

## Action Required: Addressing the Nation's Lowest-Performing High Schools

By Lyndsay M. Pinkus

Over the last few years, a handful of startling statistics have grasped the education headlines: *Every school day, seven thousand students leave high school without a regular diploma. The graduation rate for poor and minority students hovers around 50 percent. In two thousand of the nation's high schools—known as “dropout factories”—dropping out is more common than graduating.* In an age in which a postsecondary education, let alone a high school diploma, is increasingly necessary to succeed in the global economy, the growing recognition of a graduation crisis that disproportionately affects poor and minority students has helped galvanize the demand to improve the lowest-performing high schools.

As the national education policy community prepares for the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), revamping the school improvement approach leveraged by accountability systems has risen to the top of the agenda. There is an emerging consensus that the school improvement process should be systemic, led by states and districts, based on detailed information about student and school performance, and tailored to meet the individual needs of students and schools. There is also recognition that success is dependent on increased capacity—including skill, knowledge, people, and resources—at the state and district levels to support, manage, and, where necessary, direct these efforts. ***In this context, the goal of federal policy should be to leverage and support a systemic approach for addressing the problems in the nation's lowest-performing high schools—at scale.***

This brief examines the current federal approach to addressing the lowest-performing high schools, explores lessons learned from emerging strategies at the state and local levels, and provides related recommendations for federal policy.<sup>1</sup>

### The Nation's Lowest-Performing High Schools Must Be Addressed

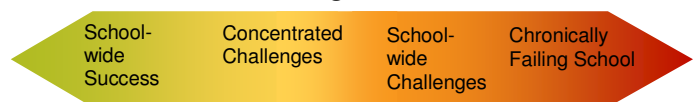
#### The Spectrum of High School Performance

As noted in a recent paper by the National Governors Association's Center for Best Practices, “not all low-performing schools are the same.”<sup>2</sup> It is critical that policies and practices to address low performance recognize this seemingly obvious point.

There are a variety of ways for policymakers to think about diversity in school performance. For example, schools can be considered along a continuum of performance (depicted in the graphic to the right) that considers the depth and breadth of their challenges.

There are some high schools that are generally doing their job of educating and graduating their students. There are some high schools that have overall acceptable performance, but face concentrated challenges or are struggling with a particular subgroup of students. Then there are those high schools that face school-wide challenges: they are generally not succeeding across subgroups of students, across academic areas,

#### The Continuum of High School Performance



or across performance outcomes. A subset of these schools is chronically low performing: student performance remains extremely low, and failure penetrates every aspect of the school, perhaps even despite previous reform efforts. Many of the nation’s two thousand dropout factories fall into this category.

Another way to think about the range in schools’ success is in terms of *performance* and *progress*. A low-performing school may be demonstrating progress, but has much more progress to make before it is considered high performing. Or a relatively high-performing school may be stuck at a certain level of performance, or be failing to make progress in certain areas. These dynamics are depicted in the graphic below.



Across the country, education leaders are using such performance frameworks to differentiate among high schools and guide reform strategies. Federal policymakers are beginning to embrace policies that support differentiated school improvement efforts at the state and district levels—as evidence through the introduction of the Graduation Promise Act (see box on page 3) and the U.S. Department of Education’s (ED) pilot program to allow some states to use differentiated accountability models (see box on page 5). For many education leaders, policymakers, and advocates, the shift to a differentiated accountability and high school improvement system is a priority for NCLB reauthorization.

**A National Imperative to Address the Lowest-Performing High Schools**

In any framework used to differentiate among school performance, there is some subset of schools with the least satisfactory results and the most significant chal-

lenges. In these lowest-performing high schools, progress is stagnant and multiple, significant problems with student achievement have been impervious to past reform efforts.

Fundamental challenges undermine the ability of less severe improvement strategies to be implemented, take hold, and succeed. They disproportionately serve communities where there is a stubborn cycle of poor education and entrenched poverty.<sup>3</sup> They are often staffed with the least-experienced, least-qualified, and least-effective educators and lack adequate resources. In addition, the existing systems of which they are a part—the school district and the state—are not responding with the necessary support to improve teaching, learning, and student outcomes.

These schools are deeply dysfunctional organizations. Sam Redding, director of the Center on Innovation and Improvement, a federally funded national center that provides technical assistance for regional comprehensive centers, state departments of education, and related agencies, notes that often in these schools, “expert guidance and professional development have already been applied; incremental change has been attempted ... something more dramatic is needed in order to achieve significant and sustained growth in student learning.”<sup>4</sup>

Education leaders have a responsibility to provide better options to the students served by such high schools. Ignoring the status quo in these schools—and essentially abandoning the students they serve—is no longer an option. There is growing recognition of the economic, civic, and civil rights imperatives to ensure that every student graduates from high school ready for college or work. Also, increased transparency about school performance, in part driven by NCLB, continues to shine a light on the lowest-performing high schools’ indefensible performance. These factors have led to a heightened commitment by policymakers and the public for effective action.

Addressing the nation’s lowest-performing high schools with effective options for all students—either through transforming them, closing them, or replacing them with multiple other schools—will require a systemic strategy that involves stakeholders and policymakers at all levels, establishes the necessary conditions for success, and promotes organizational practices and instructional strategies within a school



that lead to improved teaching, learning, and outcomes.

To support and scale up successful efforts to address the lowest-performing high schools, federal policy-makers should

1. Improve national indicators for measuring high school performance.
2. Replace the existing federal accountability and school improvement system with requirements and support for the implementation of coherent and comprehensive state and district systems of high school accountability and improvement.
3. Ensure that these state and district systems of ac-

countability and improvement are designed to prioritize and respond to the lowest-performing high schools.

