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REAL ACCOUNTABILITY, REAL RESULTS

A PENNCAN ISSUE BRIEF

REAL ACCOUNTABILITY, REAL RESULTS

THE PATH TO IMPROVING PENNSYLVANIA'S LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

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Introduction

Pennsylvania is home to many high-performing districts and schools that are meeting the needs of their students and families. We see evidence of this in Pennsylvania's NAEP scores, which exceed both the national average, as well as those of neighboring states.[1] Even in districts with a high proportion of low-income students, there are many schools that dispel the myth that poverty is an overwhelming barrier to academic success.

Unfortunately, Pennsylvania is also home to many schools that are not adequately preparing students for success in life. Tens of thousands of students are in schools where they don't have access to the same opportunities and results. For most of these students, there are no options beyond their struggling neighborhood school. In 2012–2013, taxpayers spent $1.6 billion on Pennsylvania's lowest-performing five percent of schools.

Despite this tremendous investment, only 28 percent of students enrolled in these schools passed the state math exam. Furthermore, in the lowest-performing five percent of high schools, students are ten times more likely to drop out than to pass the state math exam.[2] In fact, nearly half of these students do eventually drop out, costing taxpayers $5.8 billion over their lifetimes.[3] Additionally, remedial college coursework, necessary because of the failure of our public schools to appropriately educate our students in Kindergarten through twelfth grade, costs Pennsylvania $153 million each year.[4]

Fortunately, solutions and proven models have emerged across the country that we can learn from and replicate here in Pennsylvania to address the dire situation faced by so many of our students. It's time for Pennsylvania to examine those lessons and make changes for our students.

Even small improvements can have a transformative effect on a school system. If just the student retention rate in the lowest-performing five percent of schools rose to the state average of 84 percent, 13,000 more students would graduate from high school. This change alone would save taxpayers $3.7 billion and these kids would eventually earn $4 billion more in their lifetimes.[5]

This report explores success stories from Massachusetts, Tennessee and Louisiana that could inform new state intervention policies in Pennsylvania and concludes with recommendations for Pennsylvania's own transformational success story.

1 "NAEP Data Explorer," National Center for Education Statistics, accessed February 5, 2015, *http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/dataset.aspx*.

2 Calculated by Philadelphia School Advocacy Partners using paschoolperformance.org.

3 The average high school dropout costs taxpayers $292,000 in lower tax revenues, higher cash and in-kind transfer costs and incarceration costs compared to a high school graduate. Source: Andrew Sum, Ishwar Khatiwada, Joseph McLaughlin and Sheila Palma, "The Consequences of Dropping Out of High School: Joblessness and Jailing for High School Dropouts and the High Cost for Taxpayers," Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University, October 2009, p. 15, accessed February 13, 2015, *http://www.northeastern.edu/clms/wp-content/uploads/The_Consequences_of_Dropping_Out_of_High_School.pdf*. $5.8 billion figure calculated by Philadelphia School Advocacy Partners using this data and data from paschoolperformance.org.

4 "Saving Now and Saving Later: How High School Reform Can Reduce the Nation's Wasted Remediation Dollars," Alliance for Excellent Education, May 2011, p. 9, accessed February 13, 2015, *http://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/SavingNowSavingLaterRemediation.pdf*.

5 Calculated by Philadelphia School Advocacy Partners using paschoolperformance.org and: Maggie Monrad, "High School Dropout: A Quick Stats Fact Sheet," National High School Center, American Institutes for Research, September 2007, accessed February 13, 2015, *http://www.betterhighschools.org/docs/nhsc_dropoutfactsheet.pdf*.

Case Studies

1

Massachusetts

In 2010, Massachusetts passed An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap. This legislation provided the Office of District and School Turnaround in the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education with the authority to take over both schools and districts.

The Act gives the commissioner of education the authority to assign "Level 4" status to certain underperforming schools that are already among the lowest-performing 20 percent of schools statewide ("Level 3" schools).[6] This status can be assigned to both schools and entire districts.[7] With assistance and oversight from the Office of District and School Turnaround, the district superintendent must design and implement a school turnaround plan for the Level 4 schools or district.[8] If a school does not improve, it may be designated as "chronically underperforming" and assigned Level 5 status. The commissioner designs a turnaround plan for the Level 5 school and may allow the district to implement the turnaround plan or may select a third party receiver to operate the school and implement the turnaround plan.[9]

