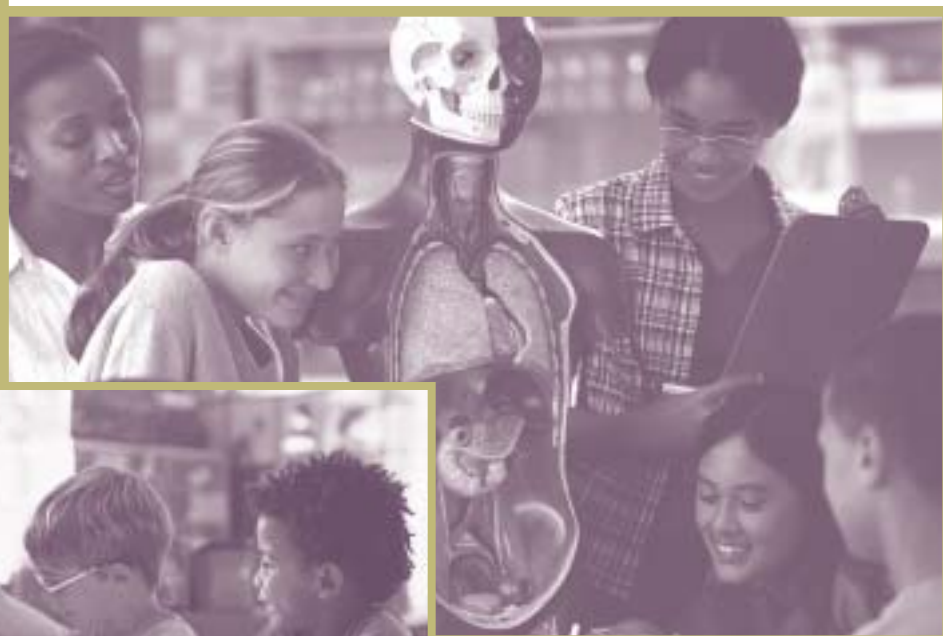


Reaching New Heights: Turning Around Low-Performing Schools



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A Guide For Governors

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FOREWORD

America's children are our nation's future. That future is threatened if we cannot improve the academic achievement of all our children. With this in mind, for the past two decades governors have committed themselves to the long and arduous task of school improvement. The 1985 National Governors Association (NGA) report *Time for Results* and the 1989 National Education Summit laid the foundation for the reforms being implemented today. Although this reform movement has had many successes—in states such as Kentucky, Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Texas—several challenges remain. Perhaps the greatest challenge is the large number of low-performing schools that fail to adequately educate our children in cities and states throughout the nation.

Yet there is cause for hope. Through the right kind of actions, reforms, and interventions, states can transform low-performing schools into places where student achievement improves and gaps in performance among ethnic, racial, and income groups disappear. What is required, however, is to move beyond these “islands of success” and establish the mechanisms to help and push all schools to succeed.

It is for these reasons that *Reaching New Heights: Turning Around Low-Performing Schools* is my initiative as NGA chairman for 2002–03. The initiative aims to provide governors with concrete strategies they can use to turn around low-performing schools in collaboration with district and state leaders.

As part of my chairman's initiative, I asked the NGA Center for Best Practices to develop *Reaching New Heights: Turning Around Low-Performing Schools—A Guide for Governors*. This guide offers governors succinct policy options for turning around these schools and highlights best practices from states, districts, and schools. It also provides specific information about the merits of various strategies, summaries of research findings, and recommendations for policy actions. I believe governors and state leaders will find this guide useful as they explore creative ways to promote meaningful school improvement and significantly reduce the number of low-performing schools in all our states. Our nation—and our children—deserve nothing less.

Paul E. Patton

Governor of Kentucky

Chairman, National Governors Association



INTRODUCTION

For more than a decade, governors have been calling for an end to academically deficient schools and the elimination of the achievement gap. With gubernatorial leadership, states have devised and implemented accountability systems to identify, prioritize, and assist schools that need improvement. These efforts have shown some initial success, but states continue to refine their school improvement programs to increase their effectiveness.

The federal *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) builds upon these first-generation accountability systems while raising the stakes for states considerably (see box, “No Child Left Behind and Low-Performing Schools”). NCLB requires states to quickly scale-up their school improvement strategies so they can accomplish the following objectives.

- ❖ ***Bring all students to proficiency by 2014.*** States must judge schools and districts not only on the basis of schoolwide performance in meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets, but also on the basis of achievement by identified groups of students. Before NCLB, only two states required schools to close achievement gaps among children from economically disadvantaged families, children with disabilities, children with limited English proficiency, and children from all major ethnic and racial groups.¹
- ❖ ***Provide assistance to more low-performing schools.*** State assistance to schools includes academic audits, peer assistance, professional development, and additional resources. In 2002, 28 states were identifying schools that needed improvement according to state accountability systems and providing intervention and assistance to these schools.²
- ❖ ***Exercise more aggressive school intervention strategies.*** These include takeover or reconstitution, and provide students from schools that fail for several years with more choice options. As of 2002, 11 states’ school accountability systems included school closure, 19 included reconstitution, and 12 permitted student transfers.³

As part of NCLB, all 50 states have developed accountability plans that define how they will identify schools in need of improvement and provide assistance to those schools. Recent estimates are that thousands of schools will be identified as “in need of improvement” under NCLB and targeted for improvement efforts or corrective action.⁴ This guide provides governors with tools and strategies to assist, improve, and turn around these schools in their states. The guide provides specific information about the merits of various strategies, summaries of research findings, and recommendations for policy actions. It also offers strategies for forging collaborations with school districts and other state partners to help build the capacity of low-performing schools.

Understanding Low-Performing Schools

Throughout this guide, we use the term “low-performing” to denote any school classified as “in need of improvement” or “corrective action” under NCLB, or identified similarly by a state through its accountability system. While we recognize that “low-performing” schools often look different, and face different challenges, we use the term for ease of communication.

No Child Left Behind and Low-Performing Schools

What is adequate yearly progress?

Under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, low-performing school and district status hinges on the measure of adequate yearly progress (AYP). To make AYP, schools must meet state-defined benchmarks for:

1. proficiency in mathematics and reading/language arts on annual statewide assessments in grades three through eight, as well as once in high school;
2. participation rates on these statewide assessments; and
3. an additional indicator chosen by the state (e.g., high school graduation rates).

To meet assessment performance targets, the entire school and all student subgroups within the school must meet or exceed the same state-defined percentage of proficient students on both mathematics and reading/language arts assessments. (Student subgroups are defined, for example, by race, income, and limited English proficiency.) All students must reach proficiency by the 2013–14 school year. Every school is also required to include at least 95 percent of all students, as well as students from each subgroup, in both mathematics and reading/language arts assessments.

States are taking multiple approaches to including AYP in their accountability systems. Some states use AYP as the sole determinant of student performance. Other states use AYP as one component of a broader state accountability system. For example, a state accountability system could, in addition to AYP, include academic growth indicators. As a result, states may have several groups of low-performing schools. Each state also bases its assessments on a distinct set of standards and definition of proficiency. Because each state's accountability system includes different measures, state comparisons of student performance levels are not valid.

How does NCLB require states to respond to low-performing schools and districts?

