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COMMENTARY

A Failing Grade for K-12 State Takeovers

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Imitation may be a sincere form of flattery, but it's not an appropriate prescription for the challenging work of providing individualized support to schools that need it.

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Unfortunately, both Georgia and Pennsylvania are poised to implement sweeping school turnaround plans in the form of state takeovers. These plans draw inspiration from systems operating in very different contexts elsewhere in the country and are based on a fundamental misreading of the evidence on effectiveness of these models. Just as concerning, the proposals double down on unproven governance strategies that reduce community voice in education and apply a cookie-cutter approach to the specific challenges confronting individual schools. Both plans rely on the same criteria for intervention, the same menu of reforms—even the same "Opportunity School District" name.

Advocates for this type of school reform frequently point to Louisiana's Recovery School District or Tennessee's Achievement School District as examples of successful state-driven reform. A recent report by the Southern Education Foundation (where two of us work) and Brown University's Annenberg Institute for School Reform gathers the research on these and other turnaround models and **offers important cautions** for any state looking to travel the same path.

Louisiana was the first state to implement such a model in 2003. Its Recovery School District is now the nation's first all-charter district, with most of these schools located in New Orleans. The state took control of all but a handful of the city's public schools after Hurricane Katrina and turned those public funds and facilities over to private charter operators.

A decade later, New Orleans still reports some of the nation's lowest achievement scores and graduation rates. Beyond poor academic outcomes, recent research from Stanford University **found a host of negative consequences**, with a majority of families reporting long commutes to school, overcrowding, a bewildering gantlet of enrollment procedures, high rates of pushout, and difficulty finding schools able to serve students with special needs (including that the most vulnerable are

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the least likely to receive needed supports).

The research also revealed that New Orleans' charter takeover has resulted in schools' increasing stratification by race and class.

In Tennessee, student performance has been decidedly mixed in buildings overseen by the state-run Achievement School District—all but five of which were turned over to charter-management organizations. When ASD Superintendent Chris Barbic resigned last year, even he conceded the difficulty of state-driven turnaround, specifically the challenge of achieving results in a zoned charter school environment.

Opposition to the ASD, including **a call for a moratorium** from the Shelby County school board on

ASD takeover of any additional schools, is growing. And it's growing in the wake of evidence that iZones—locally controlled improvement models—are posting "positive, statistically significant, and **substantively meaningful effects** on student achievement across all subjects," according to a research brief from the Tennessee Consortium on Research, Evaluation, & Development at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College of Education.

Michigan's experience—a state takeover of an *existing* state takeover in Detroit—has been **an unmitigated failure**, with the governor considering **abandoning the strategy** amid staff turnover of nearly 40 percent, declining enrollment, a federal corruption probe, opposition by legislators of both parties, and teacher protests.

A common thread in all of these "reforms," along with the new proposals in Georgia and Pennsylvania, is the heavy reliance on standardized-test scores to deem schools "failing" and in need of state intervention—even as the Every Student Succeeds Act, the new federal education legislation, acknowledges that a broader set of indicators should be used to measure schools' progress, moving us away from rigid, high-stakes-testing accountability.

In many cases, urban districts and schools have been deprived of the resources required to deliver high-quality education and then have been targeted for takeover by the same state policymakers who set those inadequate funding levels.

Viewed in this way, the proposals in Georgia and Pennsylvania seem especially cynical. Georgia has underfunded its main basic-education subsidy, the Quality Basic Education, or QBE, since 2003. Meanwhile, Pennsylvania, which has still not adopted a 2015-16 spending plan, has one of the nation's most inequitable school funding schemes: Nearly 250,000 Keystone State students attend **severely fiscally distressed schools**.

The result of this reliance on test scores in underfunded schools is a disproportionate impact of state-run turnarounds on people of color and low-income communities. People in poverty and communities of color nationwide **report being disenfranchised** by these state takeovers, which leave them and their children even further marginalized. The same will be true of the Opportunity



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"A growing body of independent investigations shows that the preferred strategies of closing and chartering schools in takeover districts open the public treasury to fraud, waste, and abuse."

Districts.

In Georgia, schools slated for takeover are overwhelmingly high-poverty and with students of color in the majority; in Pennsylvania, the legislation specifically targets Philadelphia (and only Philadelphia), even though the city outperforms several districts statewide. Under turnaround policies, residents of these districts will face new obstacles in making their voices heard.

Finally, a growing body of independent investigations shows that the preferred strategies of closing and chartering schools in takeover districts open the public treasury to fraud, waste, and abuse. Much of this fraud goes undetected, since even when stronger rules are instituted, **most states have little capacity** to monitor how private operators profit from public funds.

When abuse is discovered, and a fraudulent charter is closed, the damage to students and communities is already done: Students return to a weakened district, their education disrupted by the upheaval of rotating between three different schools.

Whether the arrangement is called a portfolio district, a recovery district, or, most egregious, an "opportunity" or "achievement" district, the goal of these policies is the same: the transfer of local, public funds and decisionmaking to nonaccountable, often remote- or chain-charter operators.

While opportunity gaps in learning persist across the country for low-income students and students of color, the intervention models and turnaround plans prescribed under these state takeovers do not address the underlying factors causing these gaps, including the systemic underfunding of—and divestment from—many of the schools these takeovers target.

Far better approaches exist.

Georgia, Pennsylvania, and other states that have shortchanged education funding should examine school finance policies, with attention to adequacy, equity, and predictability. Policymakers with an interest in school improvement should set aside plans that call for the arbitrary dismissal of principals, or 50 percent of a building's staff, and instead treat educators as professionals by investing in supports to maximize every teacher's potential.

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States that seek greater accountability for student learning should recognize that standardized-test results in core subjects tell just one part of the story. Districts and schools should be able to demonstrate progress in other important areas, including increased attendance and higher graduation rates.

Finally, rather than continued obeisance at the altar of unproven governance reforms, states should prioritize promising community-schools models and research-based strategies, such as extended-day learning, site-based health services, and quality early education.

These strategies take time, patience, investment, and sustained hard work. They also represent the surest path to real opportunity.

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