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## School Turnarounds— Recommendations, Actions, and Results

Recent statistics and studies indicate that improving student achievement in low-performing schools continues to be a challenge for states across the nation. During the 2006–2007 school year, 10,676 schools were designated as in need of improvement, and 2,302 schools were designated as in need of improvement, restructuring phase (Herman, et al., 2008, p. 4). Although many states have undertaken wide ranging efforts to address the adequate yearly progress (AYP) provision of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), a review of literature on this topic indicates that success in improving student achievement in low-performing schools has not been widespread.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, AYP is an individual state's measure of progress toward the objective of having 100 percent of its students meet the state academic standards in at least reading/language arts and mathematics. It includes minimum proficiency levels that the state, its school districts, and schools must meet each year on annual tests and related academic indicators (Herman, et al., 2008). The AYP provision requires states to take specific action for schools that fail to meet AYP for 5 consecutive years, such as 1) reopening the school as a public charter school, 2) replacing all or most of the school's staff, 3) contracting with an outside entity to operate the school, 4) turning the operation of the school over to the state educational agency, or 5) implementing another form of restructuring that makes fundamental reforms.

Which of the above options are states implementing to improve student achievement in low-performing schools, and what are the results? To answer these questions, the SECC reviewed publications from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES)—National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional



### A Note from the Director

Welcome to the first edition of our e-Bulletin for Year 4 of the Southeast Comprehensive Center (SECC). In this issue, we focus on the issue of school turnarounds. According to the 2006–2007 Consolidated Performance Report, more than 10,600 schools were identified nationally for improvement and more than 2,300 were identified nationally for restructuring. The challenge that state departments of education face in determining how to effectively utilize their resources to address the needs of these schools and their students can be overwhelming.

This issue provides information from the Center on Improvement & Innovation and the Institute for Education Sciences regarding evidence-based practices for turning around chronically low-performing schools. I hope that this edition of our e-Bulletin will help you and your colleagues learn about the evidence base in this area and use this evidence base as you develop policies for addressing the needs of these schools and providing support to them. If we can be of any assistance to you in this area or any other issue related to improving student achievement or meeting the goals of the NCLB, please feel free to contact your state liaison or me.

We at SEDL are pleased to provide the services of the Southeast Comprehensive Center and look forward to our continuing work with all of you.

Sincerely,

**Robin Jarvis, PhD**  
Director, SECC

Assistance, the Center on Innovation & Improvement (CII), the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), McKinsey & Company, and several other education research and dissemination organizations. Two publications in particular—from CII and IES—provided detailed information on turning around low-performing schools. This information is summarized below along with additional resources on this topic.

## Key Actions of Successful School Leaders

Brinson, D., Kowal, J., & Hassel, B. (2008). *School turnarounds: Actions and results*. Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation & Improvement. Retrieved August 2, 2008, from <http://www.centerii.org>

In this publication, the authors discussed the actions that must take place for school turnaround to occur as well as the actions that new leaders must take to get results. The authors indicated that of the AYP restructuring options, three options—reopening as a charter school, contracting with an external management organization, and state takeover—were rarely used. Most states have chosen option five (another form of restructuring) rather than implement stronger interventions. The authors stated that in 2006, of those districts utilizing stronger interventions, 42 percent of states appointed an outside expert to advise the school, 24 percent extended the school day or year, and 14 percent restructured the internal organization of the school. Also, only 14 percent of restructuring schools replaced a large portion of the school's staff, and almost none of the districts invited private firms or state agencies to take over restructuring schools or to reopen them as charter schools.

The authors identified the following 14 leader actions that were associated with successful school turnarounds:

1. Collect and analyze data
2. Make action plan based on data
3. Concentrate on big, fast payoffs in year 1
4. Implement practices even if they require deviation from norms or rules
5. Require all staff to change
6. Implement necessary staff changes
7. Concentrate on successful tactics; discard others
8. Report progress, but focus on high goals
9. Communicate a positive vision
10. Help staff personally feel problems
11. Gain support of key influencers
12. Silence critics with quick success
13. Measure and report progress often
14. Require all decision makers to share data and participate in problem solving

The authors also discussed real-world vignettes based on case studies to illustrate each action item and provided detailed information on the strategies used by low-performing schools to achieve successful turnarounds.

