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Intervening in Low-Performing High Schools

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Out of the roughly fourteen thousand public high schools in the United States, two thousand stand out as particularly troubled. While they comprise 15 percent of the total number of high schools, they produce more than half of the dropouts.

It's no secret where these low-performing high schools—"dropout factories" may be a better term—are located, and which students they serve. While they can be found in every state, they are concentrated in the nation's cities and in impoverished areas throughout the South and Southwest. They enroll over a third of the nation's African-American and Latino students. Most of these high schools have been low-performing for a decade or more, and have proven resistant to prior reform and accountability efforts.

Nor is it a secret that in an era of rising international competitiveness, something needs to be done to fix these schools. What remains to be devised is an effective strategy to transform these struggling institutions into successful high schools that prepare all students for success in college, career, and civic life. What is required is a coordinated local, state, and federal effort that is comparable in ambition to legendary national reforms of the past, such as the campaign to fund and build the land-grant colleges or the tremendous effort to eradicate polio. The nation cannot afford to have two-and-a-half million of its students attend high schools where graduation is not the norm.

What's Known About Turning Around Low-Performing High Schools?

There is widespread agreement on some broad strategies for reform

Over the past decade, much has been learned about the essential features that all high schools need in the 21st century—challenging college-prep courses; skilled and trained teachers; and an engaging and supportive learning environment. Much has also been learned about the interventions needed to transform low-performing high schools and the conditions that undermine reform efforts. Key findings include:

The educational resources in a low-performing high school need to match the educational challenges it faces. The ninth graders who show up each fall at the two thousand most troubled American high schools tend to bring with them intense levels of educational challenges. In these schools, up to 80 percent of freshmen are overage when they enter high school, require special education services, read and do math at less than a seventh-grade level, or are repeating ninth grade for the second or even third time.

Increasingly, these ninth graders must pass Algebra courses and end-of-course exams before they can be promoted to the tenth grade. In order to clear those hurdles, they need much more intensive and effective instruction and support than most high-poverty, comprehensive high schools typically provide (or could provide, given existing resources). Moreover, it is essential that those students receive the right type of extra help—instruction that engages their minds, builds upon the intellectual assets they have, and develops the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in rigorous college-prep courses.

High poverty schools that “beat the odds”—helping the majority of their students to succeed in challenging courses—provide multiple layers of support. In beat-the-odds high schools, strong instructional programs and effective professional development are matched with a schedule that allows for extra time in core courses and extra help from committed teachers, and with an internal school organization that enables personalization and teacher-teaming. Summer school and after-school supports and opportunities are also typically provided, and special attention tends to be given to student effort and engagement. The adults in such schools collectively and actively monitor and encourage regular student attendance and good behavior, and these schools make explicit links among academic work, college success, careers, and student interests. In addition, beat-the-odds schools are increasingly making use of on-track indicators and early warning systems to identify students in need of extra supports at the start of high school rather than waiting for them to fail or stop attending before interventions occur.

Low-performing schools typically need sustained and supportive technical assistance to transform them. Turning around low-performing schools is possible, but it is not cheap, easy, or fast. Although quick improvements can sometimes be achieved in attendance, course-passing, and promotion rates, more fundamental improvements in student achievement and graduation rates can take five or more years of sustained reform efforts.

Further, low-performing schools often lack the resources or know-how to fully reform on their own, which is one reason why they have been low-performing for a decade or more, and why they may not be influenced by strict accountability systems alone. Such schools may be populated with many committed and skilled educators, but they tend to need additional assistance and support developing, implementing, and sustaining the comprehensive reforms required.

Progress can be made even as experts continue to debate the specifics

While experts agree on some broad strategies for turning around low-performing high schools, they continue to disagree or remain uncertain about a number of particulars: What are the merits of small schools versus re-organizing large high schools into small learning communities? Should all students be required to study the same college prep curriculum, or should some be allowed to partake in more intensive career and technical education course sequences? Is it better to place students into separate ninth grade academies or into ninth through twelfth grade thematic programs? How should schools provide extra help? What types of assessments and which sorts of accountability systems can best measure and encourage achievement? In order to recruit and retain good teachers in low-performing high schools, is it more important to improve working conditions or to raise pay levels? Is it more effective to reform low-performing high schools or to replace them?