NCLB includes progressively more serious consequences for districts and Title I schools that fail to make AYP for two or more years. For example, students attending schools that miss their performance targets for two consecutive years must be offered the option of moving to a higher-performing public school within the school district. Schools must also develop an improvement plan that sets performance targets by academic subject, uses 10 percent of the school's Title I funds for professional development, and incorporates a teacher mentoring program. After three years of missing the state performance target, parents of children in these schools must be offered the option of using federal Title I dollars to purchase supplemental educational services from an approved provider on the open market. After four years of missing the state performance target, the school becomes subject to "corrective action," which requires the district to formulate an improvement plan for the school. That plan could include replacing staff, decreasing management authority at the school level, appointing outside experts to advise the school, lengthening the school day or year, or restructuring the school.

If the school still fails to meet its target after being in corrective action status for one year, the district must take further steps. The district can close the school and reopen it as a charter school, or the district can replace all or most of the staff tied to the school's failure. Alternatively, a private management company can be hired to manage the school, the school can be put into state receivership, or the school can be subjected to another governance arrangement. If at any point in this process the school has two successive years of meeting its target, it ceases to be a failing school.

STATE APPROACHES TO LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

For many states, the NCLB approach to identifying and intervening in low-performing schools is novel. Yet many states, including California, Kentucky, Maryland, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Texas, have experience working with low-performing schools as part of their education accountability systems. Although most of these earlier first-generation accountability systems are similar in basic format, they differ in their approach to working with low-performing schools and districts. States implementing the school improvement provisions of NCLB can learn from these different state approaches (see box, “California’s Intervention for ‘Underperforming’ Schools and South Carolina’s Assistance to ‘Unsatisfactory’ Schools”).⁵

State accountability systems use two common strategies: identifying and prioritizing low-performing schools and providing incentives, resources, and assistance for them to improve.

Identifying and Prioritizing Schools

States take two basic approaches to identifying schools for assistance: some focus on their weakest schools, while others identify a larger group of schools that fall below performance levels or miss growth targets. North Carolina, for example, has continually placed fewer than 2 percent of its schools into its low-performing schools program. In contrast, California identified nearly 1,300 (14 percent) of the state’s schools for its Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program in 2001.⁶

Most states tend to follow the North Carolina model, targeting a small number of low-performing schools for mandatory assistance and relying on state capacity to deliver assistance to them. These states usually place schools in different tiers, or priority groups, ranging from the greatest in need of assistance to the least in need of assistance. This enables states to prioritize the weakest schools and provide more intensive support to them.

Providing Incentives, Resources, and Assistance

States seek to improve low-performing schools by imposing sanctions and providing technical assistance and financial resources. Sanctions are relatively severe in some states. For example, 19 states provide for schools to be “reconstituted” and staff to be replaced if a school fails to improve after a certain period.⁷ Other states place a greater emphasis on technical assistance and capacity-building.

State technical assistance to low-performing schools is organized in various ways. Some states provide assistance and oversight to schools that are directly under the supervision of the state; such assistance is tailored to the problems of each low-performing school. Direct assistance strategies vary, but most use a process that includes an initial audit or school review, the development of a school improvement plan, and the provision of assistance from expert educators, instructional specialists, and/or assistance teams. Other states leverage support and assistance in an indirect way, brokering assistance from external providers, such as consultants and universities, or promoting the use of regional service centers that are open to all schools in need of assistance. In addition, a few states have garnered support from local businesses. For example, Virginia Governor Mark R. Warner’s Partnership for Achieving Successful Schools (PASS) Initiative partners businesses with schools targeted for academic intervention.

A few states also provide significant financial resources to low-performing schools. Such assistance usually takes the form of direct grants that schools can use to hire external consultants or support other improvement activities.⁸

California’s Intervention for “Underperforming” Schools

California’s 1999 Public Schools Accountability Act created an accountability system that uses an academic performance index (API) to identify low-performing schools. Between 1999 and 2001, California identified 1,290 low-performing schools that fell below the 50th percentile on the API and volunteered for the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (II/USP). These schools comprise approximately 14 percent of California’s public schools.

Local governing boards of II/USP schools contract with a state-approved external evaluator to work with school faculty, administrators, and a community team to develop and implement a school improvement plan. School plans focus on building capacity to meet students’ instructional needs, conduct data analyses, and provide intervention programs. II/USP schools that fail to meet annual API growth targets within 12 months are subject to district interventions. Schools that fail to meet API growth targets within two years and fail to make academic progress are subject to state intervention and/or sanction. Schools that meet or exceed growth targets may be eligible for awards.

Nearly 20 percent of the schools that entered in the first cohort of II/USP have met the state’s growth expectations.

South Carolina’s Assistance to “Unsatisfactory” Schools

Based on student test scores, each school and district in South Carolina receives an absolute rating of “excellent,” “good,” “average,” “below average,” or “unsatisfactory.” Schools designated as “unsatisfactory” receive the most assistance for school improvement from the state. The state requires unsatisfactory schools to undergo a comprehensive review by an external audit team composed of educators, university staff, school improvement council representatives, and business and community leaders.

The team reviews the school in four key areas: curriculum and instruction, leadership and governance, student performance, and professional development. State-provided, full-time, on-site teacher specialists (for each grade level or core subject area) and one curriculum specialist help schools implement the school improvement plan. Schools deemed the neediest of the unsatisfactory schools are also afforded a principal leader, who acts as a coach and mentor to the existing principal.

Unsatisfactory schools are eligible to apply for special funding grants. Retraining grants of approximately \$20,000 to \$30,000 per school are available for professional development and training of school staff. After-school grants of approximately \$20,000 per year help schools establish after-school academic assistance programs for students. On-site specialists also have access to limited funds (e.g., \$20,000 to \$25,000 per school) to purchase instructional materials and resources.

Originally 73 schools were identified as unsatisfactory in 2001–02. Twenty-six of those schools have successfully exited the program.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR GOVERNORS AND OTHER POLICYMAKERS

States face specific and unprecedented challenges with respect to turning around low-performing schools and implementing the school improvement provisions of NCLB. To meet these challenges, governors and other state leaders will need to build on what has worked in the past while developing more comprehensive improvement strategies for the future. Recent state efforts to assist low-performing schools as well as research and practice on school improvement suggest five guiding principles for governors and other policymakers focused on improving schools.

Principle One: Not all low-performing schools are the same

Action Recommendation: Governors should encourage state education leaders to conduct detailed assessments of the instructional programs of all schools “in need of improvement.” The state should then use this analysis to prioritize and tailor its technical assistance resources and effectively communicate its expectations for low-performing schools.

Low-performing schools neither look alike nor have the same problems. Under NCLB, states are likely to identify significant numbers of their schools as “in need of improvement.” Some of these schools may fall just below AYP targets and have specific weaknesses at certain grade levels or among certain student subgroups. These schools, for example, might fail to make AYP with their African-American students, English-language learners, or students with disabilities. Other schools may be farther from reaching AYP targets but have shown steady improvement in performance in recent years. Still other schools will be far from AYP, having performed poorly on multiple academic indicators over several years. This last group of schools may be classified as “corrective action” or “restructuring” schools under NCLB and subject to more intensive and far-reaching district and state intervention. In addition, low-performing elementary schools look different from low-performing high schools and often require different responses to turn them around (see box on page 15, “Identifying and Improving Low-Performing High Schools”).

