced students' on-track rates to graduation were also no different.

In New York City, many of the new small high schools have higher graduation rates than the large schools they replaced. Still, school closings have an impact far beyond the particular campus in transition. High-needs students who would have attended the closing schools enroll in other large high schools, further taxing those schools' capacity, reducing their effectiveness, and increasing their risk of being targeted for closure.

A Center for NYC Affairs study (Hemphill et al. 2009) last year found that of thirty-four large high schools studied, twenty-six saw their enrollments sharply increase as other schools were closed, and the majority of these schools experienced subsequent declines in attendance or graduation rates. Of the fourteen schools where spikes in enrollment caused declines in attendance *and* graduation rates, half are currently on the state's list of persistently lowest-achieving schools.

A recent report by Advocates for Children (AFC 2009) on the restructuring of two large Brooklyn high schools found that the new small schools created to replace the closing high schools took very few ELL students and often failed to provide them with mandated services: though both the large schools had housed large bilingual education programs, none of the small schools that replaced them provided any bilingual programs.

Also troubling is that in many of the small schools opened since 2002, student achievement indicators are declining. The Center for NYC Affairs (Hemphill et al. 2009) found that at most of the small schools

- attendance rates have fallen;
- teacher and principal turnover is higher in small schools than in the system as a whole;
- some small schools report graduation rates for their second and subsequent classes that are much lower than for their original class.

It is unclear whether the initially strong results of the new small schools will persist as they age and as larger numbers of high-needs students are absorbed.

What Is the Alternative?

[N]one of the federal restructuring options was associated with schools making AYP. . . . [T]he federal Institute of Education Science’s best practice guide for turning around chronically low-performing schools did not include these federal strategies and instead recommended the use of other strategies.

*Center for Education Policy
Improving Low-Performing Schools, December 2009*

Dramatic intervention is necessary in the many NYC schools that have stagnated with low achievement for years, even decades. While there have been countless failed efforts at school turnaround in NYC and elsewhere, there are also school reform models nationally and internationally that have produced steady, significant gains in student achievement in severely struggling schools – without the collateral damage inflicted by school closings. Some of these models (described in more detail in the appendix) are

- **Talent Development High Schools** and **High Schools That Work**, which use a package of interventions in hundreds of schools across the country, such as: teams of teachers who share the same students; ninth-grade academies that transition students to high school; mandatory advanced coursework for all students; collaboration with parents starting in middle school; and strong instructional support from trained coaches
- **Strategic Learning Initiatives**, which has turned around ten failing Chicago schools through intensive professional development with existing teachers and principals, and focuses on differentiated instruction, assessment, and collaborative leadership
- **Raising Achievement, Transforming Learning** in the United Kingdom, which pairs low- and high-performing schools in networks in which teachers, principals, and staff at low-performing schools receive intensive hands-on coaching, modeling, and technical assistance from peer staff at high-performing schools
- **Whole District Reform** in Hamilton County, Tennessee, which raised student achievement significantly through a college-preparatory curriculum, increased collaborative planning time for teachers, and districtwide networks of principals, literacy coaches, college advisors, and other staff for peer learning

These research-validated models are tailored to the specific needs of the schools they serve, but at the same time they share a focus on instruction and implementation of multiple, coordinated strategies.¹ Common elements of these models are:

¹ Other efforts, like Strategic Staffing Initiative in Charlotte, focus on one key element of turnaround, such as improving existing human capital. This initiative assembles “dream teams” of principals and core teachers for the lowest-performing schools, allows principals and teachers to transfer together, provides additional district support

- **More time for learning.** Expanded learning time and flexible scheduling provide opportunities for extra instruction in core subjects, as well as work-based learning and enrichment activities and extensive time for collaboration and planning for teachers.
- **High expectations for all students.** Schools provide a challenging, well-rounded college-preparatory curriculum for all students, regardless of background and achievement.
- **Strong professional development for leaders and teachers.** Embedded, relevant professional development for school leaders and teachers and networking across schools for peer learning allows for continuous capacity building.
- **Comprehensive, coordinated student supports.** Schools provide research-based accelerated learning strategies to prepare struggling students for college-prep classes, as well as intensive social and emotional supports for student who fall off track.
- **Parent and community engagement.** Effective models engage parents in planning for their children’s future and in leading school change, and connect students to community assets.

A comprehensive initiative to implement these key school improvement elements in NYC’s lowest-performing schools through the School Transformation Zone could achieve the goal of significantly increasing student achievement, without disruptive side effects on other fragile schools.

