



## State Approaches to Turnaround in ESEA Flexibility Plans from **The State Role in School Turnaround: Emerging Best Practices**

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## About the Center on School Turnaround

The national Center on School Turnaround focuses on providing technical assistance to, as well as building the capacity of, states to support districts and schools in turning around their lowest-performing schools. The Center is led by WestEd in partnership with the Academic Development Institute, the National Implementation Research Network, and the Darden/Curry Partnership for Leaders in Education at the University of Virginia.

## Focus Areas

- Developing SEA Staff Capacity and SEA Organizational Structures
- Building District Capacity
- Creating Policies, Incentives, and Partnerships to Ensure a Pipeline of Turnaround Leaders
- Promoting Cooperative Labor-Management Relations
- Promoting the Use of Expanded Learning Time
- Creating Systems and Processes to Ensure a Pool of High-Quality Turnaround Partners
- Ensuring the Availability and Use of Data Systems at the SEA Level
- Supporting Schools and Districts in Establishing a Positive School Climate
- Monitoring and Evaluating School Turnaround Efforts
- Improving Capacity of School Boards to Support Turnarounds
- Engaging Families and Communities
- Building Political Will for Dramatic Change

## State Approaches to Turnaround in ESEA Flexibility Plans

*Carole Perlman and Susan Hanes*

### Background

When the U.S. Congress reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2001, state education agencies (SEAs) found themselves in a new and more complex regulatory environment. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) required states to put in place an accountability regimen with sanctions for districts and schools that failed to show adequate yearly progress (AYP) in a march toward all students meeting standards by 2014. The progressively more severe sanctions for each successive year that a school failed to make AYP included restructuring for schools falling short for five consecutive years. Restructuring options were:

- Turning the school over to the state;
- Reopening the school as a charter school;
- Entering into a contract to have an outside organization with a record of effectiveness operate the school;
- Replacing all or most of the staff who are relevant to the failure to make AYP; or
- Undertaking any other major restructuring of the school's governance that produces fundamental reform.

Within a few years, two problems became obvious: (1) the "all students" target for meeting state standards on annual assessments by 2014 was not going to be achieved; (2) districts faced with restructuring schools predominately chose the mildest available option, and the schools remained in a low-achieving rut.

A study of five states by the Center on Education Policy (2008) found that during the 2006–2007 school year, districts and states overwhelmingly avoided

the most drastic restructuring options, instead selecting the “any other” option for between 86%–96% of their schools in restructuring. Nationally, few schools in restructuring were implementing significant changes to school governance and staffing (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Brinson and Rhim (2009) observed that LEAs often chose the least prescriptive restructuring option, in part because other, more significant options were not appealing or possibly because of state law (e.g., prohibitions against state takeovers [Steiner, 2006], lack of laws authorizing charter schools or caps on the number of charter schools [Hassel, Hassel, Arkin, Kowal, & Steiner, 2006]). In other cases, outside contractors were unavailable or unaffordable, and replacing some or all teachers and administrators was impractical because it was not possible to recruit staff likely to get better results (Kowal, 2009). In addition to these possible barriers as reasons for not choosing a more dramatic option for restructuring, LEAs often simply lacked the political will to execute significant change.

NCLB enabled the U.S. Department of Education, through Section 1003(g) of ESEA Title I, to administer a School Improvement Grant (SIG) program that awarded funds to states for the purpose of school improvement with guidelines and regulations for the allocation of the major portion of the funds to districts with schools not keeping pace with NCLB timelines. Congress approved steady increases in SIG funding in an attempt to resuscitate NCLB with an infusion of resources. But even as the SIG funding increased, so did the number of schools failing to make AYP. By the 2010–2011 school year, 48% of the nation’s schools were not making AYP, according to a study by the Center on Education Policy (2012). The U.S. Department of Education (2013) reported that in the 2011–2012 school year, 7,643 schools were in restructuring status.

When Arne Duncan assumed the role of Secretary of Education in 2009, the trends from NCLB data were clear. The number of schools failing to meet NCLB trajectories was staggering and growing each year. The number of persistently low-achieving schools was likewise rising and revealing a segment of significant dysfunction within the public education system. The new administration attacked the problems through three competitive grants: (1) Race to the Top would attempt overhaul of whole state systems; (2) Investing in Innovation (i.e., I3) grants would infuse innovation into the system; and (3) SIG would target the lowest achieving schools and provide unprecedented resources.

