

Whole-School Reform: Transforming the Nation's Low-Performing High Schools

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Executive Summary

Despite the growing consensus that all students should graduate from high school ready for college and careers, that goal is unfortunately not being realized in many schools across the country. Each year, one third of students do not graduate from high school and another third graduate unprepared for the rigors of college and careers—figures that have remained stagnant in far too many pockets of the nation. To effectively address such an extensive crisis, reform efforts must focus on the systemic improvement of low-performing high schools. Whole-school reform has emerged in the past as an effective improvement approach that can transform schools suffering from systemic challenges that extend beyond a single department or single aspect of the school. It does so by addressing the entire school—from the organization of the school to the structure of the school day to the development of leaders and staff—through the implementation of a new school design. Lessons learned from these efforts illuminate the need for schools to have a strong system of support from the district, the state and federal governments, and external entities in order for the effort to be successful.

Federal policy has encouraged the use of whole-school reform in the past through the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program and the subsequent Comprehensive School Reform Program. However, the scale of these programs has been small, and financial support for them has been cut off in recent years. In order to achieve large-scale benefits from whole-school reform, federal policy must encourage the effective and wide-spread utilization of the approach systemically instead of through programs that lie outside of its school accountability and improvement system. It must also encourage districts, states, and others to develop and provide the support that schools require to carry out an effective whole-school reform effort.

For federal policy to support greater application of whole-school reform, it will require significant change in the existing federal school accountability and improvement system, which neither differentiates among schools' needs nor serves as a catalyst for this type of comprehensive improvement effort. Federal policy has a responsibility to address low-performing high schools so that all students can graduate ready to succeed in college and careers, and the upcoming reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act provides a critical opportunity to consider ways that the nation's low-performing high schools can be improved on a wide-scale basis. To achieve this goal, school accountability and improvement systems must be based on school data and must drive the adoption of approaches like whole-school reform that have been shown to be effective in transforming low-performing high schools. Federal policymakers can support this by

- improving national indicators for measuring high school performance;
- replacing the existing federal accountability and school improvement system with requirements and guidelines for comprehensive state and district systems that are designed to respond to high schools' particular challenges;
- ensuring successful whole-school reform efforts by investing in increased capacity at all levels and encouraging the necessary policy conditions for effective reform; and
- strengthening the national knowledge base on whole-school reform.

Introduction

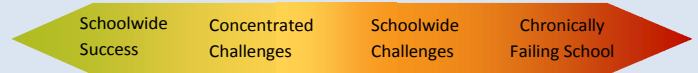
The problem is clear: an unacceptable number of America’s students are not graduating from high school, and many who do are still not adequately prepared for success in college and career. Past efforts to address this problem have only been able to achieve incremental results: the national graduation rate, as measured by the Editorial Projects in Education, has risen only 2.8 percentage points in ten years, and high school students’ scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress have not improved since the testing started in the early 1970s.¹

There is increasing recognition that in order to meaningfully solve this problem, efforts should shift from those that are narrow and often yield very slight results to those that can fully transform high schools that are failing to graduate and prepare students. Transformation can only take place when a new vision of a struggling high school is adopted and school leaders take ownership of a strategic improvement plan that is based on research and student data and implement that plan within a sufficient network of support and funding. To be truly effective, school improvement efforts must move schools from a passive and failing culture to one that is proactive and outcomes oriented. Simply layering different improvement strategies on the same failing school model will not accomplish this.

The federal government has a moral and economic responsibility to address these low-performing high schools and has a role to play in bringing about school transformation through a well-designed accountability and improvement system. This requires encouraging the implementation of research-supported school improvement approaches that will yield significant change in schools experiencing real challenges. In recent years, there has been a growing consensus among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers that this can only happen through a process in which effective improvement approaches are driven by school accountability and improvement systems that are based on school data and the particular challenges schools face.^a This call for differentiating school performance based on school data and driving school improvement approaches according to that differentiation, or data-driven differentiation, acknowledges that not all low-performing high schools experience the same challenges, to the same degree, or within the same environment. One possible framework for differentiating school performance is described in the box above.

A Framework for Differentiated School Improvement

One framework for understanding the scope of school effectiveness and needs is a continuum of school performance:



According to this framework, some of the nation’s high schools are generally doing their job of educating and graduating their students and require no particular improvement effort.

