



Strategies to Improve Low-performing Schools under the Every Student Succeeds Act

How 3 Districts Found Success Using Evidence-based Practices

By Chelsea Straus and Tiffany Miller March 2016

Introduction and summary

Almost six years ago, Terry Grier, former superintendent of the Houston Independent School District, or HISD, faced a challenge that district leaders across the country confront each year: how to dramatically improve student achievement in the lowest-performing schools. Texas state law offered Grier four options to turn around nine low-performing secondary schools in the Houston school district: allow a charter management organization to reopen the schools; implement programmatic changes; close the schools entirely; or reconstitute the schools. Wanting to demonstrate that it is possible to improve failing schools within the constraints of the traditional public school system, Grier chose the final option.¹

In a recent interview, Grier said he immediately realized that he could not undertake a school improvement initiative alone. He shared his concerns with a friend who recommended that he reach out to renowned economist Roland G. Fryer, Jr., who is the youngest African American professor to receive tenure at Harvard—at the age of 30—and is also a MacArthur Fellowship, or “Genius Grant,” recipient.² For Fryer, the work of providing all children the chance to obtain an excellent education is personal. Abandoned by his mother at a young age and raised by an abusive father, Fryer’s life was literally saved by a caring teacher. Today, he is relentless in his determination to close the racial achievement gap and provide all students the chance to succeed.³

As part of his recent research on models of effective schooling, Fryer identified five practices that largely explain significant student achievement gains in high-performing charter schools.⁴ Grier read Fryer’s groundbreaking research and wasted no time in calling him about partnering to tackle the turnaround of HISD’s failing schools.

As fate would have it, Fryer was in Houston when Grier called and the two men decided to meet in person. Fryer was cautious at first. He knew that his research could have a substantial effect on schools, but he found that many district leaders were reluctant to implement such comprehensive reforms. After all, Fryer

understood that implementing his research would require significant political will among district and school leaders, not to mention the dedication and hard work of educators. Sensing Fryer's hesitation, Grier offered this reassurance: "I'm serious. ... We are willing to take this on."⁵

Shortly thereafter, Fryer came to a decision and headed straight to a nearby mall to buy some extra clothing: There was no turning back now, he was staying in Houston. Less than 24 hours after their initial meeting, Fryer and Grier began developing a comprehensive plan to improve student achievement in the district's nine lowest performing secondary schools and 11 underperforming elementary schools. Fryer recalled: "It was the perfect storm between me, who really wanted to do this work and appreciated how hard it was because others [district leaders] were not willing to take the lead, and Terry, who had just inherited several schools that the state was going to take over if he didn't do something."⁶

What came next was the 2010 launch of HISD's Apollo 20 program, the nation's first large-scale effort to implement high-performing charter school practices in a traditional public school environment. Based on Fryer's research on effective schooling models, the Apollo 20 program implemented the following best practices of high-performing charters:

1. Data-driven instruction
2. Excellence in teaching and leadership
3. Culture of high expectations
4. Frequent and intensive tutoring, or so-called high-dosage tutoring
5. Extended school day and year

An evaluation of the Apollo 20 program found that infusing these high-performing charter school best practices into HISD schools had a statistically significant effect on math achievement that rivals student-achievement gains in math of high-performing charter schools.⁷

Following the creation and implementation of the Apollo 20 program, the Denver Public Schools district, or DPS, and Lawrence Public Schools, or LPS, in Massachusetts, also chose to pursue their own similar but customized approach to turning around low-performing schools. Fryer worked with DPS to implement high-performing charter school practices in 10 chronically underperforming schools that comprise the district's Denver Summit Schools Network, or DSSN. LPS pursued a districtwide turnaround that focused on improving schools within the existing structure, but nonetheless employed the high-performing charter best practices.

Each school district operated within a unique context and pursued differing approaches to implementation of their turnarounds. Yet, each district experienced student achievement gains. For example, prior to LPS's school turnaround initiative, the district's math and English language arts, or ELA, proficiency rates fell within the bottom 1 percent of school districts in Massachusetts.⁸ Since the implementation of similar, high-performing charter practices, the district's student math proficiency rate increased 16 percentage points and its ELA proficiency rate increased 4 percentage points.⁹ Likewise, DPS elementary schools in the DSSN increased their math proficiency rate by 18 percentage points and their reading proficiency rate by 11 percentage points over the course of two years.¹⁰

Achieving this success was not easy. All three of the school districts faced significant challenges around the issues of talent, politics, time, and money. Barriers to implementation included recruiting and training exemplary teachers and leaders; securing stakeholder investment, or buy-in; allotting sufficient planning time for the implementation of the high-performing charter practices; and financing the reforms. These sorts of challenges too often dissuade many traditional public schools and districts from attempting to implement comprehensive reforms. However, HISD, DPS, and LPS found a way.

For other districts with low-performing schools, the recent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, presents an opportunity to implement similar comprehensive, evidence-based school improvement strategies. ESSA is the nation's major law governing the K-12 public education system, replacing the outdated No Child Left Behind Act, or NCLB. Under the new law, states and districts are required to provide comprehensive support and improvement to: the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools, high schools that fail to graduate one-third or more of their students, and schools in which subgroups perform at the same level as students in the lowest-performing schools despite local interventions.¹¹

Although the new law requires districts to implement evidence-based interventions in under-performing schools, states and districts have a great deal of discretion in their approach to improving schools. ESSA also provides districts with wide latitude to develop and implement their school improvement plans. This flexibility presents an opportunity for state and local leaders to innovate. As the decisionmaking process gets underway, states and districts should take a closer look at the reform efforts of the Houston, Denver, and Lawrence public schools, which have implemented school-improvement strategies and experienced student achievement gains.