4. Invest in the nation's capacity to address the lowest-performing high schools.
5. Increase research activities related to addressing the lowest-performing high schools with effective school options for students.

The following pages will describe flaws in the current federal approach to addressing the lowest-performing high schools, examine lessons learned from state and local efforts to date, and describe these federal recommendations in more detail.

### **One Approach to High School Differentiation: The Graduation Promise Act**

A bipartisan group of education leaders in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate have introduced legislation, titled the Graduation Promise Act (GPA), that supports a data-driven, differentiated approach to high school improvement. The GPA posits that when local education leaders examine their schools' performance, high schools would generally fall into one of three broad categories of need to improve student outcomes: those that need targeted interventions, those that need whole-school reform, and those that need replacement.

High schools that need targeted interventions are those schools where a focus on the concentrated challenges in the area of low performance with an evidence-based, strategically implemented plan should suffice to address the problem identified by the school performance data. Depending on the identified need, this could, for example, include implementing an adolescent literacy initiative, a strengthened program for transitioning English language learners, or a school-wide focus on freshman attendance and credit accumulation.

High schools that require whole-school reform are those schools where student performance data reveals multiple, significant problems. These schools typically lack a core set of structural and instructional characteristics (e.g., curricular alignment, teacher collaboration, distributed counseling, use of data to guide instruction, extended learning time, etc.) and would benefit tremendously from whole-school reform strategies designed to address these issues comprehensively. Successful efforts often employ the support of an external partner; there are a number of comprehensive high school reform models with a track record of success in improving teaching, learning, and student outcomes, such as the Institute for Student Achievement, Talent Development High Schools, and High Schools That Work.

High schools that need replacement are the lowest-performing schools, where significant, widespread problems have prevented reform and progress. The legislation describes replacement as efforts to fundamentally transform, replace, or close the school.

For more information about the Graduation Promise Act, visit [www.all4ed.org](http://www.all4ed.org).



## Current Federal Policy—NCLB’s Restructuring Provision

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 directs the current federal approach to improving low-performing high schools through its provisions related to the “school improvement process” and its most intensive strategy for the lowest-performing schools, termed “restructuring.” These provisions—and the results of their implementation—have sparked some of the strongest criticisms in the public discourse on NCLB and are not designed to successfully address the lowest performing high schools.

### Flaws in NCLB’s Restructuring Approach

As described in a recent publication by the Education Alliance at Brown University, NCLB is “based on the assumption that the use of annual and strict state-specific accountability measures, public disclosure of district and school performance, and the enforcement of tiered sanctions for not meeting achievement expectations will mobilize states, districts, and schools to employ strategies, structures, and systems that will in turn serve students better.”<sup>5</sup> Some of these underlying principles make sense. School performance must be measured and reported. Low-performing schools must be identified. Steps must be taken to improve those schools. When these efforts are not successful, a different or more intense strategy should be tried. And there are certainly district, state, and federal roles in supporting and funding these efforts.

However, there are a variety of design flaws in the law, particularly when it comes to high schools.<sup>a</sup>

**Ineffective Mechanism for Measuring High School Performance:** NCLB’s mechanism for measuring school performance—Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)—is an ineffective tool at the high school level.

- AYP’s measure of student proficiency is based on performance on state tests that often measure basic skills, not students’ preparation for college and the workforce. As a result, the *definition of “low performing” varies significantly* across states because of inconsistencies in the state-set standards, tests (in terms of content, difficulty, format, and scoring scales), and proficiency targets (the percentage of

students who must score at the proficient level or above) that comprise AYP. In 2006–07, for example, the proficiency targets for high schools in California were 22.3 percent in reading and 20.9 percent in math. In Georgia, they were 84.7 percent in reading and 68.6 percent in math.<sup>6</sup>

- Graduation rates are a key indicator of high school performance. Yet the rules for determining AYP to date<sup>b</sup> have not included a consistent method for calculating graduation rates, considerations for the graduation rates of student subgroups, or requirements to increase graduation rates meaningfully over time. As a result, *AYP determinations have not truly taken graduation rates into account*, and some of the nation’s lowest-performing high schools escape identification. For example, one analysis found that 40 percent of dropout factories made AYP—and therefore did not receive federally mandated attention, intervention, and support.<sup>7</sup>

**Lack of Differentiation Among Low-Performing High Schools:** NCLB’s one-size-fits-all method of differentiating among schools’ performances and targeting the lowest-performing high schools is flawed. Regardless of the cause of failure, the depth or breadth of challenges, or the solutions that might work, the law’s strict approach requires that all schools suffer the same consequences in the same sequence based solely on how many years they have failed to make AYP. As a result, schools eligible for restructuring vary significantly in terms of the extent of their low performance. For example, of the schools in restructuring in 2006–07, 63 percent had low performance for all students (indicating that the school faces school-wide challenges in teaching and learning), while 13 percent had missed AYP for the achievement of a single subgroup (indicating that challenges are limited to a single subgroup of students).<sup>8</sup>

- As a school improvement strategy, NCLB’s timeline approach does not make sense. *Restructuring is not always the appropriate remedy for all the high schools on the low-performing-school spectrum.* From a management and capacity per-

<sup>a</sup> Unfortunately, due to the lack of available information, data is often several years behind and not available to be broken down to high schools only.

<sup>b</sup> In October 2008, ED released new regulations that will change the role graduation rates play in AYP determinations. However, it remains to be seen how these regulations will be implemented by the new administration and the states.



spective, it is not feasible for districts or states to “restructure” large numbers of low-performing schools. In 2007–08, more than 3,500 schools (7 percent of all Title I schools) were in the planning-for-restructuring or restructuring phase—an increase of more than 50 percent from the year before.<sup>9</sup> And according to some estimates, five thousand schools (5 percent of all U.S. schools) will be in restructuring by 2010.<sup>10</sup> Contributing to the number of schools reaching the restructuring phase is the fact that the prescribed interventions earlier in the timeline—SES and school choice—are not necessarily effective strategies for improving student performance.

