

A Proposal for **SUSTAINABLE SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION**



JULY 2010

**COMMUNITIES FOR EXCELLENT
PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

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Communities for Excellent Public Schools is supported by Communities for Public Education Reform (CPER), a collaboration of over 50 foundations working to support the field of education organizing. Through grants and technical assistance, CPER infuses education organizing campaigns with the resources they need to address educational inequities at scale. Specifically, CPER helps equip community-based, democratically led organizations to push for policies—at the local, state, and national levels—that improve the quality of education provided to low-income students and students of color.

Contact us at:

COMMUNITIES FOR
EXCELLENT PUBLIC
SCHOOLS

1825 K Street, NW
Suite 400

Washington, D.C. 20006

202-454-6194

www.ceps-ourschools.org

Introduction

SHOULD PARENTS, STUDENTS AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES have an important role in shaping, supporting and sustaining reform of the schools in their neighborhoods? **Communities for Excellent Public Schools** is a newly formed coalition of local parent, student and community-based education reform organizations. From Chicago to Philadelphia and Oakland to New York City and in cities across the country, we have been demanding dramatic action to improve our schools for years. Our organizations have created innovative and successful models for school reform that enjoy strong parent, student and community support and have improved student outcomes.

Research shows that community engagement is essential to sustainable reform of low-performing schools.¹ Recently U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced parent and community input will now be a required part of the Department's school turnaround program. We are gratified that Secretary Duncan is listening to community-based organizations like ours, those in the civil rights community, and others who have been demanding meaningful parent engagement. Now policy makers must focus on whether the available options for school turnaround allow this input to be meaningful and whether or not the menu of choices is adequate to improve low performing schools in diverse communities across the country.

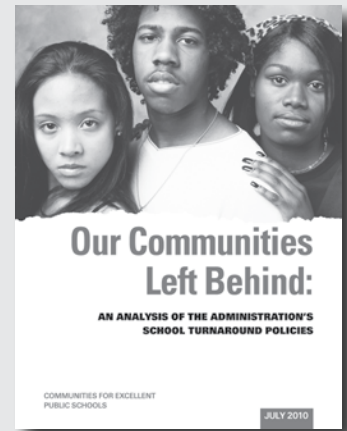
Already the policies proposed for school turnaround under the *Blueprint for Reform* are being implemented in schools across the country as part of the School Improvement Grants. Under this policy, the options available to local school districts are highly prescriptive: close down the school; be replaced by a charter school or reopen under new management; remove the principal and at least half the staff; or remove the principal and transform the school.

The policy has generated considerable controversy. When the entire staff at a school in Central Falls, Rhode Island was fired, it was front page news across the country and parents and community members protested in shock. Recently a story in *The New York Times* detailed how as a result of this policy a school district in Vermont was forced to remove a principal that school district leaders evaluated as having, "successfully completed a phenomenal year."² To date, parents, students and local communities have had little to no meaningful role in shaping the plans for how to reform their schools. Even with their mandated participation, input will not be meaningful and improvements will not be sustainable without significant changes in the available options.

Research shows that community engagement is essential to sustainable reform of low-performing schools.

Today CEPS is issuing a report, *Our Communities Left Behind: An Analysis of the Administration's School Turnaround Policies*, in conjunction with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University documenting that students in schools identified for turnaround are overwhelmingly poor, African American and Hispanic and that the majority of schools are in our nation's cities. The report, and our accompanying proposal for *Sustainable School Transformation*, critique the Administration's school turnaround policies for focusing too much on who runs and works in schools and not enough on what needs to happen within classrooms and school buildings and for lacking an adequate research-basis in formulating policy options. The top-down choices that school districts are given are too restrictive and the timeframe for making decisions—a few months—is far too short for a comprehensive, thoughtful and inclusive process. These policies have their basis in top-down prescriptions sanctioned by *No Child Left Behind*. Sustainable and successful school reform requires a different approach, which is why CEPS has developed the *Sustainable School Transformation* proposal. ***This proposal draws on the best of research and decades of parent and community experiences with education reform across the country.***

We applaud Secretary Duncan for focusing the nation's attention on low performing schools and for providing financial resources to enable reform in these schools. These schools are in our neighborhoods and our communities and we have been out front in demanding action for many, many years. But dramatic action is not enough; we need to get it right. We are asking the Secretary, and members of Congress to reconsider the approach outlined in *The Blueprint*. Research and experience supports replacing these policies with *Sustainable School Transformation*.