What many low-performing schools fundamentally lack is something Harvard University Professor Richard Elmore and his colleagues refer to as “internal accountability.”⁹ These schools lack agreement on expectations for student learning and lack the means to influence classroom instructional practice in ways that result in improved student learning. High internal accountability leads directly to observable gains in student learning. According to these researchers, some low-performing schools are engaged in developing internal accountability; these schools have had some success in generating gains in student learning, but they still may not be meeting state performance requirements. Other low-performing schools fit the typical stereotype of “failing” schools. These schools show little or no evidence of consistent expectations about the quality of instruction or student performance; adults within the schools assign responsibility for low student performance to families and communities rather than to themselves, and resources to support student learning are managed chaotically. These schools also lack internal accountability on anything but the most basic expectations—for example, orderly student conduct in the hallways. They pose significantly greater challenges for policymakers and may require more intensive and aggressive assistance from states and districts.¹⁰

Not all low-performing schools are the same, and now, due to NCLB requirements, many more schools will be identified as low-performing than in the past. Consequently, governors and other state leaders will have to make strategic decisions on how the state should prioritize technical assistance resources and communicate to the public about these schools.

Identifying Schools

States initially will be faced with large numbers of schools NCLB classifies as “in need of improvement.” While historically states have identified between 5 percent and 10 percent of their schools as low performing,¹¹ some states are estimating that 40 percent or more of their schools will not meet AYP requirements in the 2003–04 school year.¹² North Carolina, for example, projects that nearly 50 percent of its schools will be classified as “in need of improvement.” In the past, the state has provided assistance to around 100 schools a year.¹³ Although states may not be able to prevent high numbers of identified schools, they can use multiple indicators and measures to better differentiate these schools. New York will now divide its low-performing schools into three subcategories: schools “in need of improvement,” “corrective action” schools, and “schools under registration review” (SURR). For the first two groups of schools, technical assistance will be provided through the district and through the state’s regional school support centers. Schools under registration review will be provided more intensive assistance and support in collaboration with their local district.¹⁴ Connecticut and Ohio are similarly planning to differentiate their low-performing schools.¹⁵

Governors and other state policymakers can use the identification of low-performing schools as an opportunity to develop more useful and usable school- and system-level data.

- ❖ **States should use NCLB’s school improvement planning requirements to develop detailed information on the quality of teaching, learning, and leadership in identified schools.**
- ❖ **To maximize the usefulness of the information collected on low-performing schools, states should develop or adopt finely tuned assessment tools that can provide specifics about classroom instruction.**

Additional school and student performance data can help policymakers better assess a school’s level of internal accountability and capacity to improve. This information can also help the state tailor the technical assistance it makes available to low-performing schools. Tennessee, for example, has been a leader in tracking the “value added” by schools and teachers. With this information, states and districts can differentiate between low-performing schools that significantly raise achievement and those that do not. Interventions should be tailored accordingly.¹⁶

Prioritizing Technical Assistance

More low-performing schools means states may have fewer resources—human and financial—to provide each school. State fiscal conditions only exacerbate this problem. For these reasons, governors and other state leaders will have to make difficult decisions on how to prioritize state technical assistance resources.

- ❖ **States should consider targeting technical assistance, whether provided directly or indirectly, to a subset of identified schools that are weaker performers, have low internal accountability, or have limited capacity to improve.**
- ❖ **States will need to focus their resources so they can provide intensive assistance to their lowest-performing schools.**

Kentucky, North Carolina, and South Carolina have used a targeting strategy in recent years. These and other states have had some success with improving weaker-capacity schools, but only after providing intensive support and intervention.¹⁷

Communicating to the Public

Policymakers, particularly governors, can play a crucial role in communicating to the public about their state's low-performing schools and providing leadership on this issue (see box, "One Governor's Strategy: Michigan's Partnership to Help Low-Performing Schools"). Governors' messages to the public should affirm that all identified schools need to improve and that the state will help them do so. In addition, governors and other state leaders need to take these two steps.

- ❖ **Help the public and the media understand the differences among the state's low-performing schools.**

Recent public opinion research suggests the public wants more information on low-performing schools and seeks a better understanding of the differences between schools where just a few student subgroups are not reaching AYP targets and schools where most students are not making progress.¹⁸ Only by educating the public about these schools can states dispel the notion that all identified schools are the same or that all are failing schools.

- ❖ **Highlight cases where schools have improved and encourage a continued focus on schools still needing assistance.**

Many states are recognizing and celebrating schools that are no longer identified for school improvement, have made significant growth gains, or are serving challenging populations successfully. Poll data also show that, for most voters (59 percent), highlighting success stories about turnaround schools is a good way to demonstrate that improved school performance is achievable.¹⁹

One Governor's Strategy: Michigan's Partnership to Help Low-Performing Schools

Governor Jennifer Granholm recently announced the formation of a public-private state partnership to help Michigan's low-performing schools meet the adequate yearly progress (AYP) provision of the No Child Left Behind Act. The partnership brings together the state department of education, the state board of education, local school districts, the business community, the faith community, the foundation community, social services organizations, and teacher unions. Its efforts will target the state's 216 schools that did not meet AYP targets in math and reading.

The Governor's plan calls for each high-priority school to submit a detailed "AYP Achievement Plan" to the Michigan Department of Education for approval. Prior to the start of the 2003–2004 school year, each school will send its administrators to a "Principals Academy" and its staff to a "Summer Leadership School." These conferences will impart to school principals and teachers the skills necessary to implement the AYP plans.

The partnership will build the instructional capacity of high-priority schools. It will also help by offering these schools support through local businesses and/or faith organizations, targeting them for the Governor's Great Lakes/Great Hopes Scholarship Program, finding mentors for children in these schools, and focusing coordinated, improved social service delivery to these schools through the Children's Action Network.

Principle Two: Capacity-building must be part of the solution

Action Recommendation: Governors should work with state education leaders to build capacity in their state’s low-performing schools, focusing on the weakest schools. States can draw on the experience of states that have successfully implemented capacity-building strategies while asserting greater quality control in selecting and monitoring assistance providers.

Successful school improvement strategies incorporate capacity-building for the school and its staff. Capacity generally means a school’s ability “to translate high standards and incentives into effective instruction and strong student performance.”²⁰ Capacity includes the skill and knowledge of teachers and principals. Capacity also includes a willingness to diagnose problems and develop instructional improvement strategies—what Professor Elmore and his colleagues refer to as internal accountability—that can impact whether a school sustains improvement in the long run.

Research highlights the importance of capacity-building in low-performing schools. In examining school responses to being placed on probation by the Chicago Public Schools, the researchers found that some schools improved rapidly while others lingered in the program. Initial capacity to develop improvement strategies and sustain them was a key factor in explaining the results. Elementary schools with higher initial capacity had higher “peer collaboration, teacher-teacher trust, and collective responsibility for student learning” and responded more favorably to the reform push. The schools with low capacity benefited little from district accountability policies.²¹

A focus on capacity is a necessary complement to strategies that focus on financial rewards and incentives. Funding, whether in the form of improvement grants or reward bonuses, presumes that schools and districts have the know-how and willingness to make clear decisions on their instructional priorities and act on these decisions. Research on low-performing schools suggests this is not always the case. Teachers who feel helpless to affect improvement, for example, sometimes perceive rewards as unfair and/or unattainable.²²

Sanctions, whether directed at the school, the staff, or both, have had mixed success in turning around low-performing schools. The heightened pressure from sanctions appears to exacerbate teacher attrition and morale problems in many of these schools. Many low-performing schools are not attractive workplaces, and schools in jurisdictions with high concentrations of low-performing schools are often staffed with large numbers of new, often insufficiently trained teachers with little commitment to stay. Likewise, principal turnover is high. Principals under the pressure of an accountability process often are conduits of pressure, which contributes to non-supportive working relationships between teachers and administrators. Too much pressure can lead to greater dissatisfaction and additional turnover. Potential staff replacements are not necessarily of higher quality than the original teaching staff.²³

To develop strategies to build capacity in low-performing schools, governors and other state leaders can look to efforts in other states. Policymakers should think carefully about who should help schools build their capacity and how capacity-building resources can be distributed to the potentially larger number of schools identified under NCLB as needing improvement.