- Similarly, *there are low-performing schools that immediately require intense intervention*. Yet the law does not recognize the opportunity to require districts and states to respond to these schools immediately. As a result, a chronically low-performing high school could see an entire generation of students pass through grades 9–12 before NCLB’s most severe interventions—triggered only by the passage of more time—are required.

**Ineffective Approach to Intervention:** NCLB’s intervention approach does not drive fundamental improvements to teaching, learning, and student outcomes in the lowest-performing high schools.

- While all public schools receive an AYP determination, *only schools that receive Title I funding are included in the school improvement system*. Due to weaknesses in the Title I formula and the authority of local officials to decide how to allocate the funding, only 9 percent of students benefiting from Title I funds are high school students.<sup>11</sup> As a result, low-performing high schools that do not receive Title I funds are not required to be considered for attention, intervention, or support.
- NCLB specifically describes four “alternative governance” options intended to drive fundamental change. However, this *approach is undermined by the inclusion of the fifth “other option,”* which leaves wide interpretation available to states and districts. Not surprisingly, this “other option” is the most popular of the five, and state and districts have used it to implement lighter strategies that do not lead to the major changes the law intended. The three top choices of interventions under the “other

### The U.S. Department of Education Launches Differentiated School Improvement Pilot

In 2008, ED announced a pilot program to allow eligible states to propose a differentiated accountability system that would create “a more nuanced system of distinguishing between schools in need of dramatic intervention, and those that are closer to meeting goals.” Each state’s proposals were required to maintain the state’s current practice for determining AYP and clearly define its process for categorizing schools, its system of interventions, and, in particular, the interventions for lowest-performing schools categorized as restructuring or an alternate label.

Seventeen states applied; six of these (Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, and Ohio) were approved in July 2008; an additional three (Arkansas, Louisiana, and New York) were approved on January 8, 2009. According to a review of the approved proposals:

- All states will continue to use AYP determinations to differentiate among schools. In most cases, schools are placed in restructuring (or an alternatively labeled high-priority category) if they fail to meet a higher percentage of AYP criteria, have earned low scores in the states’ accountability system, have not achieved AYP for a certain number of years, have a higher number of subgroups not making AYP, or have some combination of these factors.
- In describing the strategies to be used to improve the lowest-performing schools, most states have emphasized rigorous planning and decisionmaking processes. This includes strategies such as targeted data analyses, district reviews, locally conducted needs assessments using state tools, state diagnostic evaluations, and involvement of various teams of individuals at the school, district, and state levels.
- A few states emphasize instructional changes by requiring staff participation in specified trainings, implementation of state instructional models, hiring instructional coaches, instituting a turnaround leader, or assigning a full-time state consultant.
- Only one state emphasized changes that provide school leaders increased autonomy over staff, time, money, and program.

While some had viewed this as an opportunity for states to propose innovative strategies for school improvement, most states did not propose significant changes. However, this does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest in a fundamentally different approach to addressing the lowest-performing schools. In an interview with *Education Week*, David Griffith of the National Association of State Boards of Education noted that “most states weren’t prepared to radically change what they’re doing” as they struggle to carry out the law, and prefer to wait for an NCLB reauthorization that may include larger changes.

Source: State proposals, available on ED Web site.



option” have been increased use of test data, tutoring outside the regular school day, and the employment of an instructional or leadership coach.<sup>12</sup>

- There is mixed opinion regarding the appropriateness and effectiveness of the four specified alternative governance options. However, in some cases *state education agencies (SEAs) are legally barred by state law from implementing these strategies*, including “taking over schools (15 states), entering into a contract with a private entity (eight states), replacing school staff (seven states), and re-opening a school as a public charter school (seven states).”<sup>13</sup>
- Regardless, even ED recognized, in published non-regulatory guidance, that *“governance changes alone will not likely produce significant changes in student performance without considering such issues as staff development, curricula, instruction, use of technology, assessment, and other factors that are essential for success.”*<sup>14</sup> For example, a new staff doesn’t guarantee success. Research and experience indicate that successfully turning around a very low-performing school—with old staff or new—depends on a core set of principles and conditions. As noted by researcher Carole Perlman, “Although a change in leadership generally precedes a successful turnaround, wholesale staff replacement is not usually needed. The essential thing is to have staff that support change. The capacity of existing staff to adapt to new responsibilities and goals is more important than any inherent benefits a clean slate might provide.”<sup>15</sup>

Yet the law provides little guidance or oversight for the restructuring process and no guidelines for what should happen in a school after it has been restructured to ensure improvements in teaching, learning, and student outcomes.

- NCLB assumes that chronically lowest-performing schools are not likely to change themselves, due to both lack of internal capacity and will. This theory is evident in both the intention to promote alternative governance strategies and the requirement that states implement a “statewide system of intensive and sustained support and improvement for local educational agencies and schools.”<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, the role and responsibility of providing support to low-performing schools and districts differs greatly

from the *traditional roles and strengths of SEAs*, whose typical functions have centered on compliance, setting of policy and regulations, and fund distribution. Researchers at the American Institutes of Research (AIR), a nonpartisan research organization, describe SEA capacity as a combination of infrastructure (including staff, financial resources, and technology), political resources (including legislative, gubernatorial, and union support), and professional resources (including access to expertise, strategic leadership, and communication skills). But when they recently surveyed state officials on this topic, only one third of respondents perceived that their state agencies had adequate capacity to support low-performing schools.<sup>17c</sup> NCLB did not recognize this lack of capacity, and did nothing to solve it.

