

## Baltimore City's Most Challenged Schools

### *Strategies for Improvement*

#### Executive Summary

President Obama and Secretary Duncan have set out a series of reform strategies for failing schools that are tied to federal dollars. In Baltimore City, all of the strategies are being implemented to some degree. While it is too early to evaluate whether they are working or not, reformers and stakeholders need to ask hard questions to understand the process.

#### Introduction

For many years, districts, states, and the federal government have implemented improvement strategies for struggling schools. Think of state takeovers of schools or schools placed under review as a result of No Child Left Behind. There are a series of new improvement strategies for failing schools, or those that continually do not meet AYP, tied to federal funding. Under President Obama and Secretary Duncan's leadership, the US Department of Education has provided School Improvement Grants (SIG) and funds through Race to the Top if districts agree to use the following strategies to "turnaround" their failing schools:<sup>1</sup>

- 1) School Closure – The district would close a failing school and enroll the students who attended that school in other high-achieving schools in the district.
- 2) Restart Model – Close failing school and reopen under the management of a charter school operator, a charter management organization or an educational management organization selected through a rigorous review process. A restart school would be required to admit, within the grades it serves, any former student who wishes to attend.
- 3) Transformational Model – Districts would address four specific areas: a) developing teacher and school leader effectiveness, which includes replacing the principal who led the school prior to commencement of the transformational model, b) implementing comprehensive instructional reform strategies, c) extending learning and

teacher planning time and creating community-oriented schools, and d) providing operating flexibility and sustained support.

- 4) Turnaround Model – This would include among other actions, replacing the principal and at least 50 percent of the school's staff, adopting a new governance structure and implementing a new or revised instructional program.

Currently, there are 16 schools classified as Tier I and Tier II by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). These are the lowest performing Title I schools in the state. Twelve of the 16 are in Baltimore City. The remaining four are in Prince George's County.

Baltimore City Schools have tried all of the aforementioned strategies in their lowest performing schools. Seven have received federal funds from a School Improvement Grant totaling \$47 million, spread across 16 schools statewide. Baltimore City has also received funding from Race to the Top to improve its struggling schools. In Baltimore City, an extra \$1 million has been allocated to school improvement from Race to the Top, according to the *Baltimore Sun*<sup>2</sup>. In Prince George's County, the lowest performing schools are all being "turned around" and, like Baltimore City, have also received funds from the School Improvement Grants and Race to the Top.

Whether a school is being restarted, closed and reopened as a different school, or turned around, those interested in improving these schools must pay attention to several factors. First, these schools have all had a legacy of failure. To improve them requires what Michael Salmonowicz (2009) has called a "180 degrees turn in traffic". To accomplish this, the improvement strategies involve, in most cases, replacing the principal and most of the school's teachers. New leadership is meant to take the school in a new direction with a focus on instructional improvement. The scant research that is out there on the set of improvement strategies that include restart,

<sup>1</sup><http://www2.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2009/08/08262009.htm>

<sup>2</sup> [http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2011-01-01/news/bs-md-ci-race-to-top-plans-20101230\\_1\\_school-system-plans-ceo-andr-s-alonso-top-funds](http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2011-01-01/news/bs-md-ci-race-to-top-plans-20101230_1_school-system-plans-ceo-andr-s-alonso-top-funds)

turnaround, and closure has concluded that successful turnaround leaders prioritize student achievement, hold students and staff to high standards, regularly examine achievement data, and provide teachers with resources to retool instruction (Allen, 2010).

The research also suggests that for school improvement to work, schools need a committed group of teachers. In a turnaround model, for instance, most of the teachers will be new to the school. That necessitates orienting those teachers to the school and building a new school culture. A good turnaround leader will inspire her/his staff, by showing visible improvements very early on in the process, and support them with ongoing, targeted professional development (Salmonowicz, 2009). Furthermore, this leader needs to reach out to the community and parents, listen to their concerns, and address them as she/he builds support for the turnaround strategy.

