CPRE Policy Bulletin

U.S. Department of Education Regional Forum on Turning Around Low-Performing Schools

Implications for Policy

Introduction

Standards-based reforms have set ambitious achievement goals for all students, including those attending traditionally low-performing schools. Improving student achievement in these schools presents a significant challenge to the movement for standards-based reform and is critical to fulfilling the promise of a high-quality education for all students. As policymakers renew their efforts to assist low-performing schools, it is especially important that they consider the effects of accountability measures on students and schools, learn from successful practices, and find ways to address the difficulties confronting schools as they strive to improve student achievement.

The U.S. Department of Education has initiated a series of regional forums designed to assist policymakers in crafting effective strategies to improve low-performing schools. This policy bulletin summarizes the comments of participants in the first of these forums, hosted by the U.S. Department of Education and the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) on the subject of "Turning Around Low-Performing Schools." Participants included policymakers, researchers, teachers, and state and local officials working on issues related to such schools. Participants shared strategies that have been successful in these contexts, continuing challenges confronted by schools in their attempts to improve student performance, and recommendations for policymakers at all levels. In accordance with the goal of the forum, this bulletin is intended to highlight policy issues emerging from the field rather than to make specific recommendations.

Context

Complexity

Participants stressed the need for policymakers to take into account the complex nature and the variety of the issues confronted by low-performing schools. Many warned against the tendency to promote "silver bullet" solutions that fail to address the particular needs of these schools. Low-performing schools serve students with wide ranges of linguistic and cultural diversities; effective strategies for change must be responsive to the particular needs of these students and their surrounding communities. Strategies must also take into account the larger context in which schools operate; low-performing schools in otherwise high-

CONSORTIUM FOR POLICY RESEARCH IN EDUCATION
University of Pennsylvania • Harvard University • Stanford University
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performing districts might face a different set of challenges than schools in districts with high numbers of low-performing schools. Also important is the fact that many low-performing students attend schools not designated as low-performing; the needs of these students should not be overlooked in the rush to address issues related to low-performing schools.

Continuing Challenges

Despite their differences, many low-performing schools share similar challenges, including: attracting, retaining, and supporting qualified personnel; accessing external resources such as research on best practices, technical assistance, and relevant data; implementing effective changes based on these external resources; crafting coherent strategies from limited resources; and parlaying short-term efforts into sustained change.

Professional development and support for teachers and administrators is critical in any effort to improve student outcomes in low-performing schools. Participants took issue with the public perception that teachers in these schools are unmotivated or unqualified; many teachers are simply not trained sufficiently to provide effective instruction in their school settings, especially with the inclusion of greater numbers of students with disabilities.

Teacher and administrator shortages and out-of-field teaching are major barriers to building the capacity for instructional reform. Districts with large numbers of low-performing schools often have difficulties attracting and retaining qualified teachers and the lowest performing schools within these districts tend to be assigned the least experienced or effective teachers. It is especially difficult to implement programs of instructional change in schools with high rates of teacher vacancy and attrition. Districts struggle to recruit teachers when they are unable to pay salaries commensurate to surrounding districts or when schools develop reputations among area teachers as inhospitable working environments. There is also a shortage of principals qualified to provide the kind of instructional leadership needed for schools to reach ambitious achievement goals.

Low-performing schools often do not have access to or do not know how to take advantage of external resources that exist to support school-level decisions related to instructional change. Too many schools make decisions based on immediate need, available information, and policy imperatives. Schools need accessible channels to external resources for learning about research-tested best practices, using assessment data for decision-making, and choosing appropriate technical assistance providers.

Many participants stressed the difficulty of crafting comprehensive change strategies with limited financial resources. In some low-performing schools there are still problems in accessing basic necessities—such as texts, instructional supplies, and even teachers—in a timely manner. According to a former principal in a large urban district, after being exposed to the resources available to suburban principals, she "felt like the guy watching *This Old House* on television and seeing all the routers and planers and wishing I had them, and then opening my little rusty toolbox and having maybe a hammer and a screwdriver." Many low-resource districts fall into the trap of applying for all available categorical grants; this leads them to implement a confusing array of programs and prevents them from developing coherent strategies for change. While a number of participants insisted that low resources present a major impediment to reform, others pointed out that effective use of resources is just as important as the level of resources; many successful schools and districts are learning to make the most of existing resources by aligning them with coherent strategies for instructional improvement.