### **School Improvement Grants 2.0: 2010–2013**

The 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) pumped large sums of money into education as part of an overall strategy to stimulate the economy. The SIG program had a substantially increase in funding, with awards to states for competitive subgrants to LEAs that demonstrated the greatest need for the funds and the strongest commitment to use the funds to substantially

raise student achievement in their lowest performing schools. The 2010 SIG program required more rapid, dramatic, and prescriptive interventions than ever before and provided a massive infusion of money to fund these interventions (Perlman & Redding, 2011).

Beginning in 2010, states could apply for funding that would enable the persistently lowest achieving 5% of schools in the state to apply one of four prescribed rapid improvement models (Perlman & Redding, 2011):

- **Turnaround model:** The LEA replaces the principal and rehires no more than 50% of the staff; gives greater principal autonomy; implements other prescribed and recommended strategies.
- **Restart model:** The LEA converts or closes and reopens the school under a charter school operator, charter management organization, or education management organization.
- **School closure:** The LEA closes the school and enrolls the students in other schools in the LEA that are higher achieving.
- **Transformation model:** The LEA replaces the principal (except in specified situations); implements a rigorous staff evaluation and development system; institutes comprehensive instructional reform; increases learning time and applies community-oriented school strategies; and provides greater operational flexibility and support for the school.

Once again, the least dramatic model (transformation) was by far the most widely chosen (Hurlburt, Therriault, & Le Floch, 2012), accounting for 75% of awards; turnaround accounted for an additional 19%.

### ESEA Flexibility Waivers

In 2011, the U.S. Department of Education allowed each SEA the option to request flexibility on behalf of itself, its LEAs, and its schools from certain requirements of NCLB in exchange for rigorous and comprehensive state-developed plans designed to improve educational outcomes for all students, close achievement gaps, increase equity, and improve the quality of instruction.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Department of Education chose the flexibility process to address problems with NCLB because the expected reauthorization of ESEA was stalled in Congress, the number of schools not meeting AYP was growing astronomically, and NCLB's requirements, such as the provision of supplemental educational services, was viewed by many states as an unproductive use of funds.

One of the requirements of flexibility is that the state must effect dramatic, systemic change in the lowest-performing schools by publicly identifying "Priority schools" and ensuring that each LEA with one or more of these schools implements, for three years, meaningful interventions aligned with the

<sup>1</sup>For a more detailed explanation regarding the ESEA flexibility waiver, see <http://www.ed.gov/esea/flexibility>

turnaround principles in each of these schools. The SEA must also develop criteria to determine when a school may exit priority status.<sup>2</sup> Priority schools include:

- the lowest 5% of Title I schools based on achievement and progress on statewide assessments;
- Title I-participating or Title I-eligible high schools with graduation rates less than 60%; or
- SIG schools.

As noted by the U.S. Department of Education, education experts and reformers differ on the best strategies for the lowest performing schools to undertake, but most agree that the 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 commitment to improving instruction through more collaboration and better use of data.<sup>3</sup> Flexibility requirements stipulated that states' interventions in Priority schools must assist schools in accordance with the following turnaround principles (U.S. Department of Education, 2012):

- Providing strong leadership;
- Ensuring that teachers are effective and able to improve instruction;
- Redesigning the school day, week, or year to include additional time for student learning and teacher collaboration;
- Strengthening the school's instructional program based on student needs and ensuring that the instructional program is research-based, rigorous, and aligned with state academic content standards;
- Using data to inform instruction and for continuous improvement;
- Establishing a school environment that improves school safety and discipline and addressing other nonacademic factors that impact student achievement, such as students' social, emotional, and health needs; and
- Providing ongoing mechanisms for family and community engagement.

### **State Flexibility Plans**

States have designed their accountability and support systems in a variety of ways that reflect their diverse circumstances. The remainder of this chapter describes how several states addressed the turnaround process in their ESEA Flexibility Requests. For readers seeking additional information, a link to each state's approved flexibility request is given.

