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EDITORIAL

## When the System Works

Education Secretary Arne Duncan has vowed to press states to remake the 5,000 or so chronically failing schools that account for about half of the nation's dropouts and usually serve — or more to the point fail to serve — the poorest children. A \$4 billion school improvement fund is intended to give states the help and the incentive to turn these schools around.

Piecemeal plans that evaporate once the grant money is spent won't do the job. Only comprehensive, districtwide approaches deserve to be financed.

Local administrators — and the Department of Education in Washington — should be paying close attention to what is happening in North Carolina's [Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system](#).

Two years ago, district administrators adopted an innovative staffing system intended to put the best principals in the most troubled schools — and give them the autonomy they need to succeed. While Charlotte was already one of the highest-performing urban systems in the country, it has made progress since then.

Under the Strategic Staffing Initiative, principals who have improved student performance at their current school are given bonuses and allowed to recruit new leadership teams in exchange for moving to chronically low-performing schools.

Once at the new schools, the principals are permitted to remove as many as five teachers if they consider them to be hostile to reform. These turnaround schools are also given high priority when their new leadership teams request technology, staffing or new programs.

Turning a school around is not supposed to be easy. But by the end of just the first year, test scores in the first seven schools had risen significantly and the schools were visibly more orderly.

In the beginning, district administrators worried that high-performing principals and teachers would resist taking on these very difficult assignments. But by giving the mission high priority — and making it a badge of honor to participate — they have turned the program into a magnet for talent. Principals are now clamoring to be chosen for this program, which has been expanded to a total of 20 schools so far.

Among other things, the Charlotte program shows that teachers will often respond to talented new leadership and that it is not always necessary to take wrenching steps like shutting down a school or replacing the entire staff. The program also shows that — with creativity and the right incentives — districts can build the capacity to reclaim failing schools.

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