

Forum on Educational Accountability

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A Research- and Experience-Based Turnaround Process

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The Forum on Educational Accountability (FEA) believes it appropriate for Congress to provide greater assistance to the neediest schools and in return require evidence-based, thoughtful steps toward improvement that address each such school's strengths and weaknesses. To this end, we recommend that the following process for improvement by the lowest-performing schools be included in the upcoming reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). This process should apply to all schools defined as "turnaround schools," to use the term of the U.S. Department of Education.

FEA is an alliance of national education, civil rights, religious, disability, parent, civic and labor organizations. We base our work on the *Joint Organizational Statement on NCLB* (2004), now signed by 153 national groups, and subsequent statements, reports and papers.ⁱ FEA believes that major changes in the federal role in public education are needed in three areas: empowering schools so they can better ensure strong learning outcomes for all students; providing more adequate and equitable resources for all students; and developing an accountability system that focuses evaluation on students' opportunities to learn, processes of systemic school improvement, and student learning outcomes based on multiple types and sources of evidence.

The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) has proposed four "school turnaround models" in its "Blueprint" for the reauthorization of the ESEA. These same models are required elements in Race to the Top (RTTT) and School Improvement Grants (SIG). However, these models, if implemented according to their terms, lack evidence they will significantly improve education in schools with chronically low test scores ("low-performing" schools). Indeed, research and experience suggest that certain key components of these models are largely ineffective or even harmful.ⁱⁱ

However, a growing body of research indicates there are common elements to significant school improvement (Ratner and Neill, 2010). These common elements have been minimized or ignored in the Blueprint. Section I of this document briefly describes the core components of a research- and experience-based school turnaround process. It is designed to focus district and school attention on implementing, in their own ways, those common strategies typically used by low-scoring schools that have significantly improved student learning environments and outcomes. These components form an integrated whole, requiring that all be included in the improvement effort to reach the desired result.

I. Key components of the school turnaround proposal.

A local education agency (LEA), or the state-designated entity for charter schools, with one or more schools identified for inclusion in the turnaround process, shall submit a proposal to the state education agency (SEA) for improving those schools. For each school, the proposal shall explain how the LEA or the school will use the resources provided for the improvement process- and other relevant resources- to provide, develop, improve or link to each of the following inter-related components: A) Leadership; B) Instruction; C) Curriculum; D) School Climate; and E) Parent, caregiver and community engagement and support.ⁱⁱⁱ

The proposal will set a general time frame for the implementation of the components, not to exceed five years, and include benchmarks for implementation and improvement outcomes. Outcomes shall include key performance indicators such as student progress according to multiple measures of student learning, closing achievement gaps, and (for secondary schools) improvement in graduation rates.

A. Leadership. The proposal will address how the school will ensure it has a capable principal or leadership team able to: act as a catalyst for positive change, work collaboratively with the school's staff, foster and distribute leadership roles and responsibilities among staff, provide instructional leadership, work effectively with parents, and manage the school's non-academic functions.

B. Instruction. The proposal will discuss how the school will address areas related to instruction, including:

1. Staffing:

- An appropriate teacher-to-student ratio, with a full complement of effective teachers and other professional and support staff, knowledgeable in their subjects and able to enhance the learning environment and outcomes of all the school's students.
- An appropriate number of specialized instructional support personnel providing services directly to students with behavioral and other non-academic barriers to learning and providing consultation to teachers and principals.
- Ways to include time for staff to meet to analyze student work, adjust instruction, plan how to improve the instructional program and school climate, and engage in other school improvement activities.

2. Instructional improvement:

- A coherent system of effective teaching practices that will engage students in higher-order and critical thinking, problem-solving, and communications, and will effectively assess student learning on each.
- How a school will use or develop a coherent system for collecting and analyzing multiple sources of evidence on each student's learning, including classroom-based formative assessments and various kinds of projects and work products.
- How a school will use assessment information to adjust instruction and inform professional development.

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- How curriculum, instruction, assessment, data systems and professional development are or will become aligned.

3. Professional learning/development:

- Ongoing staff development that is school-embedded, collaboratively developed by the staff, and focused on improving curriculum, instruction, assessment, parental and student engagement, and the school's overall climate, in order to ensure that each school constitutes a professional learning community.
- How improvement resources would be used to ensure that mentors, coaches, and other staff are available to support teacher and other staff effectiveness.
- How the school will use a professional evaluation system that is fair, reliable and based on multiple sources of evidence to improve professional learning.
- How schools in an LEA or across LEAs may work together to improve.

C. Curriculum. The proposal will address:

- How the school will ensure an intellectually challenging, rich, standards-based curriculum aligned across the grades to ensure a coherent learning progression.
- How, in addition to reading/language arts and math, the school will sustain or develop a comprehensive curriculum, including art, music, physical fitness, history/social studies and science, that is relevant to students' culture and experiences; engages their interests; prepares them for a globally interdependent, 21st century society; and addresses social, emotional and civic development in addition to core academic skills.

D. School climate. The proposal will address:

- How the school will ensure a safe and orderly climate, with a norm of high expectations that all students will achieve academically and behave properly.
- How the school will ensure a supportive, collegial atmosphere enhanced by positive behavioral supports and disciplinary practices that encourage students to remain in school.
- How the school will welcome parent and community support and engagement.
- How the school will address changes, if needed to improve the school climate, in the use of law enforcement personnel, suspensions, and expulsions; and promote positive changes in school climate through mechanisms such as conflict resolution, violence prevention, and preventing bullying and discrimination.