Much discussion focused on the importance and complexity of supporting sustained organizational change. Critical to the ultimate success of any reform is the ability of schools to engage in continuous improvement. District and school leaders must therefore help build the capacity of school personnel to make decisions and set instructional goals that allow them to sustain high performance over time. There is otherwise a danger that short-term interventions will lead to short-term gains rather than long-term growth. Unstable policy en-

vironments and high levels of teacher and administrator attrition further complicate the effort to build sustained change.

Strategies that Support Change at the Local Level: The Role of Districts

While accountability systems created by states and districts can help to provide guidance and incentives, they are unlikely to lead to significant improvements in student achievement unless schools develop the capacities to meet new demands. Participants stressed the critical role of districts in coordinating the supports necessary to build these capacities.

Successful districts are aligning existing resources to provide the infrastructure and support necessary for instructional improvement. Some conduct resource audits at the district and school level to ensure that expenditures are related to instructional goals. Realignment of resources and "organized abandonment" of unrelated programs or positions require strong leadership as these efforts can often generate political opposition. For example, districts may have difficulty taking advantage of the new flexibility in Title I regulations following the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act due to entrenched support for traditional uses of Title I funds.

Districts must find ways to provide supports that help schools build their capacity for instructional change. Many participants stressed the need to increase communication between and among teachers and administrators. Strategies include small schools, team-based work structures, and regular meeting times for teachers. In some cases, these efforts have required collaboration with teachers' unions in negotiating more flexible contracts. In addition to time and flexibility, districts are also providing more focused support in the form of increased, intensive professional development; school-based instructional coaches; opportunities for teachers to learn and network outside of their schools; and assistance to school leaders in building professional relationships, focused on student learning, among teachers and building staff.

There was some disagreement among participants about whether instructional supports should be coordinated with targeted learning goals set by districts or used to support schools' capacities to develop their own instructional goals. Some districts are setting a curricular focus, such as literacy, and either prescribing district-wide programs to address that focus or allowing individual schools to choose their own strategies. Other districts set sustained change as a primary goal; they are helping schools to develop their own capacities to set instructional goals.

Districts are attempting to balance concerns about teacher quality with the need to fill large numbers of vacancies. Some districts are experimenting with ways to attract, prepare, and retain teachers by helping to ease the transition of new recruits into classroom life with decreased responsibilities and increased support. One mid-sized urban district has been taking advantage of the new positions provided through Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) funding to ease in new recruits as tutors with only part-time classroom responsibilities. A large urban district has used funds provided through the federal Class Size Reduction Program to create a "literacy intern" position in which new recruits receive training in literacy instruction by working together with more experienced teachers. Participants recommended that districts collaborate with local universities in providing supportive communities for teachers during their first few years. While none of these strategies are likely to solve problems of severe teacher shortages, they provide ways for districts to help maximize the potential of existing personnel. Human resource departments can also play a critical role in ensuring that experienced teachers are placed in positions in which they can mentor new recruits. Seniority lists that allow experienced teachers to get first choice of position openings can be problematic in that they often result in the departure of experienced teachers from low-performing schools.

School boards and mayors are important in providing stable political leadership for improving low-performing schools. States and districts must work with them to forge a common understanding about the necessity of devoting substantial and

ongoing resources to support these efforts. School board members need greater access to relevant research about reform strategies. Some participants suggested that school boards in districts with large numbers of low-performing schools are especially divisive and may need external assistance in understanding the importance of coherent strategies for reform.

Crafting Coherent Strategies: The Role of States

Most states have made progress in developing standards, assessments, and associated accountability systems, but it is too soon to evaluate the impact of these reforms on student achievement in low-performing schools. As states continue to develop accountability systems that have consequences for schools and students, they must ensure that these systems provide effective guidance as well as support. There are critical lessons to be learned about the kinds of effects, both positive and negative, that accountability systems are having on schools. From the designation of accountability indicators to the provision of technical assistance, state accountability systems are powerful interventions that should be carefully designed and monitored.

Developing Appropriate Accountability Measures

Participants expressed particular concern about the widespread use of single measures to determine the performance of students and schools. Single measures may serve to narrow instructional focus and detract attention from important goals of instructional or organizational change. Single measures are also coming under increasing attack as inadequate and often inequitable indicators of student performance, especially in the determination of high-stakes consequences. Many participants drew attention to the fact that accountability indicators are focused on student performance and insufficient attention is given to the performance of adults at all levels of the system. Many called for higher standards of practice and leadership at the school and district levels as well as for technical assistance providers. The Center for Research on Evaluation, Student Standards, and Testing and CPRE are working to develop accountability standards for policymakers in the use of assessment measures for high-stakes accountability systems.