#### **Idaho**

Idaho provides an illustration of how a large, sparsely populated, rural state has leveraged its resources and used online tools to support school and district improvement.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>For a more detailed explanation regarding the definition of Priority schools, see <http://www.ed.gov/sites/default/files/supporting-state-local-progress.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>For a more detailed explanation regarding the principles underlying ESEA flexibility waivers, see <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/esea-flexibility/resources/turn-around.pdf>

<sup>4</sup>See <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/eseaflex/approved-requests/id.pdf>

Idaho employs a five-star rating system for schools based on the following measures:

- Reading, mathematics, and language achievement for all students;
- Achievement growth for all students;
- Subgroup achievement growth, using a combined subgroup composed of economically disadvantaged students, minorities, students with disabilities, and English learners;
- Graduation rate (for schools with grade 12);
- Percentage of students reaching college readiness on college entrance/ placement exams (for schools with grade 12); and
- Percentage of juniors and seniors completing at least one AP, IB, dual credit, or Tech Prep course and the percentage receiving a grade of C or better in advanced courses (for schools with grade 12).

Idaho uses the WISE (Ways to Improve School Effectiveness) tool, a version of the Academic Development Institutes's Indistar<sup>®5</sup> online tool, to create and monitor implementation of rapid improvement plans for Priority schools. WISE includes a set of over 80 research-based practices that are associated with school improvement. In addition, the WISE tool contains links to research summaries and videos of educators demonstrating improvement strategies.

The turnaround planning process for each Priority school is preceded by a site visit to determine the school's existing capacity and collect evidence of practices associated with substantial school improvement (Center on Innovation & Improvement, 2009). Data are collected by an external team of reviewers who observe all teachers, including teachers of special populations. The site visit protocol is linked to the WISE Tool, so recommendations directly tie back to school and district improvement plans and processes. Recommendations also include connections to programs, technical assistance, and training opportunities that match the needs of the district or school.

In creating plans, Priority schools must use rapid improvement strategies and address feedback provided to the school and district through the site visit. As the school and district plans are implemented, notes of steps taken are entered into the online WISE system. The district may use the tool to monitor the progress of schools, and the state may use the tool to monitor implementation and progress of school and district plans. All school improvement plans, including turnaround plans, are developed jointly by schools and districts, approved by the state, and monitored by both the state and district. Idaho holds districts responsible for the quality and the fidelity of implementation of those plans and monitors the districts' support and technical assistance efforts through its statewide system of support.

Before the school creates its turnaround plan, the district must choose one of five permissible SIG turnaround models: transformation, turnaround, restart,

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<sup>5</sup>For more information on Indistar, see [www.indistar.org](http://www.indistar.org)

closure, or a governance partnership model, in which the district partners with an external entity to implement the turnaround principles and transform the governance of the school. In the case of district charter schools, the district must renegotiate and significantly restructure the school's charter.

The interventions Idaho uses are aligned to the Turnaround Principles defined in ESEA flexibility. Idaho provides on-site technical assistance to districts with Priority schools and recommendations to districts regarding school and district leadership capacity, instructional practice, and governance structure. In addition to the site visit, the statewide system of support team<sup>6</sup> oversees the implementation of the following services directly:

- **Idaho Building Capacity Project:** Cultivation of leadership in rural and remote areas within the state is a key focus of this collaboration among the state and three universities. Distinguished educators trained by the state are assigned to all participating schools and districts within the network. They provide monthly training to leadership teams and assist in planning.
- **Principals Academy of Leadership:** Principals participate in a balance of content instruction, professional conversation, and collegial instructional rounds related directly to instructional leadership, managing change, and improving the overall effectiveness of instruction.
- **Superintendents Network of Support:** The purpose of this collaboration between an SEA and a university is to support the work of district leaders in improving outcomes for all students. Superintendents identify the issues to be addressed, and the network serves as a resource for superintendents with districts with Priority and Focus schools.

