



School Improvement Grants: Ransoming Title I Schools in Distress

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Abstract

In August 2009, the U.S. Department of Education announced opportunities for states and local educational agencies to vie for \$3.5 billion in Title I School Improvement Grants targeted at turning around or closing down chronically low-achieving schools. To qualify for a portion of these funds, school districts were required to implement one of four remedies at schools where students chronically demonstrated low academic performance. Evidence is provided showing that the mandated interventions are highly speculative, minimally effective, and overly punitive toward educational professionals.

Keywords: school improvement grants, low-achieving schools, Title I schools, school turnaround, charter schools

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Current Issues in Education

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School Improvement Grants: Ransoming Title I Schools in Distress

In August 2009, the U.S. Department of Education announced opportunities for states and local educational agencies to vie for \$3.5 billion in Title I School Improvement Grants targeted at “turning around or closing down chronically low-achieving schools” (Abrevaya & White, 2009, p. 1). To qualify for a portion of these funds, school districts are required to implement one of four remedies at those low-income schools that ranked in the bottom 5% on the state’s annual achievement test. The press release described the required “rigorous interventions” as follows:

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.

Restart Model – School districts would close failing schools and reopen them under the management of a charter school operator, a charter management organization or an educational management organization selected through a rigorous review process.

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.

Transformational Model – Districts would address four specific areas:

- 1) developing teacher and school leader effectiveness, which includes replacing the principal who led the school prior to commencement of the transformational model,
 - 2) implementing comprehensive instructional reform strategies,
 - 3) extending learning and teacher planning time and creating community-oriented schools, and
 - 4) providing operating flexibility and sustained support
- (Abrevaya & White, 2009, p. 1).

The well-intentioned remedies mandated by the U.S. Department of Education are highly speculative, minimally effective, and overly punitive toward educational professionals. The mandate has two major shortcomings:

1. This legislation falsely assumes that student learning is wholly under the control of the school system, holding teachers and administrators exclusively responsible for inadequate student achievement.
2. The mandated “rigorous” interventions are arbitrary and unsupported by solid scientific evidence.

The legislation’s first presumption is that the nation’s children are being “underserved” by the “lowest-achieving public schools.” Achievement levels are based on rank-order comparisons rather than specific criteria. This is a zero-sum formula, where one out of every twenty schools must be labeled as failing. There is no level of mastery or yardstick of competency that a “low-achieving” school can demonstrate to exonerate itself. Therefore, it is statistically inevitable that one-twentieth of Title I or Title I-eligible schools will have students whose standardized test scores rank in the bottom 5%; just as some schools must place in the upper echelon, some must place near the bottom when relative comparisons are made. Ironically, the vision of school improvement has shifted from No Child Left Behind to Some Schools Must Be Failures. Under the “lowest-achieving” philosophy some Title I(-eligible) schools must be labeled as defective. For example, if a state has 1,000 Title-I(-eligible) schools, 50 of them (5%) will be designated as low-achieving and there is nothing that anyone can do to change that fact. The standard being put into place now is that the lowest ranking schools are considered unmitigated failures, and the presumption is that those schools are deficient primarily due to the faculty. Some of the schools at the back of the pack will be closed, others will be reincarnated as charter schools, and the remaining will be whipped into shape through teacher churn and metamorphosis.

“Low-achieving” schools typically have high student drop-out rates, students with subpar standardized test scores, high absentee rates, acute classroom management challenges and myriad other indicators of academic deficiency. Some of the teachers and school administration may be partially culpable for inadequate student progress, as gauged by standardized test scores. However, the School Improvement Grant program presumes that the majority of the school personnel are guilty of malfeasance simply by virtue of their presence in a low-achieving school setting.

Under the U.S. Department of Education’s plan, one-twentieth of Title I(-eligible) schools must be considered failures. Further, the rationale for determining badness is the premise that when students’ test scores are bad the schools are bad. However, this assumption that the lowest results are always the result of bad faculty is problematic. Lashway (2003) identified three primary causes of school failure: Demographics, inefficient resources, and ineffective school practices. Attributing school failures to the latter cause is arbitrary. Teachers in low-performing schools are denied due process when they are terminated en mass, without regard to individual teacher performance. School Improvement Grants should be geared toward accurately identifying and ameliorating sources of academic inadequacy in teachers, students, parents, and the community.