Other high schools have acceptable overall performance but face concentrated challenges or are struggling with a particular subgroup of students. For these schools with specific, discrete needs, such as low achievement levels among English language learners or literacy challenges that exist throughout the school, targeted interventions are best suited to improve the school’s performance.

Then there are high schools that face schoolwide challenges: that is, they are generally not succeeding across subgroups of students, across academic areas, or across performance outcomes. The approach most appropriate for these schools is a comprehensive whole-school improvement plan that encompasses the entire school.

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. These schools require an immediate and drastic improvement strategy, such as replacing key leaders and staff within the school or closing the school altogether.

^a Building a differentiated school improvement system requires the use of multiple indicators of school performance. For more information on what those measures could be for high schools, see the Alliance for Excellent Education’s “Moving Beyond AYP: High School Performance Indicators.”



Data-driven differentiation can help to group low-performing schools in order to better understand their needs and to determine which improvement strategies might be most effective. For example, a number of low-performing high schools experience schoolwide challenges rooted in processes or structures that extend beyond a single department or single aspect of the school; therefore, transformative, not marginal, change is most essential. In these schools, leaders must implement an improvement strategy that addresses the whole school in a comprehensive way. A cohesive vision of school design and outcome goals must guide changes to the organization of the school, the structure of the school day, and the development of leaders and staff that all center on improved instruction, curriculum, and academic and nonacademic support for all students.^b

This type of approach, known as whole-school reform (WSR), has been implemented by schools and districts for almost two decades. Though not currently encouraged systemically through federal policy, WSR has a history of federal support. In order to address the nation's many low-performing high schools, however, federal policy must encourage effective, district- and state-supported WSR as part of a differentiated school accountability and improvement system. To shed light on how this can be accomplished, this brief will describe whole-school reform, how it has been supported by federal policy in the past, and what lessons have been learned from those policies.^c It will also provide recommendations for federal policy based on those lessons learned.

What Is Whole-School Reform?

In the broadest sense, whole-school reform can be defined as the use of a comprehensive, unified school design to transform all aspects of a school in an effort to improve the performance of each of its students.² At the core of WSR is the idea that effective schools operate around a coherent design that allows staff to effectively deliver consistent instruction and support to students, and that ineffective schools can adopt such a design in order to align school structures, organization, and instruction to improve learning.³

A school seeking to engage in this type of reform may either choose to develop a home-grown WSR design or adopt a model designed by an outside entity. Many schools and districts engaged in whole-school reform have chosen to implement an externally developed model. Unfortunately, just a small portion⁴ of the more than eight hundred current whole-school reform models⁵ are designed for high schools' unique characteristics and challenges, such as the transition from middle to high school and from high school to college and career, poor adolescent literacy skills, student disengagement and competing social factors, and reduced family and community involvement.⁶

Although WSR model developers are many and their designs differ, whole-school reform models typically employ very similar strategies to achieve higher student achievement. These strategies include^d

- *organizing the school to facilitate transformed teaching and learning*, often including the development of effective leadership teams and decisionmaking structures, as well as the organization of teachers into

^b The nation's lowest-performing schools that have been chronically failing for some time may also benefit from a similar improvement strategy. However, they may first require more significant organizational change, such as restructuring or replacement. For a discussion on improving schools facing this level of challenge, see the Alliance for Excellent Education's "Action Required: Addressing the Nation's Lowest-Performing High Schools."

^c This brief has been informed, in part, by a 2008 convening of and follow-up communication with school and district leaders, representatives from prominent high school reform models, researchers, evaluators, and policy experts on high school reform.

^d This list was synthesized from the High School Reform Strategy Toolkit (www.highschooltoolkit.com), a joint project of researchers at the Academy for Educational Development and Johns Hopkins University, which synthesizes knowledge about twenty-five established and emerging high school reform strategies; the eleven required components of the federal Comprehensive School Reform program (described on pages 5–6); and through a survey of whole-school reform experts including executives from organizations that have designed several of the most widely used and effective WSR models.



teams that share groups of students in order to foster collaboration and relationship building, and the creation of innovative scheduling solutions that meet students' needs;