The state expects districts to be the first line of support for the lowest performing schools and provides training to district leadership teams to fulfill this role. Districts provide technical assistance at every point prior to submission of school improvement plans to the state. The state provides a rubric for districts to use as they review school plans and requires districts to submit copies of their completed rubric to demonstrate that assistance has been provided. The state then conducts an independent review and returns feedback to the district and school. Where there are differences in state and local scoring of the rubric, the state returns the plan for further discussion and revisions. This design encourages a capacity-building relationship between the state and district and between the district and school.

ISDE will only approve district and school plans that ensure alignment of funds with school improvement plan priorities. Plans deemed to be lacking alignment will not be approved, and districts will be expected to revise them at the district and/or school level as necessary.

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<sup>6</sup>ESEA requires states to establish statewide systems of support to assist LEAs and schools not making adequate progress.

The state brokers resources to ensure that schools and districts are matched with the supports they need, such as external expertise or training opportunities available from ISDE or institutions of higher education. If a school is struggling with meeting the needs of ELLs, the state's Title III coordinator reviews the school improvement plan and provides feedback. If the state has provided all of the technical assistance and support described in the ESEA Flexibility Plan and a school has not met the exit criteria by the end of the third year in priority status, the district is considered to be responsible.

At times, districts are in need of improvement due to governance issues that can be changed by coaching of the superintendent and cabinet level staff. For this, the state will utilize support mechanisms to provide coaching. However, district leaders may not have the capacity or may be unresponsive to external support. In this situation, the state will work directly with the local school board to make recommendations regarding staffing. Recommendations may be paired with positive or negative incentives for change, such as providing extra grant funding to solve specific concerns or withholding funding until conditions are met. In rare cases, district leaders have sufficient capacity and are responsive to support, but they are constrained by decision making and policies of the local school board.

In severe circumstances, the state will work directly with the community to inform stakeholders about the needs of their district, since only the local community can facilitate a change in trustee membership. Under these conditions, the state reserves the right to withhold any or all federal funding for use in providing services directly to the students, families, and community of that school district in a manner that will ultimately result in turning around the performance of the district. Such services may include, but are not limited to:

- Contracting services, such as before and after school tutoring for students;
- Providing transportation for students to other school districts;
- Enrolling students in a virtual charter school and redirecting funds to that school; or
- Reserving a percentage of funds for the state to conduct public meetings, provide public notices, and work with the public to make necessary decisions about yearly school board elections.

## **Massachusetts**

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) uses a Progress and Performance Index (PPI) to classify schools and districts under their accountability and assistance framework.<sup>7</sup> The cumulative PPI is a four-year, comprehensive indicator of district and school progress towards college and career readiness, with the most recent years weighted most heavily. It is based on testing participation, student achievement, student growth/

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<sup>7</sup>See <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/eseaflex/approved-requests/ma.pdf>

improvement, and high school graduation and dropout rates. The most recent year receives a weight of four, the previous year a weight of three, the year before that a weight of two, and the year before that a weight of one. Annual PPIs are also calculated.

ESE uses three measures to assess student achievement for districts, schools, and subgroups with three indicators:

- Closing proficiency gaps in English language arts (ELA), mathematics, and science;
- Reducing the percentage of students scoring in the warning/failing category in ELA and mathematics; and
- Increasing the percentage of students scoring in the advanced category in ELA and mathematics.

Massachusetts assigns growth and improvement credit for:

- Exceeding the median student growth percentile (SGP) for the state;
- Increasing the group's median SGP over the previous school year; and
- Reducing the percentage of nonproficient students by at least 10% (assuming at least 30 students in the group are tested).

Massachusetts includes both graduation rates and dropout rates in the Progress and Performance Index as indicators of success in preparing students to be ready for college and careers.

The superintendent of a Priority school's district must submit a redesign plan to the local stakeholder group, local school committee, and, lastly, to the state commissioner for approval. The SEA assigns assistance liaisons and accountability monitors; defines exit criteria, including measurable annual goals tailored to each school and based on empirical data; assesses fidelity to the federal turnaround principles as well as district capacity to implement one of four federally required implementation models; and provides targeted assistance via partner providers, tools, templates, and other resources.