The Louisiana and Tennessee intervention models rely heavily on collaboration with charter school operators, while the Massachusetts law provides us with a glimpse of the positive results that can be achieved through a different approach–allowing schools to remain under district control. With three years of data now available, several key turnaround principles have emerged as crucial to the success of schools that have seen significant achievement gains. These include:

- granting schools and districts autonomy from restrictive hiring and retention policies (which did require union negotiations);
- targeting the leadership development of key school leaders;
- devoting higher percentages of funding to high-quality, direct instruction that is targeted at individual students' needs; and
- reorganizing district staff to work directly with specific school personnel at struggling schools.[10]

Among schools that adhered closely to these principles and saw achievement gains, the results are impressive. Fourteen of the original 34 schools that were Level 4 in 2010 have made substantial progress toward closing achievement gaps and have exited Level 4 status.[11] Several schools narrowed achievement gaps by more than 20 points.[12] Collaboration between unionized teachers and district officials has

6 "Methodology for identifying Level 3 and Level 4 schools," Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of District and School Turnaround, September 2013, accessed February 11, 2015, *http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/accountability/2013/MethodologyL3-4.pdf*.

7 "Guidance for Level 4 Districts: Focused Planning for Accelerated Student Learning," Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of District and School Turnaround, June 2013, accessed February 11, 2015, *http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/sss/turnaround/level4/guidance-L4.pdf*.

8 "Description of M.G.L. Ch. 69, Section 1J: An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap Process for "Underperforming" Schools," Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of District and School Turnaround, October 2011, accessed February 11, 2015, *http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/sss/turnaround/level4/CH69S1J_summary.pdf*.

9 "Frequently Asked Questions: Level 5 Schools," Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of District and School Turnaround, accessed February 11, 2015, *http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/sss/turnaround/level5/schools/FAQ.html*.

10 "Turnaround Practices in Action," Institute for Strategic Leadership and Learning, pp. i-ii, accessed January 30, 2015, *http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/sss/turnaround/2014PracticesReport.pdf*.

11 Ibid., p. 3.

12 The achievement gaps referenced in the report are based on the Composite Performance Index (CPI), "a measure of the extent to which schools have closed achievement gaps between students in their own schools and the state average." "Turnaround Practices in Action," Institute for Strategic Leadership and Learning, pp. 3-4.

been a key part of the turnaround process in many of these schools and Randi Weingarten, AFT President, has praised these efforts.[13] Among the schools that have exited Level 4 status, an overwhelming majority requested the continuation of the following authorities and autonomies:

- budget,
- staffing,
- scheduling,
- curriculum flexibility,
- expanded time, and
- increased planning time, collaboration and professional development.[14]

13 "Weingarten tour highlights school partnerships that work," American Federation of Teachers, September 10, 2014, accessed February 4, 2015, *http://www.aft.org/news/weingarten-tour-highlights-school-partnerships-work*.

14 "Turnaround Practices in Action," Appendix C.

Tennessee

Developed as part of Tennessee's *Race to the Top* plan, the state enacted legislation in January 2010 that gave the commissioner of education the authority to create a special school district focused on turning the bottom five percent of schools into high-achievers (in the top 25 percent of schools statewide) within five years.[15]

The Achievement School District has its own superintendent, selected by the commissioner, and either directly manages its schools or contracts out to charter operators. While eligibility was initially limited to the bottom five percent of Title I schools ("Priority" schools), the state's 2012 ESEA waiver now requires that all schools be held to the same accountability standards, not just those that receive Title I funds.[16]

Schools must remain in the ASD for a minimum of five years and cannot be returned to their Local Education Agency until they demonstrate the required improvement. When a school is eligible to return to its LEA, parents can choose to keep the school in the ASD for as long as the LEA is designated as in need of improvement.[17] Notwithstanding these statutory requirements, however, the state commissioner of education has the authority to remove a school from the ASD's jurisdiction at any time.[18]

Whether schools in the ASD are charter- or district-operated, administrators have broad flexibility in the areas of hiring, leadership development, professional development, curriculum, scheduling and community outreach. Currently, five of the ASD schools are district-operated, showing that chartering is not the only intervention to address low-performing schools.[19]

15 "Redefining the School District in Tennessee," Nelson Smith, April 2013, accessed January 30, 2015, *http://www.edexcellence.net/publications/redefining-the-school-district-in-tennessee.html*.