Federal dollars are currently available to support just this kind of work, through School Improvement Grants, Innovation Funds, and other incentive grants. Even in a time of budget cuts, the DOE has continued to raise money for priorities in innovation. Recently, the DOE announced the expansion of the NYC i-Zone, which pilots school improvement strategies such as flexible time and technology-based curriculum at eighty-one schools citywide. However, the low-performing schools that most need this innovation are not included. Only thirteen of the eighty-one i-Zone schools fall within the lowest-performing quartile of schools for English Language Arts and graduation rates, and only one is part of the thirty-four “persistently lowest-achieving” schools. Initiatives like the i-Zone are exactly what the lowest-performing schools need to redesign teaching and learning and raise student achievement. Instead of further school closings, CEJ calls on the DOE to invest similar commitment and resources into the city’s lowest-performing schools through the School Transformation Zone.

Closing schools as a strategy for school improvement is not sustainable for the long run. While it may be necessary for struggling schools to remove underperforming staff, school systems have to grapple with the reality that there is a limited pool of excellent principals and first-rate teachers trained and ready to serve the neediest students. The Department of Education will have to commit to the hard work of building the skills and capacity of the schools and staff they have, using the strategies that have been tried and proven in hundreds of struggling schools.

The School Transformation Zone is a great place to start.

staff, and ensures that struggling schools are first in line for hiring, resources, and assistance. In the first year, student achievement improved significantly.

Appendix: School Improvement Strategies That Work

Talent Development High Schools

The Talent Development High Schools program was created in 1994 by the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk at Johns Hopkins University in partnership with a failing Baltimore high school. More than forty districts in fifteen states have now used Talent Development to restructure schools facing serious achievement and graduation challenges.

Talent Development schools organize themselves into small learning communities, including a ninth-grade Success Academy and career-themed academies in the upper grades. An after-hours Twilight Academy serves students with severe behavioral problems and provides credit-recovery opportunities. Teams of four to six teachers share the same students, to foster close relationships and to allow extensive collaboration. Block scheduling of ninety-minute periods allows Talent Development schools to provide a “double dose” of core subjects, with accelerated “catch-up” courses in the first semester and college-preparatory courses in the second. Ninth-graders learn study and social skills in a freshman seminar. Each Talent Development school is supported by a school-based facilitator and a team of trained curriculum coaches to work with existing school staff. Schools have access to ongoing technical assistance and participate in training institutes and annual national conferences (IES 2007, Kemple et al. 2005). A partnership with the National Network of Partnership Schools supports parent engagement, and parents participate in school-based Action Teams (Kemple et al. 2005).

The Talent Development model has produced substantial gains. An evaluation of five low-performing Talent Development high schools in Philadelphia, endorsed by the What Works Clearinghouse, found that the model significantly increased ninth-grade attendance, credit accumulation, and promotion rates and that those gains persisted throughout students’ careers. The number of ninth-graders successfully completing Algebra 1 nearly doubled. Early findings on graduation rates suggest an increase of about 8 percentage points in one year over comparison schools (Kemple et al.).

Recently, Talent Development has begun a partnership with City Year and Communities in Schools to provide an even more intensive model of school reform called Diplomas Now. Diplomas Now middle and high schools in the Louisiana Recovery School District, Chicago, Philadelphia, San Antonio, and Los Angeles supplement the Talent Development model of a college preparatory, career-relevant curriculum for all students with teams of City Year corps members who act as classroom assistants, provide tutoring, and run after-school programs. Communities in Schools conducts community asset mapping to connect schools with community services and provide intensive case-management for individual students as needed. In the three Recovery School District turnaround schools, the first year of implementation has seen an 11 percentage point increase in daily attendance and a 15 percentage point increase in the proportion of ninth-graders passing at least four courses, as well as a 68 percent decrease in fights reported (Diplomas Now n.d.).

Strategic Learning Initiatives' Focused Instruction Program

Strategic Learning Initiatives, a Chicago non-profit with extensive experience in business and education consulting, developed the Focused Instruction Program when Chicago Public Schools CEO Arne Duncan invited the group to become the turnaround partner for ten failing schools, nine of which were slated for closure. The model worked with existing principals and teachers to implement a structured, eight-step instructional process of frequent formative assessment, differentiated instruction, and re-teaching with rich professional development and collaboration opportunities for teachers. Professional development facilitators spend a full day a week in each school, and leadership consultants meet with principals monthly. Frequent professional development clinics focus on needs noted by school leaders during classroom observations. The model includes curriculum workshops for parents, led by other parents. Teachers, administrators, and parents work together on school leadership teams to manage the reform.