Massachusetts requires districts with Priority schools to develop a redesign plan to rapidly implement interventions aligned to each of the Conditions for School Effectiveness,<sup>8</sup> which are research-based interventions that all schools, especially those that are struggling most, need to implement to effectively meet the learning needs of every student. The District Standards and Indicators<sup>9</sup> identify the characteristics of effective districts in supporting and sustaining these conditions in their schools. The redesign plan takes the place of any other school improvement plan and is a multipart instrument that, for a three-year period:

- Addresses district-level capacity to support its Priority schools;
- Provides a blueprint for intervention at each identified school; and
- Sets measurable annual goals which serve as the standard for exiting priority status.

<sup>8</sup><http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/ucd/CSE.pdf>

<sup>9</sup>[www.doe.mass.edu/apa/review/district/StandardsIndicators.doc](http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/review/district/StandardsIndicators.doc)

Prior to identifying interventions in Priority schools, districts must demonstrate that they have the capacity to plan for, implement, and monitor school-level redesign efforts, including the effective allocation of resources (people, time, materials, and fiscal, including all ESEA funds). In addition, the district must clearly describe:

- Their theory of action and approach to effect rapid, systemic change in its Priority schools within three years;
- The district's redesign and planning process, including descriptions of teams, working groups, and stakeholder groups involved in the planning process, especially how interventions are selected for each Priority school;
- How the district will recruit, screen, and select any external providers who provide expertise, support, and assistance to the district or to schools;
- The district's systems and processes for ongoing planning, supporting, and monitoring the implementation of planned redesign efforts;
- Their policies and practices that may serve as barriers to the implementation of the proposed plans and how those will be modified;
- How the district will ensure that the identified schools receive ongoing, intensive technical assistance and related support from the state, district, or designated external partner organizations; and
- How the district will monitor the implementation of the selected intervention at each identified school, and how the district will know that planned interventions and strategies are working.

In addition to identifying systems, processes, and issues at the district level, the plans must also describe how the school will implement interventions aligned to the Conditions for School Effectiveness as a blueprint for school-level redesign efforts. A description of each condition and examples of meaningful interventions aligned with the turnaround principles that districts with Priority schools could implement is provided to the districts.

Because Priority schools are required to address all of these conditions at once in their redesign plans, Massachusetts has seen many of these schools rapidly transform into high functioning learning environments for students. This occurs through the redesign of school and district systems and supports, including school leadership, instruction, and family/community partnerships. It also involves a rapid diagnosis of student needs, instruction tailored to the needs of each student, and a culture of high expectations for all students, parents, and families. Prior to removing a school from Priority status, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education will ensure that the capacity and conditions are in place at both the district and school levels to sustain improvement.

## **Tennessee**

Tennessee is notable for the variety of options it offers for managing the turnaround process in Priority schools.<sup>10</sup> These options are intended to effectively serve students in its two large urban centers, as well as the other parts of the state.

Tennessee's Priority schools are identified every three years based on all (not just Title I) schools' three-year achievement data. Elementary and middle schools are assessed on an aggregate index of state assessment results, which equally weights the percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced in math, reading/language arts, and science. High schools are assessed using a weighted composite of graduation rate and percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced on end-of-course exams in Algebra I, English I, English II, and Biology I.

In the short-term, identified Priority schools face one of four types of interventions:

1. Enter the state-run Achievement School District (ASD);
2. Enter an LEA-run "innovation zone" (affords schools flexibilities similar to those provided by the ASD) that an LEA has applied to create and that the state has approved;
3. Apply and be approved by TDOE to adopt one of four SIG turnaround models; or
4. Undergo LEA-led school improvement planning processes, subject to direct ASD intervention in the absence of improved results.

By 2014–15, all Priority schools will be served through one of the first three options.

### ***The Achievement School District***

The Achievement School District (ASD) was created as a division of the state's department of education. It is modeled after Louisiana's Recovery School District and has the ability to take over and operate persistently poor-performing schools or to authorize charter schools.

The primary functions of the ASD fall into five categories; the first two involve state-level work and the last three, school-level work. The categories and some kinds of activities that fall under each include:

- Oversight, when necessary, for compliance (identifying schools to enter the ASD, selecting intervention strategies, holding schools accountable for results and compliance);
- Facilitation (developing policy, overseeing public affairs);
- Human Capital (hiring and evaluating teachers and leaders);

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<sup>10</sup>For Tennessee's Flexibility Request, see <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/eseaflex/approved-requests/tn.pdf>

- Operations (transportation, food service, technology, maintenance); and
- Support (instructional services, professional development, grants administration).