Testing experts have warned against using a single annual test to gauge academic progress and evaluate teacher effectiveness (Maxwell, 2009). So, “lowest-achieving” designation is based on the speculative selection of one of three causal factors of low test scores, and this factor is assessed contrary to professional advice. Even if the supposed measure of school caliber (i.e., student achievement) is valid and the supposed cause of student achievement

is correct (i.e., school faculty), critical decisions are seldom based on a single piece of evidence (i.e., annual test scores). Consider the following analogies:

1. In 2006-2007, the following hospitals had the highest death rates due to heart failure: Memorial Hospital of Martinsville & Henry County in Martinsville, VA; Valley Hospital Medical Center in Las Vegas, NV; and St. Clare Medical Center in Crawfordsville, IN (Sternberg & DeBarros, 2008). Based solely on the mortality rates for these hospitals, is it reasonable to conclude that the hospitals' staffs are inept?
2. Between 2000 and 2008, Louisiana and North Dakota experienced population declines while every other state saw population growth (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Can this statistic be used to validly conclude that the government and legislature of these two states—in the bottom 5% of population growth—is incompetent and should be disbanded?
3. Based on the FBI's uniform crime report, issued in 2008, Detroit, Memphis, and Miami are America's "most dangerous cities" (Greenburg, 2009). Since the crime rates are high, can one reliably deduce that the cities' police forces are ineffective and that "rigorous interventions" are warranted to fix the police departments (i.e., replacing the chief of police and terminating all of the police officers)?

Rarely should a single metric be used to judge the overall effectiveness of an organization's entire staff, yet this is precisely what the Department of Education has elected to do in classifying schools as "persistently low-achieving." Ironically, this approach is contrary to the department's own long-standing precedents.

For several decades, the U.S. Department of Education attributed academic success to several factors. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Public Law 89-10)—which was the predecessor to the No Child Left Behind Act (Public Law 107-110) and the Obama Administration's School Improvement Grants—begins as follows:

Sec. 201. In recognition of the special educational needs of children of low-income families and the impact that concentrations of low-income families have on the ability of local educational agencies to support adequate educational programs [italics added], the Congress hereby declares it to be the policy of the United States to provide financial assistance (as set forth in this title) to local educational agencies serving areas with concentrations of children from low-income families to expend and improve their educational programs by various means (including preschool programs) which contribute particularly to meeting the special educational needs of educationally deprived children [italics added] (p. 1).

Almost a half-century ago, the U.S. government explicitly acknowledged that “concentrations of low-income families” have “special educational needs.” Why, then, is it surprising that some of these children would continue to underperform their more-privileged peers? More than thirty years later, the Department of Education, under the Clinton administration, reiterated the position that poverty, family distress, crime, and violence impair academic achievement. Here is an excerpt from Turning around low-achieving schools: A guide for state and local leaders (Educational Resources Information Center, 1998):

Many low-achieving schools are located in impoverished communities where family distress, crime, and violence are prevalent. *These and other circumstances make it hard for children to come to school prepared to learn ... students in high-poverty schools may be performing at levels up to four years behind their peers in low-poverty schools* [italics added] (Educational Resources Information Center, 1998, p. 1).

“Low-achieving schools” are not simply the result of bad teaching. By the Department of Education’s own admission, students in Title I(-eligible) schools having “special educational needs” that handicap their academic performance. Some Title I schools may be labeled as “low-achieving” by virtue of their inability to overcome the communities’ socioeconomic liabilities. Teachers are responsible for students’ academic growth, but not solely responsible. Furthermore, the incompetence of some teachers should not be an indictment of an entire schools’ faculty.

Another indication of the effect of the environment on students’ academic success is provided by the Foundation for Child Development (2010). The organization’s Child Wellness Index (CWI) predicts that the current economic downturn (“Great Recession”) will result in lower future scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests and higher school dropout rates. This report forecasts an academic downturn caused by an economic recession, independent of teacher and school quality.