Regarding the definition of a successful turnaround, the authors indicated that this would be a situation in which a school generated significant gains in student learning in year 1 that were sustained over time. Literature reviewed by the authors did not

support such a long-term view but did indicate that turnarounds deemed as successful by researchers were those in which the schools achieved AYP after failing to do so for 3 years prior to turnaround efforts.

## Recommendations Target Leadership, Instruction, and Staff

Herman, R., Dawson, P., Dee, T., Greene, J., Maynard, R., Redding, S., & Darwin, M. (2008). *Turning around chronically low-performing schools: A practice guide* (NCEE #2008-4020). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved August 2, 2008, from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/practiceguides/>

In the IES practice guide, the authors provided four recommendations for school turnaround along with a summary of the level of evidence to support each recommendation. The authors suggested that the evidence-based recommendations in this guide are for use by educators to quickly and dramatically improve student achievement in low-performing schools. In addition to providing specific recommendations, the authors discussed case studies of schools and described how each recommendation may be implemented.

The authors stated that the evidence used to support the recommendations ranged from expert analyses of turnaround practices to case studies of seemingly effective schools to correlational studies and longitudinal studies of patterns of school improvement. All recommendations relied on low levels of evidence as defined by the IES Practice Guide Standards. The authors could not find any studies that met the high-quality experimental and quasi-experimental study standards of the What Works Clearinghouse (<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>) and that would give the strongest evidence of causal validity. According to the IES levels of evidence, "low refers to expert opinion based on research and theory on other topics and evidence from studies that do not meet the standards for moderate or strong evidence."

The authors acknowledged that the research base on school turnaround is limited. They defined turnaround schools as those that have shown dramatically improved student outcomes over a short time. Consequently, the guide focused on schools that improved student achievement in 1 to 3 years. The authors based their recommendations on 10 case studies that looked at turnaround practices at 35 schools (21 elementary schools, 8 middle schools, and 6 high schools). This review included secondary analyses of primary studies (school profiles) and identification of common strategies across successful turnaround schools. In addition, the panel drew information from a report on turnarounds with new leaders and staff and incorporated evidence from business turnaround research.

The panel provided four recommendations for turning around low-performing schools

1. Signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership
2. Maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction
3. Provide visible improvements early in the turnaround process
4. Build a committed staff

The panel also provided a checklist for implementing the recommendations and discussed possible roadblocks and solutions for each recommendation.

### Additional Resources

Hassel, B. (2006, May 11). *Restructuring: What we know about the NCLB options*. Presentation at the 2006 Building State Capacity to Improve Schools: CSR & Title I meeting. Retrieved August 4, 2008, from <http://www.centerforcsri.org/pubs/CSRConference/BryanHassel.pdf>

McKinsey & Company. (2007). *How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top*. Retrieved August 4, 2008, from [http://www.mckinsey.com/client/service/socialsector/resources/pdf/Worlds\\_School\\_Systems\\_Final.pdf](http://www.mckinsey.com/client/service/socialsector/resources/pdf/Worlds_School_Systems_Final.pdf)

National Association of Charter School Authorizers. *Starting fresh. How to start fresh: NACSA's steps to successful restructuring*. Retrieved August 4, 2008, from <http://www.qualitycharters.org/i4a/pages/Index.cfm?pageID=3381>

Southeast Comprehensive Center. Events. 2008 SECC Annual Regional Forum—The Turnaround Schools' Journey: Insights, Initiatives, and Implications. Retrieved September 10, 2008, from <http://secc.sedl.org/forum/08/index.html>



William Guenther, President, Mass Insight Education & Research Institute Inc., was the keynote speaker during the recent 2008 SECC Annual Regional Forum, which focused on turnaround schools. Podcasts from the event are available on the SECC Web site at <http://secc.sedl.org/resources/podcast/index.html>

## State Highlights and Events

### Alabama

#### Nine Schools Receive Torchbearer Award

By Mary Lou Meadows, SECC State Liaison

On January 29, 2008, the Alabama State Department of Education awarded nine Alabama public schools the title of Torchbearer School and gave each a \$15,000 monetary award during a recognition event that was held in Montgomery, Alabama. Torchbearer Schools are high-poverty public schools that have implemented changes and initiatives that have enabled them to become high-performing schools.

