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# **SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT REPORT**

**EXECUTIVE ORDER ON ACTIONS FOR  
TURNING AROUND LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS**



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JANUARY 2001**

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# **SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT REPORT: EXECUTIVE ORDER ON ACTIONS FOR TURNING AROUND LOW- PERFORMING SCHOOLS**

**January 2001**

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## **Executive Summary**

On May 3, 2000 President Clinton signed Executive Order 13153, which directed the U.S. Department of Education to undertake actions to improve low-performing schools. The Executive Order directs the U.S. Department of Education to provide technical assistance to state and local education agencies to develop and implement a comprehensive strategy for improving school performance; strengthen monitoring of state and local compliance with Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) requirements around identifying and turning around low-performing schools; and report on the progress of these efforts through an annual school improvement report.

This is the first annual school improvement report in response to the Executive Order on Actions to Improve Low-Performing Schools. The report presents state by state data on the numbers of schools identified as in need of improvement through Title I of the ESEA and describes the factors that account for the variance in schools identified for improvement across the states. The report also highlights research and examples of promising practices associated with turning around low-performing schools and describes the school district, state, and federal roles in supporting efforts to turn around low-performing schools.

### ***Key Findings***

#### **Who Attends Low-Performing Schools**

Schools identified as in need of improvement serve disproportionately poor and minority students. Almost half of Title I schools in need of improvement (compared to only 20 percent of all Title I schools) are schools where 75 percent or more students are minority and eligible for free and reduced price lunch.

#### **Identifying Low-Performing Schools**

- Because of changes made in the 1994 reauthorization of Title I, many states have dramatically altered their accountability systems and their criteria for designating schools as low performing. Several states have not yet completed this redesign process, and as a result of incomplete implementation of changes in Title I law, over half of the states now have two systems for identifying low-performing schools, one for Title I schools and one for other schools. This period of transition in accountability systems has been marked by large year to year swings in the numbers of Title I schools identified for improvement by some states. These changes do not necessarily reflect an actual improvement or worsening in the quality of the schools.
- Flexibility measures written into Title I law allow each state to have a different system for assessing school progress and for determining which schools are low performing. These differences have resulted in states identifying very different percentages of Title I schools as low performing. Percentages range from 1 percent to 76 percent.

- The total number of Title I schools across the country identified as “needing improvement” was 7,616 in 1996-97. The number had risen, as of the release date of this report, to over 8,800 in 1998-99; because nine states had not yet submitted data, this count is expected to rise further. Changes within state systems and the lack of congruence between the varying systems in different states, however, makes this rise difficult to interpret. Differences in actual performance between states are mixed up with differences in states’ expectations and identification practices, which makes the number of identified schools an unreliable indicator for comparing school performance across states.
- The data provided by states to the Department of Education on the number of schools identified as needing improvement are frequently out-of-date and of questionable quality. The Department has begun to work with states to create an electronic data collection system to produce better, more timely data, while at the same time reducing states’ data reporting burden.

### Repairing Low-Performing Schools

- Research on the characteristics of effective schools is plentiful and largely in agreement in its conclusions. Research on the *process* of turning a low-performing school into an effective school is much less plentiful and more difficult to interpret. The limited research on the change process does make clear that in order to succeed, reform efforts need to be adapted to the needs of the individual school and involve the entire school community. Schools that engage in successful reform efforts also appear to share a four-step process involving a needs assessment, a planning phase, an implementation phase, and a period of assessment and evaluation.
- Many low-performing schools cannot turn themselves around without help. Low-performing schools are usually the ones least likely to have the capacity to turn themselves around. They need critical external support to adopt research-based strategies for creating effective schools, and they need more information and better guidance on what it takes to turn around a failing school. In many cases schools not only do not get the help they need, they do not even know why they have been identified as low performing.
- States and districts have a key role in and responsibility for supporting failing schools. At each of the four stages of school improvement (needs assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation and assessment) states and districts could, and should, provide the resources, including personnel, funds, information, and rewards and sanctions that encourage and foster school improvement. Many states and districts already have programs in place, but they must do more to help struggling schools



- In many cases, research suggests that districts and states are not doing an adequate job in helping low-performing schools build the capacity they need to improve performance, in part because they themselves lack the capacity to assist individual schools. The federal government's role is to provide programs and funds that help states and districts build their capacity to assist low-performing schools.

### ***Implications***

The report findings raise implications for further local, state, and federal actions in the continued effort to turn around low-performing schools:

- Changes in Title I law to strengthen important elements of the system must be balanced with the need to allow states to complete the implementation of major changes made in the law during the previous reauthorization.
- States that currently have different accountability systems for Title I and non-Title I schools should be strongly encouraged to institute unitary systems; without a single accountability system, all schools cannot be held to the same standard.
- States and the federal government must work together to improve the timeliness of the collection and reporting of the important school data on which programs for assisting struggling schools depend. Quality of data must also be improved.
- States must institute and carry out carefully thought out plans for their school improvement activities.
- The Department of Education must carefully evaluate its programs to determine whether or not they are contributing to helping states and districts do a better job of turning around low-performing schools, especially in terms of whether or not federal programs are sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of individual schools.

## Introduction

In May 2000, President Clinton issued Executive Order 13153, directing the U. S. Department of Education to step up its efforts to assist states and school districts to turn around low-performing schools. In order to ensure that national and state efforts in this area are regularly informed by the best available information, one key component of the Department of Education's approach is an annual report on trends in state efforts to identify and intervene in low-performing schools. This is the first such report. It identifies baseline trends and key issues for future attention and for local, state, and federal action.

Throughout the country, long-standing rhetoric about school accountability is just now beginning to be translated into action. As a result of their own initiatives as well as the requirements of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, all states are putting into place systems of challenging standards for all students, aligned assessments to measure and publicly report on school progress toward meeting state standards, and school accountability for results. Consequently, every state has now identified schools that do not measure up, schools that need improvement.

The criteria for identifying low-performing schools vary considerably from state to state, though research shows that the schools have some characteristics in common. Schools with persistently low achievement are disproportionately likely to have a large concentration of students from low income and minority background and to be located in communities with significant concentrations of poverty and its associated problems.

Low-performing schools typically lack the education resources that matter the most. They are likely to suffer from low standards and expectations for their students, watered down curriculum, and limited parental involvement. Teachers and other instructional staff in these schools are often less experienced and less well qualified than those in higher performing schools, and their staff collectively have higher turnover rates and lower morale than those in other schools. Often, the school environment lacks order and discipline.

Yet more than twenty years of research and experience teaches us that there are many high poverty schools that help large numbers of their students achieve to high standards and that low-performing schools can be turned around. Effective schools are characterized by an emphasis on academics and have high standards, a rich and challenging curriculum aligned with standards, and a system for regularly monitoring student progress. The school climate is safe and orderly; teachers are well prepared, receive ongoing, high quality professional development, and work collegially to improve instruction. And there is strong school leadership that sets high expectations and a clear direction and strives to help school staff work as an effective team.

These characteristics of effective schools have been known for nearly two decades. Unfortunately, as a nation we have not always had the will or the capacity to make them a reality on a large scale. However, those who insist on holding schools accountable for

results also have an obligation to help those that are struggling to measure up. The primary reason for making information about school performance public is to ensure that identified schools receive the assistance they need. Parents, educators, and taxpayers have a responsibility to insist that state and local education officials work together and with them to improve schools that have been identified as needing improvement.

The federal government also has a vital role to play in this area. The 1994 reauthorization of Title I requires that states and school districts identify and then assist low performing schools. Yet, as discussed in this report, recent Title I evaluations show that more than half of the Title I schools identified as needing improvement report receiving no additional assistance through professional development, technical assistance, or financial resources. In addition, many states have been relatively slow to institute their own policies and mechanisms for intervening in low-performing schools. A 1987 report from the National Governors' Association indicates that, at that time, only 9 states had policies in place to identify and intervene in low-performing schools. Now, almost 15 years later, *Education Week's Quality Counts 2001* reports that 27 states—just over half—have such policies in place. Of these, 17 provide an external assistance team to assist each low-performing school, and only 7 provide extra funds to help each identified school. Clearly, this is an arena in which the federal government must continue to spur state and local action.

A federal focus on helping low-performing schools is also a logical and necessary extension of its historic role of providing assistance to improve the quality of education of our most disadvantaged students. Starting with the enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, the federal government has instituted programs to assist economically disadvantaged students, Native American and migrant students, and students whose first language is not English. These and other programs were substantially overhauled in 1994 to ensure that they all focused on helping students achieve to high standards. Now, the effectiveness of these programs depends heavily on a system of strong accountability for results, including deliberate steps to upgrade schools that are persistently failing.

In recent years, the federal government has stepped up its efforts to target additional funds to low-performing schools to help them implement proven practices. The Reading Excellence Act helps high poverty low-performing schools implement scientifically based reading instruction programs by disseminating information on what works and through high quality professional development. Similarly, states target approximately 80 percent of their Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program funds on helping turn around Title I schools identified as needing improvement. In FY 2000, Congress appropriated \$134 million for states to assist approximately 1,400 Title I schools needing improvement; that amount was increased to \$225 million in the FY 2001 appropriations act. In addition, growing numbers of local school districts target additional federal education funds to reduce class size and provide extended learning time in after-school and summer school programs as part of their strategies to boost achievement in low-performing schools.

In response to President Clinton's Executive Order, the Department of Education has begun working with state officials to help them design and implement state strategies for turning around low-performing schools and to use federal program funds to support implementation. This report is an additional tool to help federal and state policymakers strengthen these efforts. It draws on state performance data reported to the Department of Education for school years 1996-97 through 1998-99, as well as the latest research on turning around low-performing schools. In brief, it shows that

- The total number of Title I schools across the country identified as "needing improvement" was 7,616 in 1996-97. The number had risen, as of the release date of this report, to over 8,800 in 1998-99; because nine states had not yet submitted data, this count is expected to rise further.
- Many states have not yet completed the design and implementation of their accountability systems and are still phasing in state testing programs, school reporting systems, and standards for judging school progress. Consequently, a number of states show large year-to-year changes in the number of low-performing schools they identify, changes that reflect shifts in assessment procedures far more than shifts in student or school academic performance.
- States vary tremendously in the percentage of Title I schools identified as needing improvement. For example, in 1998-99 Texas identified 1 percent of its Title I schools as needing improvement, while Michigan identified 76 percent of its Title I schools as needing improvement. The other states fell somewhere in between. There is little reason to believe that these differences reflect differences in performance or program effectiveness among the states. Rather, they highlight the variation in state content and performance standards, tests, and definitions of adequate yearly progress for each school. These differences arise from the fact that each state is responsible for designing its own approach and from the lack of consensus about how best to accomplish this task. As a result, the Department of Education has an important role to play in helping states learn from one another as they refine and revise their approaches. Further, as Congress approaches the reauthorization of Title I, it will be important for it to find the right balance between continued flexibility for states in this area, and the need to create a more uniform basis for accountability in federal education programs.
- Too many low-performing schools fail to get needed help, even though the Title I statute requires states and districts to provide such assistance. In recent years there has been a significant increase in the availability of federal resources for this purpose, and if more recent data were available it should show improvement in this area. Nonetheless, states, together with local school districts, must assume a larger role in assisting low-performing schools and have a specific plan and resources to support each school that needs it.
- There are significant gaps in research and data that must be filled. We know more about the characteristics of high performing schools than about the process of

transforming low-performing schools or about how states and local school districts can most effectively build the capacity to assist the growing number of schools that need additional help. In addition, federal and state policies increasingly require school districts to provide students in Title I schools identified as needing improvement with the choice of attending a higher performing public school within the district. There is much to be learned about how to design local public school choice plans that will provide meaningful choices to students and that will help strengthen all schools in the district.

- Further, data provided by States on the number of schools identified as needing improvement is frequently out-of-date, of unknown quality, and not comparable across states. To address this problem, the Department of Education has begun working with states on the design of an electronic data harvesting system that can produce more timely and higher quality data, while reducing reporting burdens on state and local education agencies. It will take a number of years and some additional resources before this system can be fully implemented.

## **Characteristics of Low-Performing Schools**

Despite recent efforts to address the problems of low-performing schools, we know that there are still many schools that are failing to provide a high quality education to our children. Despite some gains in overall achievement on the NAEP and on assessments in many states, the gap in performance between students in high- and low-poverty schools remains large. In some schools, expectations of students are low, teachers and parents are frustrated, and academic performance is poor. Many problems, including poverty, limited resources, unqualified teachers, and unsafe learning environments, contribute to frustration, disillusionment, and discouragingly low levels of student achievement in such schools. In 1997-1998, 9,195 schools were identified as low performing under Title I of the ESEA. Final figures for 1998-1999 are not yet available, but numbers continue to be large.

We know from many sources, including the U.S. Department of Education's National Longitudinal Survey of Schools, that schools identified as in need of improvement serve disproportionately poor and minority students. Almost half of Title I schools in need of improvement (compared to only 20 percent of all Title I schools) are schools where 75 percent or more students are minority and eligible for free and reduced price lunch.