The U.S. Department of Education's contemporary presumption that "low-achieving" schools "underserve" students summarily disregards the social, economical, physiological, and psychological extenuating circumstances that, by definition affect Title I communities. In some cases, "low-achieving" schools may simply be unable to overcome the demographic handicaps of the communities that they serve. This scenario is similar to the analogies presented earlier: hospitals cannot dictate their patients' lifestyle choices, governments cannot control citizens' emigration choices, police departments cannot suspend civil liberties simply because liberties might result in criminal activity, and Title I(-eligible) schools cannot nullify the social and economic liabilities of their impoverished clientele. School Improvement Grants cannot solve all of society's ills, but they should not place the responsibility for academic failure exclusively on the shoulders of teachers and school administrators.

Teachers and school administrators should be held accountable for student achievement, but only insofar as they have the ability to influence student outcomes. Teachers should not be held liable for lack of resources, mandated curriculum materials, mandated pacing guides, placement in non-certificated fields, excessive student absences and truancies, test scores that occurred prior to the teacher's residency, unfunded mandates, and socioeconomic declines. The current incarnation of the School Improvement Grants identifies inadequate educational progress and metes out punishments without regard to culpability. School Improvement Grants are essentially *academic redlining*; the bottom 5% threshold brands a school as anathema and the entire faculty is convicted of guilt by association.

The Department of Education has mistakenly equated "lowest-achieving public schools" with schools that have been unable to leapfrog their students' academic performances beyond the achievements of their socially-advantaged peers. These "lowest-achieving public schools" may

be doing an adequate job under the circumstances. As Diane Ravitch (2010) noted, “Our schools cannot be improved if we use them as society’s all-purpose punching bag, blaming them for the ills of the economy, the burdens imposed on children by poverty, the dysfunction of families, and the erosion of civility” (p. 229). Both educational specialists and experienced politicians across the political spectrum recognize the crucial role of families and “villages” in children’s learning (Clinton, 1996; Santorum, 2005). Conversely, the Department of Education has chosen to heap blame disproportionately on the school’s teachers and administrators.

There are bad schools. There are incompetent, disinterested, *burnt-out*, negligent educators. They should be properly identified, carefully diagnosed, intensely rehabilitated, and if necessary, terminated. However, identification and remediation cannot be based on a simplistic, naïve formula that: a) consists of an annual test with unsubstantiated construct validity, b) disregards all mitigating factors, and c) applies a scorched earth policy.

Even when substandard schools are properly identified the School Improvement Grant’s prescriptions are regressive. In order for a “low-achieving school” to be successful, this “low” school must academically jump ahead of other schools—thus making some sister school the “loser”—by engaging a talented faculty, employing an effective curriculum, and implementing superior instructional strategies. The flaw in this line of reasoning is that it presumes that other schools are not making similar academic improvements. The low-achieving school will only surpass other schools if their counterparts employ less effective faculty, a less rigorous curriculum, and inferior instructional strategies. The low-achieving school cannot simply improve; it must improve more than its peers. Adequate progress is now relative; a low-achieving school must overtake its peers regardless of how much its peers might improve.

School Improvement Grants are predicated on the unsubstantiated assumption that all schools with consistently “low-achieving” students are broken and require “rigorous interventions.” As previously discussed, many environmental factors affect student achievement. Even when deficient schools are properly identified, the government-mandated interventions are unsupported by solid scientific evidence. Each of the proposed interventions will be briefly critiqued.

One of the permissible remedies is School Closure. This intervention seldom makes sense as a mandated recourse. When a school closes, all of its students are moved to other schools within the district. Typically, all tenured faculty are relocated to other positions. Either additional classrooms are opened in target schools and there are few staff reductions, or class sizes increase at the receiving schools. Students and faculty are *shuffled*. *Shuffling* people from school to school does not magically improve their caliber any more than promoting students from second grade to third grade makes them smarter. School closure simply masks the problem of students with low academic performance by camouflaging them among higher-performing peers.

