

# 'GAME CHANGERS' FROM JCTA

Comprehensive plan for Priority Schools

To help students improve, JCTA recommends asking teachers and principals in Jefferson County's 18 Priority Schools what they need in order to be more successful, with the district, union and state then doing all they can to provide schools with what they need. GETTY IMAGES

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**how best to use this additional time.**

Teachers in Priority Schools are already struggling to find time for numerous meetings, coaching and strategy

sessions, professional development workshops and collaborative work in Professional Learning Communities, without taking time away from students. If the staff in these schools indicate that additional time in the regular teacher workday would help address these responsibilities and allow them to better assist their students, we should make additional time available to them. An extended day would also expand opportunities for students to receive additional support and enrichment without being pulled out of other classes during the school day.

Most JCPs middle and high schools end their day at 2:20 p.m., while most elementary schools end at 3:45 p.m. Since all our Priority Schools are middle and high schools, extending the school day by 85 minutes would allow these schools to participate in the already existing elementary transportation plan, thus diminishing the need for an expensive separate transportation plan for these schools.

**3. We should make teaching at Priority Schools more attractive by enhancing pay and working conditions at these schools.**

If the staff at a Priority School extends the day in a manner that causes some or all of the teachers at the school to work longer, the teachers should be compensated for the added time. For example, adding 85 minutes to the school day of a teacher earning \$50,000 per year would provide a salary increase of about

\$10,000. Such an enhanced salary could inspire more teachers within the district to apply for transfers into our Priority Schools, while helping to encourage those already in Priority Schools to stay the course. This could also assist the district's broader recruitment initiatives, which could be especially beneficial in our ongoing efforts to hire minority teachers, so our teaching staff reflects the diversity we see in our classrooms.

**4. As an extension of No. 3 above, we should invest in reducing class size at Priority Schools.**

Reducing class size at Priority Schools will allow teachers to better personalize their instruction for each student. It will also facilitate better relationships between teachers and students, and help diminish discipline problems. Studies show that reduced class size can help attract and keep quality teachers.

**5. We should make students in our Priority Schools our top priority.**

The district's organizational and financial resources should be focused on the schools needing the greatest support. For example, beginning with the 2012-2013 school year, JCPs has added approximately 80 new administrators to elementary schools all across the district, even though none of these elementary schools are Priority Schools. With the cost to the district for each of these administrators in the range of \$100,000, this represents approximately \$8 million in recurring costs. These funds might be more strategically invested in implementing the changes JCTA is proposing for our Priority Schools.

**6. Most importantly, with support from the state, we should fundamentally change the way students are assessed in Priority Schools in order to create a more engag-**

**ing learning experience that will improve attendance and student success.**

It is time we confront the fact that the effect of placing high stakes on mainly multiple-choice standardized tests creates unbearable pressure to teach to the test in a way that is not good for kids. Everything revolves around test scores and kids become numbers. Instruction is focused on basic skills, which does not promote engaging learning experiences for kids. This is especially alienating for our most vulnerable learners. But there is a better way.

A group of 28 New York high schools, known as the Performance Standards Consortium, is exempt from almost all high-stakes testing required by their state because the Consortium utilizes locally designed performance-based assessments to gauge student learning. These assessments are much richer and more "real-world" in nature than the mainly multiple-choice state tests. The Consortium has rigorous standards for the design of these local assessments, with a peer review process to ensure quality.

These better assessments promote much more engaging experiences for learners, particularly struggling learners, and the Consortium's results prove it.

Compared to average New York City high schools, Consortium schools have more students of color, more who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, more receiving special education services, and more entering 9th- and 10th-grade students scoring below the state standard in reading and mathematics. In spite of all these challenging demographic factors, Consortium schools demonstrate greater success than their NYC counterparts. They have a 10 percent higher overall graduation rate, a 25

percent higher graduation rate for special needs students, a 30 percent higher graduation rate for English Language Learners, less than half the dropout rate, less than half the suspension rate, less than one-third the teacher turnover rate, and a higher college enrollment rate for graduates, who have a lower college drop-out rate, a higher college grade point average, and a higher college graduation rate. While the national average enrollment rate for male African-American and Hispanic high school graduates are 37 percent and 42 percent, respectively, these percentages for the Consortium are 86 percent and 90 percent.

Through a broad interpretation of the new Districts of Innovation law, the state could grant JCPs permission to implement locally designed authentic assessments instead of multiple-choice state tests. Given the remarkable success demonstrated by the Consortium, the state should do so.

**We should begin immediately.** The first five recommendations above can be implemented beginning in the fall of 2013. With these changes in place, the sixth, and most powerful, recommendation could begin in the fall of 2014.

At JCTA, we recognize we are proposing bold changes that are likely to make stakeholders, including our own JCTA members, uncomfortable, but this cannot be about adult comfort. It is up to all of us in the community to move beyond our comfort zones in order to make the sort of dramatic changes our kids need to be successful. Our hope is that others will join us in supporting these recommendations, so that we can help all our students realize their amazing potentials.

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