These low-performing schools are the focus of this report and of the Department of Education's response to the President's Executive Order on Actions to Improve Low-Performing Schools. Chronically low-performing schools are an enduring problem in American education. However, we are learning more every day from research and from countless examples of turned around schools that schools can be dramatically improved if the right conditions and supports are in place. The goal of the Department's initiative to turn around low-performing schools is to mobilize resources to improve the quality of

school leadership and the teaching force and help low-performing schools implement coordinated, research-based reforms to improve student achievement.

## **Identification of Low-Performing Schools: State Systems in Flux**

### ***State Responsibility***

The 1994 Reauthorization of ESEA, along with the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, introduced a new federal approach to K-12 education, an approach built around a framework of standards based reform. Impetus for this standards based approach came from the states, particularly from the 1989 Charlottesville National Education Summit, convened by President George H.W. Bush and chaired by Bill Clinton, then Governor of Arkansas.

The 1994 reauthorization of ESEA embraced this concept of standards based reform. It was based on the premise that challenging standards for all students would promote excellence and equity, and better link Title I with other federal programs to support state and local reform efforts. Specifically, under the re-authorized Title I, states were required to develop rigorous standards for all children, aligned assessments to measure students' progress toward these standards, and means of holding schools accountable for ensuring that students reach high standards. States were required to develop measures of adequate yearly progress for schools, measures based primarily on state assessments. Schools that failed to make adequate progress in moving students toward standards for two consecutive years were to be identified as in need of improvement and receive assistance from districts and states. Recognizing that states have Constitutional responsibility for education, the 1994 reauthorization of ESEA was written so that states, with support from the federal government, were to take ultimate responsibility for seeing that local schools measured up to acceptable standards and were provided with appropriate assistance when they failed to do so.

Although the 1994 reauthorization of Title I directed that all states should implement standards, align assessments, formulate definitions of adequate yearly progress used to identify low-performing schools, and put in place mechanisms for assisting schools so identified, states were also given the flexibility to design their own systems. Since states were given several years to create and approve their standards and assessments, most states are just now reaching full compliance with the law. Given the flexibility measures built into the law, it is equally unsurprising that the systems the states have created and the speed with which they have been implemented vary considerably.

As of October 2000, all but two states had instituted content standards in reading and math, and 25 states had approved performance standards, but these standards do not reach uniform levels of rigor. States were to have final assessment systems in place by 2000-2001, but as of January 2001, only seven states had received full approval, and only nine had received conditional approval. Five states had received waivers to extend the

timeline for meeting the requirements, and at least two states were asked to enter compliance agreements in order to remain eligible for Title I funding.

When it comes to low-performing Title I schools, state efforts are particularly uneven.

- Large differences between states exist because each state has a different definition of adequate yearly progress as the basis for decisions as to which schools are deemed low performing and which are not. Some states measure progress solely with a test, while others include attendance and other non-cognitive measures. Some states expect all students to reach proficiency over an extended time, while others set lower, shorter-term goals for their schools. Some states define adequate school progress as meeting an absolute performance goal, while others focus on movement towards a specified target.
- Not all states are equally far along in implementing new definitions of adequate yearly progress, a problem that leads to occasionally wild swings in the numbers of schools identified by individual states. It is likely that when states have stable systems that have been in place for a few years, such year-to-year fluctuations will become significantly less drastic.

It is important to note that the wide variation in state definitions of adequate yearly progress and state accountability systems is a direct result of the way the Title I legislation was written. The 1994 law was specifically written with considerations of flexibility and state and local control of education in mind. The goal of the law was to allow states to create accountability systems that best fit their needs and existing state education structures. One result of this legislation is that states have been able to create systems with which they are comfortable and which were politically viable for state legislatures, but the ability to compare data and performance across states was lost in the process, making it virtually impossible for the Department of Education to make definitive statements about national data.

States are taking such different approaches to standards, assessment, accountability, and capacity building that it is not always clear where we stand as a nation in terms of low-performing schools. What is clear is that states are in flux both in determining which schools are low performing and in providing assistance to struggling schools.

### ***How States Identify Low-Performing Schools***

An example of the problematic nature of state progress in dealing with low-performing schools is how they identify such schools. To begin with, some states have not yet completed the restructuring of their accountability systems, in accordance with the last reauthorization of Title I. Many of these states, as a result, have two separate systems for identifying low-performing schools, one for all schools and one that applies only to Title I schools.

States also take different approaches to identifying low-performing schools. According to the current Title I legislation, states and school districts must identify for school improvement any Title I school that has not made adequate yearly progress for two

consecutive school years. While this is a seemingly straightforward process, flexibility measures written into the law allow states to make a series of decisions in defining adequate progress and identifying low-performing schools:

1. States develop their own content standards, assessments, and performance standards, defining what students should know and be able to do and what levels of performance are satisfactory.
2. States must select indicators of student performance. Under Title I, states must include the annual state assessment results, but may also include other measures, such as attendance and dropout rates.
3. States must establish school performance goals.
4. States must define what they consider substantial and continuous yearly progress toward that goal.
5. Using their own definitions of adequate yearly progress, states must identify schools in need of improvement.

States differ considerably in how they make these decisions, and these differences produce very different results in the numbers and percentages of schools identified as low performing. Because of variation in state policy, schools with comparable levels of student performance could easily be identified as in need of improvement in one state, but not in another.

This section of the report uses data collected from the 50 states in Spring 2000 by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) to describe how states are holding Title I schools accountable for student performance. The following sections examine the context for system reform, the problem of dual accountability systems, and how states have addressed the decision points discussed above—establishing performance indicators, setting school performance goals, defining adequate yearly progress for schools, and identifying schools in need of improvement.

## Context

It is important to note that the discussion below focuses on state *accountability* policies. It *does not* address the content, quality, or rigor of state standards or the rigor or alignment of state assessment systems, although these variables also affect how and for what students, schools, and school districts are held accountable.

Furthermore, variations in these accountability policies, both before and after the reauthorization of Title I in 1994, account for some of the differences in how states identify low-performing schools. First of all, states were at different stages of standards-based reform when they started to address the 1994 Title I requirements. Title I required all states to have challenging content and performance standards in place by 1997-1998. States were to adopt high quality assessments aligned to these standards and criteria for



measuring sustained progress for these standards by the 2000-2001 school year. States' different starting points account, in part, for differences in where they end up.

Another challenge in trying to examine the variation in identification of low-performing schools across the states is the transitional nature of many state accountability systems. Several states are in the process of redesigning assessment and accountability systems to meet state and/or federal policy requirements, including those of Title I. Even states like Kentucky, which have relatively long-established accountability systems, have continued to modify their policies in response to lessons learned through early implementation. Many states will put new assessment and/or accountability systems into place in 2000-2001. Other states will implement new policies starting in 2001 or later. Thus, we are studying a moving target.

### Dual Accountability Systems

Differences exist between states' own accountability systems and the requirements of Title I in about half the states. The intent of the 1994 reauthorization of Title I was to create in each state a single accountability system that would treat all schools equally and hold all students and schools to the same standards for performance. In the period of transition, during which states implement new systems, variations and problems with systems were expected. We know that in many cases, however, states' existing systems and the systems created to meet the requirements of Title I operate separately and overlap only partially. The procedures used to identify low-performing schools are the same for both Title I schools and all schools in the state in only 22 states (See Table 1).

In many of the cases where states have two systems, the state's accreditation or accountability system predates the 1994 reauthorization, and is not sufficiently rigorous to meet Title I requirements. Often the state system does not include a measure of progress, as required by Title I. States were required to complete the transition to a single system by the spring of 2001, but it is unlikely that all will be able to do so.

**Table 1**

<b>Alignment of Title I and General State Accountability Systems, 1999-2000</b>		
<b>State</b>	<b>Unitary Systems</b>	<b>Dual Systems</b>
Alabama	X	
Alaska		x
Arizona *		x
Arkansas		x
California	X	
Colorado		x
Connecticut	X	
Delaware <sup>1</sup>	X	
Florida	X	
Georgia <sup>3</sup>		x
Hawaii		x
Idaho		x
Illinois * <sup>3</sup>	X	

Indiana		x
Iowa	X	
Kansas <sup>3</sup>		x
Kentucky	X	
Louisiana	X	
Maine <sup>2</sup>		x
Maryland	X	
Massachusetts * <sup>1</sup>	X	
Michigan		x
Minnesota		x
Mississippi *		x
Missouri		x
Montana		x
Nebraska		x
Nevada		x
New Hampshire * <sup>2</sup>		x
New Jersey		x
New Mexico <sup>3</sup>	X	
New York <sup>3</sup>	X	
North Carolina	X	
North Dakota		x
Ohio	X	
Oklahoma		x
Oregon * <sup>2</sup>	X	
Pennsylvania		x
Rhode Island	X	
South Carolina *		x
South Dakota		x
Tennessee *		x
Texas	X	
Utah		x
Vermont <sup>1</sup>	X	
Virginia *	X	
Washington		x
West Virginia	X	
Wisconsin *	X	
Wyoming <sup>1</sup>		x

<sup>1</sup> To be implemented 2000-2001.

<sup>2</sup> To be implemented 2000-2001, pending Federal approval.

<sup>3</sup> To be implemented 2000-2001, pending State Board approval.

\*Profiles on these states have not yet been fully verified by the state's department of education.

Twenty-eight states operate dual systems of accountability in which either Title I and non-Title I schools are held accountable using different sets of indicators and/or performance standards, or only Title I schools are held accountable by the state or district outside of the performance reporting structure. These dual systems cause a certain amount of confusion in determining exactly how many low-performing schools a state actually has.

### Selecting Performance Measures

The first decision states make as part of their efforts to identify low-performing Title I schools is to select measures or indicators of student performance. States can mandate

what assessments will be used or let local education officials decide. States must use criterion-referenced tests to measure performance against state standards. Some also use norm-reference tests to compare student performance against a sample of students from across the country. A state may also decide it will measure student behaviors, such as attendance or dropout rates, in addition to achievement on an assessment. States must also decide in which subject areas to test students and which students' scores are to be included in accountability ratings. Title I requires that reading/language arts and mathematics be included at a minimum, but encourages states to include other subject areas as well.

### *What Tests Are Used?*

Each state uses a different assessment tool for identifying schools for improvement. For the 2000-2001 school year, states were required to have implemented a state assessment system that met the Title I requirements: having assessments in at least reading and mathematics at the three grade spans, elementary, middle and high school; includes virtually all students in the assessment and accountability system; is aligned with state content and performance standards; is valid and reliable; and is reported by mandated disaggregated categories. Fifty states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia submitted their state assessment systems for review under Title I. For the 31 systems with completed reviews (21 are currently under review), 9 States have met all the Title I requirements, another 7 are expected to meet the requirements by Spring 2001. Twelve states have been granted a timeline waiver to finish one or more components of their state systems, while 3 states will be entering into a compliance agreement to ensure that the Title I requirements are met.

For Title I purposes, the state assessment system must be the primary means for determining adequate yearly progress. If a state does not have a statewide system, local assessments may be used if they meet the same Title I requirements as a state system. At this time, Iowa and Nebraska do not have state wide assessment systems. They are currently developing a review and approval process that will allow the state to ensure that the local systems meet the Title I requirements. The Department will approve these state systems.

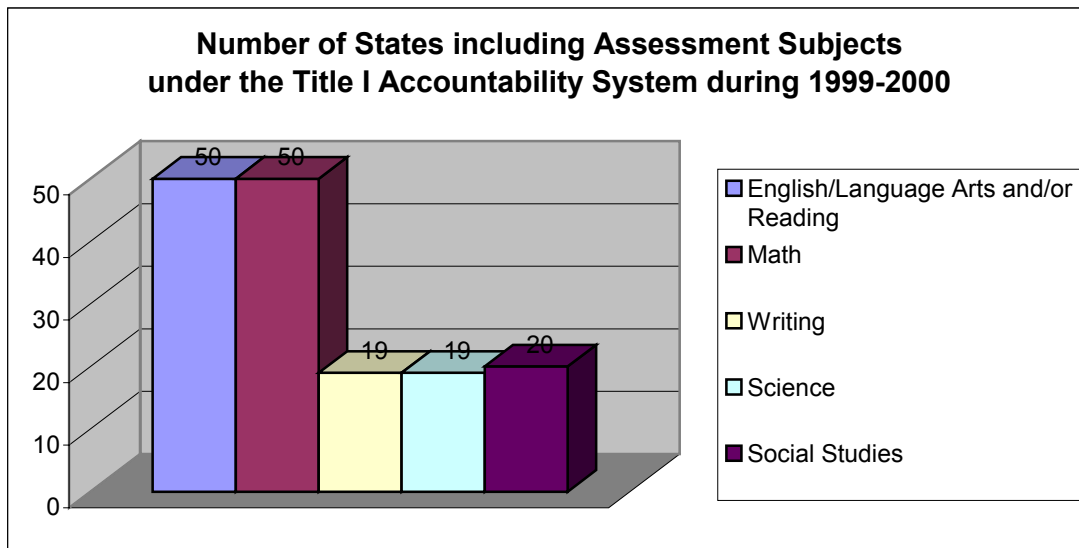
### *What Subjects Are Included?*

Title I requires that states include reading and mathematics in their standards, assessment, and accountability policies. As shown in Figure 1, all states include student performance in mathematics and either English/language arts or reading in their Title I accountability systems. In 1999-2000, many states also included other subjects: writing (19 states), social studies (20 states), and science (19 states). In all but one case, the same states assess both social studies and science for Title I purposes. Three states will add writing in 2000-2001, and one state will add both social studies and science.