The ASD employs two primary intervention strategies to dramatically increase student achievement: convert the school into a charter school or replace the LEA and directly manage daily operations of the school. In the case of direct-run conversions, the ASD's role is to:

- Invest heavily in recruiting and in human capital management in order to secure a highly effective school staff;
- Hire the turnaround team (principal and lead teachers) at least six months in advance to allow for a robust induction program;
- Employ charter-like flexibility and autonomy over personnel, budget, schedule, and program; and
- Maintain tight control over scope and sequence, assessments, professional development, and performance management.

Among the identified Priority schools, the ASD determines which schools to absorb based on (1) student achievement growth and (2) feeder pattern analysis. Priority schools that are geographically clustered with the worst growth are the first candidates for an ASD conversion.

Consistent with state law, the use of the full per-pupil funding, facilities, and transportation services for all students within the school are accessible to the ASD. The ASD controls local, state, and federal funding attributable to each school placed in its jurisdiction and has the same authority to seek, expend, manage, and retain funding as that of an LEA. In addition, the ASD has the right to use any school building and all facilities and property otherwise part of the school and recognized as part of the facilities or assets of the school prior to its placement in the ASD.

In ASD direct-run schools, the ASD has the authority to select, hire, and assign staff to positions in the school as needed to support the highest possible quality faculty in the school. All existing staff within an ASD school must reapply for a position with the ASD. The ASD has the same salary autonomy and flexibility afforded any LEA. Schools enter the ASD for a period of at least five years, with return of the management of the school subject to both the school and the home LEA meeting performance goals.

### ***LEA Innovation Zones***

Reflecting their belief that whenever possible, LEAs should be the point of intervention with failing schools, the state may permit LEAs to establish innovation zones that have similar flexibilities to the state-run ASD. These allow for greater local innovation in turning around the worst schools.

Creating an LEA innovation zone creates capacity within the LEA to successfully build upon the turnaround strategies implemented by the ASD and ensure

the long-term sustainability of student achievement gains at the campus level once the school is returned to the LEA.

The Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) may approve and support the creation of LEA-directed innovation zones. TDOE may flow federal and state funding ear-marked for Priority schools to the LEA if the LEA has: (1) developed a clear, realistic plan for developing an innovation zone and (2) demonstrated evidence that the LEA will be able to afford the innovation zone the necessary flexibility to be effective (e.g., new policies adopted by school boards).

The responsibilities of the LEA are to establish an innovation zone office and hire a leader with the authority to hire staff (at minimum, one full-time employee per Priority school and one full-time data analyst for the office). The LEA must allow innovation zone schools autonomy over financial, programmatic, staffing, and time allocation decisions.

Among other tasks, the innovation zone office:

- Establishes and monitors progress toward goals and timelines (the state also monitors progress annually through annual measurable objectives [AMOs] and on-site visits by state officials);
- Administers SIG and other grants;
- Pursues outside funding opportunities; and
- Provides technical assistance directly or through external partners.

If a school's student achievement does not improve within two years, the school will be absorbed into the ASD. LEA innovation zones that have slower rates of improvement across schools than the ASD will lose the right to expand into new schools until achievement growth in the rest of their schools improves to ASD levels.

## **Washington State**

Washington identifies Required Action Districts (RAD) that have persistently low-achieving schools if those districts/schools did not apply for SIG funding. Washington established stringent criteria and monitoring to address the needs of these districts and schools.<sup>11</sup>

Washington's accountability system incorporates the use of an index to identify chronically low-performing schools for turnaround. The index incorporates the following measures over a period of years: (a) performance on state assessments in reading, mathematics, science, and writing; (b) graduation rates; and (c) student growth in reading and mathematics. Results for (a) and (b) are disaggregated by subgroup.

Washington State's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) identifies two sets of Priority Schools: those that have received federal School Improvement Grants, and those that have not. SIG Priority schools undergo an academic performance audit and develop an action plan that addresses the audit

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<sup>11</sup> For more information, see <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/eseaflex/approved-requests/wa.pdf>

findings and employs one of the four SIG improvement models, which must be approved by the state.

