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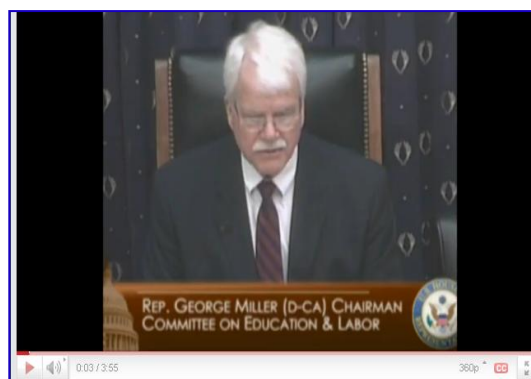


TURNAROUND OR FULL SPEED AHEAD?: House Committee Raises Concerns with School Turnaround Models Included in Obama Administration's ESEA Blueprint

During a May 19 hearing on turning around chronically underperforming schools, both Democrats and Republicans on the U.S. House Education and Labor Committee expressed concern with the four school turnaround models included in the [Obama administration's blueprint to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act \(ESEA\)](#), currently known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

In his [opening statement](#), **House Education and Labor Committee Chairman George Miller (D-CA)** stressed the need to focus attention on the chronically underperforming schools. "One of the biggest problems in our education system is the dropout crisis and our lowest-performing schools," Miller said. "Turning around our lowest-performing schools is critical for our economy, for our communities, and for our students. A recent report shows that cutting the dropout rate in half would yield \$45 billion annually in new federal tax revenues or cost savings."

However, Miller also expressed a concern with the turnaround strategies included in the Obama blueprint. As written in the blueprint, the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools in each state—about five thousand nationwide—would be required to implement one of the following four school turnaround models to support better outcomes for students: (1) transformation, (2) turnaround, (3) restart, or (4) school closure.



Under the transformation model, a school would replace the principal, strengthen staffing, implement a research-based instructional program, provide extended learning time, and implement new governance and flexibility. The turnaround model is very similar with the primary difference being that the school could rehire no more than 50 percent of the school staff. If a school chooses the restart model, it would need to convert or close and reopen under the management of an effective charter operator, charter management organization, or education management organization. Under the school closure model, the school would close and students who attended it would be enrolled in a higher-performing school in the district.

“No Child Left Behind dictated interventions to help these schools, but what we’ve learned since the law was enacted is they were too prescriptive and unrelated to the real needs of the schools,” Miller said. “Different systems work for different schools. What most of these schools need is a fresh start. A fresh start doesn’t have to mean shutting down a school. A fresh start doesn’t mean firing all the teachers and only hiring back an arbitrary number. And, if you fire all the teachers, you end up getting rid of the ones that are making a difference.”

Miller said a fresh start meant buy-in from school leaders, teachers, parents, and the community along with a team effort to put together the tools to make that school great—ideas that were echoed by witnesses throughout the hearing. Miller also stressed the importance of providing teachers with data systems to track student progress, using time to extend the school day to include successful afterschool programs, and making sure schools can provide targeted academic support to help students catch up.

In his [statement](#), **Representative Glenn Thompson (R-PA)** also took issue with the blueprint’s four turnaround models, saying that they represent a “more intrusive federal role in education policy that is better left to parents and state and local leaders.”

The first witness, **John Simmons, president of Strategic Learning Initiatives**, a nonprofit organization that works to turn around low-income public elementary schools in Chicago, attributed his organization’s success to comprehensive school reform strategies that are grounded in rigorous research and proven to work using existing school staff. According to Simmons, these strategies include five essential elements: shared leadership, high-quality professional development for teachers and administrators, rigorous and focused instruction, parental engagement, and a culture of trust and collaboration among teachers, administrators, parents, and students.



“In Chicago we find so many teachers and principals who have not had the opportunity to really show what they could do, so there’s this vast resource of people who are out there, and when they get the right model based on the research, support from the central office, and a great school leadership team ... the existing teachers respond in ways that exceeded their expectations, our expectations, and the expectations of the central office,” Simmons said.

Daniel King, superintendent of the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District (PSJA), discussed his experience in turning around two school districts located on the Texas-Mexico border. In the first district, Hidalgo Independent School District, King and his team converted the district’s high school into an early college high school and saw the school rise all the way to the number eleven high school in *U.S. News and World Report*’s 2007 rankings.