- *transforming curriculum and instruction*, through a clear focus on student learning and such activities as implementing a college- and career-ready curriculum for all students, incorporating project- and work-based learning into the curriculum, and regularly collecting and using data to inform instruction;
- *providing students with the necessary academic and social support*, such as dedicated connections between students and staff to build stronger relationships, personalization in instruction and support, interventions to address targeted student needs, extended learning and credit recovery options, and the building of college awareness;
- *increasing teacher and principal effectiveness* through the facilitation of teacher collaboration across subject areas via professional communities, the provision of high-quality professional development that is tied to data, and the development of administrator learning and networking groups;
- *maximizing stakeholder resources* by coordinating and networking with other schools, including feeder schools; partnering with higher education, community-based organizations, and industry; and engaging family and communities in the planning, development, and implementation of school improvement activities; and
- *ensuring continuous improvement* through the creation of a school culture based on data and outcomes through which clear implementation and student outcome goals and benchmarks are established and continuously monitored, and through the continued support from school staff for the whole-school reform plan.

The activities through which these strategies are implemented are specific to each WSR model and must fit the unique environment of each school. The way in which a model fits into a school environment can vary: WSR can be implemented in a large, comprehensive high school; serve as a foundational design in the creation of small schools or small learning communities; or provide a framework for creating career academies in which the model design embeds career preparation into rigorous academics. Regardless, the core of each model is the same—a coherent combination of organizational, systemic, and instructional efforts that requires the cooperation of school leaders, teachers, parents, and community members and flows from a cohesive design.

What Has Been the Role of Federal Policy in Whole-School Reform?

Prior to the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the federal approach to school reform focused on isolated, targeted efforts to improve schools, such as “pullout” programs for the lowest-achieving students, which were leveraged through ESEA’s Title I.⁷ Over time, such efforts came to be seen as often resulting in a tangled collection of contradictory programs, especially in the nation’s highest-poverty and lowest-performing schools.⁸

Education reformers began viewing a comprehensive approach to school reform as a way to integrate these disparate efforts. Beginning with the Fiscal Year 1998 appropriations process, Congress appropriated funding for the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSR D) Program. The CSR D was created “to provide financial incentives for schools that need to substantially improve student achievement ... to implement comprehensive school reform programs that are based on reliable research ... rather than a piecemeal, fragmented approach to reform.”⁹ Three-year renewable grants of at least \$50,000 were provided to districts and schools to serve as a start-up fund for school reform efforts.¹⁰



States were required to include in their applications for the funds an explanation of the process by which they would ensure the quality of the reform efforts that were to be supported by the grant and how those efforts' implementation and impacts would be evaluated. States then awarded grants on a competitive basis to districts, which applied on behalf of schools, according to the particular need of schools and the degree to which the proposed reform program was of high quality and research based.¹¹

New American Schools—A Precursor to Comprehensive School Reform

The New American Schools Development Corporation (NASDC) is a public-private partnership established in 1991 to encourage and support the development of “break the mold” designs for school reform. NASDC, now known as New American Schools, and the RAND Corporation’s evaluation of its efforts played a defining role in the evolution of whole-school reform.

NASDC invested \$130 million from businesses and foundations for the development and implementation of designs that

- were comprehensive in the change they brought to schools;
- were benchmarked against international academic standards; and
- had the capability of going to scale.

Several of the designs developed through NASDC are still currently being implemented by high schools today, including ATLAS, Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, Modern Red Schoolhouse, and the America’s Choice Design Network.

In addition to the development of these designs, NASDC and RAND’s evaluation provided essential building blocks for the nascent whole-school reform approach including a lexicon; early lessons learned for effective implementation, such as the importance of compatible district and state policy environments; and momentum that carried through to the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration.

Sources: B. Rowan, C. Barnes, and E. Camburn, “Benefitting from Comprehensive School Reform: A Review of Research on CSR Implementation,” in *Putting the Pieces Together*, ed. C. Cross (Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform, 2004); S. Kilgore, “The Development of Comprehensive School Reform Models,” in *Examining Comprehensive School Reform*, ed. D. Aladjem and K. Borman (Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 2006); and M. Berends, S. J. Bodilly, and S. N. Kirby, *Facing the Challenges of Whole-School Reform: New American Schools After a Decade* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2002).

The conference report for the appropriations act that authorized the CSRSD offered guidance about what could be considered a high-quality comprehensive reform model. According to this report, the nine essential components that any reform program supported by CSRSD funds must include were

1. effective, research-based methods and strategies;
2. comprehensive design with aligned components;
3. high-quality professional development;
4. measurable goals and benchmarks for student performance;
5. support among school staff;
6. meaningful parental and community involvement;
7. external technical support and assistance;
8. evaluation of implementation and outcomes; and
9. coordination of resources to sustain the effort.¹²

Seventeen externally developed models were mentioned in the conference report, but schools and districts were free to adopt others or develop their own as long as they included the nine components.