Other states include multiple subject areas in their testing systems but do not use the results to determine school performance for accountability purposes. Missouri, for

example, tests and includes scores from all four core subject areas in its general accountability program, but limits Title I accountability to performance on mathematics and reading assessments. The Montana Board of Public Education requires all accredited schools to report student achievement scores for grades 4, 8, and 11 in reading, language arts, math, science, and social studies but bases Title I school progress solely on reading and mathematics performance.

**Figure 1**

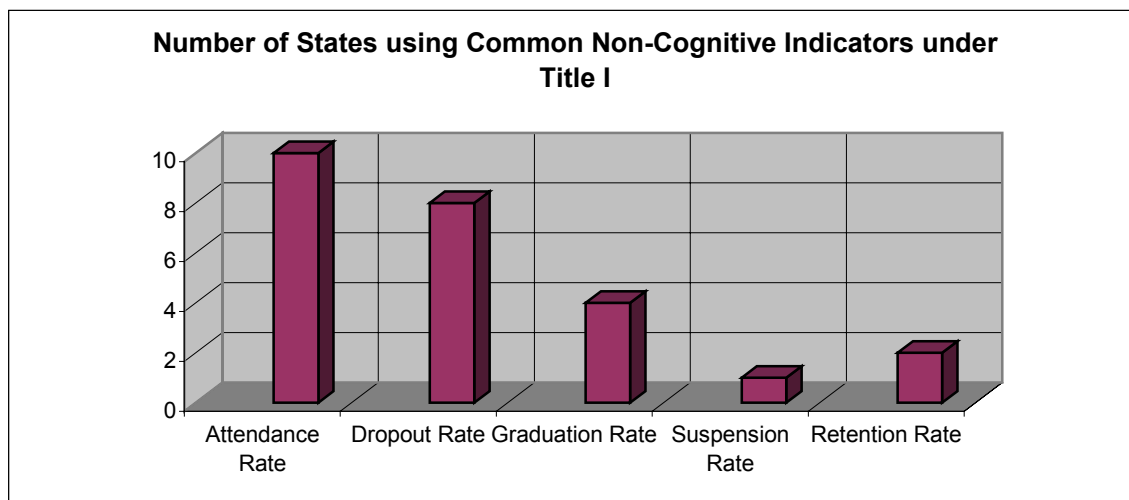


*What Other Factors Are Included in Accountability?*

Thirteen states use or intend to use non-cognitive indicators to measure the adequate yearly progress of Title I schools during the 1999-2000 or 2000-2001 school years. The most common non-cognitive indicators are attendance (10 states) and dropout rates (8 states). Less frequently used indicators include graduation, suspension and retention rates (See Figure 2).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Two additional states have included non-cognitive indicators in their accountability systems under Title I through legislation (California) or state board policy (Vermont). In both cases, however, these indicators were not included in the performance calculations for the 1999-2000 school year, and the specific weights given to these indicators have yet to be determined. When and if these indicators will be fully implemented is, at this point, unknown.

**Figure 2**



### *Who Gets Tested?*

The provisions of Title I require states to include all students in the grades they test, and assess all students against the same content and performance standards. If standard assessment procedures cannot provide this information for students with diverse learning needs, such as students with disabilities or English language learners, states must make reasonable test adaptations and accommodations, or provide alternate assessments; individual student reports are required in these cases.

In general, states are testing more students with disabilities than in previous years and report that they offer a range of test accommodations and modifications.<sup>2</sup> States appear to offer a broader range of accommodations and modifications on their own criterion-referenced assessments. States are developing and beginning to implement alternate assessments for students with disabilities but face ongoing challenges in determining student eligibility, aligning tests with state standards, and scoring and reporting test results.<sup>3</sup> States also report they are monitoring exclusion rates, and some are incorporating exclusion rates into their school accountability measures.

Testing policies in every state are being reviewed this school year. States failing to comply with Title I requirements are being required to modify their policies in order to come into compliance and to remain eligible for Title I funds. Many states have been exempting students from testing for up to three years if they are enrolled in a bilingual or an English as a Second Language (ESL) program, a practice that puts the states out of compliance with Title I. Florida, for example, excludes students with less than two years

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<sup>2</sup> Although states use these terms in different ways, and sometimes interchangeably, we define "accommodations" as changes in presentation, response mode, time and/or setting, and "modifications" as changes that alter the content of the assessment.

<sup>3</sup> Alternate assessments can be designed to measure different content and skills (such as functional life skills), or to measure the same content and skills as other students but in different ways (such as through portfolios).

of ESL; those with two or more years must be tested in English, but may have accommodations such as additional time or division of the test into shorter periods. Other states exempt students based on their level of English proficiency. English language learners in Nevada, for example, must pass the Language Acquisition Skills assessment before being included in the state assessment. Colorado exempts non-English speaking students who score at levels 1 or 2 on a 5-stage language proficiency rubric. Texas exempts non-Spanish speaking students from its grade 3-8 testing program based on their level of English proficiency, but requires all students to take the 10<sup>th</sup> grade exit test in English.

Finally, a handful of states like Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas offer Spanish versions of some of their assessments. New York provides mathematics tests in four languages and will translate high school examinations in subjects other than English into five languages. Oregon has also developed tests in languages other than English. The President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans (2000) has raised concerns, however, about the rigor and adequacy of tests created in Spanish and of translated versions of state assessments, as well as the appropriateness of many test accommodations for English language learners.

#### *Whose Scores Count for the Accountability System?*

When examining how states make decisions about identifying low-performing schools, it is important to understand whose scores are included in school and district accountability measures. Many states report including the scores of all tested students in their accountability systems, although some exclude students taking alternative assessments and other students who took tests under non-standard conditions. Such practices place states out of compliance with Title I. States found out of compliance are being required to come into compliance this year.

#### **Establishing School Performance Goals**

The goal of Title I adequate yearly progress definitions is to ensure that schools are making continuous and substantial progress, within an appropriate timeframe, toward having all students meet state proficient and advanced levels of achievement. As one looks across states, however, there is a very wide variation in how states determine the goals schools must meet to avoid being identified as in need of improvement.

Performance goals vary widely across states. State targets appear to vary along three dimensions: (1) whether they set an absolute goal or a progress goal; (2) the level at which the goal is set, determined by the percentage of students in schools that must meet standards; and (3) the length of time schools are given to meet their goals.

All but five states have established absolute goals for school performance. In a few states, like Michigan and Washington, the performance goals are to increase the percentage of students meeting state standards and to reduce the percentage of students who are well below standards. These states have not set a target number or percentage of students who should fall into each category. This approach, which we call *narrowing the achievement gap*, is used by several other states in their definition of adequate progress.

Most of the states that set an *absolute* goal for school performance expect to bring some or all of their students to the “proficient” level of performance. The measure of proficiency, however, is not comparable across states. States use different assessments aligned with different standards and set different cut scores for each performance level. A student who is proficient on Rhode Island’s assessment, for example, may (or may not) exhibit a different level and/or mix of knowledge and skills than a student who scores at the proficient level in Maryland or Wisconsin. Six states require students to meet a basic level of performance. Florida, for example, gives grades of “A” and “B” to schools where at least half of the students reach Level 3 on the state assessment (“the student has partial success with the state standards”).

States also differ in the percentage of students that schools are expected to bring up to the basic or proficient standard. About a dozen states *specify* that they expect 90-100 percent of students to reach proficiency, about a dozen specify they expect 60-85 percent to reach this level, and about another ten states set the goal at 50 percent of students meeting the assessment target in order to avoid being identified as in need of improvement. Other states focus on average scores.

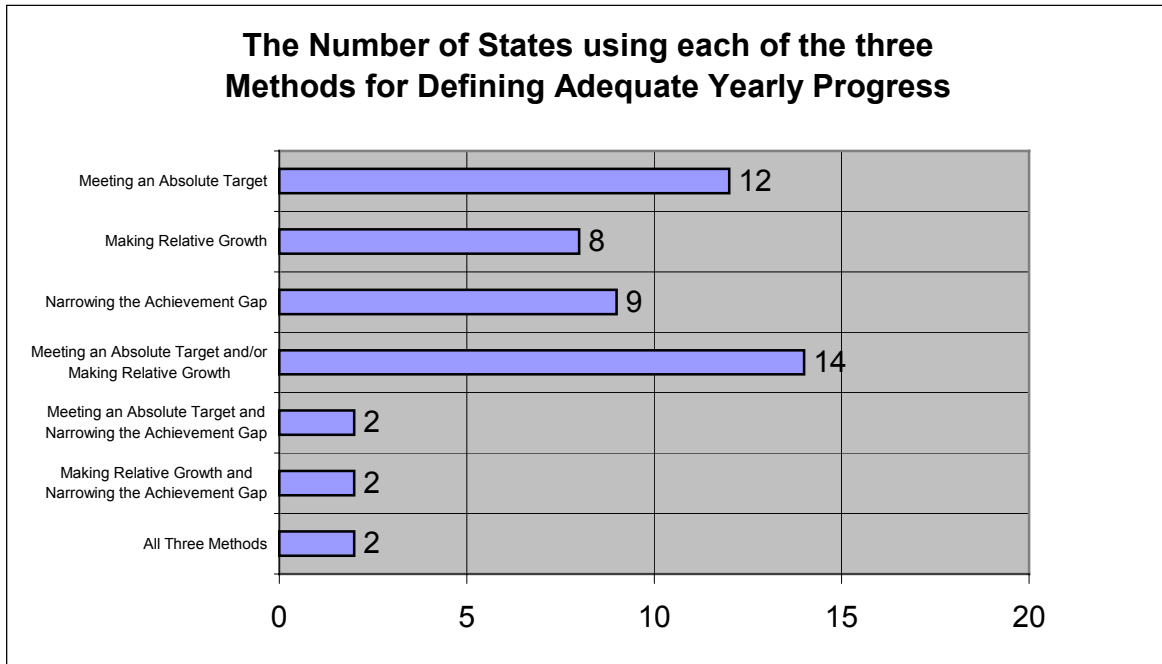
Finally, states set different timelines for meeting these performance goals. Fourteen states have established explicit target dates, ranging from six to twenty years; the modal target is ten years.

### Definitions of Adequate Yearly Progress

An important factor in examining how states identify low-performing schools is understanding whether states require schools to reach a threshold above which they will not be identified for improvement or whether all schools are required to make progress every year.

Twelve states use absolute targets rather than levels of actual progress as the only measure of making adequate yearly progress. The remaining 37 states incorporate some measure of continuous progress in their definitions, either as the sole measure or in combination with other measures.

**Figure 3**



**Table 2**

<b>Categories of Defining Title I Adequate Yearly Progress, 1999-2000</b>					
State	Meeting an Absolute Target	and/or	Making Relative Growth	and/or	Narrowing the Achievement Gap
Alabama	x				
Alaska	x				
Arizona *	x	or	x		
Arkansas	x				
California			x		
Colorado					x
Connecticut	x				
Delaware <sup>1</sup>	x	and	x	and	x
Florida	x				
Georgia <sup>3</sup>	x			and	x
Hawaii	x	or	x		
Idaho			x		
Illinois *	x			and	x
Indiana	x	or	x		
Iowa	n/a		n/a		n/a
Kansas <sup>3</sup>	x	or	x		
Kentucky			x	and	x
Louisiana	x	or	x		
Maine <sup>2</sup>					x
Maryland			x		
Massachusetts * <sup>1</sup>	x	and	x		
Michigan					x
Minnesota			x		
Missouri					x
Mississippi *	x	and	x		



Montana	x				
Nebraska					x
Nevada					x
New Hampshire * <sup>2</sup>	x	and	x		
New Jersey	x				
New Mexico <sup>3</sup>	x				
New York <sup>3</sup>	x	or	x		
North Carolina	x	or	x		
North Dakota			x		
Ohio	x	or	x		
Oklahoma	x	or	x		
Oregon * <sup>2</sup>	x				
Pennsylvania					x
Rhode Island			x	and	x
South Carolina *	x	or	x		
South Dakota					x
Tennessee *			x		
Texas	x				
Utah	x	or	x		
Vermont <sup>1</sup>			x		
Virginia *	x				
Washington					x
West Virginia	x				
Wisconsin*	x	or	x	and	x
Wyoming <sup>1</sup>			x		

<sup>1</sup> To be implemented 2000-2001.

<sup>2</sup> To be implemented 2000-2001, pending Federal approval.