- NCLB and ED have offered little guidance on what to do about schools that have already been restructured and have not improved.<sup>18</sup> According to ED, of the 1,069 schools that were in restructuring in 2004–05, only 19 percent were no longer identified as in need of improvement in 2006–07.<sup>19</sup> This could be because AYP is not an accurate measure of progress, restructuring strategies are not helping the majority of these schools improve student outcomes, or a combination of these two factors. The Center on Education Policy, a national, independent advocate for public education, found that no single restructuring option was associated with greater likelihood of making AYP.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>c</sup> The researchers reported no correlation between these answers and state size, enrollment, and the demographics of student population.



## **Lessons Learned About Addressing the Lowest-Performing High Schools**

There is general consensus that NCLB’s approach to addressing the lowest-performing schools does not meet the nation’s needs. However, NCLB has certainly sparked a national conversation about systemic school improvement, with a corresponding growth in support for data-driven and adequately funded strategies to improve high schools—particularly the lowest performing among them. The law’s requirements have resulted in greater transparency and public reporting of school performance, broken down by student subgroups. It established the expectation that districts and states are responsible for improving low-performing high schools. Highly visible conversations about the flaws in NCLB’s approach to responding to the lowest-performing schools have only drawn attention to additional or alternative approaches and policies to do so. And school improvement has moved to the top of the agenda among national, state, and district leaders.

As noted by Adria Steinberg, vice president of Jobs for the Future, a nonprofit research, consulting, and advocacy organization that works with states and communities to improve educational and economic outcomes for youth, many state and large district leaders have arrived at a “moment of impatience” with the outcomes produced by their lowest-performing high schools.<sup>21</sup> In states and districts across the nation, these leaders are implementing strategies—some would say “to comply with NCLB”; others would say “in spite of NCLB”—to improve high school outcomes. While most of these efforts are still too new to evaluate their impact on student performance, there are lessons to be learned from their approaches.

Addressing the nation’s lowest-performing high schools will require a systemic strategy that involves stakeholders and policymakers at all levels, establishes the necessary conditions for success, and drives organizational practices and instructional strategies within a school that lead to improved teaching, learning, and outcomes. The following pages examine lessons learned from local, state, and federal efforts that should inform the development of policies designed to support the successful improvement of the lowest-performing high schools.

**Addressing the lowest--performing high schools is difficult, politically unpopular, and expensive. It requires commitment by leaders in every bully pulpit and a realistic vision for the long haul.**

While there is little evidence on the successful transformation of chronically low-performing high schools “at scale”—meaning large numbers of schools within and across districts or states<sup>22</sup>—education leaders and policymakers can learn from the experiences of other sectors in improving the performance of dysfunctional or very low-performing organizations. Cross-industry research has found only two successful strategies for transforming organizations from very low performing to very high performing: turnarounds, and fresh starts.<sup>23</sup> Turnarounds usually involve a new leader implementing strategies that improve organizational performance substantially and rapidly, while fresh starts involve completely replacing the low-performing organization with a new one.

Cross-sector research indicates that efforts to transform low-performing organizations into high-performing ones are difficult and uncertain: a study of Fortune 100 companies reveals that only 30 percent of major change efforts produced improvements worth more than the companies’ cost of capital. When it comes to fresh starts in the private sector, investors generally expect little more than 20 percent to be successful.<sup>24</sup>

The lesson from the private-sector experience is that school leaders and policymakers must be committed to a long-term strategy for identifying and responding to the lowest-performing high schools. This includes establishing these efforts as a priority and dedicating a funding stream for supporting them. It also must include establishing mechanisms for the continuous evaluation of school progress and performance, developing a pipeline of school leaders equipped to lead efforts to address the lowest-performing high schools, and establishing consequences for schools that continue to fail. Ensuring broad, long-term public support requires a serious effort for securing buy-in from community and political leaders who may be resistant to change. It also requires education leaders to accept increased accountability for student outcomes.



**Addressing the lowest-performing high schools is ultimately a data-driven decisionmaking process. To support effective decisionmaking, it is necessary to build districts’ capacity to generate, understand, communicate about, and act using data.**

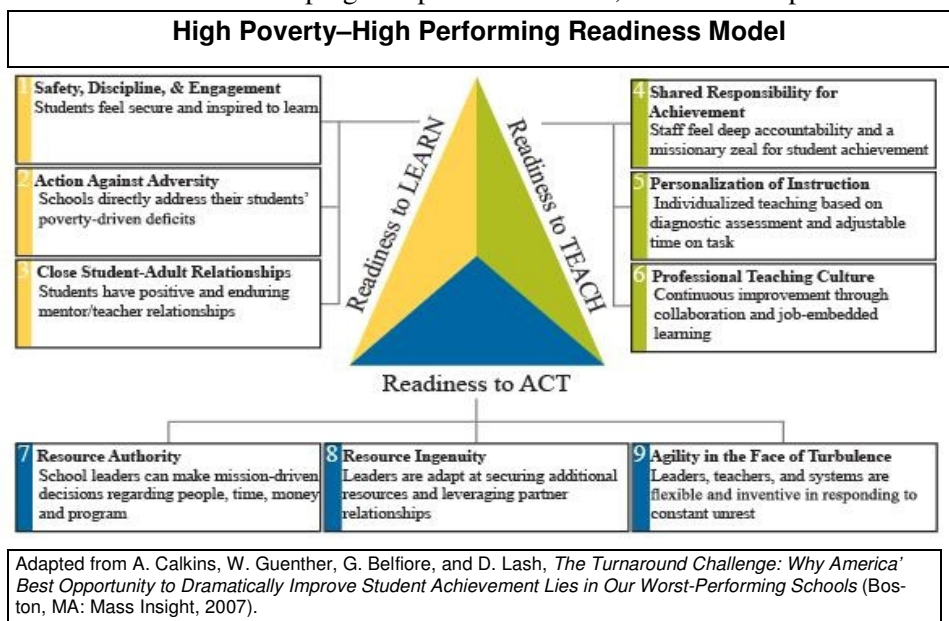
School improvement, restructuring, and replacement are decisionmaking and change processes.<sup>25</sup> In fact, “research and experience indicate that the process of choosing a restructuring strategy rivals the strategy itself in importance for successful change.”<sup>26</sup> It is evident that state and district leaders value the planning process and seek to improve it. By 2008, most states had developed a comprehensive frame-work for school improvement and tools such as templates, rubrics, and online protocols that take schools through a step-by-step process of planning and implementation.<sup>27</sup> In some states, use of these tools is voluntary; in others it is mandatory. Several states offer district and school staff training in using these tools;<sup>28</sup> others go so far as to allocate funding to pay for school staff’s improvement planning time.<sup>29</sup> Most of the states approved by ED to use a differentiated accountability model (see box on page 5 for more information) emphasized rigorous planning and decisionmaking processes including strategies such as targeted data analyses, district reviews, locally conducted needs assessments using state tools, state diagnostic evaluations, and involvement of various teams of individuals at the school, district, and state levels.<sup>30</sup> Nearly every district implementing wide-scale high school reform relies heavily on data to drive decisionmaking.