The CSRSD was expanded into the larger Comprehensive School Reform Program (CSRP) when the 2001 reauthorization of ESEA—known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001(NCLB)—authorized the



program through Title I, Part F.^e There are a few key differences between the CSRD and the expanded CSRP. First, the list of nine essential components of comprehensive school reform was expanded to also require that reform efforts provide for the support of teachers and principals, and that strategies found to significantly improve academic achievement be a part of the design. Second, the CSRP placed more responsibility on the state education agency to ensure that funds were used on models that have the eleven required components, to ensure that schools were supported by high-quality technical assistance providers, and to conduct annual evaluations of comprehensive school reform implementation and share that information with the U.S. Department of Education.¹⁴

Though authorized by ESEA, the CSRP is not a part of the NCLB school accountability and improvement system. Despite the preference states must give to districts applying on behalf of schools that are identified as in need of improvement or requiring corrective action through the system,¹⁵ the CSRP is a separate program in which schools may choose to participate *in addition* to any required school improvement efforts that are mandated through NCLB. In fact, as it is structured now, NCLB does not facilitate the identification of schools with schoolwide challenges, nor does it leverage school improvement approaches like whole-school reform that address those challenges. See the box below for more information.

In recent years, the CSRP has been defunded, and there are no signs that the trend will be reversed. FY 2006, FY 2007, and FY 2008 appropriations for the program have only been for the CSR Clearinghouse, which provides assistance and information to schools and districts undergoing comprehensive school reform efforts. No new CSR grants were awarded during these years, and the program was zeroed out completely in FY 2009. In his FY 2010 budget, President Obama did not request funding for CSR, signaling that there will not be renewed federal support for the program during this fiscal year.

CSRP and High Schools

An analysis of the distribution of grants from the Comprehensive School Reform Program shows that, as with other Title I funds, high schools received just a small share of available funds. During the 2004–05 school year, only 19 percent of CSR funds went to high schools, while 48 and 34 percent were allocated to elementary and middle schools, respectively.¹³

Source: U.S. Department of Education, *State and Local Implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act: Volume IV—Targeting and Uses of Federal Education Funds* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2009).

NCLB Does Not Address Schoolwide Challenges in High Schools

The school accountability and improvement system established through NCLB is in many ways not suited for transforming high schools that are experiencing schoolwide challenges. There are a number of factors that limit its ability to do so.

- *The indicators used to identify low-performing high schools are ineffective.* Adequate Yearly Progress, the measure by which NCLB identifies schools that require improvement, does not adequately differentiate among low-performing schools based on their improvement needs.
- *As a result, required interventions for improvement are based on a timeline approach and not the particular needs of the school.* Improvement strategies leveraged by the system are based on how long a school has been identified as low performing and not the factors that are causing schools to be identified as needing improvement or the severity of their low performance.
- *Finally, the strategies mandated by NCLB do not comprehensively address schoolwide factors that limit teaching and learning and are particularly ineffective at the high school level.* The mandated strategies—supplemental education services, school choice, corrective action, and restructuring—are either targeted strategies or strategies that require structural changes without the adoption of whole-school reform, and therefore no matter how many years a school facing schoolwide challenges has been identified as needing improvement, it will not be required to enact a comprehensive improvement strategy.

^e In FY 2003, CSR grants were administered from both Title I Part F of ESEA and the Fund for the Improvement of Education (FIE).



What Has Been Learned About Whole-School Reform So Far?

Due to the evaluation component of both the CSRD and the CSRP, there exists a large body of research on whole-school reform, the factors that affect the success of a whole-school reform effort, and the impact that particular models have had on schools. A clear conclusion from this research is that whole-school reform has positive effects on student outcomes, and that effective implementation of a research-based WSR model is the key factor for success.

Studies have documented the effectiveness of both the whole-school reform approach in general and of specific WSR models. A meta-analysis of evaluations of individual comprehensive school reform models^f found that the overall effects of WSR are positive, and that students who attended schools implementing whole-school reform scored higher on achievement tests than control students who attended schools that did not.¹⁶ This effect was found to be larger than that of pullout programs and targeted improvement approaches.