16 Ibid., p. 12.

17 Tenn. Code 49-1-614(k)(1).

18 Tenn. Code 49-1-614(k)(3).
19 "Achievement School District Fact Sheet", Achievement School District, accessed February 11, 2015, *http://achievementschooldistrict.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/ASD-Fact-Sheet.pdf*.
20 "Achievement School District Fact Sheet."

At the conclusion of the 2013–2014 school year, the ASD oversaw 17 schools[20] and saw tremendous results across the district. Serving a student population that is 96 percent black and 94 percent low-income, the district saw faster growth than the state average in reading and math. Six schools were no longer in the bottom-performing 10 percent of schools statewide, and 86 percent of parents graded their child's school an A or a B.[21] By 2015–2016, there will be 30 ASD schools serving nearly 10,000 students.[22]

Louisiana

In May 2003, Louisiana established the Recovery School District to take over and manage the state's chronically low-performing schools.[23] Performance gains in the RSD have been dramatic over the last decade, and the RSD serves as a valuable model for what may be possible for other states across the country.

The Louisiana Department of Education administers the RSD[24] and schools may be placed in the RSD if they receive an F letter grade for four consecutive years.[25] Rather than utilizing a central office model where most decisions affecting schools are made at the district level, the RSD allows greater autonomy at the school level. School officials are given control over staffing, school management, budgeting and curriculum.[26] Currently, the RSD oversees 75 autonomous charter schools: 63 in New Orleans and 12 in East Baton Rouge and Caddo parishes.[27] As of the 2014–2015 school year, the RSD is the only all-charter school district in the country.[28]

Working under a model of increased autonomy at the school level, the RSD New Orleans schools led the state in performance growth on the 2013 state exams and demonstrated the largest performance growth in the state over the past several years.[29]

Although 94 percent of the students attending RSD schools in New Orleans qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, their rate of academic improvement has outpaced the state average since 2008 and the proficiency gap between New Orleans and the state average has decreased from 32 percentage points in 2008 to 12 percentage points in 2014. Across the city, ACT scores are up, results for students with disabilities are improving, and black student performance in New Orleans is now higher than the overall state average for black students.[30]

21 "Achievement School District: Year Two Results," Achievement School District, accessed January 30, 2015, *http://bit.ly/1DwHrJi*.
22 "Seven New Schools to Join the ASD Next School Year," Achievement School District, accessed January 30, 2015, *http://achievementschooldistrict.org/new-asd-schools/*.
23 "Transforming Public Education in New Orleans: The Recovery School District," Tulane University, Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives, pp. 1 & 34, accessed January 30, 2015, *http://www.coweninstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/History-of-the-RSD-Report-2011.pdf*.
24 Administration of the district is subject to approval of the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. See, Louisiana Revised Statutes, Title 17, Section 1990 A(2), accessed February 11, 2015, *http://www.legis.la.gov/legis/Law.aspx?d=211794*. The State Superintendent of Education names the leader of the RSD. See, "Transforming Public Education in New Orleans: The Recovery School District."
25 "2013 Recovery School District Annual Report," Recovery School District, p.1, accessed January, 30, 2015, *http://bit.ly/17hJJhI*. The school's letter grade is based on school level results on the annual state test for elementary schools, assessment scores and 9th grade credits for middle schools, and a combination of assessment scores (ACT and state tests) and graduation metrics (AP and IB results and cohort graduation rates) for high schools. See "School Letter Grades," Louisiana Department of Education, *http://www.louisianabelieves.com/accountability/school-letter-grades*.
26 "RSD Charter School," Recovery School District, accessed January 30, 2015, *http://www.rsdla.net/apps/pages/index.jsp?uRECID=195276&type=d&termREC_ID=&pREC_ID=396824*.
27 "Enrollment," Recovery School District, accessed February 11, 2015, *http://bit.ly/1whHQ0b*.
28 Danielle Dreillinger, "Recovery School District will be country's first all-charter district in September 2014," New Orleans Times-Picayune, accessed February 11, 2015, *http://www.nola.com/education/index.ssf/2013/12/recovery_school_district_will_3.html*.
29 "RSD Schools in New Orleans Show Highest Growth in 2013 State Tests," Recovery School District, accessed January 30, 2015, *http://www.rsdla.net/apps/news/show_news.jsp?REC_ID=273983&id=0*.
30 "Recovery School District 2014 Annual Report," p. 4, Recovery School District, accessed January 30, 2015, *http://lrsd.entest.org/2014%20RSD%20Annual%20Report.pdf*.

