

GIVING STUDENTS A

FRESH START

A NYCAN ISSUE BRIEF



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A NEW APPROACH TO SCHOOL TURNAROUNDS
IN NEW YORK STATE

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Introduction

In recent years, New York has undertaken a number of initiatives to transform the way schools are run: a better teacher and principal evaluation framework, a larger investment in its student data system and the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, to name a few. Many of these programs seek to raise achievement for all New York students, but some have focused specifically on boosting student achievement in the state’s persistently underperforming schools.

These include special turnaround efforts in New York’s lowest performing schools. Unfortunately, these efforts—although they represent important steps forward—have failed to reverse abysmally poor student achievement and graduation rates in all schools. This is especially true in New York’s “Big 5” urban centers: New York City, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and Yonkers (see fig.1).

The pages that follow make the case for a new approach to chronic school failure: creating a new school district devoted exclusively to turnaround schools.

Turning around New York’s failing schools is a difficult but critical challenge, especially as schools continue the transition to the more rigorous Common Core State Standards. Students won’t succeed with high expectations alone—they also need adequate support and preparation to help them meet those expectations.

This issue brief 1) explores the history of school improvement efforts in New York, 2) highlights specific examples of the current challenges that face New York’s low-performing districts, 3) describes promising strategies currently underway in other states and 4) recommends policy changes that would create a new, statewide turnaround district so that all New York students—no matter what school they attend—have the shot at success that they deserve.

FIGURE 1 Percentage of students in grades 3–8 deemed “proficient” in English-Language Arts

SOURCE “ELA & Math Data Slides Supplemental,” New York State Education Department, accessed August 14, 2013, <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/pressRelease/20130807/home.html>.

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013*
NYC	50.7	50.8	57.6	68.8	42.4	43.9	46.9	26.4
Buffalo	30.1	34.5	42.5	54.4	27.7	26.9	27.9	11.5
Rochester	38.4	38.4	46.6	56.0	25.3	24.4	20.7	5.4
Syracuse	34.0	37.3	42.1	52.7	25.5	22.5	24.2	8.7
Yonkers	51.1	46.7	55.6	65.2	39.2	37.8	40.7	16.4

* The 2013 proficiency scores reflect the results from revised assessments based on the Common Core State Standards and should not be directly compared to previous years.

School improvement in New York

New York has invested millions of state and federal dollars in attempts to turn around underperforming schools. The state has also created and participated in many programs with this goal in mind. They include:

- *School Improvement Grants*: A federal grant program for states to provide their school districts with resources to enact specific school turnaround models.
- *Race to the Top*: A competitive federal grant program that incentivized state-level education policy change (with an emphasis on school turnarounds), and through which New York won \$700 million.
- *ESEA waivers*: Proposals submitted to the U.S. Department of Education that allow states to set their own goals and benchmarks on a path toward achieving 100 percent student proficiency in key subjects such as math and English-Language Arts.
- *Contracts for Excellence*: Requires the low-performing schools receiving significant increases in state aid to designate and implement specific improvement plans.

School Improvement Grants

In April 2010, the federal government awarded New York State a \$308-million School Improvement Grant to turn around 67 “Persistently Low Achieving Schools,” or the bottom 5 percent of schools eligible for Title I funding.

In exchange for funding, these schools had to create a plan to improve student performance by adopting one of four federal school improvement models, subject to approval by the state education department:

- *The turnaround model*, where the principal and half of the school’s staff are replaced.
- *The restart model*, where the school is converted or replaced by a public charter school.
- *The transformation model*, where the principal is replaced and the staff are evaluated.
- *The closure model*, where the school is shut down completely.¹

¹ “Persistently Lowest-Achieving Schools, Frequently Asked Questions,” New York State Department of Education, accessed June 23, 2013, <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/pla/FAQ.html>.

Title I and the ESEA waiver

Responding to failed efforts to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the U.S. Department of Education announced last summer that states could apply to waive some ESEA requirements and set new performance targets if they adopted an acceptable plan for raising student achievement in their lowest performing schools.