**A copy of the
Our Communities Left
Behind: An Analysis of
the Administration's
School Turnaround
Policies report is
available at
www.ceps-ourschools.org**

A Proposal for Sustainable School Transformation

COMMUNITIES FOR EXCELLENT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

JULY 2010

FOR MANY YEARS, parent and community-based organizations have led the way in calling for dramatic action to improve low-performing public schools. The Department of Education, through its “Blueprint” for reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), and the already-implemented Race to the Top and School Improvement Grants (SIG) programs, has also called for substantive intervention, and has offered significant federal resources to improve low-performing schools.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan is right to call for dramatic action, and to recognize that significant progress is not possible without resources. The question is not whether to intervene in our schools, but rather, what interventions offer the best promise for successful and sustainable school transformation?

For too long, low-income communities of color have been targeted for top-down school improvement efforts. We recognize the pattern: new strategies are imposed by decision-makers outside our communities. Because parents, students and even teachers are rarely meaningfully engaged, these strategies are not grounded in a collective vision or owned by those who must put them into effect. In short order, new district or school leadership enters, and announces yet another silver-bullet approach, so even promising strategies are short-lived, and not allowed to take root. This cycle of reform all too familiar in our communities not only often fails, but in many cases has undermined rather than strengthened our schools and has not led to sustained reform.³

Our public schools are *community* institutions. Their success—and their failure—are inextricably linked to the success and failure of the community as a whole. When our neighborhoods struggle with unemployment, drugs, violence and lack of basic health care or services, our schools also struggle as students bring these challenges into the classroom with them. Successful schools serve as centers of the community, and help stabilize young people and their families. Every effort must be made to support our public schools as community, as well as educational institutions.

The question is not whether to intervene in our schools, but rather, what interventions offer the best promise for successful and sustainable school transformation?

Our schools are not blank slates for experimentation. The best way to ensure lasting change is to build it from the bottom up, so that it is owned and accountable to the school community.

There is no shortage of research on the components of successful schools. The Consortium on Chicago School Research, for example, has found that fast-improving schools share five essential components: school leadership, parent and community ties, professional capacity of the faculty, student-centered learning climate and instructional guidance.⁴ These components address what occurs inside schools and classrooms.

In contrast, the Administration's proposed interventions—turnaround, restart, closure and transformation—focus on changing staff and management, or even just closing schools, not on proven educational strategies for disadvantaged children. The Administration's four "approved" strategies are not supported by research.⁵ In fact, many of these interventions are actually refuted by research, and appear to be largely political, and/or structural solutions.

There are other problems. Under the Administration's initiative, these interventions are imposed on schools, rather than being developed with the school community. And, they are presented as one-size-fits-all strategies. The Administration assumes that these models will work in any context; urban, rural or suburban, regardless of the local political, cultural or fiscal climate, regardless of the availability of new teachers or principals in the job market, regardless of the presence or absence of good educational options, regardless of the context and histories of the targeted schools. These four interventions are presumed to be universally applicable.

Our experiences as parents, students and community leaders suggests otherwise. **Yes, dramatic action is needed. But we must get it right.** The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act provides an opportunity to offer states, districts and schools the support and guidance to develop successful, sustainable school transformation.

To this end, we propose a more comprehensive approach to transforming local schools—one that takes into account the unique challenges and strengths of schools, and puts involved parents, students and teachers at the center of developing and implementing a transformation plan. We look forward to working with members of Congress and the Administration to develop a policy framework for this comprehensive approach to transformation.

"...it is recommended that policymakers refrain from relying on restructuring sanctions (takeovers, private management, charters, and reconstitutions) to effect school improvement. They have produced negative by-products without yielding systemic positive effects."

Mathis, W., "NCLB's ultimate restructuring alternatives: Do they improve the quality of education?" East Lansing, MI: The Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice, 2009.

Three Elements of Successful, Sustainable School Transformation

We believe that the current research suggests three key elements that together, create the best chance for success.