A study of the Focused Instruction Program (FIP), validated by the American Institutes of Research, found that after two years, the ten schools improved on average at five times the rate of their improvement prior to adopting FIP. Five of the schools had progressed enough to be considered “turned around” according to Chicago’s definition (SLI 2009, Leinwand & Edwards 2009).

High Schools that Work

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) has developed a whole-school reform intervention, called High Schools that Work, which closely parallels the strategies of Talent Development. About 1,200 schools across a dozen states use the model, which centers on a college preparatory sequence aligned to state standards with a two-semester “double dose” of core academic subjects for freshmen. Career education is integrated throughout the curriculum, and all upper-grade students are expected to complete at least one Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or dual-credit course. High Schools that Work schools assign each student a single mentor for the duration of high school; work to involve parents in planning and monitoring their students’ progress, beginning in middle school; and focus particular attention on critical transitions: summer bridge programs help prepare incoming ninth-graders for the demands of high school and schools work with postsecondary institutions to ensure that seniors are prepared for further study. As in Talent Development, professional development for existing school staff is a key component, and teams of teachers work closely together and share groups of students. The Southern Regional Educational Board provides technical assistance visits, assessment tools, training for school staff and leaders as well as district and state staff responsible for supporting schools, and regular networking opportunities through state and national conferences (SREB n.d.).

An evaluation by the Southern Regional Education Board that compared urban schools with high levels of implementation to low- to moderate-implementation schools found that students in high-implementation schools were nearly 20 percentage points more likely to meet the rigorous High Schools that Work performance targets in English, and 13 percentage points more likely to meet targets in math.

Schools for a New Society Whole District Reform in Hamilton County, Tennessee

The merged Chattanooga–Hamilton County school district substantially improved student outcomes by implementing a set of strategies similar to those of Talent Development. The Hamilton County superintendent created a single-path, college preparatory diploma and reorganized all high schools into small, career-themed learning communities, with ample time for joint planning. Within each school, teachers began to meet in professional learning communities (called quality circles) to carefully examine data about student learning and refine their teaching practice. A Youth Engagement Network was formalized and focused on analyzing student surveys at each school, preparing recommendations, and meeting with school leadership. Between 2003 and 2006, the ninth-grade promotion rate increased from 77 percent to 89 percent, the graduation rate climbed from 68 percent to 74 percent, and college enrollment increased by 14 percent.

Lateral Networks to Improve Practice

In Hamilton County

A crucial part of the reform in Hamilton County was the emergence of strong districtwide networks connecting principals, lead practitioners, and district staff. Leaders of the initiative established a network for high school principals that has developed into a highly collaborative group focused on instructional issues. Building on the success of the principals' network, other collaborative groups have formed, including districtwide networks for literacy coaches, assistant principals, and college advisors. Participants in the Hamilton County reforms credit these networks for important changes in district policy and school practices.

In the United Kingdom

Additional evidence of the value of lateral, cross-school networks has emerged from the last decade of school reform in the United Kingdom. The Raising Achievement, Transforming Learning project seeks to drive improvement in struggling secondary schools through voluntary networking and peer learning. To date, more than 1,000 secondary schools have participated. Underachieving schools are invited to participate and take part in conferences, inter-visitations, and exchanges. Schools develop mutually supportive relationships with other schools facing the same challenges. Successful mentor schools and school leaders provide coaching and support and invite struggling schools to visit and observe their practices. Importantly, the mentor schools are not assigned to struggling schools but, instead, are approached by struggling schools as they need various types of support. Project leaders provide technical assistance and models of short- and long-term change for schools to adapt and apply (Shirley & Hargreaves 2006, 2009).

Raising Achievement, Transforming Learning has posted impressive results. An evaluation of more than 300 underperforming schools participating in the project found that two-thirds of the schools raised their performance on the national GCSE exams at double the national rate of improvement over two years. A separate evaluation of “federations” of schools found similar school improvement results. Federations are sets of schools that establish tight collaborative relationships with the purpose of raising achievement, promoting the inclusion of underserved learners, building capacity, and solving problems of practice. Federations take a variety of forms: they can consist of feeder patterns of primary and secondary schools, several religious schools of

the same denomination, mainstreaming federations of special education and general education schools, or “performance” federations of a high-performing school and one or more struggling schools. Federations of all types were associated with statistically significant improvement gains over several years. At the secondary level, performance federations were particularly effective in raising student achievement.

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