<sup>3</sup> To be implemented 2000-2001, pending State Board approval.

\*Profiles on these states have not yet been fully verified by the state's department of education.

Florida and Texas are examples of states that use *absolute* targets. Florida grades schools on a scale of A to F. A school earns each grade by meeting specific performance standards. For example, at least 60 percent of a school's students must score at Level 2 ("limited success at meeting state content standards") on the state assessments in reading, mathematics and writing to receive a grade of "C." Schools that do not meet this criterion in *any* of the three tested areas are given a grade of "F" and are judged as not making adequate yearly progress. Texas defines adequate yearly progress as achieving the state's "acceptable" rating. For a school to be rated "acceptable" in 1999-2000, at least 50 percent of students in each sub-group had to pass the state assessment in reading, writing and mathematics, the drop out rate had to be six percent or less, and the student attendance rate had to be at least 94 percent.

The use of *relative criteria* emphasizes continuous improvement. California is an example of a state that has established annual goals for schools that require continuous progress towards a state-specified performance target. California recently assigned schools individualized annual growth targets based on five percent of the difference between their Academic Performance Index baseline score for July 1999 and the statewide interim performance target of 800.

Eleven states require schools to meet an absolute target *or* make relative growth. For example, in Utah, elementary schools demonstrating percentages of students equivalent

to the state average percentage at the basic or higher levels of proficiency are considered to have made progress. If a school does not meet the state average percentages, an improvement of three percent in the number of students per year attaining the basic or higher levels will be considered adequate progress. In North Carolina, a Title I school makes adequate progress if it either meets the absolute performance minimum threshold (not more than 50 percent of students below grade level) *or* its expected growth goal.

Three other states require schools to meet an absolute target *and* make relative growth. Massachusetts' new School Performance Rating Process, implemented in the 2000-2001 school year, requires that each school be assigned an overall performance rating (absolute target) *and* an overall improvement rating (relative growth). These measures will be combined to place each school in a performance category.

Fifteen states have addressed the achievement gap issue by defining adequate yearly progress in terms of moving students from one achievement level to the next higher level; nine states use this as the sole definition of adequate school progress. Michigan, for example, requires Title I schools to reduce by 10 percent the gap in the percentage of students scoring in the highest and lowest performance levels on the state assessments. Each school's achievement gap and improvement goal are calculated annually and separately for each subject area that is assessed. Schools are held accountable for closing the gap in all subject areas.

Six states include narrowing the achievement gap as part of school accountability criteria. Two states call for schools to meet an absolute target and narrow the achievement gap, while two states require schools to both narrow the achievement gap *and* make gains on their average scores.

The length of time which schools have to meet final progress goals varies. Some examples are 100 percent of students meeting standards by 2008 (Vermont); a school improvement index of 100 in ten years (Colorado) or by 2014 (Kentucky); or 70 percent (math) to 75 percent (English) of students meeting the basic standard in six years (South Carolina). A second group of states does not specify target dates for meeting standards, but uses adequate yearly progress targets as an implicit timeline for moving schools toward the state's performance goals. California, for example, has set an interim goal for its Academic Performance Indicator of 800. The state assigns each school an Annual Growth Target of at least 5 percent, based on the distance between its current performance and the state goal.

A few states set lower, but more immediate and perhaps, in their opinion, more achievable performance goals, intending to raise these goals over time. Texas is an example of this strategy. When the state enacted its reform, it rated schools as "acceptable" if 25 percent of their students passed the state assessment. The state raised this threshold by five percentage points a year, to the current level of 50 percent passing. Virginia has set a passing rate of 40 percent to 60 percent, depending on the subject, on its tests for the year 2000. In the year 2006, however, at least 70 percent of students will need to pass the state assessments in English, except for third and fifth grade students, 75

percent of whom must pass. At least 60 percent of students will need to pass the state assessments in three other core areas, except in third and fifth grade math.

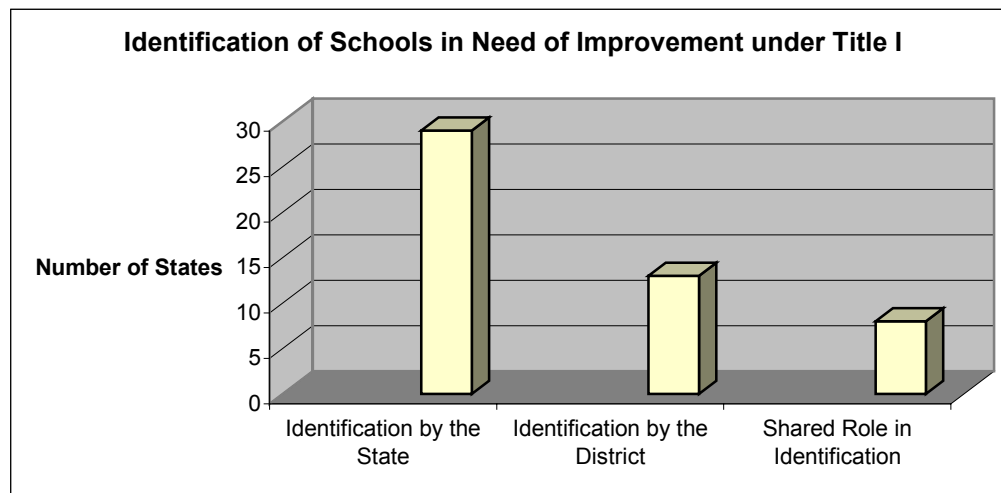
### Identifying Schools in Need of Improvement

Title I calls for districts (states) to identify for program improvement schools (districts) that have not made adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years. The process that these jurisdictions use, however, entails four decisions:

- How will schools be identified as in need of improvement?
- Will the state or the district be responsible for identifying these schools?
- How will districts be identified as in need of improvement?
- How will schools and districts get out of improvement status?

Generally, states identify schools for improvement if they fail to make adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years. A few states, such as Hawaii, Minnesota and Virginia have shortened the timeline, determining that a school that has not made adequate yearly progress for *just one year* will be placed in program improvement. States have generally adopted a “two in, two out” rule for schools, and in some cases districts, to determine who should exit school improvement. Specifically, states require schools to make adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years after they have been identified for program improvement. Some states have varied this rule by allowing schools to make adequate yearly progress for two out of three years after being identified for program improvement in order to be removed from that status.

**Figure 5**



As shown in Figure 5, 29 states keep the responsibility for identifying schools in need of improvement at the state level, while 13 states allow districts identify such schools. The remaining eight states have developed varied processes in which the state and the district share in identification.

**Table 3**

<b>Identification of Schools in Need of Improvement under Title I, 1999-2000</b>			
<b>State</b>	<b>Identification by the State</b>	<b>Identification by the District</b>	<b>Shared Role in Identification</b>
Alabama			x
Alaska	x		
Arizona *		x	
Arkansas	x		
California	x		
Colorado			x
Connecticut	x		
Delaware <sup>1</sup>	x		
Florida	x		
Georgia <sup>3</sup>	x		
Hawaii	x		
Idaho		x	
Illinois * <sup>3</sup>			x
Indiana	x		
Iowa		x	
Kansas <sup>3</sup>		x	
Kentucky	x		
Louisiana	x		
Maine <sup>2</sup>	x		
Maryland			x
Massachusetts * <sup>1</sup>	x		
Michigan	x		
Minnesota		x	
Mississippi *	x		
Missouri		x	
Montana	x		
Nebraska			x
Nevada			x
New Hampshire * <sup>2</sup>		x	
New Jersey	x		
New Mexico <sup>3</sup>		x	
New York <sup>3</sup>		x	
North Carolina			x
North Dakota	x		
Ohio		x	
Oklahoma	x		
Oregon * <sup>2</sup>	x		
Pennsylvania		x	
Rhode Island	x		
South Carolina *	x		
South Dakota	x		
Tennessee *		x	
Texas	x		
Utah	x		
Vermont <sup>1</sup>	x		
Virginia *	x		
Washington		x	
West Virginia	x		

Wisconsin *			x
Wyoming <sup>1</sup>	x		

<sup>1</sup> To be implemented 2000-2001.

<sup>2</sup> To be implemented 2000-2001, pending Federal approval.

<sup>3</sup> To be implemented 2000-2001, pending State Board approval.

\*Profiles on these states have not yet been fully verified by the state's department of education.

The states with shared responsibility provide interesting examples of state and district collaboration. These eight states—Alabama, Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, and Wisconsin—each developed a different process by which both the state and the district could take ownership for determining which schools were eligible for program improvement or notifying those schools of their program improvement status. For example:

- In Colorado, districts are responsible for determining whether a school is to be identified for school improvement. An assigned consultant from the state department will review the district recommendations and the data that led to those decisions for each school to make a final determination. The district staff and the assigned consultant will review the body of evidence and determine if a school should be exempted from this final list.
- In Maryland, the state first notifies the district as to which schools are not making progress. The district is asked to identify those schools for program improvement as a way of verifying the state's determination. If the district and school actions that follow do not improve the school's achievement, a school can become eligible for reconstitution. The state superintendent and the district superintendent make that determination, with the state holding final authority on reconstitution eligibility.

## Summary

States differ widely in the goals they set for Title I schools, their measures of continuous progress, who is included in their assessment and accountability systems, and how they identify schools and/or districts for program improvement. It is not surprising, therefore, to see considerable variation across states in the numbers of Title I schools that have been identified for program improvement.

### ***Trends in State Identification of Low-Performing Schools***

While states differ markedly in how they identify low-performing schools, there has been a general, continued increase in the number and percentage of Title I schools identified as in need of improvement in the country as a whole. In 1996-1997, state education agencies reported that they identified more than 7,000 schools (16 percent of Title I schools) as in need of improvement under Title I. In 1997-1998, that number rose to more than 9,000 schools (20 percent of Title I schools). Preliminary figures for the 1998-1999 school year, although incomplete and subject to change, indicate that the numbers of schools identified as in need of improvement continues to rise. What, if anything, this overall rise means in real terms, however, is difficult to determine.

To begin with, not all states have been consistent in how they identify schools for improvement. In some states, the number of schools identified has remained remarkably similar from one year to the next, but this is not true in others. In a few states the numbers have decreased quite markedly. In Nevada, for example, a large drop between 1997-1998 and 1998-1999 was the result of a change in state definition of adequate yearly progress. It is not clear, however, that the drop in numbers and percentages of identified schools is evidence that schools actually improved in absolute terms.

Several states, on the other hand, have had dramatic increases in the number of schools identified as being in need of improvement. As with the Nevada decrease discussed in the previous paragraph, it is difficult to determine whether the increases are indicative of an absolute change in the performance of Title I schools. Reasons for the increases vary, but most can be accounted for by changes in the measures states use to identify which schools are low performing.

In Kentucky, a sharp rise between 1996-1997 and 1997-1998 in the number of schools identified for improvement reflects a change in the state's definition of adequate yearly progress. In Arkansas and Nebraska, new state laws changed the definition of adequate yearly progress and based identification for improvement on schools' failure to meet goals for two consecutive years, using 1996-1997 as the baseline. The two-year rules account for large increases in schools identified in the 1998-1999 school year, the first year for which two years of data collected under the new law were available. In both Georgia and Hawaii, increases in the numbers of schools identified for improvement resulted from new, more rigorous expectations for performance on established state tests. Increases in the number of schools identified in Massachusetts can be accounted for by the replacement, in the 1997-1998 school year, of a norm referenced assessment test with a test based on the state's standards. In 1996-1997, California allowed individual school districts to determine measures for adequate yearly progress. In 1997-1998, however, California began to move toward a statewide definition of adequate yearly progress based in part on a new standardized test; this change accounts for the increases in the numbers of schools identified for improvement.

These changes in the way adequate yearly progress is defined and measured make it difficult to determine whether the increases or decreases in the numbers of schools identified for improvement in states are the result of real changes in the schools or whether they are simply byproducts of the changes in definitions and measures. The changes in the definition and measurement of adequate yearly progress are partially the result of changes made in the 1994 reauthorization of Title I. Because states were given a period of several years during which such changes could be made, it is not surprising that the numbers of schools identified in some states have swung wildly over the last three years. If the Title I law remains substantially unchanged for the next several years, it is reasonable to assume that large, within-state fluctuations in the numbers of schools identified will stabilize over time.

The sometimes huge variations between the numbers of schools identified for improvement by different states is more difficult to evaluate. As we have already

established, each state uses its own criteria for defining low performance, but the results are rather startling. Some states identify a very small number and proportion of their schools for improvement under Title I. Texas, for example, has more than 4,000 Title I schools but identified only 61 schools (1 percent) for improvement in 1998-1999. Of the states that have so far reported for 1998-99, nine (Alaska, Idaho, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Texas) identified 5 percent or fewer of their Title I schools as in need of improvement. In contrast, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Arkansas, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Hawaii, Kentucky, and Michigan have thus far identified a majority of Title I schools as in need of improvement. These differences in numbers of schools identified do not, however, necessarily mean that individual states are doing “better” or “worse” than others in terms of identifying or improving low-performing schools. The number of schools identified for improvement in each state reflects not only the number of low-performing schools in an absolute sense, but also how each state defines “low-performing.” These definitions vary widely, and they have a pronounced effect on how many schools states identify.