Indeed, research into the School Closure model suggests that this approach is not effective. Marisa de la Torre and Julia Gwynne (2009) studied the effects of eighteen school closures on students in the Chicago Public School system. They concluded that: “Most students who transferred out of closing schools reenrolled in schools that were academically weak” (p. 2); reading and math achievement for the relocated students did not improve one, two, or three years following school closure; students’ high school completion outlook did not improve; and, “Changing schools neither resulted in additional negative effects on student achievement nor substantially improved the achievement of displaced students” (p. 26).

School Closure does not seem to be a worthwhile approach to improving students' academic achievement. When schools close, students and staff are displaced; children are dispersed from their neighborhoods; the connections between the community, the family, and the school are weakened; and academic acceleration does not occur. School Closure is not an effective solution for low academic performance.

A second remedy permitted under the School Improvement Grant legislation is the Restart Model. Under this approach, school districts close failing schools and reopen them under the management of a charter school operator, a charter management organization or an educational management organization (EMO). The fallacy with this approach is a misconception that will be called *The LeBron James Syndrome*. Consider the following scenario. A teacher attempts to emphasize the importance of academic skills in helping students pursue future career opportunities. Invariably, a few students will contend that they do not need these academic skills because they are going to be professional athletes. The teacher argues that most athletes are recruited from college teams and that aspiring athletes will need academic credentials to be admitted into Division 1 colleges. A student retorts that, "LeBron James didn't need to go to college." Hence *The LeBron James Syndrome*: The person suffering from this affliction misinterprets the possibility that an event *can* occur as the probability that an event *will* occur. This line of reasoning is only slightly less radical than subscribing to a state lottery as a retirement plan; one could win a fortune but they probably will not. Conceptually, there is nothing wrong with charter schools; there is simply no compelling evidence that this approach is superior to a public school implementation. The Department of Education misinterprets the possibility that Charter Schools and EMO's *could* be effective as the probability that they *will* be

effective. School vouchers, home schooling, or private school enrollment alternatives *could* be equally-viable options.

A number of educational experts and researchers have questioned the efficacy of charter schools. Here are some of their findings. Fleishman and Heppen (2009) found no “reliable evidence that EMOs [Education Management Organizations] can have a positive impact at the high school level” (p. 125). Buckley and Schneider (2007) concluded that charter schools’ promises are “at best, weakly supported by evidence” (p. 267). The National Center for Education Statistics (2005) found that students in charter schools scored lower on mathematics assessments than their public school counterparts and observed “no measurable difference between the overall performance of charter school fourth-grade students as a whole and their counterparts in other public schools” (p. 10). Interviews of charter school parents indicated that their impressions of their children’s school meshed with those of public school parents, and their children felt “no differently about their schools than their peers in the traditional public schools” (Buckley & Schneider, 2007, p. 269). Finally, an extensive study of 2,403 charter schools across 16 states found that 17% of the charter schools were superior to their traditional public school counterparts, about half of the charter schools provided educational quality similar to that of public schools, and 37% of the charter schools were significantly worse than corresponding public schools (Center for Research in Education Outcomes [CREDO], 2009). Charter schools, in total, fail to live up to their claims and their hype.

There definitely are instances of highly-successful charter schools but there are also numerous instances of inferior charter schools and premier public schools. There is nothing inherent in the charter school implementations that heighten their likelihood of success above that of other school structures. The next charter school to open certainly *could* be a successful

school but, based on the research cited above, there is 83% chance that it will not be any more successful than a traditional public school. In fact, the likelihood that a charter school will be inferior to a public school is more than twice as high as the chances that it will be superior to a public school. Should we invest in a venture that has less than a one-out-of-four chance of success and a large downside? Should we bet our children's educations on those odds? Even if we should choose to take this gamble it should be pointed out that charter schools are prohibited in many communities; state and local regulations do not allow public funds to be allocated to charter schools. For most "low-performing" schools, the Restart Model is either ill-advised or illegal.