Washington requires low-performing schools that do not receive SIG funds to develop and implement action plans that include rigorous interventions and are monitored by an external liaison. A district with at least one persistently lowest achieving school is designated as a RAD. A series of required steps then follows:

1. The district notifies parents that the school has been identified for required action.
2. OSPI contracts with an external review team to conduct an academic performance audit of the district and each persistently lowest achieving school within the district.
3. RADs must then collaborate with administrators, teachers, other staff, parents, students, and unions to write a required action plan. The plan must include:
  - a. An application for a SIG that includes a plan to implement one of the four federal intervention models;
  - b. A budget that provides adequate resources to implement the plan;
  - c. A description of the changes in the district's and school's policies, structures, agreements, processes, and practices that are necessary to attain significant achievement gains for all students;
  - d. A plan to adequately remedy all the findings in the academic performance audit; and
  - e. Identification of the measures the district will use to assess student achievement in at least reading and mathematics.
4. RADs must reopen collective bargaining agreements to make changes to the terms and conditions of employment necessary to implement the plan.

If a district does not receive state approval for a required action plan, that district's Title I funds may be redirected based on the academic performance audit findings. The SEA provides RADs with technical assistance and federal SIGs or other federal funds for school improvement, if available, to implement an approved plan. The RAD is required to report progress to the SEA.

A district may be released from RAD status after it (a) has implemented the required action plan for three years, (b) has made progress in reading and mathematics over the past three years, and (c) no longer has a school identified as persistently lowest achieving. If the RAD has not met the requirements for release, the district remains in RAD status and must submit a new or revised required action plan.

Schools identified for SIG or Priority school status based on their mathematics and reading (combined) performance must: (1) increase performance in

reading and mathematics in the all students group and for all subgroups for three consecutive years and (2) decrease the percentage of students (for the all students group and subgroups) scoring at the lowest levels of performance on reading and mathematics over a three-year period.

Secondary schools that graduate students and are identified for SIG or Priority school status based on their graduation rates must (1) increase graduation rates in the all students group and for all subgroups and (2) decrease the percentage of students who drop out over a three-year period (for all students and subgroups).

Prior to removing any school from priority status, OSPI will review evidence submitted by the district around the goals on its redesign plan to ensure the district has the capacity and that conditions are in place at both the district and school levels to sustain that improvement.

### **Conclusions**

The ESEA Flexibility process is an attempt to patch up deficiencies in NCLB while the nation awaits reauthorization of ESEA by Congress. The U.S. Department of Education's guidance and regulations assert administration priorities to maintain or elevate accountability while allowing greater state discretion in designing accountability regimes, to focus on the lowest achieving schools, and to implement turnaround principles. As with the SIG program, the state flexibility plans open a wide vista of alternative approaches that will yield valuable evaluative data to determine what, in this great laboratory, proves to work.

### **Action Principles**

States have responded to the ESEA Flexibility requirements in a variety of ways suited to their unique contexts. Although it is too soon to know the results of their interventions, the following practices seem promising:

- Take advantage of the state-designed flexibility plan to make significant changes in the education system, and pay close attention to high-quality implementation.
- Aggressively build school and district capacity simultaneously. Providing training and technical assistance to districts as well as schools can help states maximize “bang for the buck,” increase local buy-in to improvement efforts, sustain positive changes, and increase the ability of the district to work with other schools that need to improve.
- Assign districts responsibility for the improvement process in their Priority schools with consequences for failure to improve.
- Conduct comprehensive school site visits to help identify instructional, personnel, and professional development needs that must be addressed in the school's rapid improvement plan.

- Create and, with the help of the district, closely monitor implementation of a single, realistic school improvement plan in which resources are tightly aligned with identified needs.
- Convey a sense of urgency to school staff, parents, the school board, and the community. Effectively communicate to each constituency the reasons why drastic change is necessary, what the changes will be, and the consequences for continued low performance.
- Use technology to leverage sparse state resources and increase the effectiveness of the statewide system of support by making it easier to monitor improvement plan implementation, providing training and technical assistance, and making data and other resources readily available to schools.

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