Building on Existing State Programs

States need not “reinvent the wheel” because several states have already invested heavily in capacity-building in their low-performing schools program with good success.²⁴ North Carolina and South Carolina, for example, have effectively used an assistance team model to diagnose school weaknesses and provide follow-up assistance to low-performing schools. A review of research about the North Carolina program shows that efforts to assist schools in analyzing data, modeling good instruction, and aligning curricula with state standards helped these schools improve. Of the 60 schools assigned assistance teams by the state, only three retain their classification as low-performing schools.²⁵

To build on the lessons of these and other programs, governors and other state policymakers should take these two actions.

- ❖ **Develop capacity-building strategies that help schools diagnose weaknesses and provide extensive on-site follow-up support from expert educators to implement research-based instructional improvement strategies.**²⁶
- ❖ **Invest significant energy in training expert educators, instructional specialists, and assistance team members to work with schools.**

External assistance providers need specific strategies to build trust, develop staff ownership and buy-in, and prepare the schools for the experts' eventual exit.

Choosing Providers

Evidence from Kentucky, North Carolina, and other states suggests that providing intensive support is an essential part of these states' success in turning around low-performing schools. The challenge states face is how to serve larger numbers of schools intensively. "In general," notes one researcher, "the more schools a state serves, the more difficult it becomes to ensure that all schools receive high-quality assistance and support."²⁷ States that have served larger numbers of schools by brokering assistance or by providing resources to schools to contract with consultants or evaluators have found the quality of that assistance varies greatly.²⁸ Differences in the quality of assistance may be why the initial evidence from research on low-performing schools suggests that instructional specialists, expert educators, and state-managed support have been more successful than contracting and brokering strategies.²⁹ Yet, under NCLB, states will likely have to use both direct and indirect support strategies to work with all their identified schools.

To ensure adequate support for low-performing schools, governors should encourage state education leaders to heed the following.

- ❖ **Choose providers who have experience leading successful school improvement and can build trust with school staff and administrators.**
- ❖ **Provide clear expectations for indirect assistance providers and invest heavily in the training of these providers and in the monitoring of capacity-building efforts.**³⁰

States have had success with a range of direct and indirect assistance providers, including expert teachers and principals, instructional specialists, state department of education staff, and private consultants. These efforts have worked best when goal-setting and training are offered up-front and the work of the providers is assessed at regular intervals.³¹



Identifying and Improving Low-Performing High Schools

High schools have been called the “most fundamental test” of standards-based reform. Low-performing high schools have needs and challenges distinct from low-performing elementary schools. Besides low academic achievement, these schools often have high levels of apathy and disengagement. Low-performing high schools warrant explicit state strategies for major and comprehensive reform.

High schools are more resistant to change than elementary schools because they serve older students and are typically larger and more complex. Just as elementary schools have to make up more ground academically with students who are less prepared or ready for school in the early grades, high schools are often forced to make up ground with students who are poorly prepared in middle and elementary school. High schools are programmatically complex, in part because of an accumulation of prior reform efforts that target only a few students. Magnet programs serve academically advanced students, dropout prevention programs serve at-risk students, career or technical programs serve another subgroup, and special education programs serve the growing number of students identified as learning disabled. These programs typically have their own space, staff, mandates, funding streams, and interest groups that can impede or complicate reforms designed to institute major changes across the entire school.

Educating adolescents contributes to the complexity of reform. Teens are more likely to defy adult authority, be strongly influenced by peers and social pressures, and assume adult roles as worker or parent that distract them from schoolwork. They also become old enough to decide whether to remain in school and require clear and persistent motivation to do so. Working conditions for teachers and administrators can be especially tough in low-performing high schools where students’ academic and non-academic needs far exceed the human, material, and financial resources available to meet them. Unsafe climates, poor attendance, low achievement, rundown facilities, and material scarcity also make it difficult for such schools to attract and retain good teachers qualified to teach at high levels in core subject areas.

Often the low-performing high schools that produce most of the state’s high school dropouts are the same high schools attended by most of the adolescents who have contact with the juvenile justice system. Not surprisingly, these schools also produce most of the unemployed young adults. Transforming these high schools not only holds the promise of reducing dropout rates but also of reducing crime and increasing economic productivity.

How can policymakers identify the high schools most in need of reform in their state?

To develop an explicit strategy for high school reform, governors need good information and accurate data about what is happening within their state’s low-performing high schools. Achievement on standardized tests measured in a single year and aggregated to the school level can be a misleading indicator, particularly for high schools with high dropout rates.

An alternative indicator of a low-performing high school is a longitudinal measure called “promoting power.” This measure is calculated by dividing the number of twelfth graders in any given year by the number of ninth graders four years prior. It uses readily available data to indicate the strength or weakness of any given high school. Balfanz and Legters (2001), for example, calculated promoting power for public high schools in the nation’s 100 largest cities and found approximately 400 schools where the size of freshmen cohorts had declined 50 percent or more by their senior year.

Because high school-level data can be so confounded by high dropout rates and student mobility, states and districts are well advised to use multiple measures (e.g., attendance, achievement, promotion, and graduation) and as much longitudinal information as possible when identifying and monitoring progress in low-performing high schools. Using multiple measures and longitudinal information can produce a better picture of what is really happening in these schools.

What strategies can help overcome the challenges of improving low-performing high schools?

All states must start by reviewing their processes for identifying low-performing schools to ensure the indicators they examine are accurate measures of high school effectiveness.

Low-performing high schools need comprehensive, not piecemeal, reform. Research suggests that governors should develop detailed high school improvement plans that include the following five strategies.

1. **Align standards and assessments with the expectation that all students need to be ready for college success.** State standards and assessments need to be rigorous and aligned with postsecondary placement standards. Further, assessment results need to be timely so teachers can modify curriculum and instruction to match students' abilities. Applied learning and extended learning opportunities, including internships, help all students meet academic standards and link learners to the wider world.
2. **Increase student and teacher supports, including sustained professional development and time for collaborative efforts.** Specific strategies include social supports, collegial networks, school- and classroom-based coaching, and flexible time for high-quality contextualized and content-specific professional development.
3. **Ensure adequate human and financial resources to meet the scope and degree of educational challenges faced by the schools.** High schools should be given the flexibility to use funds as needed. To help high schools use their money wisely, states need to ensure they have the necessary information and budgetary tools to do so.
4. **Create small, focused high schools that prepare all students for the future.** Large, chronically low-performing high schools need to be closed and reopened—with new leadership and carefully selected staff—as smaller schools. In these settings, adults can motivate students through caring personal relationships and knowledge of their learning needs.
5. **Support robust, high-quality public school choice options.** States need to give schools the authority to hire their own teachers. They need to make it easier to start charter schools and other schools. To ensure options are available to all students, states need to give parents information about school availability and performance and provide students with transportation and other reasonable accommodations.

