



Incentivizing School Turnaround

A Proposal for Reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

Jeremy Ayers and Melissa Lazarín April 2011

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

Large numbers of schools across the country are low performing and have been for years. This longstanding and widespread problem painfully reveals that individual schools are not the only ones responsible for their performance. The public school system as a whole is unable, and sometimes unwilling, to address the root causes of dysfunction.

Districts rapidly introduce piecemeal reforms at low-performing schools but neglect larger issues of human capital and leadership. Restrictive state policies and lack of time or expertise prevent state education agencies from effectively managing district reforms. Significant and sustained interventions, with strong support and oversight from outside of the school, are necessary to interrupt continuous cycles of underperformance.

Federal policy can play an instrumental role in rectifying the systemic failures that allow schools to flounder. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or ESEA, is a ripe opportunity to revise the law's main program that supports school improvement—the School Improvement Grant fund.

Therefore, we make four recommendations:

- Target dollars to high-need schools and districts ready to reform so that limited federal dollars make the greatest impact
- Use in-depth data to identify the interventions that districts and schools should implement to achieve maximum results
- Build the capacity of states to support school-level reform
- Construct sensible evaluation, reporting, and accountability policies that support substantial school turnaround

We agree with critics that some aspects of the current School Improvement Grant program could be improved to serve the needs of low-performing schools better. But we disagree that school improvement should be left entirely to states, due to the systemic nature of the problem. Thus, some form of school improvement must be part of a reauthorized ESEA. This paper, though not offering definitive answers, lays out clear steps the federal government can take to incentivize school turnaround.

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