The Torchbearer School Program was developed in 2004 to provide recognition to high-poverty, high-performing public schools. To receive the monetary award, Torchbearer Schools must meet specific criteria, which include having

- Identification as a Meeting the Challenge School, Advancing the Challenge School, and Exceeding the Challenge School in accordance with the state rewards plan
- At least 80 percent poverty rate (percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price meals)
- At least 80 percent of students score at level III or level IV on the reading section of the Alabama Reading and Mathematics Test (ARMT)
- At least 80 percent of students score at level III or level IV on the mathematics section of ARMT
- At least 95 percent of grade 12 students pass all required subjects of the Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE)
- A high school graduation rate above the state average

In addition to receiving monetary awards, Torchbearer Schools will be featured in a video highlighting their success qualities, which will be used to show other Alabama schools how they may achieve Torchbearer status. For more information on the Torchbearer School Program, contact Dr. Angela Mangum, Alabama State Department of Education, at 334-353-9251 or [amangum@alsde.edu](mailto:amangum@alsde.edu).

### Georgia

#### School Turnaround Focus

By Glenda Copeland, SECC State Liaison

The Georgia Department of Education continues to focus attention on improving student achievement and turning around low-performing schools and districts in its state. Two recent initiatives—implementation of a differentiated accountability plan and participation in a national college- and career-readiness effort—highlight the state's efforts to make a difference in these areas.



## Differentiated Accountability Plan

Georgia has been named as one of six states to pilot a “differentiated accountability” plan. This plan will allow the state to address one of the biggest concerns with NCLB—that it treats all schools the same. Under Georgia’s differentiated accountability plan, schools that are in needs improvement (NI) status will face consequences that are scaled to their needs and their academic performance.

The plan makes these three major changes in the way Georgia implements NCLB:

- It allows school systems to offer Supplemental Educational Services or Public School Choice to students in first-year NI schools. Previously, schools in this category were required to offer choice, and it was not widely used by students.
- It creates tiers of consequences for schools in corrective action—those in NI status for 3 or 4 years—based on academic achievement.
- It allows the state to enter into a school improvement contract with schools that have been in NI status for 5 or more years and places a state director in the school full time to support school improvement efforts.

For more information on the differentiated accountability plan, visit the following Web site [http://www.gadoe.org/pea\\_communications.aspx?ViewMode=1&obj=1648](http://www.gadoe.org/pea_communications.aspx?ViewMode=1&obj=1648)

## College- and Career-Ready Policy Institute

Georgia, along with seven other states, has been chosen to participate in a nationwide collaborative effort targeted at increasing the number of students who graduate high school prepared for college and careers. The College & Career-Ready Policy Institute is sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and supported by a partnership of several groups including Achieve, the Data Quality Campaign, the Education Counsel, Jobs for the Future, and the National Governors Association for Best Practices.

States were selected based on their strong leadership and commitment to a college- and career-readiness agenda that includes rigorous academic standards and graduation requirements for all students. The other states chosen to participate in the institute are Arizona, Arkansas, Louisiana, Minnesota, New Mexico, Ohio, and Tennessee. Participating states will address the task of ensuring that their assessment and accountability systems are anchored in college- and career-readiness and that state education policies support this goal.