After receiving its approved ESEA waiver, New York required 221 “Priority Schools”—the bottom 5 percent of schools in the state—to develop and implement one of the four federal turnaround models and demonstrate improvement, or risk closure.²

Contracts for Excellence

In implementing an updated school funding formula, adopted in 2007, New York included guidelines for districts with schools that have had multiple years of poor performance. Districts that are going to receive, or have historically received (since 2007), significant increases must submit contracts for excellence. These “contracts” are performance plans outlining the steps districts will take to improve performance in their low-performing schools as a condition of receiving state aid. Districts must document the schools, programs and student subgroups they will target, along with specific, achievable performance goals. The state education department must approve these goals.³ Districts that have schools in good standing—or have brought their schools into good standing—are exempt from these provisions, regardless of how much funding they receive.

² “School and District Accountability Reports,” New York State Department of Education, accessed June 18, 2013, <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/accountability/ESEADesignations.html>.

³ “Contracts for Excellence,” New York State Department of Education, accessed September 24, 2013, <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/mgtserv/C4E/>.

Results of turnaround efforts

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These school turnaround efforts have produced mixed results.

In some districts, schools that have undergone one or more of the existing interventions have successfully improved performance. For example, in the 2008-09 school year, 39 school districts were required to submit contracts for excellence for the low-performing schools in their district. Entering the 2013-14 school year, only 15 districts continue to have low-performing schools that require their participation in the program.⁴ Over those four years, school and district leadership

⁴ “2013-2014 Contracts for Excellence,” New York State Department of Education, accessed September 25, 2013, <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/mgtserv/C4E/13-14home.html>.

have, in some instances, been able to move low-performing schools to at least be in good standing. In other instances, districts have addressed chronic poor performance by closing those struggling schools.

Yet none of the existing models and interventions has led to success in all schools and districts. Too many schools in too many districts continue to struggle.

Problems with persistently low performance pervade the state and are not limited to any one district or geographic region. Nor are the problems in many of these schools new. In districts across the state, many of the currently designated priority and focus schools—and schools identified in other local, state and federal accountability systems—have been selected for some level of school improvement as far back as 2005.⁵ And in some extreme cases, turnaround efforts are stalled in the planning stage, preventing programs and funding from reaching the schools and students that need the most assistance.

⁵ NYSED Report Cards, last accessed September 25, 2013, <https://reportcards.nysed.gov/index.php>.

Case study: Lafayette and East High Schools in Buffalo

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Chronic low performance has plagued public schools in Buffalo for years, and current events—specifically at Lafayette and East High Schools—provide a compelling case study of the failure of some turnaround options.

Over the years, the district and its schools have struggled to find success for their students—and the overall trajectory of student performance in the city is discouraging. Seventy-six percent of Buffalo’s public schools have been designated as “priority” or “focus” schools, falling in the bottom 15 percent of schools statewide—and most of those schools have been designated as in need of some kind of improvement since 2005.⁶

⁶ NYSED Report Cards, last accessed August 2, 2013, <https://reportcards.nysed.gov/schools.php?district=800000052968&year=2011>.

⁷ “ELA & Math Data Slides Supplemental,” New York State Education Department, accessed August 14, 2013, <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/pressRelease/20130807/home.html>.

* The 2013 proficiency scores reflect the results from revised assessments based on the Common Core State Standards and should not be compared directly to previous years.

Percentage of students in grades 3–8 deemed ‘proficient’ in English-Language Arts⁷

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013*
Buffalo	30.1	34.5	42.5	54.4	27.7	26.9	27.9	11.5

Lafayette and East High Schools are examples of low-performing schools that have not improved, in part because the district leadership has failed to outline viable turnaround strategies. And because there are no turnarounds plan in place, these schools do not have access to state-based programs and resources that exist to help struggling schools. The state education department, for example, has rejected these schools’ School Improvement Grant applications for each of the last three years.⁸

Lafayette High School

More than 80 percent of students at Lafayette live in poverty, and nearly half the students have limited English proficiency.⁹ Attendance rates are some of the lowest in the district, as is the graduation rate. Although Lafayette has been the focus of turnaround efforts in recent years, its graduation rate dropped from 48 percent in 2005 to 23 percent in 2008.¹⁰ There were 373 students enrolled in ninth grade in 2008-09, but only 67 students graduated in 2012.