This report documents and analyzes how these three different school districts overcame significant obstacles to implement strategies and ultimately produce outcomes that many believed were only achievable in high-performing charter schools. Further, this report highlights the policy context and external partnerships that enabled the success of each district’s school improvement plan. Finally, this report offers evidenced-based examples of school improvement that states and districts should consider as they start to implement ESSA.

This study has two goals: to obtain a better understanding of the strategies that led to successful implementation of these practices in many schools in Houston, Denver, and Lawrence, and to identify key themes across each school district that could help other district and school leaders achieve similar results.

The authors selected seven schools across the three districts for more in-depth study. For these seven schools the authors collected comprehensive data about the how and why districts and schools pursued certain strategies to overcome turnaround implementation obstacles related to the five practices. The sample of schools was purposeful. The authors examined the student achievement data of each school included in the turnaround initiatives—and in LPS, each traditional public school in the district—to select schools that have made notable academic gains since implementing these practices. In each district and school, the authors conducted interviews with the key stakeholders, including district superintendents, school leaders, external partner organizations, union leaders, school board members, and district staff. From that effort came the following findings, referred to in the report as lessons learned:

- **More planning time results in a smoother implementation process.** While time can be a significant obstacle to implementing these practices, districts and external partners examined in this report worked swiftly to plan and implement practices associated with high-performing charter schools. However, it became clear that allotting at least one year for planning eases the implementation process.
- **Districts used school-level budgeting and strategically reallocated funds based on student needs.** School-level budgeting was integral in two ways. First, it ensured that school leaders were able to fill teaching positions that best fit student needs. Second, it allowed school leaders to tailor implemented practices to a particular school.

- **Districts, school leaders, and external partners aggressively recruited, hired, and trained innovative teachers and leaders.** These school leaders would be able to use their autonomy to effectively infuse high-performing charter school practices into low-performing schools. School leaders then identified and hired teachers who are resilient, hardworking, and dedicated, and also able to work with diverse populations, have a thorough understanding of high-quality instruction, and maintain high expectations for students.
- **Data and word-of-mouth are powerful tools for obtaining stakeholder investment.** Parents and other stakeholders who share details about school reforms and improvements in everyday conversations are the most effective at convincing stakeholders that implementing high-performing charter school practices is an effective school improvement strategy.
- **High-performing charter school practices spread throughout districts.** Practices associated with high-performing charter schools are no longer confined to only targeted underperforming schools in Houston and Denver. The success experienced by the schools implementing the best practices and the resulting student achievement gains sparked the Houston and Denver districts to expand data-driven instruction and tutoring to many of their schools.

The above key findings, as well as an analysis of interview data, inspired the following recommendations:

- **States should use the new 7 percent set-aside fund under Title I, Part A of ESSA to implement a targeted strategy focused on a subset of the lowest-performing schools.** Spreading the money among all schools that have been identified as low-performing will not yield enough funding per school to significantly support aggressive improvement strategies. Instead, states should employ a targeted strategy, such as a sequencing approach that begins with schools facing similar challenges or those that are geographically close to each other.
- **Districts should give leaders of schools identified for improvement greater autonomy over school budgets and spending.** As districts create school improvement plans for low-performing schools under ESSA, it is key that school leaders are provided the autonomy to craft school budgets and spend funds based on their school's needs.

- **Districts should give school leaders hiring autonomy.** In creating ESSA school improvement plans, districts should provide school leaders with hiring autonomy over their teaching staff. School leaders should use the recruitment and hiring practices employed by high-performing charter schools, including the use of data to drive hiring decisions of teaching staff. These practices include screening applicants for their resilience, work ethic, high expectations for students, effect on student learning, past achievement, and leadership.
- **Districts should implement intensive leadership and teacher training programs that resemble professional development provided to high-performing charter school leaders and teachers.** High-performing charter schools' leadership training programs differ from professional development in most public schools in that they train principals to be sophisticated consumers of data and to use data analysis to improve instruction; teach school leaders how to perform observations and provide actionable feedback; and help principals learn how to tackle administrative concerns, such as managing budgets and student enrollment.¹²
- **District leaders should plan and conduct town halls, church events, and meetings with parents and other stakeholders to secure community investment—buy-in—early in the turnaround process.** While school leaders and districts may choose different approaches to securing stakeholder investment, developing a cohesive communications strategy must be a key priority from the start of the planning process so that community members understand the impetus behind implementing these practices.

The Houston, Denver, and Lawrence school districts were trailblazers in implementing a suite of new reforms within the constraints of a traditional public school system. If other districts follow the lead of these three innovative districts, they, too, could realize dramatic student achievement gains. It is our sincere hope that district and school leaders contemplating similar comprehensive reforms will use this report as a resource to avoid obstacles as they seek to successfully navigate the implementation process and set the structure to improve low-performing schools under ESSA.

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