States that have more schools identified for improvement may actually have more low-performing schools, or they may simply have higher expectations for performance. Changes over time in the number of schools a state has identified for improvement may reflect an actual change in school performance, or a change in the state’s practices for identifying low-performing schools. In short, differences in performance are mixed up with differences in expectations and identification practices, which makes the number of identified schools an unreliable indicator for comparing school performance across states or over time.

Table 4 below shows, state by state, how many schools were identified for improvement under Title I for the 1996-1997, 1997-1998 and 1998-1999 school years. The numbers for 1998-99 should be viewed as preliminary figures, subject to change as additional information is submitted to the U.S. Department of Education.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Table 4 reveals serious problems with data collection. These problems are particularly disturbing because this is the most important data that the U.S. Department of Education collects. Data for the 1998-99 school year was due to the Department in December of 1999. As of December 20, 2000, six states had not provided a count of low-performing Title I schools to the Department. Late data has been a consistent problem. The Department also has concerns about the accuracy of numbers provided by some states; departmental efforts to check and verify numbers submitted by states often result in reports of different numbers. Requiring states to provide the names of all the Title I schools they identify as low performing, along with the state total, might help alleviate some accuracy problems.

Problems of collection of state numbers are made worse by inconsistent and unsystematic efforts on the Department’s part to collect, manage, and record the data that it does acquire from states. It would behoove both the states and the Department to come up with a better, more timely, and more accurate system of data collection and management. To this end the Department is reevaluating the data it currently collects from states in an effort to reduce the burden on states, while at the same time collecting information, such as data on low-performing schools, that is vital to the Department’s work. The Department is also initiating a pilot data collection project in eight states. This program, the Integrated Performance and Benchmarking System (IPBS), will

**Table 4**

<b>Title I Schools Identified as in Need of Improvement, by State</b>						
<b>State</b>	<b>1996-97</b>		<b>1997-98</b>		<b>1998-99</b>	
	<b>Number in Improvement</b>	<b>% in Improvement</b>	<b>Number in Improvement</b>	<b>% in Improvement</b>	<b>Number in Improvement</b>	<b>% in Improvement</b>
Alabama	248	31	26	3	60	7
Alaska	24	12	11	5	8	2
Arizona	42	5	107	15		
Arkansas	101	13	53	7	499	64
California	330	8	1,307	34	1,307	34
Colorado	15	3	13	2	91	15
Connecticut	95	24	102	24	26	6
Delaware	29	26	39	36	32	32
District of Columbia	82	85	60	59	100	80
Florida	29	3	3	0	73	7
Georgia	236	24	537	52	603	59
Hawaii	37	32	77	60	91	66
Idaho	45	12	44	11	14	4
Illinois	93	4	62	2	727	32
Indiana	242	29	257	31	98	12
Iowa	28	4	28	4	148	17
Kansas	147	22	144	21	171	22
Kentucky	356	40	634	73	615	71
Louisiana	30	4	162	19	162	19
Maine	127	31	307	72	†	†
Maryland	59	22	31	8	18	6
Massachusetts	97	12	422	47		
Michigan	641	33	1,048	57	1,523	76
Minnesota	98	11	103	12	*	*
Mississippi	129	19	108	16	100	15
Missouri	551	44	551	44		
Montana	53	9	63	10	62	10
Nebraska	102	21	80	16	204	41
Nevada	64	70	62	69	35	36
New Hampshire	1	0	2	1	4	2
New Jersey	185	16	#	#	#	#
New Mexico	394	81	182	41	149	33
New York	410	16	410	15		
North Carolina	74	8	76	7	46	4
North Dakota	16	6	16	6	20	7
Ohio	680	38	450	22	508	25
Oklahoma	37	3	81	7	31	3
Oregon	29	4	9	1		
Pennsylvania	215	12	204	12	215	12
Rhode Island	23	17	1	1	34	25
South Carolina	88	18	97	20	75	15
South Dakota	10	3	8	2	0	0
Tennessee	118	16	118	16	17	2

allow for the creation of an Internet-based system for harvesting information from states regarding Federal program activities at the school and district levels. The system would allow users to link Federal program participation and outcome information to characteristics of recipient states, districts, and schools. The IPBS will help to meet policy makers' need for timely, outcome-based information while streamlining, modernizing, and reducing the reporting burden on states from Federal information requests. States will no longer send data to the Federal government. Rather, they will collect and store the data in their own warehouses in such a way that the Federal government can harvest them. States will monitor and ensure the quality of district- and school-collected data.



Texas	40	1	55	1	61	1
Utah	7	3	20	8	20	9
Vermont	14	6	10	5		
Virginia	152	22	152	21	150	20
Washington	176	19	172	19	71	8
West Virginia	60	13	146	32	130	29
Wisconsin	139	8	211	12	166	15
Wyoming	23	18	36	26	31	22
BIA	160	92	148	86	147	85
Puerto Rico	435	32	150	11	200	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,616</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>9,195</b>	<b>19</b>		

**Note:** The 1996-1997 figures for Colorado, Idaho, Missouri, North Carolina, and Washington are early 1997-1998 figures used as a proxy for 1996-1997.

† Maine is in the middle of changing assessments and does not have the necessary three years of data to determine which schools are low performing

\* The Minnesota legislature is currently debating how to define adequate yearly progress. Until this issue is settled, the Department of Children, Families, and Learning cannot make any decisions about identifying low-performing schools.

# New Jersey was unable to provide this information for 1997-1998 or 1998-1999.

States reported that of the over 46,000 schools that participated in the Title I program in 1996-1997, 16 percent (7,616 schools) were identified for improvement. States reported that of the nearly 48,000 schools that participated in the Title I program in 1997-1998, 9,195 schoolwide and targeted assistance schools (or 19 percent) were identified for improvement, an increase from the previous year. Preliminary data for the 1998-1999 school year indicate that the increase in the number of schools identified for improvement across the United States continues.

## **Turning Around Low-Performing Schools**

The identification of low-performing schools presents sticky problems for states and districts and raises the additional problem of improving the performance of schools so identified. Research on effective schools is plentiful and largely in agreement in its conclusions. Research on the process of turning a low-performing school into an effective school is much less plentiful and more difficult to interpret. It is also clear that even if low-performing schools are aware of what they should be doing to improve performance, they do not always have the capacity to carry out improvements. States and districts should play the primary role in building needed capacity, but the federal government also has an important role to play in school improvement.

### ***Research on Effective Schools***

Low-performing schools, especially those in high poverty neighborhoods, are receiving a good deal of attention from education researchers. Several organizations, as well as the U.S. Department of Education, have conducted studies to determine why some schools manage to perform at high levels of academic achievement while others do not. While these studies tend to be narrowly focused, concentrated on relatively small numbers of schools, and varied in terms of the

### **Recent Reports on High-Performing Schools on the Web**

*Hope for Urban Education*  
[www.ed.gov/pubs/urbanhope/](http://www.ed.gov/pubs/urbanhope/)

*Dispelling the Myth*  
[www.edtrust.org/pubs-online.html](http://www.edtrust.org/pubs-online.html)

*No Excuses*  
[www.noexcuses.org/lessons/](http://www.noexcuses.org/lessons/)

rigor and intensity of their research methods, they come to similar conclusions about what makes for effective schools. Noteworthy recent studies include the following:

- *Hope for Urban Education: A Study of Nine High-Performing, High-Poverty, Urban Elementary Schools* (1999), compiled by researchers at the Charles A. Dana Center at The University of Texas at Austin for the Planning and Evaluation Service of the U.S. Department of Education;
- *Dispelling the Myth: High Poverty Schools Exceeding Expectations* (1999), conducted by the Education Trust in cooperation with the Council of Chief State School Officers;
- *No Excuses: Lessons from 21 High-Performing, High Poverty Schools* (2000), written by Samuel Casey Carter, a Bradley Fellow at the Heritage Foundation; and
- *Leave No Child Behind: A Baker's Dozen Strategies to Increase Academic Achievement* (1999), a report based on the findings of a two year study conducted by the Chicago Schools Academic Accountability Council.

Although these studies and others like them are products of individuals and organizations representing a broad range of political and ideological positions, and despite their varying methodologies, they are remarkably similar in their findings. While the studies differ in detail and emphasis, there is general agreement among the researchers about what works in high poverty schools.

Researchers in these studies repeatedly stress seven important characteristics of high-performing schools. These findings are consistent with findings from the effective schools research of the past two decades and indicate that if low-performing schools were to emulate these characteristics of high-performing schools, performance would improve.

### **Seven Characteristics of High-Performing Schools**

- High-performing schools set high standards for student achievement and plan curriculum and assessment based upon those standards.
- High-performing schools hold teachers and administrators accountable for meeting school goals.
- High-performing schools create a safe, orderly environment that allows students to concentrate on academics.
- High-performing schools maximize time spent on instruction.
- High-performing schools have teachers and administrators who are committed to the philosophy and mission of their schools and who have access to quality professional development that helps them achieve that mission.
- High-performing schools have high levels of parent and community involvement.
- High-performing schools have the freedom of flexibility in curriculum design, as well as in making personnel and finance decisions.

## ***Turning Low-Performing Schools into High-Performing Schools***

While the research is clear on what an effective school should look like, there is considerably less research consensus on the *process* by which a low-performing school becomes high performing. In fact, research on process is only now beginning to appear in any quantity. Researchers who are investigating the process of school reform have a shared sense that reform is *not* a one-size-fits-all proposition; it is, rather, highly context-specific. Not all low-performing schools are low performing for the same reasons or in the same ways; therefore, reform strategies must also be varied to fit the needs of the particular school. In addition, researchers agree that reform only works if those most directly involved in it (teachers, school staff, school leaders, parents, and students) buy into it. Researchers involved in the High Performance Learning Communities Project, a five-year research study conducted by RPP International and funded by OERI, go so far as to say “No Buy-in, No Reform.”

It is clear that in order to succeed, reform efforts need to fit the site and involve the entire school community. Schools that engage in successful reform efforts also appear to share a four-step process involving a needs assessment, a planning phase, an implementation phase, and a period of assessment and evaluation.

- **Needs Assessment and Goal Setting**—The school needs to examine itself and see where its problems are, which of those problems are most pressing and/or solvable, and what its specific needs in terms of curriculum, staff, training, outside help, use of time, and other resources are for addressing problems.
- **Planning**—The school must choose reform strategies or models that meet its *identified* needs and priorities. Jumping in and trying the first reform strategy that comes to hand will not be effective; this means that planners need access to research and information about what has worked for other schools. All parties interested in the school need to be part of the planning in order to create necessary buy-in.
- **Implementation**—The chosen reform strategy or strategies must be carefully implemented, which means that the school needs access to appropriate resources. These might include staff development for teachers and school leaders, access to useful data on student performance, increased parental involvement, rearrangement of time use, expert advice from outside the school, or a schoolwide or subject specific model. Above all, the school needs the *flexibility* to choose and use the kinds of resources that address its specific problem or problems.
- **Evaluation and Feedback**—At some point, preferably in an ongoing manner, the school must assess the effectiveness of the chosen reform in solving school problems. This evaluation should feed back into the next round of needs assessment and planning so that ineffective programs can be eliminated and replaced. The goal is to use regular and systematic assessment and evaluation to facilitate *continuous improvement*.

### ***School, District, and State Capacity for Effective Reform***

Some schools can complete the change process described above on their own, but many low-performing schools are not undergoing this process. Reasons for failure to initiate change vary, but certain obstacles are widely shared. Staffs in low-performing schools are often demoralized, and they frequently have little access to research that would tell them what to do to improve their schools. The temptation for staff in low-performing schools is to concentrate on survival, not improvement. The research on school improvement efforts to date suggests, however, that *capacity* is the major issue in turning around low-performing schools. Low-performing schools are usually the ones least likely to be in a position to turn themselves around. They need critical external support to adopt research-based strategies for creating effective schools, and they need more information and better guidance on what it takes to turn around a failing school.

In many cases, research suggests that districts and states are not doing an adequate job in helping low-performing schools build the capacity they need to improve performance, in part because they themselves lack the capacity to assist individual schools.

Although we have a great deal of information about state systems for identifying low-performing schools and some information on the number identified, we know much less about what states are doing to help Title I schools and districts identified for improvements. We need to examine the role states and districts play in assisting and intervening in low-performing schools, and we need to know whether or not states and districts have the necessary capacity to support school improvement efforts in struggling and failing schools.

States and districts need knowledge, human resources, and financial resources to turn around low-performing schools. It is unclear what the optimum mix and level of resources are, but states and districts report having insufficient capacity to help the number of schools that have been (or should be) identified as in need of improvement. California, for example, designated over 3,000 schools as under-performing in 1999-2000, but included only 430 of these schools in the first year of its Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program. Some states, in contrast, appear to identify for improvement only the number of schools for which necessary resources for improvement are available.