Since that study, the results of independent evaluations of other whole-school reform models geared specifically toward high schools have been found to be promising. Models such as Talent Development, First Things First, and those from the Institute for Student Achievement and New Visions for Public Schools have been shown to have positive impacts on attendance, credit accumulation, promoting rates, dropout rates, and, in many cases, graduation rates.¹⁷

In addition, the final report of a U.S. Department of Education–funded longitudinal study of whole-school reform completed by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) found that when whole-school reform is implemented well and over an extended period of time, it is effective in transforming schools. The results show that, regardless of the particular model utilized, faithful implementation of a research-based comprehensive school reform model is significantly associated with improvements in student achievement.¹⁸ AIR and others have also found greater impacts after schools had been implementing models faithfully for many years.¹⁹ This is especially true for high schools;²⁰ see the box on the next page for more information.

These findings have led to a second direction of study on whole-school reform: identifying the essential support elements and conditions necessary for the successful and sustained implementation of comprehensive school reform models. Through this focus of study, much has been learned about what must be done and which conditions must be present to increase the likelihood that models are implemented faithfully and more completely, therefore having a greater impact on student outcomes.

School characteristics such as poverty levels, percent of English language learners, and number of students have not been found to be associated with a school's ability to implement WSR models.²¹ Thus, the key factors in full and sustained implementation of comprehensive school reform models, and, by extension, increased student achievement, lie with those involved in these reform efforts. These entities—school staff and leaders, districts, states, and external partners—each play an essential role in successful and sustained whole-school reform. The rest of this section will describe what lessons have been learned about the conditions and support these players must provide for the successful implementation of whole-school reform.

^f This study included only models designed by external developers and had been implemented in at least ten schools by the time of the study.



Giving High School WSR Time to Show Results

Research on whole-school reform efforts shows that it takes several years of implementation for a school to see significant impacts. This is particularly true in high schools for a variety of reasons.

- *It will take at least four years for the first class to graduate having benefited from a fully implemented model.* Given that most students fall off track to graduation in the ninth grade, a school has to wait until the first freshman class has graduated to see the full impact of the reform. If the model is fully implemented in the first year, there theoretically will be a four-year lag to see results—but in reality it often takes several years for a model to be implemented in its entirety.
- *The indicators currently used under NCLB to measure school performance are not suited for measuring interim progress toward improvement goals in high schools.* Under NCLB, school performance is measured based on scores from assessments students take only once during their time in high school, and in lesser part on graduation rates. These are large-grain measures that often do not reflect smaller indications of progress and may therefore signify that a school is continuing to fail even though it is on the track to improvement.

The need to address low-performing schools is urgent, however, and waiting four years or more to determine the effectiveness of a reform effort is not an option. Thus, as Dr. Robert Balfanz, a research scientist at Johns Hopkins University's Center for Social Organization of Schools, asserts, a high school WSR model, just like any other type of reform effort, "needs to be given the time to show impacts, while using interim indicators to ensure that it's on track to success."

These interim indicators could include attendance rates, credit accumulation measures, or other data points that can predict if students are on or off track to graduation, and would allow school leaders and others to determine more quickly if the reform effort is serving students better than the school had been before. See the Alliance for Excellent Education's "Moving Beyond AYP: High School Performance Indicators" for a description of these and other measures and how they might be incorporated into school improvement and accountability systems to demonstrate progress.

Leading for change

Much of the research on WSR focuses on the key role that school leaders play in effective reform efforts, and many model developers have echoed this finding. This point, however, focuses on a broader school leadership structure than just the school principal. Because of the significant and complex work that goes into implementing a WSR model, even the most capable principal may struggle when leading the effort alone.²² Thus, it is necessary for a school preparing to embark on whole-school reform to build a strong leadership team and decisionmaking structure through the creation or inclusion of other leadership positions such as assistant principals, coaches, or counselors.

School leaders must direct faculty and parents in a strategic search for the reform model best suited to both address the specific needs of the school and guide the school to the outcomes the school community envisions. Unfortunately, all too often the decision is made after looking at only one model or choosing a model based on factors other than the school's individual needs and vision.²³ Because of the small number of externally developed models designed to address high schools' unique challenges, finding an appropriate model can be difficult.