Sources: Robert Balfanz and Nettie Legters, Center for Social Organization of Schools.

Robert Balfanz and Nettie Legters, *How Many Failing High Schools Are There? Where Are They Located? Who Attends Them?* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Civil Rights Project, January 2001), www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu.



Principle Three: Districts are essential collaborators in efforts to turn around schools

Action Recommendation: States should partner with districts to build the capacity of low-performing schools and encourage districts to develop systems of instructional support to serve these and other schools.

Building school capacity requires local education agencies—school districts—to play a greater role in state turn-around efforts. Although Florida, Maryland, and Texas have successfully engaged districts in school improvement strategies, most state technical assistance efforts have tended to ignore or obscure the role of districts. This is likely because of the perception that districts, particularly large urban districts, are more a hindrance than a help to low-performing schools.³² States typically restrict the role of districts to that of fiscal agent for school-level improvement dollars.³³

For several reasons, districts must now become central partners as states design and implement the school improvement provisions of NCLB. Recent research confirms there are places where district reform strategies have improved schools (e.g., Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Sacramento City Unified School District). This same work suggests that efforts to turn around schools will be hampered or derailed entirely without a supportive and complementary district context within which to implement reforms.³⁴ Professional development, data analysis, and curriculum reforms will only take hold if they align with district efforts in these areas. Districts are also important partners as the number of schools identified as “in need of improvement” grows. States cannot single-handedly assist all schools failing to meet AYP targets, necessitating a larger role for districts in capacity-building.

In addition, local districts are a critical source of human and financial resources to assist low-performing schools. Medium- and large-sized districts tend to have professional developers and other instructional specialists who can assist low-performing schools; these individuals have often worked with these schools and know them very well. Districts are also a source of scarce dollars that can support intervention and improvement efforts. Under NCLB, districts classified as “in need of improvement” must allocate at least 10 percent of their Title I funds to provide professional development for teachers and principals.³⁵

To more effectively leverage the role of local districts in delivering technical assistance and supports, governors and other state leaders will need to develop partnerships with higher-performing districts and with districts classified under NCLB as “in need of improvement.”

Developing Partnerships

Many school systems with high numbers of low-performing schools have developed systemic strategies for instructional improvement. Governors can work with these districts and state education leaders to ensure district experience in improving schools is utilized.

- ❖ **Encourage and support districts with coherent school improvement strategies to assume long-term responsibility for monitoring the performance of low-performing schools and develop systems of instructional support for those schools.**

States may want to consider allowing schools that operate within well-established district systems of school improvement to present evidence of improvements in instructional practice as interim evidence of progress toward state performance standards.³⁶

Strengthening District Accountability

Districts that lack coherent school improvement strategies and have a history of poor performance will require a more hands-on approach. Maryland has had some success with such an approach in Baltimore. In 1997 the state transferred governance of the Baltimore City Public Schools to a new board of school commissioners jointly appointed by the governor, the mayor, and a new chief executive officer hired by the board. The new leadership team reorganized the district's low-performing schools—called “reconstitution-eligible” schools—into a separate district and began implementing an improvement plan focused on capacity-building and the use of school-level data to examine teaching and learning. A five-year study of Baltimore schools by Westat revealed slow and incremental progress and improved test scores, though as of 2001 only four of the 85 Baltimore schools were taken off the state's reconstitution-eligible list.³⁷

Under NCLB, states can now require low-performing districts to develop improvement plans. The law also empowers governors and other state and local leaders to take these actions.

❖ **Require low-performing districts to develop systemic strategies for instructional improvement and capacity-building.**

Among the characteristics that states should stipulate as criteria for approval of such strategies are systemwide curriculum content in reading, writing, and mathematics; professional development systems that reach every teacher in a given content area; and annual school-level performance plans that set targets for professional development of teachers and principals and the improvement of practice and academic performance.³⁸ Policymakers should also ensure district curricula are research-based and aligned with state standards.

❖ **Remove schools from the authority of troubled districts and/or restructure district governance to better support student learning.**

Currently, 24 states provide authority for the takeover of local school districts, permitting state or city officials to assume authority over a school district for “academic bankruptcy” or for performing at severely low academic levels. States have seen student achievement improve as a result of takeover or restructuring, but these processes can take considerable time as the Baltimore case illustrates.³⁹ An alternative model that Louisiana and other states are considering is to remove low-performing schools from troubled districts and place them in a temporary “recovery” district managed by the state.⁴⁰ New York City's “Chancellor's District” has shown promising results using a similar strategy.⁴¹

Principle Four: Be prepared for the long haul

Action Recommendation: States should provide technical assistance and support to low-performing schools for several years and continue to offer support to schools no longer designated as “in need of improvement.” States should ensure their accountability system has the flexibility to identify when and how schools are improving and provide support to those schools accordingly.

One of the enduring lessons of school reform is that lasting change takes time.⁴² Improvement is highly sensitive to changes in leadership and instructional personnel, and the process of improvement is neither constant nor linear (see box on page 20, “The Process of School Improvement”). In many low-performing schools, significant gains in performance are not always sustained, and the gains may be followed by periods of flat performance. Though not inevitable, periods of flat performance can be critical to the improvement process. During these times, individual teachers consolidate and deepen the knowledge and practices they acquired in earlier phases of improvement and schools diagnose and identify the barriers to the next phase of improvement and develop the capacity to work on those barriers.⁴³

States will have to show even greater patience and persistence as they work with their low-performing schools under NCLB. Although most current state assistance programs are voluntary, interventions will become mandatory under the new federal law. Consequently, schools and communities will need time to accept their low-performing designation and embrace assistance.⁴⁴ External assistance providers will need time to build trust and support among parents, teachers, and administrators.⁴⁵ Schools, communities, and assistance providers will need to work together to develop focused school improvement strategies and to implement those strategies.⁴⁶



Governors and state leaders will need to find ways to adapt their accountability systems to the timing and stages of school improvement. Most research suggests that accountability systems work best when they pressure schools to improve and provide support or capacity to make that improvement happen more easily.⁴⁷ Initial pressure, through the threat of sanctions, creates urgency and often the initial test score gains necessary to challenge low expectations for minority and low-income students.⁴⁸ Sanctions work best, however, when accompanied in later stages by sustained efforts to build expertise and capacity in lower-performing schools. The threat of school reconstitution in Baltimore was complemented with the hiring of highly qualified instructional specialists to assist teachers within schools. Extensive professional development is provided on site by these specialists and through other sources, which encourages teacher dialogue on instruction and student learning and greater internal accountability in the schools. Chicago's decision in 2001 to provide full-time reading specialists to schools on probation has also shown some promising initial returns.⁴⁹

To prepare for the long haul, governors will need to work with state and local leaders to extend technical assistance over a longer period and to build flexibility into state accountability systems.

Extending Technical Assistance

States need to extend assistance to low-performing schools beyond the typical one-year cycle.

- ❖ **States should provide one to two years of intensive technical assistance followed by a shorter period of less-intensive follow-up support.**

Several states including Arkansas, California, Nevada, and Vermont organize their technical assistance in multi-year cycles.⁵⁰

- ❖ **States should provide follow-up support for schools that have left the state's low-performing schools list.**

A local district or state-identified intermediary with more regular access to schools and the day-to-day implementation of improvement strategies may best provide follow-up support. Arkansas and North Carolina provide such follow-up support to their schools.⁵¹

Building Flexibility into State Accountability Systems

Accountability systems need ways to recognize schools that are making significant improvements in instructional practice and demonstrable gains in student performance, even when the schools are not meeting AYP targets.

