EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

JULY 2010

COMMUNITIES FOR EXCELLENT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Our Communities Left Behind:
An Analysis of the Administration's School Turnaround Policies

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No one disputes the critical need for action to improve low-performing schools. There is no question that thousands of schools across the country must do better. We must deliver what we have always promised to all our nation's young people: a free and excellent public education.

The Obama Administration and Congress are currently debating the details of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). As part of that process, the Department of Education (ED) is revisiting old territory through its School Improvement Grants (SIG) program, hoping that adding teeth to the largely unsuccessful turnaround strategies of No Child Left Behind—school closure, conversion to a charter, reconstitution or "transformation" - will somehow result in different outcomes for the 2,136 schools eligible to receive SIG grants.

Communities for Excellent Public Schools (CEPS), a new national coalition of community-based organizations composed of parents and students in low-income communities, is releasing, for the first time in one document, the list of these schools.   The analysis of the demographic composition of these schools confirms that low-income communities and communities of color will be disproportionately affected by federally-stimulated intervention.

- o **There are currently 2, 136 schools on the list of schools targeted for SIG grants. Nearly 1.5 million students attend these schools;**

- o **81% of students in these schools are students of color;**

- o **85% of the most urgently targeted schools (Tier I) have high concentrations of poverty, (defined as more than 50% of students eligible for federal free and reduced priced meals).**

- o **Black students are seven and half times more likely to be in a SIG-eligible school than white students. Hispanic students are four and a half times more likely to be in a SIG-eligible school than white students.**

We believe that the school turnaround strategies being implemented through the SIG program are time-tested…and flawed. While the Administration is right to call for dramatic action and to recognize that significant progress is not possible without added resources to support school improvement, it's time to look at new directions.

Simultaneous with the release and analysis of this list, we are proposing a new approach to school intervention called "Sustainable School Transformation."   Our proposal emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive, inclusive process in partnership with parents and communities, research-based strategies, and a broader look at both schools' and students' unique and individual needs.

We want dramatic and sustainable change in our schools. But our communities want to be part of building that change, not the targets of it.

A Call for Sustainable Transformation

Communities for Excellent Public Schools has a new approach to school turnaround. We call it "Sustainable School Transformation." At its core, our proposal places priority on three components:

(1) A Strong Focus on School <u>Instruction, Culture, Curriculum and Staffing</u>

While in some circumstances, structural or staffing changes may be necessary to ensure real improvement at a school, these changes are not sufficient to transform a school.   Successful schools feature a highly qualified staff, high expectations and a challenging and engaging curriculum that prepares all students for higher education, meaningful work and civic participation. A school's academic program must be comprehensive and research-based, and supported with the necessary resources. Our *Sustainable Transformation* proposal outlines the types of strategies and supports necessary to build school cultures conducive to high quality teaching and learning, and academic programs that are challenging and hold high expectations for all students.

(2) Wrap-Around <u>Supports</u> for Students

As critical as good teachers are to improving student achievement, students cannot learn to their full potential when they are hungry, exhausted or ill, when their parents cannot support them at home, or when they feel unsafe or disrespected in school. A comprehensive turnaround plan must assess and address student needs and organize the supports necessary for them to succeed academically.

(3) <u>Collaboration</u> to Ensure Local Ownership and Accountability

We support an inclusive process to assess a school's strengths, challenges and needs, and to develop a vision, and a plan to meet those needs. District or state support should be provided to ensure that this process is rigorous and efficient, and adequate time should be dedicated to it. We also believe that where possible, districts should establish networks of schools in transition, so that leaders and educators can work together, share best practices and learn from each other.

The Best Opportunity for Sustainable School Transformation

Rather than requiring districts to choose one of four highly prescriptive options, federal policy should support and guide districts through three key elements to transforming low-performing schools —a collaborative and inclusive process, comprehensive instructional and school culture reform, and coordinating services to meet student needs. This set of approaches allows local flexibility, while still requiring dramatic and comprehensive action. It also increases accountability, by creating community ownership of the reform plan and establishing clear interim milestones and goals for the transformation.

These are our communities. We know the strengths and the challenges in our schools. Responsible school change is a process of collaboration between students, parents, communities and educators. Successful school change must employ research-based strategies that have the greatest likelihood of actually improving conditions for learning. Dramatic action is not enough; we need to get it right.