Once a model is selected, principals and key school leadership personnel must drive the effort at the school level and ensure that school staff is bought into the effort and is committed to the model's principles.²⁴ School leaders must communicate clear goals for the reform at hand,²⁵ and, as one executive from a model development organization asserts, must articulate to each staff person their responsibilities to the reform to ensure that everyone knows and understands their role in the effort.



Finally, school leaders must serve as a shield to protect the school from distractions from the reform as well as act as an advocate to the district in search of additional resources and policy changes to support the work in the school.²⁶ As another model developer explains, “The challenge of . . . alleviating distractions to an instructional focus cannot be overestimated.” This task can be made significantly easier when the district serves as a committed partner to the improvement effort.

Leadership within the school can also be supplemented at the district level. Districts with low-performing schools can provide leadership for whole-school reform by encouraging the adoption and continued implementation of WSR through district policies. This has been the case recently in many large urban districts, such as New York City, Atlanta, San Diego, and Los Angeles. Through such activities as launching districtwide reform initiatives or developing comprehensive accountability systems, districts can spark and support schools’ whole-school reform efforts.

Supporting teachers and leaders

To ensure a successful WSR effort, school leadership must, in concert with the district, build teachers’ capacity for enacting the instructional components of the reform design. In turn, districts must support school leaders and ensure they are well equipped to lead the effort.

Building in a planning period of significant length for the reform has been found not only to allow for greater teacher buy-in through increased familiarity with the model, but also to provide additional time for teachers to be trained and to understand the changes that will take place through the reforms.²⁷ Professional development at the onset of reform efforts should be supplemented with ongoing training as the reform is implemented, and both should be augmented by model classrooms, onsite instructional leadership, and professional learning communities.²⁸ All of these efforts will ensure that teachers are able to carry out the components of the reform model more skillfully and learn from each other and instructional leaders.

Districts must work with school leaders to provide teachers with these necessary opportunities for professional development.²⁹ Additionally, district leadership must also ensure that teachers have strong instructional leadership onsite and that principals have professional development and professional learning communities of their own.³⁰ Accomplishing both goals requires the district to develop the infrastructure that can support this work and provide the necessary technical assistance to school leaders.³¹

Many districts are turning to outside organizations to assist them in providing this support to their schools. The San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) has partnered with the American Institutes for Research for this purpose. AIR supports the secondary school reform efforts within SDUSD by providing the necessary professional development and technical assistance for school staff and leaders involved in WSR efforts.³² The School Redesign Network at Stanford University is another prominent technical assistance provider. Through its Leadership for Equity and Accountability in Districts and Schools (LEADS) initiative, the group connects district leaders and education researchers and organizes them into networks to share support and knowledge and to provide technical assistance and professional development for secondary school reform. Among those that are currently partners in LEADS networks are several large school districts, including Albuquerque Public Schools, Knox County Public Schools in Tennessee, and San Francisco Unified School District.³³

States also have a role to play in ensuring that schools engaged in whole-school reform receive the support they need. Both Kentucky and North Carolina have embraced this role by providing teams of highly experienced educators to offer assistance and coaching to school leaders and staff engaged in reform efforts.³⁴



Establishing a favorable policy and political climate

Research has shown that, in addition to supporting the work at the school level, political and policy support by the district and state increases a school's ability to effectively implement a reform model. Whole-school reform is a difficult task and requires the participation and buy-in of many stakeholders within the community. Districts and states can help by publicly supporting schools' efforts and building the political environment necessary to begin and sustain the work.³⁵

In addition to building political will, both districts and states can create policy conditions that enable successful reform. Research has suggested that states can facilitate the successful implementation of models by creating waivers for districts and schools in order to provide flexibility for assessments, operations, and the flow of resources.³⁶ Districts can also align related policy to the reform goals of their schools or provide site-based autonomy for principals engaged in reform efforts. In either case, allowing for flexibility in the hiring and transfers of teachers³⁷ and the funneling of funding and other resources to schools in a way that supports reform efforts³⁸ can directly affect a school's success.