They also need to align expectations for annual improvement with the timeframe and process by which schools improve.⁵² Several states have begun incorporating these elements into the accountability plans they are required to produce under NCLB.

- ❖ **States should consider indicators of growth and averaging school performance over long enough periods to enable low-performing schools to take credit for previous gains during periods when their performance is flat.**

Mississippi, for example, has made growth in student performance one component of its accountability system and plan for meeting performance requirements under the new federal law. Indiana will average the three most recent years of test score data and compare the average with the most recent year of scores. The higher of the two scores will be used for school accountability.⁵³

- ❖ **States can delay or space performance targets to give schools more time to improve instruction; implement professional development strategies; and build teacher, principal, and school capacity.**

Delaware, Georgia, and Wisconsin are using annual accountability targets that increase more rapidly in later years. Florida and South Carolina are spacing performance targets so these targets rise in three-year increments.⁵⁴

The Process of School Improvement

School improvement generally proceeds in phases rather than in a steady, linear fashion. Each phase involves more complex and demanding challenges than the prior phase and thus more skill and knowledge on the part of people in the organization. Although none of these phases is inevitable or occurs in every school, each captures the flavor of what improvement can look like from the vantage point of schools as they are going through a particular phase.

Improvements in school performance seem to follow these phases.

- ❖ **Problem Recognition.** Schools recognize and internalize problems of performance by paying attention to evidence on student performance. They choose a proximate performance target—increasing reading performance, for example—and focus their work on improving their individual and organizational capacity to meet this target.
- ❖ **Low-Hanging Fruit.** If schools succeed in choosing the right target and developing the initial knowledge and skill in teachers and students to reach that target, they typically see a modest bounce in student performance. Often, these initial moves, especially in very low-capacity schools, consist of very low-level changes, such as devoting a set number of minutes per day to teaching reading, realigning the curriculum so content that is tested is taught before the test is given, or identifying and focusing on students whose performance could easily be improved and whose improved test results would make the entire school look better. This can be called the “low-hanging fruit” phase, or, less complimentarily, the “some teaching versus no teaching” phase.
- ❖ **Stagnation.** These initial simple moves usually turn out to have very short-term, very disappointing effects. Yet the critical point is the school has decided to make some collective commitment to a goal that has to do with performance. This is a prerequisite to developing internal accountability—namely, the capacity for individuals in the school to subscribe to common expectations about what is important to work on and what students should be able to do. If the organization reads its performance well, it is during this phase that schools often try to tackle a more ambitious kind of instructional improvement. This improvement is often focused on adopting specific curricula and instructional practice.

- ❖ **External Help.** This next phase almost always requires the school to receive some external help, support, and professional development. New practices take time to acquire and implement with any consistency. They also require people to organize and manage themselves around increasingly clear, collective goals—another defining characteristic of internal accountability. Yet schools that go through this phase almost always see gains in student performance. This is partly because they are learning to work together more powerfully and partly because they are teaching different content in different ways. Just as predictably, performance tends to go flat again almost immediately. This happens because the problems of improving student performance are more complex than the strategies adopted during this phase can cope with.
- ❖ **Barrier Resolution.** The school most often chooses the next problem to tackle based on an analysis of the barriers to continued improvement. Typically, the problems that schools work on during this phase require some external help to resolve. They are problems like increasing the consistency and cognitive demand of instruction or determining why the instructional strategies they adopted earlier work for some students and not for others.
- ❖ **Impossible Work.** The problems of improvement become more complex and demanding as performance increases; the challenges to existing instructional practices and existing organizational norms become more direct and difficult. Often schools experience a crisis at this point. Teachers and principals argue that the work has become impossible to do with existing resource constraints and that expectations set by external accountability systems are simply impossible to meet. What teachers and administrators are saying is they simply do not have the capacity to make the next round of changes, and they usually are correct. This is the impossible work phase. The conditions for future improvement are present in the school, but the capacity to make that improvement is not. It is critical for schools to receive high levels of support during this phase—to get help in diagnosing the next problems, to get assistance from people with expertise about problems of student learning and instructional practice, to broaden and deepen common expectations about high-quality instructional practice, and to see schools in similar circumstances that have managed to move through this phase.
- ❖ **Transformed Organization.** Schools that make it through this crisis typically emerge as much different organizations—stronger, more coherent, with responsibilities more widely distributed, with much higher morale related to student learning, and with much higher cognitive demand in the classroom. Yet they often have difficulty demonstrating that these changes are consequential because going through a crisis saps the energy and commitment of people while it is going on, and often performance goes flat during these periods. This occurs because the school has built the capacity for higher-level instruction, but it has not yet seen its full effects. This is where more concentrated work on instructional practice—not less—is important because teachers and administrators must understand that not only have they changed the way instruction occurs in the school, but they also have changed their own capacity to take responsibility for, as well as manage their school’s response to pressure for, performance.
- ❖ **Self-Management of Improvement.** The next phase of improvement is one that very few schools achieve, even nominally “high-performing” schools. During this phase, the school collectively takes over managing its own improvement process, and administrators, teachers, and students internalize the values of managing and monitoring their own learning.

Source: Richard Elmore, *Knowing the Right Thing to Do: Low-Performing Schools and Performance-Based Accountability* (Washington, D.C.: National Governors Association, Center for Best Practices, August 2003).

Principle Five: Assistance to low-performing schools should be part of a larger strategy of school improvement

Action Recommendation: Governors should work to build capacity in schools by developing a comprehensive state policy strategy that aims to enhance the quality of teachers and principals, expand school choice options, and develop the state’s capacity to promote school improvement.

State efforts to turn around low-performing schools will not succeed in isolation. To make and sustain the improvements envisioned under NCLB, states will have to marshal all of their education policies and resources to support school improvement (see box on page 24, “Marshaling Resources to Support Assistance to Low-Performing Schools”). Because school improvement is so dependent on building the capacity of schools, states will need to develop a comprehensive policy strategy that supports capacity-building. States can support capacity-building by expanding their teacher and principal quality efforts and by promoting quality school choice options for students. States will also need to increase their capacity to provide meaningful assistance to low-performing schools.

Enhancing Teacher and Principal Quality

Central to improving capacity in low-performing schools is improving the quality and skills of teachers and principals. Cases of successful turnarounds often point to exceptional teachers and principals as a crucial success factor.⁵⁵ Yet low-performing schools are more likely to be filled with teachers who are inexperienced and lack expertise in literacy, math, or more specialized subject areas. Few principals in low-performing schools have the knowledge and skills needed to lead instructional improvement and develop better teachers.⁵⁶ Investments to improve the knowledge and skill of teachers and administrators in these schools tend to have a limited effect because of high turnover in personnel. Low-performing schools often face a labor force in which between 15 percent and 25 percent of their teachers turn over during a single school year. Teachers and administrators who demonstrate skill in such settings are at a premium and are often recruited to settings where they believe the conditions are more conducive for their success.

To improve teaching and leadership in low-performing schools, governors must focus state resources on producing high-quality teachers and principals and getting these individuals into the neediest schools.