PSJA saw a similar transformation, going from a district where every high school was labeled a dropout factory to one that reduced the dropout rate by 75 percent and increased the number of graduates from less than one thousand in 2007 to a projected 1,800 graduates in 2010. King attributed part of PSJA's success to its decision to provide dual credit for high school students and a college credit recovery program for high school dropouts aged eighteen to twenty-six that allows them to earn a high school diploma and connects them to college. "That was instantly successful, and in a matter of three months we graduated the first fifty, and the community got all excited—the district, the teachers—and they saw the capacity that we can do something, we can make a difference," King said.

Based on these experiences, King said that high expectations, bold goals, and quality leadership at both the district and school levels are critical. He added that high schools should be "flexibly and seamlessly connected to higher education" so that students can move to college-level work in any course of study as soon as they are ready. King also stressed the importance of career and technical education for creating viable career pathways for all students. "These courses should be industry standard and college connected," he said. "I'd like them to be dual credit—for college credit and leading towards certification, leading towards high-wage, high-skill potential jobs, leading towards certification, associate degrees, and bachelor degrees."

Jessica Johnson, chief program officer for district and school improvement for Learning Point Associations, a nonprofit education research and consulting organization, testified that research on specific school turnaround strategies is sparse, but when combined with related research, research can suggest key themes that must be a part of any turnaround effort. Those key themes include strong leadership, a solid learning environment for students that engages families and supports the nonacademic needs of students, and a commitment to change on the part of school staff. But even with all of those elements in place, the challenge is in implementation, she said.

Johnson noted that, under the Obama administration's blueprint, schools in turnaround or transformation must replace their principal, but she said that there are not enough school leaders equipped with the knowledge and expertise to take over and lead these efforts, especially in rural areas where approximately one third of these schools exist. "It's one thing to say, 'We've got to have strong leaders that know how to use data, that know how to manage budgets, that can operate flexibly with autonomy,'" she said. "It's another thing to say, 'We have enough of these strong leaders so that they can go out to rural Illinois and lead a high school turnaround in that setting.'"

In his testimony, **Thomas Butler, superintendent of the Ridgway Area School District (RASD) in Pennsylvania**, discussed some of the challenges rural schools face and offered examples of how his school district has overcome them. One area of great focus for his district is its teacher evaluation system, which encourages professional development for teachers and collaboration between teachers and administrators in an effort to determine the resources a teacher needs to improve student achievement.

To further its teachers' learning, RASD sends teachers to other districts with exemplary programs, high-quality seminars and conferences, and encourages its teachers to earn advanced

degrees. However, because the district is isolated from these opportunities, its teachers have also accessed training in a virtual environment through webinars.

Butler expressed frustration with the turnaround models in the Obama administration's blueprint. "The turnaround models for our area are really a nonstarter," he said. "If you're going to close a school down to send the students to another high-performing school within your district, there is none because that's the only elementary school, that's the only middle school."

Susan Bridges, principal of A.G. Richardson Elementary School in Culpeper, Virginia, credited her efforts to initiate change to her hardworking and dedicated staff, as well as the support and flexibility in decisionmaking that she was given by the school district. "There is no single plan or one set of resources or one style of leadership that will make every school successful," she said. "Each school has its own personality and culture, and successful leaders use this information to make critical decisions every day."

After the school went through a redistricting effort that resulted in a 60 percent student turnover, teachers relied on targeted assessments and real-time data to identify students' specific skills and needs. Bridges also created a Parent Liaison Program to bring school families together and reestablish the atmosphere of a neighborhood school.

"As the instructional leader, principals have a vital and unique perspective of their school," Bridges said. "Principals understand that local decisions—staffing, resource priorities, infrastructure needs, et cetera—must continue to reside at the school level and district level where community and school needs can be adequately weighed and addressed. Recent proposals from the federal government have recognized the important role principals play in turning around low-performing schools but fail to factor in the need for locally-based decisionmaking."

David Silver, principal of Think College Now Elementary School in Oakland, California, discussed the five key levers—(1) community involvement, (2) high expectations, (3) data systems to drive instruction and monitor progress, (4) family and community partnerships, and (5) outstanding teachers and school staff—that have allowed his school to make gains on state tests of over 800 percent in reading and 300 percent in math across every student subgroup.

