

STRUGGLING SCHOOLS

Key Discussants:

Zollie Stevenson, Director, Student Achievement and School Accountability Programs, US Department of Education

Nancy Protheroe, Center on Innovation and Improvement

Jason Raymond, Teacher Ambassador, US Department of Education

Facilitator Maria Paz (M.P.) Avery, Senior Manager, New England Comprehensive Center, REL-NEI

Recorder:

Debra Jennings, Executive Co-Director, Statewide Parent Advocacy Network

Participants discussed opportunities, considerations, and challenges that arise in efforts to improve struggling schools. As Zollie Stevenson said in his opening remarks, the lowest performing schools need to be “lifted.” He reminded participants that the Title I program was designed to close the achievement gap for economically disadvantaged students, and the current reform initiatives support that original objective. The effort to transform the lowest performing schools and prepare their students to be college- and career-ready will require the continuous investment of energy, skill, and resources. In a changing landscape, as the bottom five percent of schools improve, a new bottom five percent will be identified and merit our attention and support.

Stevenson outlined the four intervention models proposed in the federal grant programs for helping struggling schools: (1) turnaround, (2) restart, (3) school closure, and (4) transformation. The turnaround requires extensive commitment and collaboration by the entire school administration and faculty to make meaningful, systemic changes. Under the restart, a school would be closed and reopened under a new entity; the school closure model envisions that students will be redistributed to other schools. In the transformation model, a school is expected to make powerful improvements informed not only by student achievement data but by data on school climate, student attendance, and parent involvement, among other factors.

These models incorporate a range of expected changes and Stevenson argued that at least one of them would be applicable to any struggling school in the country. Part of the challenge for states and districts will be matching the best model to particular schools. Participants observed that a school’s needs can be highly specific and complex and possible interventions to address those needs may vary. Both presenters and participants agreed that collaboration among all stakeholders—teachers, administrators, district leaders, parents, and community agencies—will be key to the success of any changes implemented at the school.

While the research base is not conclusive, Stevenson described instances where different interventions met varying needs. For example, cities with declining enrollments and tight budgets, such as Pontiac, Michigan, contain large numbers of struggling schools. Under those circumstances, it may make more sense for the city to close schools. Districts

that are growing in population, such as Oakland, California, may be better served by restart or transformation models. Regardless of the model chosen, the essential task is to change and improve classroom instruction for all students. "The core," emphasized Stevenson, "is improving instruction." In a related discussion, presenters noted the need to consider environmental, cultural, and other factors in addition to test scores in evaluating particular schools' needs.

In response to a participant's question, Nancy Protheroe and Stevenson concurred that a coherent and well-articulated statement of the underlying principles of transformation is necessary when a district begins working with its struggling schools. A focus on core principles can guide immediate change efforts, and more importantly, contribute to the sustainability of changes once the urgency and funding are no longer powerful factors. For example, instruction is a common and critical element among all four interventions, but it is not the only one. Guiding principles can be aligned not only across the four interventions but also across schools in a district and across districts in a state.

Presenter Jason Raymond stressed the underlying importance of personal responsibility as a crucial factor of every turnaround. A high school English teacher in an economically disadvantaged, largely Dominican neighborhood in Manhattan, Raymond participated in the major turnaround his school experienced: Today 87% of its students complete state exit exams at the proficient level. He identified three major components of his school's success: (1) focused leadership and leadership support, (2) a collective sense of personal responsibility, and (3) raising expectations. A sense of personal responsibility originated from the principal, who built relationships with staff that created a trusting community. As the commitment to personal responsibility reached the classroom level, teachers gained a sense of "ownership" of each child while confident that they could rely on the support of a team. A superintendent from Vermont applauded this approach, affirming that with such a perspective, "We can change the culture of schools."

During a lively question and answer period, participants and presenters noted the importance of the teaching staff in school transformation and raised concerns that there is often a "disconnect" between teacher education programs and a school's needs. On a related theme, discussants agreed that teacher quality data might be able to pinpoint which teacher preparation programs prepare the teachers who contribute to student success. Support for struggling schools begins with effective teachers and leaders, they said.

Protheroe reviewed the core principles of effective systems of support for struggling schools, highlighting the theme of building capacity in schools and districts to implement effective change strategies. Strengthening leadership and improving teaching through embedded professional development have demonstrated positive effects, as Raymond described in his school. Protheroe cited three elements common to effective turnaround efforts: they are quick, dramatic, and sustained. Leaders who accomplish quick wins generate energy to move staff toward the more demanding changes required to accelerate achievement. Stevenson described an anticipated timeline of one year for planning and two years for implementation.

Participants and presenters considered the interconnectedness of schools and the intended allocation of funds. Stevenson reminded all that school improvement grants (SIG)

can be allocated by states to serve high-poverty secondary schools that may not participate in Title I and their feeder schools. The proposed SIG regulations recognize the critical links between elementary, middle, and high schools and give states flexibility in allocating resources.

Participants posed additional questions on the role of charter and pilot schools as interventions for struggling schools. Stevenson recognized the mixed results from these schools and described efforts underway to conduct case studies to understand the impact of the federal initiatives and to generate a set of underlying principles that can inform all school turnaround efforts.