However, while such questions are extremely pressing, reformers need not wait for answers in order to begin to transform the nation's lowest-performing high schools. By analogy, medical researchers have much to learn about how best to treat heart disease, yet they are moving forward all the same with large-scale efforts to improve patients' lives. Similarly, education reformers can take dramatic steps to improve schools even as they continue to investigate the most effective ways to do just that.

It is not easy to scale up successful programs

To date, all successful efforts to transform low-performing high schools have struggled when it comes to replicating and scaling up their work. It's challenging enough just to find the resources needed to expand, but it tends to be extremely difficult to recruit and train new teachers and staff, as well as to oversee the model to make sure that it is implemented faithfully. Likewise, reformers must contend with the short-term thinking that prevails in many districts and states—with every shift in personnel or policy, promising programs tend to be undermined or abandoned in favor of a new strategy or another model of reform.

How Can the Federal Government Help Turn Around Low-Performing High-Schools?

In order to fundamentally transform the nation's low performing-high schools and bring successful reform strategies to scale, the federal government must play a critical role in providing the impetus and the infrastructure needed to reform or replace the two thousand lowest-performing high schools. Indeed, this should be the central focus of efforts to incorporate high school reform more fully into the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Instead of spreading available resources thinly around, they should be concentrated on the sub-set of high schools with the greatest needs.

No doubt, a reauthorized NCLB will include a number of programs and incentives that benefit *all* high schools—improvements in mathematics and science education; funding for adolescent literacy programs; the expansion of AP courses; improvements in teacher quality, college access, and data systems; and so on. These are important, but additionally, the federal government should pursue four strategies specifically designed to turn around the lowest-performing high schools:

1. Make it an immediate priority

The federal government may choose to expand to the high school-level the gradualist strategy that NCLB has taken in grades three through eight; that is, it could create incentives for all high schools to make annual improvements in various performance categories, and it could hold them accountable for helping all student populations make steady gains. The better alternative, though, would be for the federal government to take immediate, targeted action to improve the most troubled high schools. After all, those two thousand dropout factories have been identified already, and their shortcomings are well understood. Rather than waiting five or more years for those schools to miss their benchmarks (which will likely happen, given the severe challenges those schools face, and given their demonstrated lack of capacity to improve), why not call upon states to transform or replace them right away, and why not provide the necessary federal resources now, rather than five years down the line?

2. Ensure that sufficient technical assistance and expertise exists to transform low-performing schools

Many, if not most, states and districts lack sufficient technical assistance capacity and technical know-how to successfully transform large numbers of failing high schools. Federal funding and guidance need to be provided to develop this technical assistance capacity and technical know-how in state departments of education, local school districts, and among independent third party providers (such as universities, local education funds, school reform organizations, and so on).

3. Address the resource problem

Nearly all of the nation's low-performing high schools serve high-poverty populations. Research suggests that some of those schools have sufficient resources to educate the given students successfully, but they would have to reallocate their funds in sensible ways; other schools, however, would need modest amounts of additional support, and some would need substantial increases. Whatever their needs, however, few high schools currently receive federal Title I funding. In essence, then, a substantial portion of the nation's Title I investment is being squandered—money is being spent on kids up through eighth grade, but then those same kids are left to flounder in and/or drop out of under-resourced, low-performing high schools.

The far more sensible approach would be to continue to invest in kids all the way through high school, whether as a part of Title I or by way of a separate, dedicated funding stream, possibly with funds matched by the states. The amount of funding made available should, in part, take into account the degree of educational challenge schools face, based on the number of students who enter with academic skills below grade level, and based on the school's existing resource base. Renewal of funding could be tied to implementation of proven practices and school improvement.

4. Invest in research and development

The existing high school reform knowledge base is sufficient to enable significant improvements among low-performing high schools. Fundamental and lasting transformation, however, may require the development of additional knowledge, tools, and techniques. In particular, federal investment should go toward the creation and evaluation of effective instructional programs that enable students who enter high school with below-grade-level skills to succeed in rigorous coursework. Finally, there is an urgent need for funding to support a large-scale randomized study of the costs and benefits of different ways to increase learning time (such as by lengthening the school day, the school week, or the school year), a topic that has surfaced as an exciting strategy for reform, but which is not yet rooted in an adequate knowledge base.