



Turning Around the Lowest-Performing Schools

BACKGROUND:

The *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* (ESEA) has directed federal resources to schools for more than four decades to help ensure all children have equal access to a quality education. The most recent reauthorization—or congressional update to the law—occurred with the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB). Although ESEA was due for reauthorization in 2007, NCLB has governed education policy in states and school districts for more than a decade. While waiting for Congress to complete its next reauthorization, the U.S. Department of Education has offered states flexibility from prescriptive provisions of the law that have become barriers to state and local implementation of innovative education reforms. ESEA flexibility moves away from top-down policies, instead supporting decisions informed by data and expertise at the state and local levels. All participating states must show how their reform plans advance all students' achievement by maintaining a high bar for student success, closing achievement gaps, improving the quality of instruction, and increasing equity by better targeting support and resources to schools based on need.

DISCUSSION:

Under NCLB, schools that had perpetuated cycles of underachievement for years were labeled as “failing” and were required to implement the same one-size-fits-all interventions that did not result in significant improvement. ESEA flexibility provides states with additional options to dramatically turn around the performance of their lowest-achieving schools. Recognizing that schools are at different points in their improvement processes and have different needs, states are creating tiered systems that target the most intensive support to the lowest-performing schools. All participating states must implement rigorous interventions in the lowest-achieving five percent of Title I schools—those that receive federal funds based on their population of low-income students.

Through ESEA flexibility, the Department will both recognize states for demonstrating success—such as providing additional resources and support to schools that are most in need of assistance—and challenge states that fall short of their goals to pursue rigorous reform efforts that focus on what is best for students.

History in Review:

ESEA's most recent reauthorizations—1994's *Improving America's Schools Act* and 2001's NCLB—required that states make an effort to turn around their lowest-performing schools. Historically, these schools have very few students meeting state standards, including high schools that fail to graduate more than half of their students. Overwhelmingly, these schools are located in our nation's most impoverished areas. Since 2009, federal investments have directed billions of dollars to states for turnaround efforts that focus on the bottom five percent of the nation's lowest-performing schools, requiring:

- School closure;
- Closure or conversion with restart using an independent operator or a charter school;
- Replacement of the principal and 50 percent of school staff; or
- Transformation with several reforms, including replacing the principal.

ESEA flexibility provides states with additional options to dramatically turn around their lowest-achieving schools. Education experts and reformers differ on the best strategies for these schools to undertake, but most agree that key factors for success include a dynamic principal with a clear vision for establishing a culture of high expectations and talented teachers who share that vision, with a relentless commitment to improving instruction through more collaboration and better use of data.

STATES IN ACTION:

Examples of strong plans that states have proposed to turn around the lowest-performing schools follow.



Massachusetts will:

- Classify schools in five levels, and classify districts based on the level of their lowest-performing schools, requiring each district to be responsible for every school within its jurisdiction;
- Require the lowest-performing schools to immediately develop and implement plans that will use comprehensive interventions to drive rapid, systemic change within three years; and
- Take over schools that are chronically underperforming as its highest level of intervention.



Through Tennessee's flexibility plan, the state will:

- Group its lowest-performing schools into an entirely new district that will be run by the state, in order to ensure dramatic change in these schools;
- Pair high- and low-performing schools together to share best practices; and
- Direct any district in which subgroups do not make progress to implement corrective action plans in collaboration with the state.



In implementing flexibility, Virginia:

- Requires its low-performing schools to involve an *external* lead turnaround partner as they craft their school turnaround plans; and
- Includes a state monitoring system with built-in data prompts to ensure that a district's chosen interventions are genuinely rigorous and based on student needs.

Fast Facts:

- Nearly 50 million students are attending 99,000 public elementary and secondary schools.
- There are approximately 5,000 chronically underperforming schools; half are in big cities, a third are in rural areas, and the rest are in suburbs and medium-sized towns.

“[Flexibility] is a game changer. ... We now have added urgency to press ahead with the implementation of reforms and a chance to help schools in our state improve. Having this flexibility will empower Oklahoma teachers to focus on each individual student and his or her growth.”

- Oklahoma Superintendent Janet Barresi
ESEA flexibility granted February 9, 2012