The Institute will assist participating states with 1) developing goals for improving high school graduation, college- and career-readiness, and post-secondary attainment rates; 2) implementing a comprehensive state assessment system that is aligned with the specified goal; 3) establishing a coherent accountability

system; 4) designing a statewide system of support to help low-performing districts and schools and ensure continuous improvement for all schools and districts statewide; and 5) providing educational options and support to raise achievement levels of low-income students and other at-risk groups.

## Louisiana

### Ensuring Literacy For All Initiative

*By Darlene Brown, SECC State Liaison*

Recently, the Louisiana State Department of Education (LDE) received approximately \$12.5 million from the state legislature. With these additional funds, the LDE added 43 schools to its Ensuring Literacy For All (ELFA) plan. This summer, with the assistance of the SECC, Dr. Katherine Mitchell, and Dr. Reid Lyon, the LDE provided extensive professional development to its 110 Reading First schools, 26 Literacy Pilot schools, and the recently funded 43 ELFA schools. More than 180 schools and 4,000 teachers were trained in Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling, also referred to as LETRS Foundations, which was developed by Louisa Moats. This comprehensive training provided teachers with an in-depth look at reading research and provided the opportunity for them to develop deep knowledge of the context and process of reading instruction.

In Fall 2008, all instructional coaches and administrators will receive professional development in the areas of classroom management and coaching strategies, with training developed by Jim Knight. Louisiana is committed to providing follow-up with its school districts to sustain the continuous and ongoing professional development being provided.

## Mississippi

### Mississippi Coaches Academy 2008

*Provided By*

*Debbie Meibaum, SECC Mississippi State Liaison*

*Sara Maghan, Retired Assistant Superintendent, Pascagoula School District*

*Peggy Williams, Director of Instruction and Federal Programs, Lamar County School District*

The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) and its partners, the SECC and the Mississippi Staff Development Council, launched the Mississippi Coaches Academy in June 2008. The goal of the Coaches Academy was to train instructional coaches to help low-performing schools improve student achievement by implementing school-based professional development through coaching and collaborative learning.

The first phase of the MDE’s plan was to train the “Coaches of Coaches.” On June 27–28, 43 educators participated in a “Coaches of Coaches” professional development activity in Jackson, Mississippi. The goal for the instructional coaching session was to increase participants’ capacity to provide training to school-based

instructional coaches. The MDE anticipates that these coaches will provide on-site technical assistance by going into MDE-identified schools approximately six times during the 2008–2009 school year to coach school-based instructional coaches.

The next phase was to hold two Mississippi Coaches Academies for instructional coaches and their principals from the 21 schools identified by the MDE under NCLB guidelines for corrective action and/or restructuring. The training sessions consisted of 2 days of instruction. The first day focused on the foundations of coaching, while the second day focused on the skills of coaching. Participants included principals, school-based instructional coaches, individuals trained during the June Coaches of Coaches activity, and MDE staff members. The first of the two Coaches Academies was held in Cleveland, Mississippi, on July 8–9, with 25 participants in attendance. The second academy was conducted in Canton, Mississippi, July 15–16, with 34 participants in attendance.

The final phase of the MDE’s plan will be the technical assistance provided on-site by the coaches of coaches as well as follow-up training for the two Coaches Academy participants. After the initial academies are held in 2008, the MDE plans to offer additional academies in 2009 for any of its schools that wish to participate.



MDE staff members participated in a Coaches Academy, July 15–16, in Canton, Mississippi.

## South Carolina

### School Turnaround Efforts

By Sandra R. Lindsay, SECC State Liaison

The South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) has a number of school turnaround efforts that focus on school and

district improvement as well as exploring innovative ways to teach and learn.

### Corrective Action School Districts: Technical Assistance

The SECC has worked in collaboration with the South Carolina Office of Federal and State Accountability to deliver a 2-day professional development session for school and district leaders in seven school districts in corrective action (CA) status. The sessions were held June 12–13, 2008, at The Embassy Suites in Columbia, SC. The professional development is part of a yearlong effort by the Title I office to provide support and assistance to identified districts in CA status. All seven districts—Allendale, Hampton Two, Colleton, Jasper, Florence Three, Barnwell 19, and Marlboro—have adopted the Anderson Five curriculum as an intervention under NCLB requirements for CA status. While these districts focused on implementation of the curriculum with teachers, leadership at the SC Department of Education recognized that support for principals and district leaders also was essential to the success of the curriculum intervention. Dr. Nancy Busbee, Director of the Office of Federal and State Accountability, and Kathy Mason, Education Associate, requested the SECC’s assistance with the leadership portion of this school and district reform effort.