Pennsylvania context

2

In recent years, Pennsylvania has attempted to provide options for students enrolled in schools that are falling short of serving all students well. These efforts include:

- **The Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit:** For the 2013–2014 school year, the OSTC provided over $17 million in scholarships for low-income students to attend private and parochial schools. To qualify, these students must live in the catchment area of the lowest-performing 15 percent of schools.[31]
- **The ESEA Waiver:** As part of its federal waiver, The Pennsylvania Department of Education is required to identify the lowest-performing five percent of Title I schools and provide support services to boost student achievement.[32]
- **The Fiscally Distressed Schools Bill:** In June 2012, Governor Corbett signed a law giving the state the authority to appoint a chief recovery officer to intervene in school districts that fail to meet a stress test of fiscal performance, such as an inability to make payroll. Chief recovery officers have already been appointed in Chester, Harrisburg, York, and Duquesne City.

Each of these initiatives is making a difference, but falling short of the goal of ensuring that the $1.6 billion spent on the lowest performing five percent of schools is optimized. The OSTC is a popular program, but it is both small in scope (in 2013–2014, only 7,601 scholarships were awarded),[33] and does little to improve the low performing schools the vast majority of eligible students attend. The Pennsylvania Department of Education drafted a waiver to *No Child Left Behind* as an act of compliance with federal law, but has demonstrated very little interest in aggressively improving schools they identify as the lowest-performing five percent of schools. Finally, the primary focus of the Fiscally Distressed Schools Bill, as its name suggests, is restoring a district to solvency, not improving student achievement.

Perhaps the most successful example of an effort similar to those highlighted above is in Philadelphia. Beginning in 2010, the School Reform Commission transferred management of some low performing schools to charter management organizations. Independent studies conducted by Research for Action and the School District of Philadelphia's Office of Research and Evaluation have confirmed its early success.[34] In the Renaissance schools, retention rates are up, serious discipline incidents are down and math and reading proficiency have increased (when there was an overall decline district-wide).[35]

31 "Pennsylvania: Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit Program," The Friedman Foundation, accessed February 3, 2015, *http://www.edchoice.org/School-Choice/The-ABCs-of-School-Choice/PA---Opportunity-Scholarship-Tax-Credit-Program*.
32 "ESEA Flexibility Request from Pennsylvania," U.S. Department of Education, July 2013, pp. 67-76, accessed February 11, 2015, *http://www2.ed.gov/policy/eseaflex/approved-requests/pareq82013.pdf*.

33 "Pennsylvania: Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit Program."

34 "Philadelphia's Renaissance Schools: Start Up and Early Implementation Executive Summary, May 2011," Research for Action, accessed February 5, 2015, *http://bit.ly/1DF0eAP*; "The School District of Philadelphia Renaissance Schools Initiative Progress Report, December 2013," The Office of Research and Evaluation, accessed February 5, 2015, *http://bit.ly/1DF0gsl*.
35 "The School District of Philadelphia Renaissance Schools Initiative Progress Report, December 2013," pp. 8, 12-14.

Recommendations

3

The Pennsylvania Department of Education is already required by law to annually identify "Priority" schools, defined as the bottom five percent of Title I schools. By using Priority schools as a starting point, districts that oversee these schools should be granted a broad array of powers to intervene. Based on current research and the results seen in the states highlighted throughout this report, Pennsylvania should strongly consider enacting the following policy changes:

- Create an independent entity tasked solely with providing oversight of the transformation of struggling schools.
- Grant this entity the flexibility and autonomy to:
  - select the schools most appropriate for intervention,
  - authorize charter schools,[36]
  - close failing schools, and
  - manage leadership development, school staffing, curriculum, scheduling and budgets in schools that remain under the entity's control.
- Allow charter school authorizers to revoke or non-renew charters if schools are designated as Priority schools for multiple years.

We should also acknowledge and learn from other states, like Michigan, where efforts to transform the lowest-performing schools have hit implementation snags.[37] Pennsylvania should be sure to:

- Ensure the entity has adequate staffing capacity to handle the number of schools in its portfolio,
- Allow appropriate phase-in time for the policy to ensure it's implemented with fidelity,
- Allow only high-quality charter operators with a proven track record of success to assume control of schools and actively recruit those operators to the state (for example, by ensuring they will receive fair funding), and
- Ensure a great leader with a proven track record of success is assigned to lead the entity.

By enacting this narrow list of changes, Pennsylvania can begin to chart the course toward improving our lowest-performing schools, just as Massachusetts, Tennessee and Louisiana have been able to do.