In closing, Miller talked about the "portfolio of things" needed to see better performances from traditionally low-performing schools, including collaboration, buy-in, community involvement, and the empowering and professional development of teachers. He also seemed open to granting schools and districts more flexibility in implementing efforts to turn around schools.

"What's emerging in my mind is the sense that there is a tradeoff here between flexibility and responsibility for success, and if we're willing to grant people and provide—and they're responsible—to provide them that flexibility to make these choices about the ingredients—I think you'd need sort of a critical mass of them—but you may change them, then we've got to sort of get out of the way," said Miller.

Read complete witness testimony and watch video of the May 19 hearing at <http://edlabor.house.gov/hearings/2010/05/research-and-best-practices-on.shtml>.



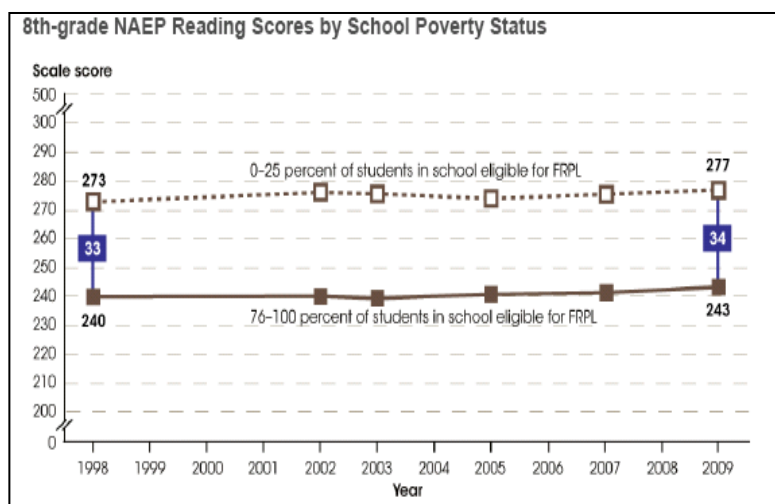
THE CONDITION OF EDUCATION 2010: NCES Report Offers Special Analysis on High-Poverty Schools

A special section in *The Condition of Education 2010* paints a picture of the nation's high-poverty schools in which students are most likely to be black or Hispanic, teachers are less qualified than their peers in low-poverty schools, average reading and math scores are far below those of students in low-poverty schools, and students are less likely to graduate and go to college.¹

According to the report, 46 percent of Hispanic and 34 percent of black students attend high-poverty elementary schools, compared to only 5 percent of white students. At the secondary school level, 44 percent of students in high-poverty schools were Hispanic, compared to 38 percent for black students, but only 11 percent for white students. The percentage of students who were limited-English proficient (LEP) was also much higher in high-poverty schools than in low-poverty schools. For example, at the secondary level, about 16 percent of students attending high-poverty schools were identified as LEP, compared with 2 percent attending low-poverty schools.

The report also finds that teachers in high-poverty schools tend to have lower levels of educational attainment than their colleagues in low-poverty schools. For example, 38 percent of teachers working in high-poverty schools had a master's degree as their highest level of educational attainment, compared to 52 percent of secondary school teachers in low-poverty schools. Additionally, teachers in high-poverty schools tend to be less experienced; 22 percent of teachers working in high-poverty schools had less than three years of teaching experience, compared to 15 percent of teachers in low-poverty schools.

On average, students from high-poverty schools did not perform as well on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading or math as students from low-poverty schools. In 2009, eighth-grade students from low-poverty schools had an average reading score of 277, compared to 243 for students in high-poverty schools; this represents an achievement gap of 34 points that *increased* by only 1 point since 1998. In eighth-grade



¹ High-poverty schools are those in which 76 to 100 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches through the National School Lunch program; low-poverty schools are those where 0 to 25 percent of students are eligible. Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level (\$28,665 in School Year 2009–10) are eligible for free meals; children from families with incomes that are above 130 and up to 185 percent of the poverty level (\$40,793) are eligible for reduced-price meals.

math, the achievement gap has narrowed only slightly, falling from 41 points in 1998 to 38 points in 2009.