District leaders in New York City have made this a hallmark of their districtwide improvement effort. The New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) has restructured its central office and drastically modified its policies in order to provide school leaders with autonomy on issues that impact the success of school improvement efforts. Through this, the NYCDOE has enabled principals to strategically budget for reform plans by eliminating many restrictions on school funds, has renegotiated its contract with the teachers' union in order to allow principals more unilateral authority in hiring school staff, and has provided principals the choice of external or internal organizations with which they can partner for technical assistance.³⁹

Aligning school and district improvement efforts

School improvement efforts do not take place in a vacuum; several schools in a district may be undergoing their own reform efforts at the same time that the district is engaging in improvement efforts itself. This can result in a tangled and incongruous web of activities that can end up inhibiting the implementation and success of each. A district can avoid this confusion by initiating its own reform efforts in direct response to the needs of the schools that are undergoing reform. Such efforts must focus on the infrastructure, resources, and support necessary to accommodate for any lack of capacity or expertise at the school level.⁴⁰

Atlanta Public Schools is one of the districts aligning its reforms to the needs of its schools. It has partnered with the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's Recreating Secondary Schools team to develop a cohesive districtwide high school reform program. Under this plan, each high school in the district will undergo a whole-school reform effort, transforming into a collection of new, small schools that each utilize a WSR design. In concert with the school-level reforms, the district is transforming its operations to closely match the new structure and needs of its high schools, coalescing individual initiatives that had once come from several different departments within the system into an "interdisciplinary" central office approach to supporting high school transformation.⁴¹

Districts like Atlanta that have several schools undergoing reform efforts at once can also ensure that those efforts are aligned to the needs of the district's students by guiding the creation of a "portfolio" of schools that together can meet the wide range of student needs and interests.⁴² It can encourage the development of an array of schools with a variety of academic and career foci within a range of school models. Districts can then take advantage of this portfolio and draw schools together into a network in order to build capacity at the network level instead of just the individual school level.⁴³



Developing and supporting effective high school reform models

As discussed earlier, there are relatively few WSR models that are adequately targeted for high schools; yet schools benefit from having a wide array of models to choose from to find one that best matches the needs of the school and environment in which it operates. Thus, more high school–specific models must be developed if WSR is to be implemented on a wide scale.

While models must address the complex challenges that high schools face, they must also be clear and specific enough to be easily implementable while also flexible enough to be able to fit the unique nature of each school that will adopt it. Experience has shown that models with less complexity and greater clarity and specificity in their design are the most likely to be implemented fully and with fidelity.⁴⁴ However, each school has unique needs and operates within a unique environment, so models cannot be overly prescriptive. To be sure, no externally developed model will ever completely fit the needs and constraints faced by an individual school. In cases where models have been implemented effectively, model developers typically have worked with schools to modify their designs for individual implementation.⁴⁵ By working with a school, developers can ensure that their model is adaptable enough to fit within the school’s context and reduce the likelihood that the school will discontinue implementation because of friction between the model and the environment within which it is being used.

Model developers can also support effective implementation by providing strong assistance to the schools adopting their designs.⁴⁶ Complementing the technical assistance provided by the district or state, model developers can both serve as coaches for the implementation of specific model activities and ensure that school staff are familiar with the components of the design and understand their role in the effort. Principals engaged in reform report that this external assistance is critical to their schools’ ability to implement effective reform efforts, as it plays a role in helping to plan the effort at the very beginning and ensures that focus is kept as the reforms are implemented.⁴⁷ In particular, model developers can assist school leaders in engaging in data-driven decisionmaking—looking at school data to better understand the problem and how to best fix it.⁴⁸ While outside technical assistance is important, however, school leadership teams must maintain their sense of ownership over their chosen model as opposed to seeing themselves detached from the effort, considering it a reform implemented by and accountable to an external entity.⁴⁹

Sustaining school improvement efforts through capacity building and investment

As discussed above, sustaining whole-school reform efforts is a critical factor in achieving positive and significant outcomes. School leaders and districts must ensure that schools will be able to sustain WSR efforts in the event that outside assistance or funding is no longer available. All too often, reforms are abandoned because of a lack of capacity or funding to continue to drive the effort.

Adequate funding is essential to a successful whole-school reform effort and ensures that the assistance described above continues to be available to schools as they proceed with their reform. Model developers agree that a loss of funding is one of the most common reasons schools cease reform efforts. Decreased funding, whether because of competing priorities at the district or state level or due to a weak economy, most often results in decreased assistance from model developers and the elimination of professional development opportunities, two of the elements that are most essential to a successful reform effort.

A loss in funding, in addition to a variety of other factors, can also result in the severing of the relationship between a school and the external developer of the model it is implementing. Given the above discussion of the assistance these developers tend to offer schools, it is essential that schools and districts actively work to build capacity so that they can fill that gap should the direct intervention of developers no longer be



possible.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, building that capacity requires a significant amount of resources, knowledge, and practical experience that many schools and districts lack.