East High School

Like at Lafayette, more than 80 percent of East High School students are low-income. In the 2008-09 school year, the school had 318 students enrolled in the ninth-grade class. Yet by 2012, only 75 students graduated and only seven said they intended to attend a two- or four-year college. Like Lafayette, East High School has also been undergoing turnaround initiatives only to see its graduation rate drop between 2005 and 2008 from 59 to 28 percent.¹¹

	2008-2009 9 th - Grade Class	2011-2012 Graduates	NUMBER heading to 2-year colleges	NUMBER heading to 4-year colleges
Lafayette High School	373	67	53	12
East High School	318	75	4	3

Other struggling schools in Buffalo

While East and Lafayette High Schools were denied School Improvement Grants, other Buffalo schools have enacted state-approved turnaround plans—and they have continued to fail, as well.

Three other Buffalo schools were awarded a total of more than \$13 million in School Improvement Grants in the state’s most recent disbursement.¹² Yet, as evidenced above, overall student performance in Buffalo has continued to flounder.

Despite opportunities and efforts, what is available now just isn’t working at these schools.

⁸ “Asking what went wrong,” The Buffalo News, accessed August 2, 2013, http://blogs.buffalonews.com/school_zone/2013/07/asking-what-went-wrong.html.

⁹ “Stacking the deck against Buffalo’s six ‘failing schools,’” The Buffalo News, accessed August 2, 2013, <http://www.buffalonews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20130724/CITYANDREGION/130729506/1010>.

¹⁰ “State threatens to close two Buffalo high schools,” YNN Buffalo, accessed September 24, 2013, <http://buffaloynn.com/content/news/672871/state-threatens-to-close-two-buffalo-high-schools/?ap=1&MP4>.

¹¹ “State threatens to close two Buffalo high schools,” YNN Buffalo, accessed September 24, 2013, <http://buffaloynn.com/content/news/672871/state-threatens-to-close-two-buffalo-high-schools/?ap=1&MP4>.

SOURCE NYSED Report Cards, last accessed August 2, 2013, <https://reportcards.nysed.gov/schools.php?district=800000052968&year=2011>.

¹² “State Education Department Announces \$126 Million in SIG Funding for 7 Districts to Support Turnaround and Transformation Efforts in 34 Schools,” New York State Education Department, accessed August 1, 2013, <http://www.oms.nysed.gov/press/sig-funding-2013.html>.

Examples from other states

Creation of turnaround districts

New York is not the only state that faces a challenge when it comes to revitalizing its failing schools through the current menu of turnaround options. That's why some states have adopted another approach: placing their low-performing schools into a completely new school district focused on making tremendous improvements.

In Louisiana, Tennessee, Connecticut, Michigan and Virginia, for example, individual underperforming schools are placed in a turnaround or recovery district. In these districts, schools are provided freedom from the bureaucracy and outdated practices that are entrenched in so many underperforming districts and the students are given a chance for a clean slate while staying in their schools. These districts offer valuable examples to help determine what works when making school turnaround efforts more successful.

Louisiana's Recovery School District

In May 2003, Louisiana established a Recovery School District to manage the state's chronically low-performing schools.¹³ Currently the RSD oversees more than 80 schools, including both traditional public schools and public charter schools. Once the RSD takes over management, schools must remain in the RSD for at least five years and demonstrate improvement before they are eligible to return to their original district.¹⁴

The RSD encourages much more autonomy at the school level than other districts in the state, giving building-level officials control over staffing, school management, budgeting and curriculum.¹⁵ This model of increased autonomy appears to be working. The RSD led the state in performance growth on the 2013 state exams and has demonstrated the largest performance growth of any district in the state over the past six years. Since 2008, the percentage of students performing at a level of basic or above on the state assessment has increased by 29 percentage points. From 2008 to 2013, proficiency rates rose from 28 percent to 57 percent for RSD students.¹⁶

While these schools still have a long way to go—more than 40 percent of RSD students remain significantly behind—their dramatic progress is encouraging.