Students in high-poverty schools also face more challenges in graduating from high school and enrolling in college. According to the report, only about 68 percent of twelfth graders in high-poverty secondary schools graduated from high school with a diploma, compared to 91 percent of twelfth graders in low-poverty schools. The report also finds that only 28 percent of students from high-poverty secondary schools enroll in college immediately after high school, compared to 52 percent of students from low-poverty secondary schools.

The report attributes these high school graduation and college enrollment numbers to a survey of school administrators. According to the results from that survey, the average percentage of seniors in high-poverty secondary schools who graduated with a diploma has declined by 18 percentage points—from 86 percent to 68 percent—since the 1999–2000 school year. Meanwhile, the percentage of twelfth graders who graduated with a diploma from low-poverty secondary schools declined only slightly from 92.4 percent to 91.2 percent.

Overall, 17 percent of public schools in the United States during the 2007–08 school year were considered high poverty, an increase of 5 percent since 1999–2000. Twenty percent of public elementary schools and 9 percent of public secondary schools in the United States are high poverty, according to the report.²

Produced by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), *The Condition of Education* is an annual report that presents indicators of important developments and trends in U.S. education. These indicators focus on participation and persistence in education, student performance and other measures of achievement, the environment for learning, and resources for education. The report includes data that was available by April 2010.

Browse or download *The Condition of Education 2010* at <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/>.



I LOVE L.A.—AND ATLANTA: Results from NAEP 2009 Trial Urban District Assessment Show Some Large Cities Making Progress, Though Much More Work Is Still Needed

Average eighth-grade reading scores for the nation and large cities with populations greater than 250,000 were higher in 2009 than in 2007, but only two of the eleven districts that participated in 2007—Atlanta and Los Angeles—showed an increase since that year, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA). Atlanta and Los Angeles were also the only two districts that showed an increase in eighth-grade reading scores since 2002, the year of the first reading assessment.

“Today’s report shows that the reading achievement of students in our largest cities has increased over time,” said **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan**. “At the same time, the results also

² The report notes that enrollment in the free and reduced-price lunch program (FRPL), which is voluntary, may be lower for eligible older students who have greater feelings of stigma associated with FRPL, greater feelings of independence, and more complaints about food quality and choices.

show that cities have significant work to do. The overall scores of cities are lower than the nation, and the achievement gap in the urban districts is larger than in the nation.”

Eighth-grade reading scores were up 5 points in Atlanta since 2007 and up 14 points compared to 2002. In Los Angeles, scores were up 3 points and 7 points, respectively. In all the other districts, the score changes were not considered statistically significant even though six other districts posted gains.

Jurisdiction	Average Reading Score for Eighth Graders: 2007	Average Reading Score for Eighth Graders: 2009	Difference (in points)
National Average	261	262	1
Large City Average	250	252	2
Atlanta	245	250	5
Austin	257	261	4
Boston	254	257	3
Charlotte	260	259	-1
Chicago	250	249	-1
Cleveland	246	242	-4
District of Columbia	241	240	-1
Houston	252	252	0
Los Angeles	240	244	4
New York City	249	252	3
San Diego	250	254	4

For 2009, an additional seven cities participated in the TUDA. The additional cities and their eighth-grade average scores are as follows: Fresno (240); Miami-Dade (261); Jefferson County, Kentucky (259); Milwaukee (241); Detroit (232); Baltimore City (245); and Philadelphia (247).

Among the eighteen districts that participated in 2009, the percentages of students who performed at or above the “proficient” level, which indicates competency over challenging subject matter, ranged from 7 percent in Detroit to 30 percent in Austin. In three districts, including the District of Columbia (52 percent), Fresno (52 percent), and Detroit (60 percent), more than 50 percent of students scored below the “basic” level, indicating that they did not have even a partial mastery of knowledge and skills that are considered fundamental.

At the fourth-grade level, four districts—Boston, the District of Columbia, Houston, and New York City—had higher scores in 2009 than in 2007. The remaining seven districts, as well as the national average and large city average, showed no significant change.

Download the complete results at http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2009/.

Straight A's: Public Education Policy and Progress is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events in Washington, DC and around the country. The format makes information on federal education policy accessible to everyone from elected officials and policymakers to parents and community leaders. The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national policy and advocacy organization that works to improve national and federal policy so that all students can achieve at high academic levels and graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship in the twenty-first century. For more information about the Alliance, visit <http://www.all4ed.org>.