While student performance data such as test scores and graduation rates are critical indicators, state and district leaders should use a range of additional data to inform decisions and measure their success. In addition to the qualitative information often collected through needs assessments, surveys, and other tools described above, practitioners from leading districts and states point to the following indicators as being useful in their decisionmaking processes: student age, attendance, course passing, credit accumulation, grade promotion, suspensions, enrollment power, and teacher attendance.<sup>31</sup> Unfortu-

nately, many districts and schools lack the capacity—in terms of infrastructure, time, and expertise—to support these critical data analyses. Most state data systems do not house the necessary local data, and many districts are only beginning to build their own data systems or collect the necessary data. One official from a large urban school district with new leadership recently noted that district officials were “literally appalled at the state of the district’s data system and the lack of quality information about the schools.”<sup>32</sup>

In facing limited capacity, school districts are increasingly turning to external partners to help build a data infrastructure and conduct analyses.<sup>33</sup> Even districts as large as Boston and New York City have benefited from a partnership with an external consulting firm. In New York City, for example, this collaborative data analysis demonstrated that 93 percent of dropouts were overage and undercredited. Using this data, the NYCDOE replaced a number of its large failing high schools with alternative settings designed to serve the needs of the overage and undercredited population. In these settings, graduation rates for these students have increased from 19 percent in traditional schools to 56 percent at small transfer schools and 39 percent in evening programs.<sup>34</sup>

As districts and schools build their capacity, their use of data should evolve over time.<sup>35</sup> For example, several districts are aiming to supplement existing data by supporting the development of formative and diagnostic assessments at the classroom level.<sup>36</sup> Others are developing composite indicators, such as “the percent



of students on track to graduation,” to inform their efforts. Many districts are implementing Web-based portals that allow school leaders and staff to access school-specific data and download customized reports.

**Strategies designed to address the lowest-performing high schools must contemplate more than governance changes and include tactics that will improve teaching and learning.**

If efforts to address the lowest-performing high schools are to be successful, they must address the teaching and learning challenges present in schools. In schools across the country, educators are successfully educating high-challenge populations.<sup>37</sup> These schools employ “innovative strategies that acknowledge and address the daily disturbances caused by student mobility, learning deficits, disruptive behavior, neighborhood crises, and a host of other poverty-related circumstances.”<sup>38</sup>

It makes sense to use these high-performing, high-challenge schools as the benchmark and model for efforts to address the lowest-performing high schools. Many researchers and organizations have attempted to “capture the magic” in these beat-the-odds schools and articulate a framework that others can use to guide their own efforts. One such effort, by Mass Insight Education & Research Institute, a Boston-based education consulting organization, identifies nine strategies used in high-performing, high-poverty (HP-HP) schools that make up the “Readiness Model” depicted in the graphic below. “These strategies enable the schools to acknowledge and foster students’ *readiness to learn*, enhance and focus staff’s *readiness to teach*, and expand teachers’ and administrators’ *readiness to act* in dramatically different ways than more traditional schools.”<sup>39</sup>

**Strategies to address the lowest-performing high schools should be supported by a policy environment that makes change possible.**

Mass Insight’s work indicates that HP-HP schools are successful because they operate in environments characterized by conditions and incentives for decisionmaking based on the needs of students. This includes “flexible authority over critical resources—people, time, money, and program—and professional incentives that actively encourage people to do their

best work.”<sup>40</sup> Schools fostering this environment have a coherent strategic approach to providing students with integrated social services that address students’ nonacademic challenges. There is an effective leadership team that manages performance-based behavioral expectations for all stakeholders—students, staff, and even parents. And school leaders are provided clear authority over staffing, scheduling, budget, and curriculum.<sup>41</sup>

Efforts to scale up the transformation of very low-performing schools to high-performing schools that reflect the HP-HP model are still in early stages. At the district level, “a handful of entrepreneurial superintendents have created dramatically different new strategies” that attempt this system-level change.<sup>42</sup> An analysis of four such efforts—in Miami, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York City—found four common strategies: recognition of the need for dramatic fundamental change; changes to operating conditions that provide school leaders flexibility over people, time, money, and program, including union-negotiated flexibility; intensive collaboration with external partners to expand capacity; and additional investment.<sup>43</sup>

Districts and states should work together to create policy environments that support change; this may include establishing flexible operating conditions. However, as noted throughout this brief, there is no silver bullet when it comes to successfully addressing the lowest-performing high schools. Changes to governance, leadership, and conditions must be paired with improvements in the delivery of instruction.

