



# IMPROVING PENNSYLVANIA'S LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS:

## WHY GOVERNOR WOLF'S PROPOSAL IS NOT REAL ACCOUNTABILITY

### *York City School District should NOT serve as a model*

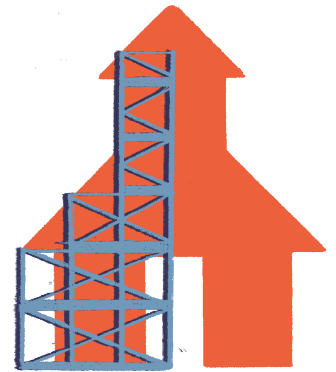
In 2012, Governor Corbett declared York City School District in financial distress and appointed David Meckley as the Chief Recovery Officer. Meckley's recovery plan included sweeping changes to school governance and collective bargaining agreements. Prior to implementation, Tom Wolf was elected Governor and announced his opposition to the plan, leading to Meckley's resignation.

Governor Wolf appointed Carol Saylor as the new Chief Recovery Officer and promised a new direction. The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) spent \$140,000 to hire Mass Insight, a Boston-based non-profit, to complete a diagnostic audit of the district. Mass Insight published the 63-page report in July 2015. Based on the recommendations, the Chief Recovery Officer was supposed to begin creating a 90-day plan and submit an amendment to the 2013 recovery plan.

As of February 2016, PDE has still not made the updated recovery plan publicly available.

Based on media reports, the efforts to implement the plan so far include:

- Hiring a communications officer to improve the district's social media presence;
- Extending the superintendent's contract for three years with a 2.5% salary increase; and
- Forming a committee to discuss the overhaul of the curriculum, which is not yet finished.



Meanwhile, York City School District continues to struggle both academically and financially. In July, the district's bond rating was downgraded to junk status. On the most recent state test, less than a quarter of its students were proficient in reading.

*“Implementation of comprehensive recovery plan for York City School District will serve as model for Pennsylvania's low-performing school districts.”*

—PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
“GOVERNOR WOLF'S 2016-17 EDUCATION BUDGET PROPOSAL; RESTORING FUNDING, EXPANDING OPPORTUNITY BRIEFING”

***The Research is Clear: School improvement plans (SIP) are often poor quality, not implemented with fidelity and are more likely to become compliance documents than catalysts for real change.***

*“...unless accompanied by true commitment to change and resources to enable such change, planning has been found to lead less to reform and more to compliance activities.”<sup>1</sup>*

**1** Strunk, K., Marsh, J., Bush-Mecenas, S., & Duque, M. (2015), “The Best Laid Plans: An Examination of School Plan Quality and Implementation in a School Improvement Initiative,” *Educational Administration Quarterly*, pp. 5-6, DOI: 10.1177/0013161X15616864 (citing Levine & Leibert, 1987; Mintrop et al., 2001).

*“...school improvement planning processes have not been conceived in ways likely to produce desired learning outcomes for many students.”<sup>2</sup>*

**2** “School improvement planning: What’s missing?,” Center for Mental Health in Schools, UCLA, p. i, <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/schoolimprovement/whatsmissing.pdf>.

*“[R]esearch shows that SIPs produced in education settings are often overly optimistic, unrealistic, and lacking in necessary strategy and implementation details.”<sup>3</sup>*

**3** Strunk, et. al, p. 5 (citing (Broadhead, Cuckle, Hodgson, & Dunford, 1996; Clark & McCarthy, 1983; Conley, 1993; Levine & Leibert, 1987).

***Real Accountability in Action:  
Case-Study: Union Hill Elementary School,  
Worcester, MA***

In 2010, Massachusetts passed An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap. This law provided the state with the authority to take over both schools and districts. The Act gave the commissioner of education the authority to assign Level 4 status to underperforming schools that are among the lowest 20% of the schools statewide. With assistance from the state, the principal must design and implement a school turnaround plan. If a school does not improve, it may be designated Level

5 status, which allows a third party receiver to operate the school.

In 2010, Marie Morse became principal of Union Hill Elementary, where 98% of students qualify for free or reduced price lunch. At the time it was a Level 4 (lowest performing) school. She developed and implemented a comprehensive implementation plan that included intentional changes to school culture, authentic community engagement, curriculum planning and common planning time for teachers, and hiring a wraparound zone coordinator to manage nonacademic supports. Within three years, the school became a Level 1 (top performing) school.

**AT PENNCAN, WE SUPPORT MORE MONEY FOR SCHOOLS BUT ONLY IF IT IS PAIRED WITH REAL PLANS FOR IMPROVEMENT.**