Other professional development sessions were held in September 2007 and January 2008. The sessions were augmented by on-site mentors that were assigned to each school in each CA district. Fall and spring visits were conducted with school and district leaders to continue the leadership conversations and support necessary to bring about school-wide change with the new curriculum. Both interim and final reports of the project indicate successes in improved communication and a dramatic increase in the number of instructional walk-throughs being conducted by school administrators.

### Palmetto Priority Schools (PPS)

The South Carolina Department of Education is working in collaboration with partners across the state to provide assistance to 16 Palmetto Priority Schools (PPS). The effort is a special project with direct oversight by Dr. Jim Rex, State Superintendent. The project director is Dr. David Rawlinson, an exemplary former principal who agreed to return to full-time leadership to shepherd the work of the PPS project. The 16 schools were made part of the collaborative when they consistently failed to meet expected progress on student achievement. The targeted schools are middle and high schools from eight school districts across the state. The delivery system requires the coordination of services from a number of innovative sources and partners. Participants at the quarterly collaboration meetings include the 16 principals, 8 superintendents, 8 school board chairs, higher education partners, the SC Palmetto Priority Schools coordinator, the SCDE, and PPS liaisons. The SECC served as a partner in planning and

delivering content during an intensive professional development conference held July 28–30. Invitations to the conference were extended to the 16 PPS schools and 83 additional schools at which academic progress for students has been deemed “unsatisfactory.” Focus areas for the conference included curriculum, instruction and assessment; improving culture and climate; and data-driven decision making.

## New Grants to the SCDE

The SCDE has received a number of grants within the last few months, including two noteworthy projects: one focused on transforming teaching and learning that features the Inside-Out Learning Center and the other giving laptops to rural South Carolina students.

### Inside-Out Learning Center

The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future awarded South Carolina a planning grant to help develop initiatives that transform teaching and learning. The grant will support the creation of learning centers that will explore new ways of involving communities in teaching and learning and providing whole child support. South Carolina’s Inside-Out Learning Center will serve as an incubator for developing new ways of educating the state’s children. The initiative integrates team teaching, looping, community schooling, and other innovative approaches that are all focused on improving student achievement and school performance. West Virginia was the only other state to receive an award.

### One Laptop Per Child/South Carolina

Five hundred kindergarten and elementary students in one of the state’s most rural school districts will receive their own personal laptop computers as part of a new campaign to make South Carolina the first state with laptop technology in its primary grades. State Superintendent of Education Jim Rex said that the pilot is a partnership between the SCDE and the non-profit *Palmetto Project* and is underwritten with private funding. The

program potentially could expand to every school district in the state.

“Our goal is to promote affordable laptop technology for students and communities across the state,” Rex said. “Students who can get technology into their hands early will have a head start on acquiring the kinds of computer skills they’ll need for learning at all stages of life.”

The XO laptops were developed by *One Laptop per Child*, a non-profit organization created by Nicholas Negroponte and others from the MIT Media Lab to design, manufacture, and distribute laptop computers that are sufficiently inexpensive to provide every child in the world access to knowledge and modern forms of education. Charleston entrepreneur Phil Noble worked with Negroponte to bring the idea to South Carolina.

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The Southeast Comprehensive Center (SECC) is one of 16 regional centers established by the U.S. Department of Education. The primary goal of the regional centers is to build the capacity of the state education agencies and statewide systems of support to implement NCLB. Links to the other regional centers, the content centers, and the U.S. Department of Education may be found on the SECC Web site (secc.sedl.org).

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