The third intervention allowed by the School Improvement Grants legislation is the Turnaround Model. This approach requires that the principal and at least 50 percent of the school's staff be replaced and that the instructional program be revamped. This approach is so ambiguous and speculative that it defies being either supported by or refuted by scientific research. For example, is it a good idea to replace a failing school's principal? Districts typically have wide latitude when dealing with administrators. Why must the U.S. government mandate a principal's reassignment? What basis is there for the presumption that a principal is always guilty when a school's students are "low-achieving"?

Similarly, the requirement to replace "at least 50 percent" of the faculty is completely arbitrary. Statistically, one-half of the faculty is at or below the median, but this says nothing about their competency. There is no scientific basis for presuming that "at least" 50% of a "low-achieving" school's faculty is incompetent. Couldn't two-thirds or three-fourths of the faculty be good? Most faculty members have a minimum of a bachelor's degree, professional certification, and positive employee evaluations. These teachers—who are employees of the Local

Educational Agency (LEA), not employees of the “low-achieving” school—have met all state and LEA employment criteria. Junior faculty may be relegated to these stigmatized schools, and some teachers may be forced to teach subjects for which they are not certificated employees. These employees should not be condemned based solely on their involuntary placement into a struggling school.

Even if we accept the dubious premise that half of the veteran core teachers in “low-achieving” schools are incompetent, what about teachers with less than three years at the school? Should they be held liable for student scores that occurred prior to their arrival at the institution? And what about teachers outside of the core subject areas? For example, art teachers, P.E. teachers, and music teachers have an ancillary impact on standardized test scores in communication arts and mathematics. What criteria will be used to assess their competency when their students span grade levels and core subject area teachers? On what basis are school counselors and other support personnel evaluated, condemned, or exonerated?

The Turnaround Model mandates faculty changes. How will the replacement staff be selected? What reason is there to believe that the replacement teachers will be superior to the faculty that they are replacing? Recall that a median cut-off was part of the “rigorous intervention” mandated by this legislation. Statistically speaking, one-half of the newly-selected teachers will be at or below the median of the new group. Therefore, the turnaround model is placing a new set of subpar teachers into the revamped school (i.e., half of the replacement group will be at or below the median of their group). Perhaps the LEA could circumvent future problems of having half of its staff “below the median” by hiring twice as many replacement teachers as needed and then summarily firing the bottom half of the newly-recruited pool!

Assuming that the displaced faculty can be rehabilitated, the School Improvement Grant legislation has not fully considered the consequences of the mandates on these teachers. Teachers who are “fired” from low-achieving schools will often be reassigned to another school within their district (especially if they are tenured), quite possibly a struggling school with high staff turnover. What happens to this teacher if the target school is designated as “low-achieving” within the following year or two; should this reassigned teacher be held liable for scores that he or she did not affect? The edict that at least half of all teachers must be dismissed disregards many of the nuances of a LEA’s personnel issues, just as the “low-achieving” designation overlooks the characteristics of the school’s community.

Overall, the Turnaround Model seems rather inchoate. Here are just a few of the issues that have been trivialized. Perhaps this is nitpicky, but the word *turnaround* means a reversal in direction. Are “low-achieving” schools always going in the wrong direction, or could it be that they are going in the right direction but at an inadequate pace? It could be that additional supports are required to help the school surmount obstacles. Then there is the issue of principal selection under the Turnaround Model. Unless some ingenious process is implemented it is quite possible that the new principal will be no better than his or her predecessor. The same holds true for the replacement faculty. The Turnaround Model’s ambition to employ better principals, recruit better staff and improve instruction presumes that the existing structure is defective, and that the same people who created the existing structure can “build a better mousetrap” if compelled to do so through federal edict and financial incentive.

The Turnaround Model is a shotgun approach to fixing low-achieving schools by a series of speculative prescriptions aimed at arbitrarily-presumed causes of low student achievement.