36 Partnering with external organizations, such as the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), can help districts establish a high quality and rigorous authorizing process to ensure that only applicants likely to succeed are approved.

37 Nelson Smith, "Redefining the School District in Michigan," Thomas B. Fordham Institute (October 2014), pp. 16 & 28-29, *http://edex.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/publication/pdfs/Redefining-the-School-District-in-Michigan-FINAL.pdf*.

Conclusion

It is no longer a question of whether or not state intervention is a viable solution for turning around struggling schools. Evidence continues to build in support of state intervention as we continue to see the positive impact state entities in Massachusetts, Tennessee and Louisiana have had on student achievement across all demographics. The need is great, and there are models to follow and lessons to be learned from other states across the country. It's time for Pennsylvania to embrace this opportunity and create the next great system of public schools for our kids.

School accountability models at a glance

	MA (2010)	TN (2010)	LA (2003)
Governor (at the time the legislation passed)[38]	D	D	R
Legislative Control (at the time the legislation was passed)[39]	D	R	D
Targets which schools?	Level 4 & 5 Schools	Priority Schools	F Letter Grade Schools
Can authorize charter schools?	No; but some Level 5 receivers are CMOs[40]	Yes	Yes
Currently manages how many schools	35 Level 4 schools and 4 Level 5 schools ('14–'15)[41]	30 ('15–'16)	75 ('14–'15)
How is it funded? (in addition to traditional per pupil funding)	Federal SIG grant; state Bridge Grants and School Redesign Grants[42]	RTTT startup funding, private donations, federal SIG and Investing in Innovation grants[45]	Federal and private disaster-relief funds; philanthropic donations; federal Teacher Incentive Fund, Investing in Innovation, and SIG grant programs
School level autonomy? (staffing, budget, curriculum, etc.)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Authority to close schools?	Yes[43]	Yes[46]	Yes[48]
Governance	State office helps advise district leaders with Level 4 schools, turnaround plans must be approved by the commissioner; the commissioner sets the turnaround plan for Level 5 schools[44]	District superintendent reports directly to state commissioner of education[47]	Superintendent reports directly to the State Superintendent of Education, who reports to the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education[49]

38 Governors: Former Governors' Bios," National Governors Association, accessed February 6, 2015, *http://www.nga.org/cms/FormerGovBios*.
39 Partisan Composition of State Legislatures 2002-2014," National Conference of State Legislatures, accessed February 6, 2015, *http://bit.ly/1EpdHNF*.
40 Staff Interview, February 5, 2015, Office of District and School Turnaround, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.
41 Staff Interview, February 5, 2015, Office of District and School Turnaround, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.
42 "Turnaround Practices in Action," Institute for Strategic Leadership and Learning, Appendix B, accessed January 30, 2015, *http://bit.ly/1EK8GNP*.
43 See, e.g., "2014 Turnaround Plan Directions & Guidance," p. 21, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, accessed February 23, 2015, http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/sss/turnaround/level4/Guidance.pdf
44 "An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap," Massachusetts Laws, accessed February 6, 2015, *http://1.usa.gov/1whKhzY*.
45 "Redefining the School District in Tennessee," Nelson Smith, April 2013, pages 15-16, accessed January 30, 2015, *http://bit.ly/1BgVClB*.
46 "Redefining the School District in Tennessee," Nelson Smith, April 2013, page 8, accessed January 30, 2015, *http://bit.ly/1BgVClB*.
47 "Redefining the School District in Tennessee," Nelson Smith, April 2013, page 7, accessed January 30, 2015, *http://bit.ly/1BgVClB*.
48 "Transforming Public Education in New Orleans: The Recovery School District," Tulane University, Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives, accessed January 30, 2015, *http://bit.ly/17sdyfk*.
49 "The Louisiana Recovery School District: Lessons for the Buckeye State," Thomas B. Fordham Institute, page 8, *http://bit.ly/1a8cclg*.

About PennCAN

PennCAN: The Pennsylvania Campaign for Achievement Now launched in the Spring of 2012 as an education reform advocacy organization building a movement of Pennsylvanians with the political will to enact smart public policies so that every Pennsylvania child has access to a high-quality education regardless of their address. We are a branch of 50CAN: The 50-State Campaign for Achievement Now, a growing national network of state-based education reform advocacy groups with campaigns in Rhode Island, Minnesota, New York, Maryland, New Jersey and North Carolina.

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