What is clear is that many schools need help but do not get it. Principals are all too often unsure even of the reasons why their schools are considered low performing. Recent school level data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Schools (NLSS), conducted by the Planning and Evaluation Service of the U.S. Department of Education, raises concern about whether states and districts are currently assisting and intervening in schools that need help. The 1998-1999 NLSS revealed that

- Thirty-one percent of principals of Title I schools identified as in need of improvement did not know what their districts considered adequate or substantial yearly progress. Urban and elementary Title I school principals were much more likely than their counterparts in rural Title I schools or high schools in need of improvement to know what their districts considered adequate progress.

- Of those school principals who were familiar with how school performance was judged, more than a third overall, and a majority of urban principals, felt that the measures of adequate yearly progress were inadequate for judging their schools.
- The NLSS, like the National Assessment of Title I for 1997-1998, showed that less than half (47 percent) of principals of schools identified as in need of improvement under Title I reported receiving additional technical assistance or professional development as a result. In general, the longer schools are identified as in need of improvement, they more likely they are to report receiving additional assistance. Sixty-two percent of principals in schools identified for four or more years reported extra assistance. However, only 30 percent of principals of schools identified for three years reported extra assistance.
- Almost a quarter of principals in schools identified as in need of improvement under Title I reported implementing no additional strategies to address low performance.
- Of schools that reported receiving additional assistance as a result of identification for improvement, the majority report receiving that assistance from their school district (84 percent), the state department of education (65 percent), or school support teams (77 percent). Eighteen percent reported assistance from the U.S. Department of Education's Comprehensive Regional Assistance Centers, and 14 percent reported assistance from the Department's Regional Educational Laboratories.

Clearly, many states and districts cannot or do not provide low-performing schools with the help they need to turn around performance. State and district actions need to be directed at setting high expectations, at building school capacity to improve, at encouraging innovation at the district and school levels, and at stepping in to take actions if schools fail to perform at expected levels.

### ***State and District Roles in Turning Around Low-Performing Schools***

States and districts have a key role in and responsibility for supporting failing schools. At each of the four stages of school improvement discussed above (needs assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation and assessment) states and districts could, and should, provide the resources, including personnel, funds, information, and rewards and sanctions that encourage and foster school improvement.

#### **Needs Assessment and Goal Setting**

Before poorly performing schools can conduct adequate assessments of their needs, they must know what the expectations for adequate performance are and where their performance ranks in terms of those expectations. Without this information, schools do not have a clear goal at which to aim their efforts or a clear sense of where they are failing to measure up. States and districts can help by communicating to all stakeholders in a highly visible way that all students are expected to meet high standards. To the extent that states and districts have clear, consistent, and coherent expectations, and focus

resources on priorities, the groundwork is laid for systemic improvement and accountability.

States need to create clear state standards for what students should know and align state assessments accordingly. Districts' standards and assessments, as well as curricula, should be similarly aligned. Without clear roadmaps for what will be measured, individual schools will have a difficult time planning their own activities. During the past six years, 49 states developed statewide academic content standards. In accordance with the ESEA, states are finalizing their state assessments and accountability systems, and the U.S. Department of Education is reviewing them to ensure that they meet the Title I requirements.

Once standards are set, states and districts need to create clear, measurable student performance goals for schools. These goals, and the consequences for meeting them, must be easily discernable for all schools, for parents, and for the community. Setting such goals means that states and districts need to collect, summarize, and report student performance data on a regular basis. This collection and distribution of data should be a foundation for schools' needs assessments.

## Planning

Once schools are able to identify their needs, they need to plan appropriate actions to meet them. In order to choose appropriate reform measures, schools need information. States and districts have a responsibility to act as a source of research and information for schools. States and districts can collect research findings on school reform methods and distribute them in a format that is useful to practitioners at the school level. Most teachers are not trained as researchers and have little experience with translating research findings into action plans for daily use. They also have limited time to sift through the volumes of research findings that are currently available. States and districts can provide analysis of research findings for schools or provide training that will allow schools to do this for themselves. States can also provide current information on school reform models, including research on the effectiveness of the models. States and districts should act as experts to whom schools can turn for advice and direction.

## **Using a District Planning Model to Effect Change Pinellas County Schools, Florida**

The Pinellas County Schools use the Baldrige Model for Education to identify district and school needs and plan actions accordingly. The district has created a district-wide school improvement plan based on the Baldrige model, which requires the alignment of curriculum, standards, assessment, leadership, human resource development, and information systems with the strategic goals of the school system. Under this plan, the district has improved student performance, improvement facilitated by intensive professional development on the Baldrige model for teachers and school staff. Cadres of teachers and administrators from most district schools have already been trained in how to use the Baldrige criteria, especially in terms of data; by 2001, cadres from all district schools will have received training. In addition, all district administrators and principals receive monthly training to better enable them to monitor and train teachers. Other school employees, from bus drivers to secretaries, have also received Baldrige training, so that all adults in the school system know what the schools' goals are and can help students reach them.

This training has allowed elementary school teachers in Pinellas County to teach even very young students to use data. Two classes of struggling first-graders at Azalea Elementary, for example, went from zero percent ready for first grade to 100 percent ready to enter second grade in less than one academic year (1998-99). The first graders kept data books charting their individual progress in reading, writing, and math. All students knew where they stood in terms of requirements for entering second grade, and access to data made them enthusiastic about learning and gave them a sense of pride in their progress. Data were also shared regularly with parents. Other district elementary schools have had equally good results.

Since the Baldrige model was introduced in the district in 1994, the number of students scoring at or above grade level on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) has gone up significantly in writing, reading, and mathematics in all grades tested. Scores have also gone up on state standardized exams. In addition Pinellas County high schools were able to use data collected on student behavior problems to pinpoint efforts at ninth-graders, the students that the data indicated were the most likely to be in trouble at school. As a result of sharing this data with teachers, parents, and students, the number of students with no referrals has risen; this improvement in behavior has been accompanied by an overall increase in grade point average among ninth-graders.

### **Implementation**

Once schools have made plans for improvement, they need resources to implement them effectively. States and districts play an important role in providing access to resources. These resources could include staff, time, expert advice, parent and community involvement, or schoolwide and targeted models for reform. States and districts can help

schools make better use of the resources they already have as well as provide additional resources to fill gaps in what schools are able to provide.

### *Staff Development*

A primary resource in all schools is staff, especially teachers and school leaders. When a school decides to make changes, staff members need training to carry out new programs and fulfill new requirements. Quality professional development, targeted toward specific needs identified by the school, is an often-neglected element of the academic program in low-performing schools. States and districts can help remedy this problem by increasing the amount of the education budget spent on professional development. More importantly, states and districts can rethink *how* professional development is delivered to schools and teachers. States and districts must encourage professional development programs that are regular, sustained, and monitored for effectiveness—as a general rule, a few scattered workshops will not be sufficient. States and districts should also work to create mechanisms that promote ongoing, collaborative work between teachers and school level administrators. Finally, districts are in a good position to create and support programs that allow teachers and principals to visit other schools and classrooms to observe successful teaching techniques and promising school reform efforts.



## **Professional Development to Meet ESL Needs Baldwin Elementary School, Boston, Massachusetts**

Baldwin Elementary in Boston serves a demographically diverse student body. About 80 percent of the student body are identified as low income and many of the students are recent immigrants. Seventy-two percent of the students are Asian American, including a large number of Chinese immigrants.

When Principal Suzanne Lee first came to Baldwin, her major goal was to improve the climate of the school. One way to do this was to create systems that made it possible for teachers to work together to identify school needs and create strategies to address them. Through collaboration and discussion, teachers identified ESL training as a major need for the school. Bilingual classes for Chinese often contained students speaking three distinct dialects of Chinese, making it difficult for bilingual education teachers to function effectively. Regular classes often contained immigrant students speaking several different languages. Teachers often felt overwhelmed and ill equipped to deal with their students' ESL needs, wondering, "Are we doing the right thing?"

To address the ESL problem, the school applied for one of a number of small professional development grants offered by the school district. Lee saw the grant as an opportunity to address an issue that was important to teachers and students. The school received a \$5,000 grant that provided materials and workshops on ESL strategies. The workshops, which were not mandatory, were held on weekends and after school, and teachers were invited to participate on their own time. Despite the voluntary nature of the program, over 70 percent of Baldwin teachers participated. Lee believes that the high participation rate was in part a result of the sense of teamwork created by teacher collaboration. Teachers had decided as a group that ESL was important for the entire school, so they were willing to participate in addressing the problem as a group. Teamwork was the key.

As a result of this ESL professional development and other reforms at Baldwin, Stanford 9 reading scores increased substantially between 1996 and 2000. In 2000, all but 4 percent of third graders and 9 percent of fifth graders passed the reading test, and, more importantly, 60 percent of third graders and 39 percent of fifth graders scored at the proficient or advanced levels.

Reforms have continued under Grace Madsen, who became principal of Baldwin in 2000-2001. Under her leadership, teachers are receiving training in moving toward a more balanced literacy model. She has also instituted a two-hour literacy block during which all newly immigrated students receive intensive ESL instruction.

## *Time*

Time is one of a school's most precious resources, and one of the most scarce. Teachers need time to work together and collaborate on planning and time for professional development activities. Principals need time for professional development and time to fulfill their role as instructional leaders. States and districts can help low-performing schools enhance the efficiency and efficacy with which time is used. States and districts can help teachers find time for professional development by providing funds to cover development activities and substitutes for days when teachers must be out of the classroom. States can compensate teachers financially for time spent on development.

Students also need increased time spent on learning. To help ensure that every student reaches high standards, states and districts can use resources to increase instructional time, extend the school day or the school year, and offer after-school assistance to students who need it. Participation in high-quality learning environments that build on the regular school day, such as after-school extended learning programs, can improve children's academic and social development. State and district policies can be constructed in such a way that individual schools are able to use time in ways that work best for them. Freedom to make modifications in the school day to accommodate block scheduling, or the reduction of class size to allow teachers to work with students on a more individual basis are ways that states and districts can help schools make better use of time in the classroom.

## **Increasing Instruction Time** **Gladys Noon Spellman Elementary, Cheverly, Maryland**

In 1994, only 17 percent of third graders at Spellman, a racially diverse school in the Washington, DC metropolitan area, scored at or above the satisfactory level on the Maryland State Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP). Teachers were concerned about overcrowded conditions and about interruptions of instructional time. Because the school was staffed at an appropriate rate for the population, the school had a number of teachers “without classrooms.” To address the interruptions caused by special services and to address class sizes nearing 40, the school instituted block scheduling. The main goal of the schedule was to provide small group instruction in reading and language arts during a 90-minute block each morning. Each teacher was paired with another staff member who served as a language arts instructional partner in 10 to 15 day rotations. Each class was split in half, with one teacher providing direct instruction for half the class, while the other staff member reinforced language skills, using his or her specialty as a basis for instruction. All staff—music teachers, physical education teachers, guidance staff—became teachers of language skills. No interruptions of any kind were allowed, including announcements, assemblies, and even field trips.

The focused time use had a profound impact at Spellman. Teachers began to feel that academics were the true focus of the school, and relations between classroom teachers and specialists improved because of their collaboration during the reading block. Most importantly, student achievement improved dramatically. The percentage of third-graders performing at or above the satisfactory level on the MSPAP went from 17 percent in 1994 to 72.9 percent in 1999.

### *Expert Advice*

One of the most important things that states and districts can provide to struggling schools is expertise. State and district employees can, and in many cases already do, serve as experts, visiting schools and districts to provide assistance with the planning, implementation, and evaluation of reform efforts. Many states and districts also provide funds that allow schools to hire outside consultants. Many schoolwide reform models, for example, provide consulting help as part of the implementation of the model, and states and districts provide schools with funds that allow them to purchase this help. Several states, like North Carolina, are beginning to institute comprehensive technical support systems to assist low-performing schools. Other states have not made financial investments as large as North Carolina’s, but many states have smaller scale programs to provide expert assistance to struggling schools.

## **Oregon's Distinguished Educator Program**

The Oregon State Department of Education has used two provisions of Title I of the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, the Distinguished Educator Program and the Distinguished Schools Program, to provide assistance to struggling schools in the state.

Under the auspices of its Distinguished Educator Program, Oregon has hired five teachers with successful Title I experience as full-time consultants to provide support for Title I and CSRD schools developing and implementing schoolwide and targeted assistance programs. Each of these teacher/consultants provides free counseling and ongoing professional development to an assigned group of schools; consultants visit each of their assigned schools on an as needed basis, averaging approximately once every two weeks. Services provided include professional development for schoolteachers and administrators on how to use school planning to improve student performance and how to use school data to assist in planning. The consultant teachers are also provided with professional development to help them assist schools more effectively.