States and districts are in the beginning stages of developing multiple measures of student performance. Many districts are already using their own supplementary measures such as early grade assessments, or "leading indicators," to supplement state indicators. The development of multiple measures may best be accomplished in collaborative efforts between states and districts, but there is currently insufficient communication between local and state officials. Increasing collaboration between and among states and districts would facilitate learning in the process of developing multiple measures and prevent duplication of similar efforts.

Participants applauded states' efforts to increase the incentives for schools to focus on low-performing students by adopting indicators that measure the degree to which schools are closing the achievement gap rather than just raising average student performance. States can also provide disaggregated data reflecting the achievement of different groups to assist schools in analyzing their own performance.

Providing Effective Supports

Many states may not currently have the capacity to provide adequate support for low-performing schools. Too many schools identified as low-performing are receiving little or no assistance from states. Participants noted the downsizing of State Education Agencies and insufficient funding as possible explanations for states' limited capacities to provide support. There may also be continuing uncertainty about which level is most effective for targeting capacity-building efforts and technical assistance—state, district, schools, or other alternatives such as universities or regional educational labs.

One way in which states can increase support is by upgrading the quality of instructional guidance provided by state standards, curriculum, and as-

sessments. Participants pointed out that many states are still using assessments that do not support the learning goals stated in the standards, that some standards are very difficult to interpret, and that the curriculum in many states is either nonexistent or not aligned with its standards. Further, data from state assessments are not always immediately accessible for use by states and schools. States can take steps to make data more accessible by making it easier to interpret and available online.

Participants noted that North Carolina's accountability system is distinguished from many others in that it is well funded, has been sustained over time, and provides extensive assistance to low-performing schools. Schools identified as low-performing in North Carolina are assigned assistance teams composed of an experienced principal and four-to-six teachers who work intensively with the schools for one year. The principals and teachers are on loan from local systems and are trained for several months in how to do a general needs assessment and observations of all school staff. The assistance teams also provide intervention strategies, staff development, and demonstration lessons. These assistance teams are not intended as "takeover" teams; they strive, rather, to help schools build their own capacities for continued growth. The number of schools identified as low-performing in North Carolina dropped from 123 to 30 after introduction of this model. Schools in need of improvement but not identified as low-performing can voluntarily request assistance from similar teams that districts are responsible for providing.

States, like districts, must take steps beyond the development of accountability systems to address basic issues of capacity for improving student achievement in low-performing schools. States should consider strategies to improve the quality of teachers and administrators available to these schools, including improving teacher preparation programs, providing incentives for experienced, high-quality teachers and administrators to work in low-performing schools, and providing quality guidance about professional development programs.

Supporting Coherent Change: The Federal Role

The federal government can take a significant leadership position in bringing attention to the problem of low-performing schools and providing guidance to states and districts in the development of effective assistance strategies. In particular, participants suggested a role for the federal government in providing technical assistance to states in the design of appropriate accountability systems and use of federal and other resources to support coherent strategies for reform. The federal government can also sponsor and disseminate research and facilitate national conversations related to low-performing schools.

Technical Assistance

The federal government can work with states and districts to develop accountability systems that provide effective guidance as well as support to low-performing schools. States need assistance in developing appropriate indicators of student and school performance and in finding ways to assign accountability to all levels of the system. The federal government can also help states to make the findings of their accountability systems accessible and relevant. There is a special need for guidance about how states should define Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for Title I schools. There is currently enormous variation among states in their definition of AYP as some states define it according to absolute standards and others by expected incremental changes each year; the percentage of Title I schools identified as low-performing ranges from five percent to 70 percent in different states. With the move to include English Language Learners and students with disabilities in assessment systems there will be a great need to know more about how these students are performing. The federal government might also provide guidance about how to use innovative strategies in developing alternate assessments systems and how best to incorporate English Language Learners in accountability systems.

In light of the potentially great influence of district policies on low-performing schools, the federal government could play a greater role in assisting districts to use federal resources to craft coherent strategies. Many districts do not use funds available from federal programs such as Title I, CSRD, the Class Size Reduction Program, and the 21st Century Community Learning Centers as building blocks in a general strategy for reform but are focused instead on accessing grants and implementing specific programs. These districts do not know how to do sustained planning around instructional change or develop internal systems for evaluating the effective use of resources. Participants suggested that the federal government model coherence by giving more thought to how its various programs can work together to support instructional improvement. At the same time, the federal government should reinforce the importance of using funds to support improvement in low-performing schools in particular. Responding to looser regulations, some districts may be treating Title I more as general entitlement funds than as a resource available for improving low-performing schools.