Running a school that has had a legacy of failure is no easy task. That is why so many districts turn to outside organizations to help them hire new staff and do ongoing support throughout the turnaround process. Mass Insight, New Leaders for New Schools and the University of Virginia's Turnaround Specialist Program which is part of the Darden School of Business, all have played a large role in turnaround schools nationally. In Baltimore City, local partners like Johns Hopkins and Living Classrooms as well as outside partners like Global Partnerships are leading restart schools. Researchers caution that there are many pitfalls to avoid when implementing a turnaround strategy. Joseph Murphy at Vanderbilt University has warned that schools cannot "install new programs in the hopes of growing out of failure." Rather they need strong leadership focusing most of her/his energy on academic achievement. Successful turnarounds need to put the needs of the parents and students above all else. District support, like having an office dedicated just to the turnaround schools, is very important, as is attending to the local context of the schools since each one of them will be different even in the same city.

In Baltimore City, there is a central office of school turnarounds led by Beth Nolan. She has regularly visited the schools, and provides support to the schools individually. At some point, there needs to

be some evaluation of the support that the schools are getting from the central office to find out how they can be more helpful to schools. In Prince George's County, the school turnaround efforts are led by Ed Ryans.

### **Lessons from other cities**

Improvement strategies for failing schools are in place in many other cities around the country. What we are learning from New York is that there has been opposition to reform strategies for failing schools in large part because the public has not yet been part of the decision-making process on how to improve a school and whether to close it, turn it around, or restart it.

While there are examples of successful turnarounds in cities as diverse as Los Angeles (Feldman, 2009) and New Haven,<sup>3</sup> there has not been a whole district yet for whom this new set of strategies has worked. Part of the reason for that is an endemic problem of finding a pipeline of highly effective principals to lead and teachers to teach in the newly reformed schools.<sup>4</sup>

### **Conclusion**

It is still very early in the process as most turnarounds in the city are less than one year old, but for those concerned about improvement in these schools, there are a few questions that are worth considering:

- 1) What are we learning about the progress at each school? What seems to be working?
- 2) How are the partnerships functioning at the different schools? Which ones are high functioning and what can we learn from them?
- 3) What is the relationship like between the school staff and the parents and students? What kind of culture is being built at the schools?
- 4) How can funds be leveraged to improve further? What more is needed in terms of resources to help the school and the community of families improve?
- 5) What monitoring system is in place to track the progress of the schools? At what point will we be able to evaluate progress? What indicators can

<sup>3</sup>[http://newhavenindependent.org/index.php/archives/entry/katherine\\_brennan\\_literacy/](http://newhavenindependent.org/index.php/archives/entry/katherine_brennan_literacy/)

<sup>4</sup><http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/08/education/08education.html>

we use besides student achievement data to show success?

As we move forward with turnaround schools, we need to answer these questions in order to improve the process. Baltimore City can also look to other cities for lessons learned, but finding out what is working and not working here, and revising the strategy will be the path forward.

The following is a list of schools in need of improvement and improvement strategy in Prince George’s County and Baltimore City:<sup>5</sup>

<b>School name : Baltimore City</b>	<b>Improvement strategy/partner</b>
Calverton Elementary/Middle*	Restart-Friendship Academy
Garrison Middle*	Restart- Global Partnerships
Commodore John Rogers*	Restart-Living Classroom
William C. March*	Restart- Hopkins Talent Development
Cherry Hill Elementary/Middle	Recommended for Turnaround 2011-2012
Frederick Douglass HS	Restart- Ed Works
Chinquapin Middle,* now Baltimore IT	Restart- Baltimore IT Academy
Masonville Cove	Recommended for Turnaround 2011-2012
Augusta Fells Savage Institute *	Turnaround
Francis C. Wood	No information obtained from City Schools
Institute for Business and Entrepreneurship	Closing
Booker T. Washington*	Turnaround
<b>School name : Prince George’s County</b>	<b>Improvement strategy/partner</b>
G. James Gholson Middle	Turnaround
Thurgood Marshall Middle	Turnaround
Benjamin Stoddert Middle	Turnaround
Drew Freeman Middle	Turnaround

\*Received funds from the School Improvement Grants (SIG)

<sup>5</sup> Of the 7 SIG turnaround schools, 2 are K-8, 4 are middle schools, and 1 is a high school. Of the 5 non-SIG schools, 3 are high schools, and 2 are K-8.

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