**Districts play the central role in addressing the lowest-performing high schools and creating the policy conditions necessary for success.**

Addressing the lowest-performing high schools is ultimately the role and responsibility of district officials. They must convene the stakeholders—such as parents, educators, community members, and governing bodies—and negotiate the final decisions. To inform these efforts, districts must facilitate the use of data, either by conducting analyses internally or contracting with an external provider. Use of data not only helps ensure that decisions are made based on student need and school capacity; the transparent use and communication of data is also a strategy for garnering support for decisions. As one district official noted, “it’s hard



for [stakeholders] to argue with our decisions when we are armed with the data.”<sup>44</sup>

In many cases, district strategies to address the lowest-performing high schools are part of a broader district effort to develop a portfolio of high schools and provide students with a range of options to meet their instructional needs and preferences. This strategy often includes replacing large, chronically failing high schools with small learning communities or smaller schools; the opening of new schools; and the development of alternative settings designed to recover and recuperate students who are struggling, are falling behind, or have already dropped out. Districts have to navigate a number of challenges as they make the decisions. In addition to developing options that will meet the school’s staffing requirements and the academic needs of the students, districts must deal with facilities management; address concerns of community members who disagree with such decisions; manage the conflicts between student populations that may resist integration, such as opposing neighborhood gangs; and ensure that students and parents are well informed about the changes. District leaders also use their bully pulpit to align support for selected strategies, including by serving as the intergovernmental liaison, helping manage relationships with dissatisfied parents, and building civic support.<sup>45</sup>

Education leaders must recognize the necessity of ensuring instructional improvements in low-performing schools that have been transformed or replaced. Districts across the country are instituting district-wide strategies to impact classroom instruction, such as the alignment of curriculum or support for the development of formative assessments; improved instructional interventions for students who lack basic skills, such as literacy; and streamlining the delivery of wrap-around services that reduce social and emotional barriers to learning. There is also increased reliance on externally developed interventions such as those guided by a comprehensive school reform model. These strategies may seem like a safer strategy for schools, since developed organizations have generally articulated implementation steps and there is often evidence of effectiveness through independent research.<sup>46</sup>

Certainly, districts are the leading force in creating the flexible policy conditions described above. For exam-

ple, district leaders play significant roles in supporting the flow of human capital to the lowest-performing high schools. They negotiate union contracts that will provide school leaders with flexibility and control over staffing issues such as recruiting, hiring, placement, professional development, responsibilities, supervision, evaluation, and removal.<sup>47</sup> They are also well positioned to develop partnerships to help recruit and train leaders and to create incentives for staff to work in harder-to-staff schools.<sup>48</sup>

To help organize their efforts to address the lowest-performing high schools, several districts have created “zones of improvement.” In these zones, school leaders are provided autonomy over decisions related to people, time, program, and money and are subject to increased accountability for results. By organizing schools in this way, districts can streamline delivery of support and services, facilitate cross-school collaboration, and increase accountability and consequences for sustained low performance.

**SEAs are generally not designed to make decisions regarding, or lead efforts to address, the lowest-performing schools. To meet these new expectations, states must bolster the SEA’s role in catalyzing and supporting effective change.**

There is certainly a major role for states to play in supporting the implementation of effective approaches at the district and school levels. Over the last few years, SEAs have made progress in building the internal capacity to support school improvement areas in a number of ways, such as supporting school improvement planning, establishing consequences for districts and schools that fail to improve, bringing coherence to state policies and systems of support, leveraging political resources, and building pipelines of leaders. However, it is not evident that any state has implemented a successful comprehensive approach<sup>49</sup> to lead to the wide-scale transformation, replacement, or closing of the lowest-performing high schools.

While NCLB placed the burden of restructuring on the local education agency (LEA), generally known as the school district, accountability for successful implementation rests with the SEA. Capacity also varies significantly across districts (particularly between large urban districts and small rural districts). Complexity and ambiguity regarding the respective roles of



the LEA and the SEAs have led each state to interpret its role differently.<sup>50</sup> Certainly, “sustained school improvement is a bigger task that cannot be accomplished by a statewide system of support alone.”<sup>51</sup> As noted in a recent publication by the Education Alliance at Brown University, “it is clear that states must make the transition from an emphasis on monitoring to an emphasis on actively catalyzing and supporting school and district improvement.”<sup>52</sup> This will require establishing a role that works well with both small and large districts within the state.

States have taken steps to build the capacity of individuals throughout the system to lead and support efforts to address the lowest-performing high schools. All states have designated individuals to provide technical assistance to the lowest-performing schools: external staff (fifty states), consultants, including exemplary educators or individuals with specialized expertise (forty-six), district staff (twenty-nine), and regional networks of service centers or county offices (twenty-five).<sup>53</sup>

Many states have also developed professional networks and implemented strategies to foster collaboration among school improvement professionals.<sup>54</sup> This includes Massachusetts’ School Support Specialist Network, Michigan’s networking among principals of SINI, and Delaware’s Education Support System facilitators, who work with the schools and facilitate relationships across schools to promote implementation of common strategies.<sup>55</sup>

Observers and stakeholders have discussed the need for states regularly to gather feedback, evaluate, and adjust their state’s system of improvement to respond to school and district needs.<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately, there is little research on effective state systems of support and few rubrics for their evaluation. To advance this work, researchers at AIR have recently developed a framework for assessing the quality of state support based on eight indicators: coherence, comprehensiveness, stability, responsiveness, intensity, prescriptiveness, fit, and timeliness of the system. It remains to be seen whether states will use such frameworks and how effective they will be as tools for improving state systems.