1 A Strong Focus on School CULTURE, CURRICULUM AND STAFFING

While in some circumstances, structural or staffing changes may be necessary to ensure real improvement at a school, these changes are not sufficient to turn around a school, in and of themselves. Instead the focus must be on creating safe and inclusive school communities that are grounded in the belief that all students can achieve at high levels. Schools must feature 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.

We recommend the following proven ingredients to enhance instruction, climate, and culture:

- Strong leadership, which creates a school climate that attracts and retains highly skilled, culturally competent educators;
- Staffing structures that facilitate collaboration;⁶
- Job-embedded professional development, designed to meet the individual needs of the staff;
- A researched based, thoughtfully crafted teacher evaluation program, developed in conjunction with parents, students, teachers, and administrators;
- A well-rounded, culturally relevant and enriched college and career preparatory curriculum available to all students;
- High quality extended learning opportunities to engage students in a full range of arts, athletics, internships and other experiences from kindergarten through high school;
- Intensive literacy support and "reading recovery" programs to ensure a focus on literacy;
- Instructional models and supports in every school to serve a diverse range of students, including English language learners, students with disabilities and other students with special needs;
- Continuous use of data to inform and differentiate instruction, and training for the school staff and leadership in the use of data to inform practice;
- Specific and ongoing opportunities for parents to be partners in the education of their own children and to be active members in the ongoing life of the school.

"CEP studies in the previous two years found that none of the federal restructuring options was associated with schools making AYP (CEP, 2008g)... the federal Institute of Education Science's best practice guide for turning around chronically low-performing schools did not include these federal strategies and instead recommended the use of other strategies."

Center for Education Policy:
"Improving Low-Performing Schools: Lessons from Five Years of Studying School Restructuring under No Child Left Behind."
December 2009

2 Wrap-Around **SUPPORTS** for Our 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 also assess and address student needs and organize both in- and out-of-school supports necessary for them to succeed academically. Students should be engaged in the process of determining what supports are needed and how they can best be provided.

School improvement plans, focused on the nation's lowest performing schools, should specifically address student needs such as:

- access to guidance counselors at the high school level;
- a positive behavioral approach to school discipline, and a positive youth development framework guiding all aspects of school culture;
- access to primary health care services to address basic wellness issues in children of all ages, including emotional/mental health experts;
- supports for students with special needs, such as homeless students and teen parents;
- programs that engage students as mentors and peer mediators, or that offer adult mentors to students;
- programs that provide enrichment activities for students, including college visits, theater and athletic programs and other opportunities;
- coordination of job and internship opportunities for high school students, and basic supports for students to help them be successful in applying for jobs.

We recommend that all schools in turnaround status be required to assess the availability of these and other supports for students—perhaps through “asset mapping”—as part of the school transformation process, and that school transformation resources be available to establish delivery systems—through coordination of existing services or development of new services based on student needs.

3 COLLABORATION to Ensure Local Ownership and Accountability

Families, students, communities and school staff, *must* play a meaningful role in designing and implementing a school transformation plan. The process of planning and implementing a school transformation is a key element in its success.

The first step should be a comprehensive assessment of the school's individual strengths, challenges, and the impediments to student success. The assessment should incorporate a rich process that is explicitly aimed at developing a coherent and shared vision for the school. The vision then guides the development of a transformation plan that addresses the school's specific circumstances. When all stakeholders are invested in the transformation plan, they are more likely to hold each other, as well as the school and district accountable for its successful implementation. Finally, there must be ongoing monitoring of the transformation process, including clear accountability milestones, and the flexibility and resources to address challenges as they arise.

We support the following elements in the process of designing and guiding reform:

- A full school year should be required for the assessment and plan development;
- Students, parents and community members must be full partners in all stages;
- The comprehensive assessment of school strengths and weaknesses should look specifically, for example, at such factors as:
 - teacher-student ratio;
 - teaching quality, the presence of experienced and effective teachers and conditions for quality teaching;
 - feeder school programs and shortcomings that impact performance at the target school;
 - how data is used to identify instructional strengths and weaknesses as well as student support needs;
 - measures of school climate and discipline issues;
 - the availability of wrap-around supports for students;
 - measures of parent engagement.
- A review of external obstacles that create barriers to school success. These might include district human resources or other structures that don't work effectively to support schools; contractual agreements; inequitable state or district funding formulas; community characteristics, and more;
- The assessment should consider the potential benefits of specific autonomies—in budget, curriculum, staffing, calendar and assessments—and whether such situational flexibility should be part of the transformation approach for the particular school;

“According to NCLB there is an option of replacing all school staff. Most of the research recommends not pursuing that option. The research recommends that there needs to be a core of committed staff who both know the school and the students, and are committed to the reform.”