Similarly, Oregon uses schools identified as Title I Distinguished Schools and Programs of Merit to assist low-performing schools around the state. The Distinguished Schools are each provided with funds from the state that allow them to participate in regional teams of staff and teachers that visit low-performing schools to assist with school planning. Teams from low-performing schools may also visit Distinguished Schools in order to observe. The state has compiled a database of high-performing schools, including school demographics and programs, which low-performing schools can use to determine which Distinguished Schools best match their own demographics and needs.

### *Parent and Community Involvement*

Schools cannot do their jobs alone. Low-performing schools, in particular, need the help of parents and the community to improve student performance. Effective schools find ways to communicate regularly with parents and to involve them in their children's education. Successful schools also form ties with the community. Many schools have formed fruitful partnerships with local businesses, colleges and universities, and cultural organizations that help students learn more and help teachers teach more effectively.

States and districts can help schools by forming partnerships and fostering communication with parents and teachers. The Chicago school district, for example, has instituted a policy of giving report cards to parents in an effort to get them more involved in their children's education. California has worked with the U.S. Department of Education to implement the Compact for Reading in several California schools. The Compact is a written agreement among families, teachers, principals, and students to work together to help improve the reading skills of kindergarten through third grade children. Many states and districts have also invested considerable time and effort in forging relationships with local institutions and businesses. These partnerships can

provide additional funds for schools, mentoring and tutoring services for students, ways of expanding school curricula, and training opportunities for teachers and staff.

### **Involving Parents in School Reform Burgess Elementary, Atlanta, Georgia**

Burgess Elementary in Atlanta has a poverty rate of 81 percent. In 1995, only 29 percent of Burgess students were performing at or above the norm in reading on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, and only 34 percent of students were performing above the norm in mathematics. In an effort to improve student scores, particularly in reading, Burgess staff members instituted a number of reforms, including reform centered on improving parental involvement in the school and in the students' education.

Prior to reform efforts, parent involvement at Burgess was virtually nonexistent. Only one or two parents volunteered regularly at the school and few attended sporadic PTA meetings. In an effort to improve parent input, Burgess staff concentrated on enhancing parents' ability to support their children's schooling. They wanted to get more parents into the classroom and more parents included in special academic programs. As a first step, all Burgess teachers attended staff development workshops on working with parents in the classroom. The workshops taught teachers how to plan what to do with parent volunteers. Burgess also established a Saturday School to help prepare students for yearly standardized testing. The Saturday School ran parallel programs for parents and students. The parent programs allow parents to hone their academic skills and improve their knowledge about the school curriculum. Parents felt more confident about helping their children with homework because of what they learned at the Saturday School. The Saturday program was so successful that Burgess later instituted computer classes for parents and a program to involve parents in the annual Science and Social Science Fair.

Since reforms were instituted, parent involvement at Burgess has grown at an astounding rate. On most school days, ten to fifteen parents are typically in the school doing various kinds of volunteer work. PTA meetings are held every month, and it is not unusual for a hundred parents to attend. Parent involvement has also had an effect on student performance. As of 1998, 64 percent of students performed above the national average on the reading section of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, and 72 percent of students scored above average on mathematics.

#### *School Reform Models*

For many low-performing schools, the best approach to school reform is to adopt a schoolwide model, like Success For All or Direct Instruction. Models are attractive to failing schools because they generally offer a complete package for change, including a set curriculum, training for school staff, and on-site assistance with planning and evaluation. Models do, however, vary in terms of curricular emphasis and methodology. In order to choose the model that best fits the needs of the individual school, school personnel need access to good information about the many models that are available.

They need to choose models whose curricular emphases match the needs of the school. Schools need to know whether or not the model has been effective in improving student achievement in other schools, and whether good results are likely to be replicable. Therefore, a clear understanding of what constitutes reliable evidence of effectiveness is crucial to schools that adopt models. States and districts can play a key role in providing schools with access to information about models and advice about which models best fit school needs. States and districts can also provide assistance to schools in reallocating current funds, in addition to providing new funds to adopt models.

### **Using Tech Prep and High Schools That Work Avery County High School, Newland, North Carolina**

Avery County High School serves a high-poverty rural area in northwestern North Carolina. Over a decade ago, staff at Avery County began to look into ways to improve lagging student performance. Teachers complained that many of their students were taking “the path of least resistance” in course selection, choosing easier courses as opposed to a more rigorous program designed to prepare them for college or technical careers. Teachers also worried that many Avery County students were coming to high school unprepared to do the work necessary to complete a rigorous high school program. The school saw a need to raise students’ expectations about their ability to complete a rigorous program and to encourage them to take more challenging courses.

Avery County staff first uncovered a pattern of social promotion, starting in the earliest grades, in the schools that fed the high school. The high school appealed to county elementary schools to alter this practice, assisted by a new statewide system of accountability and promotion standards. Then Avery County began to alter its own program, using the Tech Prep Program, a four-year program spanning two years of high school and two years post-secondary occupational or apprenticeship education, in partnership with a local community college. Avery County examined the kind of skills students would need for the program and made rigorous academic courses, like algebra, prerequisites for Tech Prep. The career-training program was attractive enough to induce many students who might previously have avoided academic courses to enroll in them in order to be eligible for Tech Prep. After five years of success with Tech Prep, Avery County also joined High Schools That Work (HSTW), a program that combines challenging academic courses with vocational training. In conjunction with HSTW, Avery County started an after-school learning lab and restructured the student guidance system so that the students work with the same teacher-advisor for four years. The school also began job-shadowing projects for teachers and students, and internship and apprenticeship placements for students. The changes made through Tech Prep and HSTW have raised students’ scores on both the SAT and the North Carolina End of Course Exams. The number of students taking the SAT nearly doubled between 1996 and 1998, even as average scores rose.

### *Flexibility*

The key to effective school reform is allowing schools to choose site-specific solutions to problems. For example, if a school identifies literacy as its primary area of deficiency, it must be able to adopt reform strategies that address reading. In order for this to happen, states and districts need to allow individual schools some degree of flexibility in making changes, whether they are changes in personnel, curriculum, or how school funds are spent. Freedom to channel more Title I dollars toward professional development is particularly important. States and districts should give schools the authority to act quickly, decisively, and creatively in order to meet school needs, but at the same time hold them accountable for their actions. For low-performing schools, this flexibility needs to be accompanied by guidance on how schools can effectively make decisions around budgets, staffing, and curriculum. Districts can help schools form school management teams and provide clear guidelines on school authority and responsibilities.

#### **Using Tutors to Improve Reading Skills Hillsborough County School District, Florida**

According to Florida's 1999 statewide reading assessments, nearly 30 percent of the Hillsborough County School District's 103 elementary schools failed to meet the minimum standards for student reading performance. To remedy the problem, a collaboration between the district and AmeriCorps Hillsborough Reads, an early literacy support program, provided 35 AmeriCorps members to serve as one-on-one reading tutors in 11 elementary schools with demonstrated low reading achievement. In addition, three AmeriCorps members recruited and trained over 300 volunteer reading tutors to assist in other schools in need of tutoring resources. The program also supported parent involvement activities and cross-age tutoring efforts in targeted schools.

The goal of the program was to provide the extra support needed to insure that all struggling students were reading at grade level by third grade. An experimental study of a representative sample of students participating in the program showed that second-graders who received tutoring improved their composite assessment scores by 274 percent, more than double the rate of increase for non-tutored students. Tutored students were also three times more likely than their non-tutored counterparts to be reading at the third-grade level.

### **Evaluation and Feedback**

Schools need to include assessment and evaluation in their improvement process so that reform measures can be periodically evaluated for success. States and districts can help by providing schools with expertise in and information on ways to conduct good evaluations, help in evaluating and using school data, and ways to incorporate findings into the school's continuous improvement process.

States and districts can also encourage schools to regularly assess performance by creating workable accountability systems. States and districts across the nation are holding schools accountable for student performance. To work, accountability measures *must* include clear consequences, rewards for those doing well and improving, and assistance for schools that do not improve. Public reporting of accountability results to parents and the community can act as a further inducement for schools to engage in regular self-review and assessment.

States and districts can establish award programs for schools, administrators, and teachers and play an active role in recognizing excellence. Such programs should be closely tied to efforts to meet measurable student performance goals.

### **Professional Development on Using Data Cooperative Educational Service Agency 7, Green Bay, Wisconsin**

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction encourages all school districts in the state to use student data to assist in district and school planning to improve student performance. Recognizing that some districts and schools are apprehensive or unsure about using data, Cooperative Educational Service Agency 7 (CESA 7), which serves school districts in northeastern Wisconsin, has organized summer data retreats for all 37 of its districts to help them learn to use data as a planning tool.

Each three-day retreat provides an opportunity for teams of district personnel, including superintendents, principals, district staff members, and teachers, to get together away from the distractions of their offices and classrooms to examine data and figure out how to best use it to plan instruction. Individual schools may also send teams to the retreats. The goals of the retreat are to use data to develop concrete goals for improving student learning and to provide professional development in data use for district personnel. During the school year, district teams collect and organize data on student achievement, educational programs, demographics, and perceptions. Teams bring their data to the retreat and work with their own data. At the retreat, which is facilitated by experienced CESA personnel, teams analyze patterns in their data and develop hypotheses about the data. Based upon their hypotheses, teams develop improvement goals, come up with specific strategies to meet those goals, and define evaluation criteria to measure their progress. Teams commit to using their goals and strategies as a focus for staff meetings, planning team meetings, professional development, and supervision and evaluation in the coming school year.

The data retreat program has been a great success; districts are learning that properly used data are helpful rather than a nuisance or something to be feared. Districts and schools have developed specific goals as a result of retreats, and many participants have learned to spot problem areas that had previously gone unnoticed. The program has been such a success that a special January retreat was held for all Wisconsin schools participating in CSRD as a way of helping these schools meet their performance goals. In the future, all Wisconsin schools wishing to apply for participation in CSRD will be required to participate in a data retreat so that CSRD funds can be distributed in the most useful way possible. The program has also been expanded statewide to all CESAs in Wisconsin.



## Responses to Schools that Fail to Turn Around

There is much that states and districts can do to assist low-performing schools to improve, but when all available reform measures fail, states and districts also have a responsibility to take more drastic measures to see that all children have the opportunity to receive an education in a quality school.

One way to do this is to provide students with alternatives to their local schools. Many states and districts have instituted charter school and magnet school programs as a way of providing families with educational alternatives for their children.

States and districts can also create systemic improvement mechanisms by introducing choice into the public school system, thus giving students in low-performing schools, particularly schools that have been unable to correct their problems, access to other, more successful schools. Public school choice mechanisms can be a way to remove students from low-performing settings quickly, but the threat of choice may also act as a means of encouraging poor schools to improve. Title I now requires school districts to provide students in schools identified for improvement with the opportunity to attend another, higher performing public school within the district, subject to capacity, unless prohibited by state or local law or school board policy.

Because low-performing schools often have little capacity to make major reforms demanded by accountability policies, several U.S. states have policies for intervening and mandating major changes in chronically low-performing schools. These policies range from helping “redesign” schools, through a collaborative process, to, as a last resort, reconstituting failing schools, which involves closing a school and reopening it with new school leaders and usually with new teachers and staff. Reconstitution policies are controversial and there is no conclusive data about whether reconstitution is an effective strategy for school improvement. Some believe that the threat of reconstitution has been an important force for leveraging change in chronically low-performing schools. Opponents believe reconstitution policies unfairly place the blame for poor student achievement on teachers and damage fledgling school communities.

### **Reconstituting a Failing Elementary School Humboldt Elementary, Portland, Oregon**

In 1997-98, Humboldt Elementary became Oregon's first reconstituted school. Humboldt, where all students participate in the free breakfast/lunch program, is located in Portland's inner city and is predominantly African-American. Historically, staffing patterns at the school had supported low performance and expectations.

As part of the school reconstitution, the entire staff was unassigned from the school. One-third of the original staff was rehired, and a new principal was hired after the staff was assigned. Teaching and learning in a child-centered environment that established high expectations for student achievement became the number one focus during the first year of reconstitution. School culture and climate, curriculum and instruction, and parent and community support were also critical factors requiring attention.

Student scores on state tests have begun to rise. Particularly impressive are the steady increases in the percentages of students who have met or exceeded the benchmark standard on the tests. In 1997, only 17.4 percent of third graders and 10.7 percent of fifth graders met or exceeded the benchmark score on the reading test; in 2000, those percentages increased to 67 percent for third graders and 60 percent for fifth graders. On the math test, only 25.3 percent of third graders and 8.8 percent of fifth graders met or exceeded the benchmark score in 1997; by 2000, 57 percent of third graders and 70 percent of fifth graders met or exceeded the benchmark math score. This continuous improvement has encouraged school staff to maintain its curricular choices and to boost staff development.

### **North Carolina's Program to Turn Around Low-Performing Schools**

While many states have programs to address the entire process of turning around low-performing schools, North Carolina's system is one of the most established, most comprehensive, and most expensive. It covers all areas of the process of helping failing schools, from needs assessment to evaluation.

In 1995 the North Carolina General Assembly passed legislation creating the ABCs of Public Education, the state's school accountability system. The system identifies both exemplary and low-performing schools, and offers assistance to schools that are performing poorly.