- ❖ **States must create more comprehensive, targeted incentives to encourage well-trained and highly qualified teachers and principals to stay in these schools and districts.**

To strengthen the recruitment of quality teachers and increase their rates of retention in low-performing schools, states can use:

- ❖ *financial incentives* (e.g., loan forgiveness for teachers in low-performing schools, extra compensation, academic improvement bonuses, targeted signing bonuses, and housing assistance);
- ❖ *professional incentives* (e.g., professional development for teachers and principals, career ladders, leadership opportunities, and access to advanced degree programs); and
- ❖ *improved working conditions* (e.g., induction programs for new teachers, reduced teaching workloads, smaller class sizes, district-university teacher preparation partnerships, improved physical infrastructure and materials, and elimination of residency requirements).

States should partner with local systems to create and promote these incentives.⁵⁷

❖ **States should also consider reforming their systems of licensure, preparation, and professional development for teachers and principals to better build the capacity of schools.**

The quality of teacher preparation and professional development programs varies greatly. Few programs have deep connections with schools or districts—the employers of the workforce they are developing. These connections are especially crucial in recruiting promising students, developing more contextualized curricula, and in mentoring and supporting candidates in the early stages of their career. While many colleges and universities provide exemplary training, only a handful prepare beginning educators or assist veteran educators to teach in low-performing schools. The fact that new teachers are more likely to be assigned to low-performing schools makes this lack of preparation to teach in these schools more troubling. One promising approach is professional development schools (PDS)—partnerships between teacher colleges and low-performing school districts. PDS programs train graduates to teach in challenging environments. License reciprocity can also expedite the filling of vacancies in low-performing schools by opening up the recruitment pipeline across state borders.

Expanding Choice Options for Students

Setting goals for better performance and ensuring that standards, assessments, and accountability systems help schools move toward those goals are the bedrock of any education reform strategy. Yet these reform elements are not sufficient. At all levels of the education system, there is a serious need for more, and more varied, learning environments that can motivate young people, make them feel responsible for their learning, and improve academic achievement.⁵⁸ States can play an important role in expanding the supply of good school choice options for students in low-performing schools.

To create more choice options for students in low-performing schools, governors and other state policymakers should consider several strategies.

❖ **Create an innovation fund to promote the development of new schools.**

The Gates Foundation and other private foundations are providing funds for initiatives to create clusters of small schools in districts and states nationwide. In addition, several states are considering legislation to create innovation funds. North Carolina, for example, is considering a high school “innovation fund” to provide startup grants for three or four years to new schools. New schools need this initial funding help because they have significant startup costs for recruitment, professional development, and curriculum design and development.⁵⁹

❖ **Develop or strengthen state charter school laws to encourage greater choice.**

Thirty-nine states have passed charter school legislation in the past decade, creating a mechanism for the birth of new schools that gain autonomy in staffing, budgeting, certification, and programming in exchange for accountability for results. State charter school laws vary greatly in terms of chartering authority, funding levels and mechanisms, degree of autonomy, accountability expectations, and other characteristics. A well-designed charter school law can be a relatively low-cost way to stimulate the supply of quality new schools that are accountable for academic performance. Effective state charter school laws allow multiple authorizing entities, including universities, school districts, and community-based organizations, and provide access to startup capital funds and financing for facilities. Many view Minnesota’s charter school law as one of the more effective laws in balancing opportunities for new school development with an emphasis on accountability for improved outcomes.⁶⁰

❖ **Provide opportunity scholarships to allow students options to transfer out of low-performing schools and evaluate the impact of these policies on student achievement.**

Florida’s A+ Program offers tuition grants of nearly \$4,000 to families with children in low-performing public schools. The state voucher programs in Cleveland, Ohio; and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, expand school choice options to include private schools.

Developing State Capacity

To effectively build school and district capacity, states must develop their own capacity to improve schools. Several studies have documented the limited resources and weak organizational capacity of state departments of education and regional service agencies.⁶¹ Under NCLB, states will be expected to centrally direct an effective process of school improvement and to intervene aggressively in poor-performing schools and districts. Yet, according to Marc Tucker of the National Center on Education and the Economy, state departments of education lack “the staff, legitimacy, and expertise” to do this. “[C]ompliance, not school improvement, has been their business,” he explains.⁶²

Governors should work with the heads of their state departments of education to do the following.

- ❖ **Develop short- and long-term strategies to expand the capacity of these agencies to lead improvement.**

Low-performing schools need help to diagnose the problems of instructional practice they are facing and to determine solutions for those problems. This assistance must be sustained over time as the schools develop their capacity to diagnose and solve instructional problems. Ongoing assistance requires staff—whether housed in state agencies or districts—who know content and pedagogy. It also requires instructional resources—materials, teacher coaches, and professional development—that schools and districts often do not have.⁶³

Marshaling Resources to Support Assistance to Low-Performing Schools

States rely on state and federal funding streams, state education agency staff, and other programs and personnel to support interventions and assistance to low-performing schools. A review of state assistance to low-performing schools in nine states—Arkansas, California, Florida, Indiana, Nevada, North Carolina, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming—conducted by Policy Studies Associates (PSA) for the U.S. Department of Education found that funding arrangements and the type of assistance varied widely among the nine states.

How much does state-sponsored technical assistance cost?

Among the nine states referenced above, the cost of state-sponsored interventions depended on the intensity of the services provided. Staff and consultant time accounted for the lion’s share of expenditures on support to schools. Other costs, including travel to and from schools and purchases of new instructional materials, accounted for a much smaller proportion of the total. Generally, the more time spent on site training school staff, the more expensive the assistance.

North Carolina, for example, placed school assistance teams in residence at the state’s lowest-performing “mandatory assistance” schools for one year. The teams were composed of four to five educators recruited from other classrooms and schools across the state. They audited all facets of school operations, developed school improvement plans, evaluated teachers and other staff, and provided professional development. Off-site teams with responsibility for multiple schools played a similar role in “voluntary assistance” schools with less severe performance problems, though they spent proportionately less time in each school. In 2002–03, the state spent \$5.7 million on school assistance teams.

Nevada worked with schools to assess their needs and select an appropriate remedial program from one of 26 state-approved, research-based instructional programs, such as Success for All, Direct Instruction, Reading Recovery, and Read 180. It then awarded grants to schools based on the costs of implementing these programs and purchasing needed training and support services from program vendors. Grants typically ranged from \$70,000 to \$100,000 per school.

California schools in their first year of the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (II/USP) engaged in extensive needs assessment and school improvement planning under the guidance of an external evaluator. The state provided each school with a minimum of \$50,000 to support these planning activities; schools with higher enrollments received more, up to \$168 per student.

In **Indiana** a line item in the state budget for fiscal 2002 provided \$420,000 for schools with probationary or short-term accreditation under the state's performance-based accreditation system, an average of \$19,000 per school. State grants to schools, ranging from \$16,000 to \$32,000 per school, support various staff development activities. The state considers such factors as school size, staff, and equity when making its funding decisions.

What steps can states take to design cost-effective technical assistance and support?

Assistance that ultimately fails to promote student achievement is not cost-effective. When resources are scarce, states need to be particularly attentive to designing interventions that are likely to improve the way schools work. The experience of nine states suggests the following five strategies are useful.