13 "Transforming Public Education in New Orleans: The Recovery School District 2003-2011," Tulane University, Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives, accessed June 24, 2013, <http://www.coweninstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/History-of-the-RSD-Report-2011.pdf>.

14 "BULLETIN 129 - The Recovery School District," Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, accessed June 24, 2013, <http://www.bese.louisiana.gov/documents-resources/policies-bulletins>.

15 "RSD Role in LA," Recovery School District, accessed September 24, 2013, http://www.rsda.net/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=195268&type=d&pREC_ID=393781.

16 "RSD Schools in New Orleans Show Highest Growth in 2013 State Tests," Recovery School District, accessed July 11, 2013, http://www.rsda.net/apps/news/show_news.jsp?REC_ID=273983&id=0.

Tennessee Achievement School District

Tennessee's Achievement School District is a statewide school turnaround model similar to Louisiana's Recovery School District. Developed as part of Tennessee's Race to the Top plans, the state enacted legislation in January 2010 that gives the state commissioner of education the authority to create a special school district focused on turning the bottom 5 percent of schools into high-achievers (in the top 25 percent of schools statewide) within five years.

The ASD 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 5 percent of Title I schools ("Priority" schools), the state's approved 2012 ESEA waiver now requires that all schools be held to the same accountability standards, not just those that receive Title I funds.

Eligible schools must fall in the bottom 5 percent in the state, and must also be selected by the Achievement Advisory Council, whose recommendations count for 40 percent of the ASD's decision to take over a school.

The ASD currently governs six schools and plans to add 35 schools by the 2014-15 school year. If a school makes adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years, it will be eligible to develop a plan to transition out of the district.¹⁷

ASD schools have shown encouraging early results. The district earned a Level 5 Growth Rating—the highest level awarded by the state for improved student achievement. Schools' scores from the 2013 statewide assessments show impressive gains in math and science, though reading scores have taken a dip.¹⁸ The ASD's math gains were just shy of the state's overall average growth of 3.5 percentage points, but it still had higher gains in math than more than half of the other school districts across the state.¹⁹ Additionally, the ASD's proficiency gains in science were triple the state average, earning the ASD the seventh-highest percentage growth in science²⁰ in the state. Importantly, teachers in the ASD also feel valued: 92 percent of the ASD teachers said they were recognized as experts in their schools, which is 18 points higher than teachers statewide. And 75 percent of teachers said that they planned to stay with their ASD school, compared to only 55 percent of teachers in the state's other districts.

In addition, the district has received positive reviews from parents and has been able to partner with YES Prep Public Schools, the highly successful charter network.²¹

17 Nelson Smith, "Redefining the School District in Tennessee," Thomas B. Fordham Institute, April 2013, accessed June 24, 2013, <http://www.edexcellence.net/publications/redefining-the-school-district-in-tennessee.html>.

18 "Press Release: ASD Schools Make Progress in Y1," Achievement School District, accessed September 24, 2013, <http://www.achievementschooldistrict.org/press-release-asd-schools-make-progress-in-y1/>.

19 "2013 TCAP System Math Results," Tennessee Department of Education, accessed September 14, 2013, http://www.k-12.state.tn.us/tcapresults/system_math_2013.aspx.

20 "2013 TCAP System Math Results," Tennessee Department of Education, accessed September 14, 2013, http://www.k-12.state.tn.us/tcapresults/system_science_2013.aspx.

21 "Press Release: ASD Schools Make Progress in Y1," Achievement School District, accessed September 24, 2013, <http://www.achievementschooldistrict.org/press-release-asd-schools-make-progress-in-y1/>.

Recently created districts

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While Louisiana and Tennessee have the most history and experience with operating this type of turnaround-focused district, states across the country are following suit—and more examples are emerging.

Connecticut's Commissioner's Network

In 2012, the Connecticut legislature established the Commissioner's Network, which allows the commissioner of education to take over some low-performing schools across the state and implement comprehensive school turnaround plans. The state has selected four schools to be a part of the initial Network cohort.