Rebecca Herman, American Institutes for Research, in a video on the Department of Education website: http://dwww.ed.gov/topic/?T_ID=21

- A team of external experts should be available to conduct a separate assessment of the school, or to support and discuss the internal assessment to help identify challenges and strategies to enhance the transformation plan;
- The development of short-term, immediate changes that can make a real difference and keep longer-term reform on track;⁷
- Clear milestones for which the school and school district can be held accountable, and specific opportunities to reassess, reevaluate and adjust the plan, depending on identified needs;
- An ongoing and inclusive monitoring system that engages students, parents and community;
- Collaboration with the teachers union on any changes to the collective bargaining agreement necessary to support the reform plan;
- Collaboration with a responsive higher-education partner to provide (for example),
 - fellowships, training and credentialing opportunities for community members with the talent, skills and desire to become in-service professionals;
 - professional development in culturally-competent teaching, literacy strategies and technology-mediated, out of school learning, and
 - site-based research on academic and wellness strategies that might hold promise for the school.
- Time—support should be provided to schools for three to five years, and strategies that are proving successful should be maintained for even longer.

Low performing schools should not be isolated or stigmatized. Where possible, districts should establish and support networks of schools in transition, so that leaders and educators can work together to share best practices and learn from each other. Such networks of schools help build a culture of collaboration rather than competition—as is often the result of top-down, mandated reforms.⁸

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 as they develop a triad of approaches—a collaborative and inclusive process, comprehensive instructional and school culture reform, and coordinating services to meet student needs—to transforming low-performing schools. 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.

The federal government, through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, should provide sufficient support to districts to ensure that the turnaround process is comprehensive and robust. Again, we believe that simply assessing the school's needs and developing a transformation plan should never be done in less than a full year. Implementation of a robust transformation plan should be supported with federal funds for three to five years, so that it can fully take root.

We recognize that in some circumstances, structural or staffing changes will be necessary to ensure real improvement at a school. But the Administration's reliance on structural and staffing changes is not based on research or experience, does not provide for the individual needs of low-performing schools, and will not be successful or sustainable in the absence of much more comprehensive strategies. We believe that sustainable transformation will happen only when students, parents and communities are brought to the table to help shape a unique and locally-owned plan for improvement. We insist on being part of that process.

ENDNOTES

¹ Anthony S. Bryk, Penny Bender Sebring, Elaine Allensworth, Stuart Luppescu, John Q. Easton, *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons for Chicago*, Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, 2010.

² Michael Winerip, "A Popular Principal, Wounded by Government's Good Intentions," *The New York Times* 18 July 2010: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/19/education/19winerip.html?ref=michael_winerip

³ Mintrop, H. and G.L. Sunderman. 2009. "*Predictable Failure of Federal Sanctions-Driven Accountability for School Improvement and Why We May Retain It Anyway*." *Educational Researcher* 38: 353. Or online at <http://edr.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/38/5/353>

⁴ Sebring, Penny, et. al. "*Essential Supports for School Improvement*." Consortium on Chicago School Reform. 2006.

⁵ Mathis, W., "*NCLB's ultimate restructuring alternatives: Do they improve the quality of education?*" East Lansing, MI: The Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice, 2009.

⁶ Balfanz, Robert, "*Turning Around the Nation's Low-Performing Secondary Schools*," testimony to the Senate HELP Committee Hearing on ESEA Reauthorization: School Turnaround. April 13, 2010.

⁷ Herman, Rebecca, *American Institutes for Research*, in a video on the Department of Education website: http://dwww.ed.gov/topic/?T_ID=21

⁸ Shirley, Dennis "*Report Accompanying Public testimony*" Race to the Top Public hearings, Los Angeles, CA, November 18, 2009.

CASE STUDY

John Whittier Elementary School—East Oakland

In the Fall of 2007, John Whittier Elementary School in East Oakland was reborn as Greenleaf, a new small school designed by a team of parents, students, educators, and community members. A school that was once marked by low achievement, safety concerns, and distrust among teachers, parents, and school administration, is now a community with a unified vision for student success and the commitment, plan, and support to make the vision a reality.