E. Parent, caregiver and community engagement and support. The proposal will describe how the school or LEA will address academic and non-academic areas:

1. Academic:

- Programs for effectively engaging parents with the school, through activities such as participation in parent-teacher conferences and in school improvement planning.
- Programs for strengthening parents' support for their children's learning at home, including enhancing parenting skills and adult literacy.

- Opportunities for extensive engagement of community members as volunteer tutors, adult mentors and providers of enrichment programs for students.

2. Non-Academic:

- Effective and responsive coordination with community-based services that provide health, recreation, youth, safety and other quality-of-life factors that support students' learning.

II. Preparation and Implementation

FEA recognizes that implementation of this process will be complex: from the initial self-evaluation of a school to preparing an acceptable proposal, to proposal development and implementation processes, to monitoring and evaluating its success. Following are ideas on how best to address some of the relevant issues that should be considered by the school, LEA, SEA or federal government.

A. *Initial evaluation.* A school self-evaluation and, where feasible, an independent evaluation by an appropriate entity should precede and inform development of the proposal. FEA recommends such school evaluations be independently conducted as part of identification for participation in a mandated turnaround process. These evaluations would be a basis for proposal development. An independent evaluation is important because it provides 1) an external, skilled analysis of a school's strengths, weaknesses and needs, and 2) an independent basis for the SEA to evaluate the proposal.^{iv}

B. *Proposal preparation.* Proposals must be developed in a collaborative process that includes affected school staff or authorized representatives of the staff, parents, community members and organizations, and high school students.

C. *Initial implementation.* Many, if not most, of the conditions described in I.A–E above will be missing or weak at the beginning of the turnaround process, though some may be strong. LEAs should concentrate on how to use the resources provided for the turnaround process and other available resources to implement these interrelated systemic changes in collaboration with their school staffs and communities. Changes would not have to be made in areas of strength; however, the LEA would explain how each element plays an appropriate, considered role in the turnaround effort. If a school lacks the resources to make all the necessary changes, the proposal should address this issue and explain the choices made.

D. *General timeline for improvement.* Identifiable progress in implementation of the components should be shown in the first and second years. Improvement in student learning outcomes can be expected to follow. Fully implementing the organic turnaround process and showing significant results using multiple sources of evidence can be expected to take about five years. By the end of five years, in addition to strong program implementation, a school should have established a clear trajectory of strong improvement in student learning.^v

E. Monitoring, evaluating and reporting by the LEA. In its proposal, the LEA will describe how it will monitor and evaluate the improvement effort to ensure, in part, that federal turnaround grant funds are being used to implement strategies required by section I.A–E, above. The LEA will produce annual public reports on the improvement process, addressing successes, obstacles and proposed modifications. This component of the proposal will include a description of the resources needed for effective monitoring and evaluation, and an assurance those resources would be distributed or provided using turnaround funds. The evaluation itself may include recommendations to halt, continue with the current course of action, or continue with modifications. If the decision is to halt the specific turnaround effort, the LEA would recommend to the SEA what steps will be taken instead.

F. SEA approval, support and evaluation. An SEA shall develop and implement an approval process. The process should address such areas as whether the proposal is a coherent plan-backed by evidence, research and experience, to the extent feasible; and -whether it shows reasonable promise of sustained and strong improvement by each affected school. The SEA may approve turnarounds for some schools while requiring the LEA to revise proposals for other schools. If an LEA fails to submit a satisfactory proposal for one or more of its schools in the turnaround process, the SEA may develop such a plan, provided it addresses the criteria in section I and is allowable under current state education law, including contracts with school employees.

The SEA would develop mechanisms for providing assistance to LEAs and schools. A portion of federal turnaround funds shall be reserved for this purpose.

The SEA would develop a means by which to monitor and evaluate the improvement process in each turnaround school.

G. Federal monitoring. The Secretary will determine how the U.S. Department of Education will monitor states regarding their responsibilities for approving, monitoring and evaluating turnaround schools.

Bibliography

Ratner, G., and Neill, M. 2010. “Common Elements of Successful School Turnarounds: Research and Experience.” May 2010. This is a brief analysis and summary, with references, of significant research and experience that undergirds the plan proposed here. On the web at <http://www.edaccountability.org>. 301-469-8000

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End Notes

ⁱ The Forum on Educational Accountability includes some of the 153 organizations that have signed the *Joint Organizational Statement on No Child Left Behind*. Signers agree to the goals of the *Joint Statement* and seek to implement its recommendations. Additional reports and statements issued by FEA reflect this commitment and are reviewed by Joint Statement signers, but may not reflect all individual positions taken by signatories.

ⁱⁱ The two models that include some components that are common to successful school turnarounds, the “Transformation model” and “Turnaround model,” include at least one arbitrary and harmful requirement: mandatory firing of the principal or the principal and at least half the staff, respectively, without regard to evaluation, prior district support, or the availability of a well-qualified replacement. In addition, for a variety of reasons it is not practicable to implement these four models in many districts.

ⁱⁱⁱ FEA has made recommendations for school improvement in many of these areas. They can be found in *Empowering Schools and Improving Learning*, *Redefining Accountability*, *Assessment and Accountability for Improving Schools and Learning*, and *FEA Recommendations for Improving ESEA/NCLB*, all available on the web at <http://www.edaccountability.org>.

^{iv} A review could examine, among other things, the quality, completeness and alignment of the school's systems of student assessment, curriculum, instruction and leadership; other critical indicators influencing student learning, including student health, safety and well-being; teaching, working and learning conditions; class size; support and professional development for teachers and other staff; parent/community engagement; and other factors identified by the state.

^v (For more on expected rates of improvement, see FEA materials listed in note ii.)