Research

Participants were in agreement about the need for federal funding of additional research on many issues related to low-performing schools, including instructional practices, professional development, technology, technical assistance programs, and the effect on schools of consequences associated with accountability systems such as rewards for teachers and schools, school reconstitutions, and state takeovers. Not enough is known about the particular combinations of technical assistance, professional development, and curricular reform that make a difference for these schools. Given the increasing numbers of English Language Learners and students with disabilities, there is also a great need for research on strategies that are effective with these students. Participants also suggested a role for the federal government in taking advantage of technology to provide easy access to existing research. Decision-makers at all levels are currently limited by time and expertise in their use of research.

Communication and Networking

The federal government can also help to facilitate communication between practitioners, administrators, and policymakers. As the pace of change accelerates across all 50 states, there is a great need for national-level conversations about issues related to low-performing schools. Participants spoke favorably of existing networks that provide opportunities for teachers and administrators to learn from each other as well as prominent researchers. The federal government can fund such networks as well as conferences that bring together educators at all levels of the system. Technology also provides promising opportunities for the development of learning networks and distance learning.

Conclusion

This forum provided a context for the kind of communication and rich discussion that is needed in the continuing effort to devise effective strategies to improve low-performing schools. Despite the urgency of this challenge, policymakers must avoid quick-fix solutions that fail to address the unique needs and challenges of these schools. In the current policy context, this means ensuring that accountability systems provide guidance as well as support. Effective policies must be conceived of as part of sustained, long-term, and comprehensive efforts at reform. Participants suggested specific strategies that have been successful at improving low-performing schools while also stressing the need for continued research and collaboration on the development of strategies that address persistent challenges. In conjunction with local efforts at reform, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers must continue to be involved in national conversations about how to meet the very important challenge of improving low-performing schools.

Regional Forum on Turning Around Low-Performing Schools

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PARTICIPANT LIST

HUGH BURKETT, U.S. Department of Education

DEANNA BURNEY, University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education

MITCHELL D. CHESTER, School District of Philadelphia

MICHAEL COHEN, U.S. Department of Education

TOM CORCORAN, University of Pennsylvania, Consortium for Policy Research in Education

SUSAN FUHRMAN, University of Pennsylvania, Consortium for Policy Research in Education

PEG GOERTZ, University of Pennsylvania, Consortium for Policy Research in Education

DAVID GREEN, University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education

MERLE HOROWITZ, Upper Darby School District, Pennsylvania

JANICE JACKSON, Boston College, Lynch School of Education

JOE JACOVINO, Penn Delco School District, Sun Valley High School

JOE JOHNSON, University of Texas/Austin, Charles A. Dana Center

JULIA LARA, Council of Chief State School Officers

SHARON LEWIS, Council of the Great City Schools

JAMES (TORCH) LYTLE, Trenton Public Schools, New Jersey

JOANN MANNING, Temple University, Laboratory for Student Success

NANCY J. MCGINLEY, Philadelphia Education Fund

JENNIFER O'DAY, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Consortium for Policy Research in Education

MARVIN PITTMAN, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

LINDA PLATTNER, Council for Basic Education

CHARLENE RIVERA, George Washington University, Region III Comprehensive Center

DAVID ROBINSON, School District of Philadelphia, McKinley School

ELLIOT SEIF, Bucks County Intermediate Unit, Pennsylvania

NANCY STREIM, University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education

SAM STRINGFIELD, Johns Hopkins University, Center for the Social Organization of Schools

RACHEL TOMPKINS, The Rural School and Community Trust

JEANNE VISSA, University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education

MARGARET WANG, Temple University, Laboratory for Student Success

About CPRE

The Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) unites five of the nation's leading research institutions to improve elementary and secondary education through research on policy, finance, school reform, and school governance. Members of CPRE are the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard University, Stanford University, the University of Michigan, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

CPRE studies alternative approaches to education reform in order to determine how state and local policies can promote student learning. Currently, CPRE's work is focusing on accountability policies, efforts to build capacity at various levels within the education system, methods of allocating resources and compensating teachers, and governance changes like charters and mayoral takeover. The results of this research are shared with policymakers, educators, and other interested individuals and organizations in order to promote improvements in policy design and implementation. CPRE is supported by the National Institute on Educational Governance, Finance, Policymaking, and Management, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education.

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For Further Information

To learn more about CPRE research or publications, please call (215) 573-0700, or email us at cpre@gse.upenn.edu.

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