Greenleaf Elementary, serving low-income Latino and African-American students, has become a symbol of pride and hope for a long underserved neighborhood. In addition to a strong standards-based academic curriculum, students enjoy enrichment through music, art, and physical education classes. The school partners with a variety of community-based organizations who provide resources for students and families that include counseling, dental screening, food giveaways, and English and computer classes. Through an active parent leadership team parents are active partners in the life of the school. Teachers are part of a professional learning community, receive support and guidance from coaches, and share parents' vision and expectations for high achievement for every student.

"It's an amazing place," says Sheila Loarca, a parent member of the school design team whose two boys attended the school. "Students, parents, teachers, even the neighbors—we all feel really proud of our school."

The transformation wasn't quick and it wasn't easy. As early as 1997 parents brought concerns to Oakland Community Organizations (OCO) about the quality of education their children were receiving at Whittier Elementary. Early parent-initiated efforts to enable Whittier to participate in the community-led new small school reform strategy were unsuccessful. Later, district-instituted reforms (triggered by the No Child Left Behind Act), including a failed attempt to convert the school to a charter and the firing of some teachers for non-compliance with the school's scripted curriculum, created turmoil and distrust, but did not result in meaningful improvements for students.

The turnaround finally started in 2006, when parents and teachers, with support from OCO, embarked on a redesign process through the district's New School Development Group, an innovative "incubator" in which teams of students, parents, educators, and community members, with support from district staff, engage in a year-long process to create a shared vision and to design a new school to make that vision a reality.

Led by newly hired principal Monica Thomas (selected through the New School Development Group process), the 12-member design team began meeting for two hours every week in the Fall of 2006. Their work was grounded in a district-designed curriculum that started with a three-month visioning process in which parents were invited—often for the first time—to express their hopes and dreams for their children. From these hopes came the vision for the new school—grounded in the belief and expectation that all students would succeed at high levels.

"It was a deep and very focused process," says Principal Thomas. "It was about expressing our values. It was about daring to dream about something better for our children."

In addition to the visioning process, the work of the design team included an asset mapping of the school and the neighborhood, an analysis of student achievement data, visits to high-performing schools serving similar students, and extensive work on community engagement and partnerships—a core value that was integrated into all aspects of the new school development process.

"Principals of these new schools were expected to be school leaders and community leaders," explains Jean Wing with Oakland Unified School District's Research and Assessment Group. Wing, who helped to lead the new school development process, says family and community engagement was a foundation of every design team and was seen as critical to the success and sustainability of the new schools.

continued on next page

CASE STUDY *(continued)*

John Whittier Elementary School—East Oakland

The results of the intensive process speak for themselves.

In 2005, only 14 percent of students at Whittier were proficient in English/language arts and just 25 percent were proficient in math. By the end of the 2008-09 school year (the last year for which data is available), 42 percent of students were proficient in English and 66 percent in math.

While there is no “one thing” that led to Greenleaf’s remarkable turnaround, some key factors made it possible, says Principal Thomas. Time to develop the vision and to create the plan for the new school and the district support to make it happen was critical, she notes, as were the autonomies over budget, curriculum, and, in the first year, hiring. “The first year hiring autonomy enabled us to build a team committed to the vision and with shared expectations for our students and school,” says Thomas.

Roughly half of the existing teachers applied for positions at the new school, with the remainder placed at other schools in the district. All but one of the teachers who

reapplied was rehired through a process that included parents and community members. Once a strong staff culture was in place, says Thomas, a relentless focus on student achievement through regular data cycles and targeted professional development was possible.

The Greenleaf success story has been replicated in neighborhoods throughout Oakland, where once unsafe, overcrowded, and unsuccessful schools have been transformed into vibrant new small schools serving the same students and families. In large part through this community-based approach to school transformation, Oakland has been named California’s most improved large urban district for five successive years.

For parents like Sheila Loarca, the transformation represents what’s possible when communities come together to re-envision what they want for their children.

“It was very hard work,” says Loarca. “We learned a lot. It took years and a lot of working hard to build relationships to make it all happen, but it really did pay off in the end.”

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Suite 400

Washington, D.C. 20006

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