Michigan Education Achievement Authority

Launched in 2012, the Education Achievement Authority of Michigan is a new entity that assumes operation of the lowest-achieving 5 percent of schools in the state of Michigan. The network opened in September 2012 with 15 of Detroit Public Schools' lowest-performing schools, and will expand to additional schools across the state.²²

Virginia Opportunity Educational Institution

In 2013, the Commonwealth of Virginia created the Opportunity Educational Institution, which will be administered and supervised by the Opportunity Educational Institution Board. The bill requires any school that has been denied accreditation by the state,²³ and is therefore required to have an approved turnaround plan, to be transferred to the Institution. It also permits any school that has been accredited with warning for three consecutive years to be transferred. Schools in the OEI are required to remain for five years, or until the school achieves full accreditation. The bill also outlines requirements for student attendance, staffing and funding for the Institution.²⁴ The OEI will start taking over governance of selected schools in 2014.

²² "About the Education Achievement Authority (EAA)," State of Michigan, accessed September 2, 2013, <http://www.michigan.gov/eea/0,4841,7-281--263377--,00.html>.

²³ For accreditation, elementary, middle and high schools must achieve minimum levels of student proficiency on the Virginia Standards of Learning Assessments. If a school does not meet the requirements for three consecutive years, then accreditation is denied. When accreditation is denied, the Virginia Board of Education prescribes corrective action that the local school board agrees to through a signed memorandum of understanding. "School Accreditation Ratings," Virginia Department of Education, accessed September 5, 2013, http://www.doe.virginia.gov/statistics_reports/accreditation_federal_reports/accreditation/index.shtml.

²⁴ "SB 1324 Opportunity Educational Institution," Virginia's Legislative Information System, accessed August 14, 2013, <http://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?131+sum+SBI324>.

Next steps

In many New York districts, schools face challenges as dramatic as those found in Louisiana, Tennessee and other states across the country. And New York can learn from those states to give students here a fresh start by creating a “turnaround district” devoted exclusively to supporting and improving failing schools. This will give schools and their students the opportunity to be part of a district that has new leadership, a fresh staff and a culture defined by achievement.

NYCAN recommends that the state adopt legislation creating such a turnaround district. This legislation should:

- Create a new statewide local education agency without geographic boundaries that has complete authority over the schools in its jurisdiction. This new turnaround district, although created by the state, would run as an independent entity.
- Appoint a turnaround district superintendent with the same autonomy as other school district superintendents throughout the state.
- Establish financial and academic criteria to determine if a school is eligible to join the turnaround district, while still allowing new district leadership to make the final decision.
 - These criteria should combine both objective student data performance as well as more subjective measures.
- Provide for funding to cover the start-up costs of creating a turnaround district.
- Provide for annual funding for the turnaround district through the per-pupil pass through of all state, federal and local funding.
 - One-hundred percent of per-pupil funds, regardless of source or intended use, should flow to the turnaround district.
- Empower the turnaround district to operate as any other district in the state, with the same managerial and budgetary authority.
 - Employees of a school absorbed by the turnaround district, if hired, would be employees of the new district, not the school’s former district.
 - Employees of the turnaround district would be governed only by the policies and practices of their new employer.

- Require that the turnaround district have a clearly stated mission and that there be a clear and transparent process for a school entering or exiting the new district.
- Legislation enacted to create such a district should clearly state the purpose of the district: to intercede in the governance and oversight of chronically low-performing schools. It should also expressly lay out the criteria for entering and exiting the district so it is clear on the front end what goals must be achieved before the turnaround district cedes control.

- Authorize the turnaround district to act as a charter school authorizer, under the oversight of the state education department.
- The turnaround district should have maximum flexibility to bring in new leadership, including external partners, as has been key to the successes in Louisiana and Tennessee.

Revitalizing floundering schools has never been more important. Creating a district devoted exclusively to that mission will be a critical piece of New York's efforts to ensure that the schools failing today will not continue to do so five, 10 and 15 years from now, and that the students in those schools right now will have the best chance at success.

About NYCAN

NYCAN: The New York Campaign for Achievement Now launched in January 2012 as an education reform advocacy organization building a movement of New Yorkers with the political will to enact smart public policies so that every New York child has access to a great public school. 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 Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island based on the groundbreaking model developed by ConnCAN in Connecticut. NYCAN is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization funded by individual donors and foundations.

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