How Can Federal Policy Encourage Effective Whole-School Reform at Scale?

Federal policy has a responsibility to address low-performing high schools so that all students can graduate prepared for college and careers. Given the already clear and established role for federal policy in encouraging whole-school reform and the evidence of the effectiveness of WSR in transforming high schools, federal policy should encourage increased implementation of this approach by incorporating whole-school reform into its systemic approach to school improvement. To ensure success, federal policy should also reflect the lessons learned from successful practice by encouraging districts, states, and external entities to provide the support necessary for effective WSR. Specifically, federal policymakers should take the following actions.

1. Improve national indicators for measuring high school performance.

NCLB’s mechanism for measuring school performance, Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), currently does not adequately measure the dual purpose of high schools: ensuring that students obtain the necessary content knowledge and skills for college and career success *and* that they graduate from high school with a regular diploma. In addition, while the October 2008 final regulations to Title I of NCLB now require states to calculate and report uniform measures of graduation rates, states still independently develop and administer standards and assessments, making it impossible to compare some measures of high school AYP. Therefore, to make AYP more meaningful at the high school level, federal policy should

- support the effort to develop common national standards and assessments that are aligned to college and career readiness; and
- require the use of a meaningful and common measure of graduation rates to be included in high school AYP with a weight equal to measures of college and career readiness.

2. Replace the existing federal accountability and school improvement system with requirements and guidelines for comprehensive state and district systems that are designed to respond to high schools’ particular challenges.

Lessons learned from NCLB indicate that a federal system for identifying and improving low-performing schools is not an effective way to differentiate improvement based on high schools’ needs because it is a one-size-fits-all approach to addressing schools that face unique challenges. Federal guidelines around which state and district systems could be designed can ensure that the systems utilize data to differentiate improvement and leverage improvement approaches that are effective for high schools. To this end, federal policymakers should

- require states and districts to design a transparent system for using additional data (beyond AYP) to differentiate among low-performing high schools for the purpose of planning interventions aligned to school needs;
- require states and districts to leverage, as part of their school improvement systems, differentiated improvement approaches that include whole-school reform; and
- require states and districts to utilize data to assess the progress made by schools undergoing whole-school reform, thereby allowing sufficient time for schools to fully implement models conditional on their progress and thus reducing the “churn” of reform that often prevents high school improvement efforts from yielding significant results.



3. Ensure successful whole-school reform efforts by investing in increased capacity at all levels and encouraging the necessary policy conditions for effective reform.

It is clear that whole-school reform requires significant capacity—knowledge, time, flexibility, and resources—at the school, district, and state levels in order to have significant impacts on student achievement. Enabling wide-scale implementation of WSR will require even greater capacity at all of those levels. Federal policy can help by investing in the development of this capacity and by encouraging the necessary policy environment needed to sustain whole-school reform efforts. Specifically, federal policy could

- dedicate new funds to improving or replacing low-performing high schools;
- invest in state and district data systems that can collect and analyze student, school, and system performance data to provide the additional data needed to differentiate school improvement efforts;
- require states to streamline and articulate the statewide technical assistance infrastructure for supporting high school improvement;
- encourage states and districts to collaborate to establish policy conditions that support change, such as by providing some school leaders flexibility related to people, time, resources, and programs;
- invest in effective strategies to recruit and train principals specializing in leading whole-school reform efforts; and
- invest in the development of innovative and effective high school–targeted comprehensive school reform models and support model developers’ capacity building so that they can better assist schools implementing their designs.

4. Strengthen the national knowledge base on whole-school reform.

As several researchers have noted, many previous studies of the impact of whole-school reform efforts may have been understated because the level of model implementation was not taken into account and researchers do not have a common definition of what the full implementation of a whole-school reform strategy entails. Federal policy can further the education policy community’s understanding of whole-school reform as a school improvement strategy through continued support and funding of research on this topic. Specifically, federal policymakers should seek to catalyze

- continued research on the impact of whole-school reform efforts that take universally defined implementation levels into account;
- further research on comprehensive school reform within high schools and the components critical to the effectiveness of high school specific designs; and
- long-term studies of the impact of whole-school reform efforts that adequately capture the entire life span of a fully implemented and sustained improvement effort.

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Endnotes

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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.