The American Education Research Association, a group of more than 25,000 education researchers, agrees that the turnaround model is a highly speculative approach (Vaidero, 2009). The final intervention available under the School Improvement Grant guidelines is the Transformation Model. Two key characteristics of this model are to replace the principal—a recurring theme—and develop “teacher and school leader effectiveness.” Principal replacement in this scenario is equally as dubious as described in the Turnaround Model. Developing teacher and school leader effectiveness includes monetary rewards for teachers based on student achievement. Recent research debunks the assumption that performance-based pay enhances teacher quality (Sawchuk, 2010; Springer et al., 2010). Upon reflection, this should be a fairly self-evident conclusion: Teacher salaries are typically lower than salaries for comparable business opportunities. Unless teacher salaries are commensurate with those of business people—a highly-unlikely scenario—“effective” teachers who are salary-motivated will likely exit the teaching profession despite a nominal incentive pay.

There is an important caveat to the Transformation Model: Many local teacher unions prohibit merit pay, nullifying this option. Sure, some inferior teachers use tenure and pay steps to protect them from well-deserved indictment, but the primary reason for opposition to merit pay in education is that it is very difficult to objectively measure teacher quality. Measuring teacher quality is like assessing beauty. The Transformation Model is ethereal and its implementation is frequently prohibited by union contracts.

Interestingly, the Department of Education’s regulations prohibit the use of the Turnaround Model in more than 50% of the district’s low-achieving schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). One has to wonder under what omniscience the government has divined that the Transformation Model is one of only four viable “rigorous interventions,” interventions that

must be used 100% of the time, but this particular approach cannot be effective in more than 50% of a district's endangered schools. Does incentive pay make sense for one of the district's schools but not for another one? This double-standard could certainly cause friction among the school district's employees.

Through its definition of what constitutes a "low-achieving school," the U.S. Department of Education may have unfairly indicted some institutions by erroneously presuming that all schools with academically sub-par students are defective schools with categorically incompetent or uncaring faculty. Teachers in these schools are victims of professional *profiling* and are at risk of being blacklisted by virtue of their association with a "low-achieving school" (School Improvement Grants mandate that *all* teachers be "fired" and no more than 50% rehired). In actuality, some effective schools may simply be unable to compensate for the socioeconomic liabilities of their clientele. Schools that are erroneously singled out for improvement are then blackmailed into tolerating a litany of harsh, speculative interventions. Here are just a few of the concerns with the interventions expressed by reputable researchers:

- "The [Center on Education Policy] studied what 23 school districts and 48 schools in six states learned during the past five years about improving struggling schools. It found that the five strategies for restructuring under the No Child Left Behind Act, the current version of the ESEA, did not offer much help to schools that were trying to improve after five or more years of failing to make adequate yearly progress under the law" (Gewertz, 2009, p. 10).
- "Federal restructuring strategies have not shown promise, and all six states in our studies have moved away from these options" (Caitlin, 2009, p. 2).
- "Experience with these sorts of remedies outside the NCLB context provides little cause to believe that they reliably yield heightened student achievement or school improvement" (Hess & Finn, 2007, p. 317).
- "Thus far, research on takeovers and reconstitutions has been inconclusive" (Lashway, 2003, p. 4).
- "All recommendations had to rely on low levels of evidence" (National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2008, p. 1)

Schools whose students are academically unsuccessful are not necessarily “low-achieving” schools; “powerful cultural and political forces will continue to impede school improvement” (Hess & Finn, 2007, p. 328). Furthermore, there is little reason to believe that the “rigorous interventions” mandated by the U.S. Department of Education are pedagogically sound. Even if the interventions were sound, two of the four possible interventions, the Restart Model and the Transformation Model, are often prohibited by either local statutes or teachers’ unions, and the School Closure model is more of a condemnation than an intervention. This leaves many “low-achieving” schools with the Hobson’s choice of the Turnaround Model. Title I(-eligible) schools serve a disadvantaged populace. The edicts of School Improvement Grants exacerbate the problem, ransoming federal funds contingent on districts making ill-conceived interventions. The U.S. Department of Education should recognize the competency of local school districts, retract the edicts of the School Improvement Grants, and work cooperatively with local authorities to achieve authentic educational improvements for disadvantaged families. School Improvement Grants are a great idea gone seriously awry. The Department of Education needs to close the book on the current incarnation and then turnaround, restart, and transform their approach.

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