***There is not sufficient leadership capacity to address the lowest-performing high schools. Building capacity for success requires building a pipeline of effective school leaders.***

There is widespread agreement that one of the most significant challenges inherent in efforts to address the lowest-performing high schools is the lack of human capital. This is particularly true in rural settings, in larger districts with a high concentration of such high schools, and in states where the SEA has not historically played a strong role in school improvement efforts.<sup>57</sup> There is also growing recognition that the “long-term elimination of very-low performing schools”<sup>58</sup> will likely require a long-term strategy for systemically recruiting, training, and deploying individuals who can successfully spearhead these challenging efforts.

Of course, the development of such a strategy requires an answer to a critical question: What do these leaders need to know and be able to do to be successful? There is an emerging theory that leadership needs are unique to various situations, such as turning around the lowest-performing high schools in an autonomous environment, starting up new schools, or leading schools or settings designed to serve at-risk or struggling students. Better understanding these dynamics and how they impact leadership needs is an area of interest to many policymakers, advocates, and foundations.

There is also not a consensus on the best strategy for building, training, and supporting this pipeline of leaders. One school of thought encourages investment in a strategy that brings specialized leadership in from outside the system; others believe it is critically important to build the leadership skills of principals who are already inside the system. Either way, it is important that education leaders and policymakers keep in mind evidence that suggests that an “approach that relies too exclusively on individual leaders—without corollary attention to the operating conditions in which they do their work—may not be sufficient to general fundamental change in stagnant systems, particularly at scale.”<sup>59</sup>

Recognizing that this is critical, many actors are starting to address this need. Institutions of higher education, including Harvard University and the University of Virginia, have paired their business and



education schools to develop leadership programs to improve leadership skills teams from states and districts. Some districts, including NYC, have partnered with local universities to create leadership recruitment and training programs for current and aspiring principals. Many cities are partnering with New Leaders for New Schools, a national nonprofit organization that recruits outstanding leaders and supports them through a three-year program that includes intensive leadership training, a yearlong residency, and on-site coaching. And a number of states have invested in developing a cadre of specialists—often former exemplary educators—to serve in a consulting role to districts in addressing their low-performing schools.

**States, districts, and schools increasingly rely on external partners to manage various components of their school reform efforts. A long-term strategy for responding to low-performing schools requires an expanded resource base of external partners and increased district capacity to manage those relationships.**

As noted above, districts and states collaborate with external partners on a variety of strategies, including data analysis and the development of school leaders. Increasingly, districts and states are turning to external partners to maximize their experience in “change management” or in the management of actual schools. In these cases, the “premise is that low-performing schools lack the capacity to improve by themselves and will best be served by external organizations that bring knowledge, on-going research, professional development and other supports.”<sup>60</sup>

These partnerships take various forms. Some districts have identified a comprehensive “lead” partner (e.g., Chicago’s partnership with the Academy for Urban School Leadership) that shares in the accountability and authority for the reform strategies. Some observers prefer this approach as a means of providing coherence to a disjointed system of multiple providers; however, there is recognition that there is a lack of lead partners available to districts.<sup>61</sup> Other districts, including Philadelphia, are employing a diverse service provider model either to outsource particular components or a school’s entire operation.<sup>62</sup> Alternatively, New York City has created a new structure of intermediaries—organizations that work between the district and the school, and in collaboration with both,

to build district and school capacity.<sup>63</sup> School leaders select their own intermediary from a list of district-approved options.

Managing the relationship with external partners can be a challenge for districts with no previous experience.<sup>64</sup> Much has been written about districts’ experiences working with external providers, and one lesson with direct policy implications emerges from this work: districts must build governance structures that include accountability measures for contractors. Successful contracting strategies include strong accountability measures where the indicators used to hold contractors accountable are not too narrow and are linked to financial incentives.<sup>65</sup> Initially, New York City applied an informal accountability approach for intermediaries; dissatisfied school principals could choose to discontinue utilizing their services in the next school year, or the NYCDOE could remove the intermediary from the list of approved options. Concerns arose that this was not the most effective system because a principal may be hesitant to point out that the school is not excelling under his or her chosen support organization.<sup>66</sup> In early 2009, the NYCDOE began formally grading intermediaries using school-level indicators, school observations, and staff interviews; the information will be made public for use by school leaders in selecting their intermediary for the 2009–10 school year.<sup>67</sup>

**Federal policy is an important catalyst for change.**

Despite its many flaws, the federal requirement to intervene in low-performing schools has been a powerful tool for state and district leaders battling to make drastic changes in their schools.

For example, districts have long had difficulty replacing inadequate administrators and teachers. The NCLB requirement to restructure has allowed some districts to remove principals or staff who in the past were more protected by contracts and bargaining agreements and would have been difficult to replace without the power of federal sanctions.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, by requiring state and local leaders to address the lowest-performing high schools, federal policy has provided political cover for these leaders to move forward with unpopular decisions, such as closing down chronically low-performing schools in communities that oppose the decision.<sup>69</sup> It is important that thoughtful federal



policy support making the often difficult, but necessary, strategies to address the lowest-performing high schools.

**More research is needed to improve the knowledge on addressing the lowest-performing high schools.**

If one thing is clear from the available research, it is that there is not enough available research and data. To better understand and evaluate the impact of current policies, more information is necessary about NCLB's restructuring efforts. For example, there is no data available on the number of high schools in restructuring. Districts and states need to provide more transparent and accessible data related to schools' status and the interventions being implemented in them.