- ❖ **Target schools carefully to ensure an adequate level of support.** Most of the nine states limited the number of schools they assisted by making their services voluntary, mandating their assistance in only the very lowest-performing schools, or providing tiered assistance that was more intensive for some schools than for others. Respondents in several states explained that they had adopted these strategies to avoid spreading limited staff and funding too thinly.
- ❖ **Coordinate closely across funding streams and programs.** Where states cannot rely on special appropriations to fund assistance to their low-performing schools, other funding streams and programs can be tapped for school improvement. Title I is an important source of funding. The No Child Left Behind Act requires states to set aside 2 percent of their Title I allocation to support school improvement activities; the percentage will rise to 4 percent in 2004. Coordinating effectively takes time and effort, however. Respondents in several states expressed frustration that they were not able to work more closely with staff in other offices and programs providing services to the same groups of schools.
- ❖ **Require schools to reallocate resources to support school improvement goals.** Low-performing, high-poverty schools typically qualify for diverse federal and state initiatives, including Title I schoolwide funding, Reading First initiatives, Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration grants, and state compensatory education funds. States can help schools review their school budgets and allocate school resources to support school improvement goals. California and North Carolina, for example, include review and revision of school budgets as part of their assistance process.
- ❖ **Monitor the quality and assess the impact of the services that schools receive.** High-quality technical assistance is tailored to each school's needs and provides schools with access to the best information about strategies that work. States can develop strategies for monitoring the quality of the assistance schools receive and for evaluating the impact of those services, so ineffective efforts can be discontinued.
- ❖ **Have an exit strategy.** Some states, including Arkansas, California, Nevada, and Vermont, organized their technical assistance in multiple-year cycles, so reforms begun with the state's help could be sustained over time. Very few states, however, had clear guidelines for how or when to end special support. States need to set clear, measurable goals for technical assistance, so they can reallocate limited technical assistance resources when those goals have been accomplished.

Source: Katrina G. Laguarda, Policy Studies Associates.

CONCLUSION

Though NCLB presents states with many challenges—most notably increasing the numbers of schools states will identify as low-performing—the legislation also provides governors with a tremendous opportunity to focus on helping *all* students in their states meet standards. Through the right kinds of actions, reforms, and interventions, states can transform low-performing schools into places where student achievement improves and gaps in performance among racial and income groups disappear. Governors and other state leaders can build successful policies to transform low-performing schools based upon research and experience as crystallized in this *Guide's* five principles.

- ❖ Not all low-performing schools are the same.
- ❖ Capacity-building must be part of the solution.
- ❖ Districts are essential collaborators in efforts to turn around schools.
- ❖ Be prepared for the long haul.
- ❖ Assistance to low-performing schools should be part of a larger strategy of school improvement.

By successfully utilizing these principles, governors can lead their states in reaching new heights and turning around low-performing schools.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON TURNING AROUND LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

National Governors Association Publications

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Margaret Goertz, "Implementing the No Child Left Behind Act: The Potential for a 'Perfect Storm'" (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, Ill., April 22, 2003), 11.
- ² *Education Week*, "State Survey: Standards and Accountability," in *Quality Counts 2003* (Bethesda, Md.: *Education Week*, January 2003), 84–88.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ Lynn Olson, "All States Get Federal Nod on Key Plans," *Education Week*, 18 June 2003.
- ⁵ For more on these different state approaches, see Heinrich Mintrop, *Turning Around Low-Performing Schools: Lessons from First-Generation State Systems* (Washington, D.C.: National Governors Association, Center for Best Practices, forthcoming).
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ *Education Week*, 84–88.
- ⁸ Katrina Laguarda, "State-Sponsored Technical Assistance to Low-Performing Schools: Strategies from Nine States" (Paper prepared for the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, Ill., April 22, 2003), 9.
- ⁹ Charles Abelmann et al., *When Accountability Knocks, Will Anyone Answer?* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 1999).
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³⁶ Elmore, *Knowing the Right Thing to Do*.

³⁷ O'Day; and Westat, *Report on the Final Evaluation of the City-State Partnership* (Rockville, Md.: Westat, 2001); and Catherine Gewertz, "Report Finds Progress in Baltimore-State Partnership," *Education Week*, 21 December 2001.

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³⁹ Kenneth Wong and Francis Shen, "City and State Takeover as a Reform Strategy," in *ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education* (July 2002).

⁴⁰ Erik Robelen, "State of the States," *Education Week*, 9 April 2003; and Mike Wang, education policy advisor, Office of the Governor of Louisiana, telephone conversation, 5 June 2003.

⁴¹ The "Chancellor's District" was created by the New York City Board of Education in 1996 in response to New York State's decision to place nine city schools on a corrective action list. The Board of Education removed these schools from their local community school districts and placed them in a district managed by the chancellor's office that appointed a superintendent and implemented a common curriculum with literacy and math blocks along with extra professional development support for teachers. Schools remained in the district for as long as they needed extra intervention; once they improved they could return back to their local districts. Though measuring success of the Chancellor's District model is difficult (since schools moved in and out of the district), the test score evidence suggests that student performance in these schools improved in both reading and math. For more on the Chancellor's District, see Snipes, Doolittle and Herlihy, 169–176.

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⁴⁶ Fred M. Newmann, BetsAnn Smith, Elaine Allensworth, and Anthony S. Bryk, "Instructional Program Coherence: What it is and Why it Should Guide School Improvement Policy," in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* (winter 2001), 297–321.

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⁵⁰ Laguarda, 16–17.

⁵¹ Ibid, 17–18.

⁵² Performance expectations under NCLB are not entirely linear. States can hold performance standards for schools constant for up to three years as long as state targets rise to 100 percent proficiency by 2013-14.

⁵³ *Mississippi Consolidated State Application Accountability Workbook*, March 19, 2003, 8; and *Indiana Consolidated State Application Accountability Workbook*, January 6, 2003, 23.

⁵⁴ *Georgia Consolidated State Application Accountability Workbook*, May 1, 2003, 22; *Wisconsin Consolidated State Application Accountability Workbook*, May 20, 2003, 16; *Delaware Consolidated State Application Accountability Workbook*, January 31, 2003, 32; *South Carolina Consolidated State Application Accountability Workbook*, January 31, 2003, Attachment D; and *Florida Consolidated State Application Accountability Workbook*, March 26, 2003, 22.

⁵⁵ Kati Haycock, "Good Teaching Matters: How Well-Qualified Teachers Can Close the Gap," in *Thinking K–16* (Washington, D.C.: The Education Trust, Inc., summer 1998), 1-2.

⁵⁶ Cynthia D. Prince, *Higher Pay in Hard-to-Staff Schools: The Case for Financial Incentives* (Arlington, Va.: American Association of School Administrators, June 2002); and Jay Matthews, "Teacher Experience Lags at Poorer Schools," *The Washington Post*, 27 August 2002, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A2000-2002Aug27.html>.

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⁵⁸ Andrew J. Rotherham, "Hopes and Hazards: No Child Left Behind and Low-Performing Public Schools," *The State Education Standard* (Alexandria, Va.: National Association of State Boards of Education, summer 2003), 30-35.

⁵⁹ Richard Kazis and Hilary Pennington, *Toward Postsecondary Success for All: Remaking Secondary Education for the Knowledge Age* (Washington, D.C.: National Governors Association, Center for Best Practices, forthcoming); and WestEd, *Creating Excellence for All Students: Transforming Education in Los Angeles* (San Francisco, Calif.: WestEd, 2003).

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