It is noted throughout this brief that there has been a significant shift in the state's role in supporting the improvement of low-performing high schools. As states adjust to this role, more research is needed on

the "nature of capacity at the state level, how it is related to the model of assistance that each state employs and how different states cope with differing levels of capacity—including how state officials use specific strategies to leverage the capacity they have."<sup>70</sup>

As districts and states continue to implement strategies to address the lowest-performing high schools, it is critically important that these efforts be documented, evaluated, and shared widely so that the broader education community can learn from these experiences. This could include embedding evaluation mechanisms in the design of these strategies, sharing of best practices through evaluations by nationally and federally funded research centers and Web-based portals, and convenings that provide leaders opportunities to collaborate. Such research should include a focus on areas of national interest where knowledge is more limited, such as rural high schools and schools serving high percentages of students with academic or other challenges.

## **Recommendations for Federal Policy**

If the nation is going to meet the goal of every child graduating from high school prepared for college, work, and citizenship, there is a national imperative to address the lowest-performing high schools. Drawing from the lessons learned through the implementation of NCLB and emerging strategies at the state and local levels, federal policymakers should take the following actions:

**1. Improve national indicators for measuring high school performance.** There is inherent value in the comparability of performance data and an indicator like AYP that could serve as a kind of check-engine light for measuring the performance of high schools across districts and states. For AYP to be useful at the high school level, it must measure the dual purpose of high schools: ensuring that students obtain necessary content knowledge and skills *and* that they graduate from high school, on time, with a regular diploma. To improve this indicator, federal policy should

- *provide incentives for states to work together to develop high-quality standards and assessments that reflect the demands of the twenty-first century and measure college- and work-readiness; and*

- *require the use of a meaningful and common measure of graduation rates to be included in high school AYP.*

**2. Replace the existing federal accountability and school improvement system with requirements and support for the implementation of coherent and comprehensive state and district systems of high school accountability and improvement.** The federal guidelines for these systems should include

- *requiring states and districts to develop and articulate a transparent system for using additional data (beyond AYP) to differentiate among low-performing high schools, plan interventions, and measure progress;*
- *requiring districts to implement district-wide activities that support activities at the school level, including improving data analysis and use, supporting the development and usage of formative assessments, developing multiple pathways for students, offering wraparound services, and equitably distributing teachers and leaders; and*



- *requiring states to streamline and articulate the statewide technical assistance infrastructure for supporting high school improvement.*

**3. Ensure that these state and district systems of accountability and improvement are designed to prioritize and respond to the lowest-performing high schools.**

Without a federal check and balance, states and districts may continue to default to easier and less contentious (but less effective) improvement strategies. Federal policy requirements can also serve as political justification for state and local leaders who want to take more intensive approaches. As a result, federal policy must set guidelines for states to meet in addressing the lowest-performing schools, including

- *establishing a “bright line,” such as a graduation rate below 50 percent, that identifies chronically low-performing high schools that districts must consider for the most comprehensive school-wide strategies such as whole-school reform, replacement, or closing;*
- *requiring states and districts to provide guidance to schools to improve teaching and learning in the lowest-performing high schools;*
- *encouraging states and districts to collaborate to establish policy conditions that support change, such as by providing some school leaders authority over and flexibility related to people, time, resources, and program;*
- *requiring states and districts to develop an organizing mechanism for supporting the lowest-performing high schools, particularly if they will be eligible for flexible conditions and additional support; and*
- *requiring states to establish final consequences for schools that continue to fail so that these schools cannot just continue to be unsuccessfully reinvented through a school improvement process.*

**4. Invest in the nation’s capacity to address the lowest-performing high schools.** Successfully

addressing the lowest-performing high schools with high-performing options will require significant capacity at every level of the education system. To support the building of this capacity, federal policymakers should

- *appropriate new funds dedicated to improving or replacing the lowest-performing high schools through the implementation of plans designed through the state and district accountability and improvement process described above;*
- *invest in innovative strategies to recruit and train individuals specializing in leading and improving or replacing the lowest-performing high schools;*
- *encourage states and districts to collaborate with effective external partners and invest in innovative efforts to expand the pool of effective external partners; and*
- *invest in state and district data systems that can collect and analyze student, school, and system performance data.*

**5. Increase research activities related to addressing the lowest-performing high schools with effective school options for students.**

As noted throughout this brief, there is limited research and data available on successfully improving the lowest-performing high schools. The federal government has historically played a role in catalyzing and supporting research and development on areas of great national interest. Federal policymakers should look for opportunities both within existing research functions and school improvement activities, as well as through new funding, to

- *build the knowledge base on improving the lowest-performing high schools; and*
- *research, evaluate, and share findings on issues including effective improvement strategies, enabling conditions, SEA and LEA capacity, and correlations between strategies and models of assistance with student outcomes.*

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> This brief is informed in part by a 2008 convening of district and state leaders, researchers, and advocates discussing issues related to addressing the lowest-performing high schools.
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- <sup>45</sup> Wong, "District-Wide Framework for Improvement."
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<sup>64</sup> J. M. Kowal and M. D. Arkin, *School Restructuring Options Under No Child Left Behind: What Works When? Contracting with External Education Management Providers* (Naperville, IL: Learning Point Associates, 2005).  
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*The mission of the Alliance for Excellent Education is to promote high school transformation to make it possible for every child to graduate prepared for postsecondary learning and success in life.*

*The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national policy and advocacy organization, based in Washington, DC, working to improve national and federal policy so that all students can achieve at high academic levels and graduate high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship in the twenty-first century.*

The Alliance has developed a “Framework for Action to Improve Secondary Schools,” that informs a set of federal policy recommendations based on the growing consensus of researchers, practitioners, and advocates about the challenges and solutions for improving secondary student learning.

The framework, shown graphically here, encompasses seven policy areas that represent key leverage points in ensuring a comprehensive, systematic approach to improving secondary education. The framework also captures three guiding principles that apply to all of the policy areas. Although the appropriate federal role varies from one issue area to another, they are all critically important to reducing dropouts and increasing college- and work-readiness.