The North Carolina State Board of Education makes an annual determination, based on test data, of which schools are low performing. Schools are required to meet both performance and growth standards. In 1999, 13 schools were identified as low performing. From the identified schools, the State Board selects the neediest to receive

additional assistance from State Assistance Teams. Schools selected to have Assistance Teams are those that are far below the growth standards established by the State Board and where the majority of students are considered low performing (below grade level and/or below proficiency). Low-performing schools not chosen to receive help from Assistance Teams may, however, be eligible for assistance if they volunteer for it. Teams begin to work with schools in August. Assistance Teams provide services and support on a daily basis for the length of the assigned school year to schools required to have teams. Schools that volunteer to have teams receive less intensive service, usually only 2-3 days per week, and one team may serve more than one volunteer school. In the 1999-2000 academic year, teams served a total of seven traditional public schools. Five of these made exemplary growth, while two remained low performing. Teams also served six charter schools. Four of these schools made exemplary or expected growth while two remained low performing.

State Assistance Teams are made up of currently practicing teachers and staff, retired educators, representatives from the higher education community, school administrators, and others deemed appropriate by the State Board. Teams sent to K-8 schools typically have 5-8 members. High school teams generally have 5 members.

The goal of the teams is to help school staffs devise ways to improve student achievement. Teams work with schools throughout the academic year on the following:

- Reviewing and assessing all facets of school operations, including staff development, financial management, school leadership, alignment of instruction with curriculum, use of data, etc.;
- Assisting staff in devising recommendations for improving student performance;
- Evaluating all certified personnel at least semiannually and providing them with specific recommendations to improve performance;
- Collaborating with school staff, district staff, and the local school board to design, implement, and monitor the school's improvement plan;
- Reporting school progress to the local board, the community, and the State Board; and
- If the school continues to perform poorly, recommending the extension of assistance or more drastic measures, including the firing of teachers and principals (although such decisions are ultimately made by local boards, not by the teams or the state).

Schools that are assigned Assistance Teams are monitored once they are out of assistance to make sure that they continue to progress. Since the ABC program was instituted, six schools served by Assistance Teams have been unable to sustain progress and have returned to the low performing list, but the majority of schools served thus far have managed to maintain their improvement.

While North Carolina's efforts have had some success, the state's system is not perfect. North Carolina has elected to invest substantial funds in turning around low-performing schools, but even so, because of financial constraints, not every low-performing school can be served. The system's comprehensive efforts are extremely expensive, and even though a relatively small number of schools are served each year, the budget for

assistance teams is high. The North Carolina State Board of Education has requested a total budget of \$474.6 million for the 2001-2002 school year, \$4.23 million of which will go toward supporting assistance teams. Despite the high financial cost of the assistance teams, the Board considers assistance team funding one of the highest priorities in the state's education budget.

### ***The Federal Role in Turning Around Low-Performing Schools***

While states and districts are the key players helping low-performing schools improve, the federal government also has an important part to play. The U.S. Department of Education provides assistance to states and districts and encourages and facilitates the improvement process in schools. Numerous federal education programs are designed to help states and districts do a better job of assisting failing schools through the provision of needed funds, expertise, and guidance.

The Administration and the U.S. Department of Education have made turning around low-performing schools a priority through federal education programs such as Title I, the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program, the Reading Excellence Act, the Eisenhower Professional Development Program, the Class Size Reduction Program, and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers Program. These programs address the pressing needs of low-performing schools and disadvantaged students.

The Congress has twice responded to President Clinton's call for increased federal support to help districts turn around low performing schools. The FY 2000 appropriations act provided \$134 million, and the FY 2001 appropriations act provided an additional \$225 million to help districts carry out school improvement and corrective action activities in low performing Title I schools. The FY 2001 appropriations act specifically requires that all school districts with one or more Title I schools identified for improvement provide all students in those schools the option to transfer to another public school in the district that has not been identified for improvement with certain exceptions. School improvement activities coupled with public school choice comprise a key reform strategy capable of delivering a high-quality education to all students.

The Department's goal is to make high student performance a reality in every American classroom. In order to help states, districts, and schools, the Department has developed programs based on what we know about the most promising strategies for raising student achievement. Federal programs provide assistance at all points of the school improvement process.

### **Needs Assessment**

Clear state standards that set high expectations for all students are a crucial requirement for low-performing schools. Without clear standards and expectations, schools cannot properly assess either their progress or their needs. With federal leadership and support through **Title I** and **Goals 2000**, 49 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia have completed the development of state content standards for all students. Supporting the development of the same challenging standards for all children in all public schools has

transformed the federal role in education, linking federal programs to state and local improvement efforts. While some states and districts are still in the early stages of implementing high standards, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that sustained standards-based reform is a powerful vehicle for improving student achievement. States are developing performance standards for what students should know and be able to do at key grade levels and are finalizing state assessments aligned to their standards so that they can accurately measure student progress.

## Planning

In order to implement change successfully, low performing schools must carefully plan their reform efforts, basing actions on their identified needs. The Educational Accountability Fund, which provided \$134 million for FY 2000 and \$225 million for FY 2001 to help districts turn around low-performing schools, can be used to develop and implement school improvement plans that have the greatest likelihood of improving student achievement.

State planning is also important for ensuring that Federal and State resources work together to help turn around low-performing schools. Last summer, the Department sponsored a two-day institute on strategies to turn around low-performing schools. The purpose of the institute was to assist states in thinking about how Federal resources such as the Reading Excellence Act, the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program, and Title I, can work together to support local school improvement efforts. Over 400 participants worked in State teams on developing and refining action plans to turn around low-performing schools.

## Implementation

Many federal education programs are designed to provide states and districts with the resources they need to successfully implement reform strategies. While a provision in the 1994 reauthorization of Title I—Section 1002(f)—authorized funds to carry out a variety of improvement strategies at the state and district levels, it was funded only in 1995 for \$25.6 million. No appropriations have since been made. Other federal programs, however, provide assistance through provision of funds, staff development, information and expert advice, programs to extend learning time and enhance parent and community involvement in schools, assistance in adopting schoolwide reform models, and many other programs that allow schools to address specific reform needs.

### *Staff Development*

Good teaching matters. A recent report released by the Education Trust presents research substantiating the claim that teachers make a difference in student achievement and that the effects of good teachers on student performance are long-lived. Findings from studies in Tennessee, Dallas, and Boston reveal that, whatever their background or disadvantages, students taught by effective teachers achieved substantially larger gains than students taught by less effective teachers. But research also reveals a troubling picture of the state of our nation's teaching force. According to the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, one of the most important factors in improving

student achievement is the knowledge and skills that teachers bring to the classroom. Yet students in schools with the highest concentrations of poverty or minority enrollments, those who often need the most help from the best teachers, are the ones most likely to be in classrooms with teachers who are less fully qualified. For example, science teachers in our central cities are less likely to have majored or minored in science than are teachers in other school systems (79 percent compared with 91 percent). The U.S. Department of Education supports efforts to help ensure that all teachers have the skills necessary to help all children meet high standards through

**The Eisenhower Professional Development Program** (Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act) is focused on providing teachers with sustained and intensive high-quality professional development in core academic content areas. Title II also supports new teachers during their first three years in the classroom, ensuring that teachers are proficient in relevant content knowledge and teaching skills. Appropriations for FY 2001 require school districts to use additional Eisenhower funds to reduce the numbers of uncertified and out-of-field teachers. **Title I** funds may also be used for staff development purposes. The Department's **National Class Size Reduction Initiative** is helping states, districts, and schools to recruit, hire, and train qualified teachers.

The Department's 1999 proposal for the reauthorization of the ESEA, which was not enacted, contained provisions to ensure that classroom teachers are qualified and prepared to teach to high standards by requiring each state to include, as part of its certification process for new teachers, an assessment of both subject-matter knowledge and teaching skills and by phasing out the use of teachers with emergency certificates and the practice of assigning teachers to teach subjects for which they lack adequate preparation.

#### *Time*

Research indicates that programs that extend the school day by providing extra, academically oriented activities for students contribute to improved student achievement. In support of these strategies, the U.S. Department of Education created the **21st Century Community Learning Centers** program to fund school-community partnerships that expand after-school and extended learning programs for school-age children. In addition, Title I is helping to fund more than 13,000 extended-time instructional programs across the nation. The **National Class Size Reduction Initiative** also helps schools make better use of the regular school day by allowing teachers to give more individual attention to students.

#### *Expert Advice*

One of the primary roles of the federal government in assisting states and districts to turn around low-performing schools is acting as a source of information and expert advice.

The Department of Education is as an important source of research and information for school practitioners across the country. The Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) is the Department's primary center for research. OERI supports

basic and applied education research; collects and analyzes education statistics; identifies promising and exemplary programs and models of practice; disseminates quality education information from a variety of sources; provides assistance to school districts, states, and others; develops information products for many different audiences; and offers library and information services. Other divisions of the Department also provide research and information to states, districts, and schools on strategies for improving school performance. In addition, specially commissioned groups provide information and research on important education subjects. The National Commission on Mathematics and Science Teaching for the 21st Century, for example, released a comprehensive plan to ensure that every American student receives excellent instruction in math and science in September 2000. Most of the research products and reports produced by the Department are made available to the general public on the Department's web site (<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/index.html>).

The fifteen **Comprehensive Regional Assistance Centers** and the ten **Regional Educational Laboratories** also serve as sources of information and research for practitioners. The Comprehensive Centers help states, school districts, and schools meet the needs of children in high-poverty areas, migratory children, immigrant children, children with limited-English proficiency, neglected or delinquent children, homeless children and youth, Indian children, and children with disabilities. The Centers focus on two priorities: assisting Title I schoolwide programs, and helping local education agencies and BIA schools that have the highest percentages or numbers of children in poverty. The regional laboratories work to help educators and policy makers solve education problems in their states and districts. The labs conduct research on education issues, print publications, and provide training programs to teachers and administrators.

In addition to research, struggling schools need direct assistance to improve the achievement of all students. In response to the Executive Order on Actions to Improve Low-Performing Schools, the U.S. Department of Education has launched an initiative to mobilize Department resources to assist states and districts as they work to turn around low-performing schools.

The Executive Order, which is the catalyst for this initiative, directs the Department to use its resources to assist states and districts in turning around low-performing schools. In addition to providing targeted support to states and districts as they develop comprehensive strategies, the Department will continue to publish an annual progress report on school improvement and will strengthen monitoring of requirements for identifying and turning around low-performing schools.

The mission of this initiative is to increase student achievement in low-performing schools. By mobilizing the Department's resources to support states, local school districts, and individual schools, the initiative seeks to improve the quality of school leadership and the

**The U.S. Department of Education's  
Low-Performing Schools Initiative**

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teaching force, implement coordinated, research-based reforms, and make more effective use of local, state and federal resources in these schools.

To assist state and local education agencies, the Department will take the following steps:

- Support State Education Agencies and Local Education Agencies in the development of comprehensive action plans to turn around low-performing schools using effective strategies;
- Summarize, synthesize and disseminate the knowledge base surrounding best practices and research on effective strategies for turning around low-performing schools;
- Build partnerships between states and between states and technical assistance providers, foundations and other organizations;
- Improve the use of and access to resources, particularly federal resources, such as Title I, the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program, the Reading Excellence Act, the Eisenhower Professional Development Program, the Class Size Reduction Program, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers Program, the Technology Literacy Challenge Fund and Gear-Up;
- Improve accountability systems; and
- Increase national awareness of the low-performing schools initiative and provide information for policymakers and others.

Through this initiative, the Department will coordinate the many activities that already support low-performing schools with new activities that focus federal resources on this issue. New activities include:

- Summer Institute: The initiative was launched with a Summer Institute on *Strategies for Turning Around Low-Performing Schools*. Over 400 participants came in state teams to specifically focus on strategies for low-performing schools and to work on state action plans.
- Network of States: A small group of states are creating a learning community focused on turning around low-performing schools. States in the network will be able to share resources and expertise with each other and also receive support from technical assistance providers.
- Regional Forums: The Forums provide opportunities for researchers and practitioners to discuss issues related to turning around low-performing schools and to advise the Department on the low-performing schools initiative.



- Integrated Reviews: The integrated reviews that the Department uses to monitor state implementation of federal programs will focus on turning around low-performing schools
- Presentations at national conferences, workshops and symposia

### *Parent and Community Involvement*

Schools cannot do their jobs alone. Low-performing schools, in particular, need the assistance of community stakeholders to raise student performance. Parent involvement is essential. Children whose parents are involved in their educations earn higher grades, have higher test scores, attend school more regularly, complete more homework, demonstrate better attitude and better behavior, graduate from high school at higher rates, and are more likely to go on to higher education than are children whose parents are less involved. Local businesses, colleges, and universities also are invaluable sources of support. Teacher unions can be cooperative allies in the process of change if they are invited to work in partnership to improve low-performing schools.

Because parental and community involvement in education is critical to academic success, the U.S. Department of Education sponsors the **Partnership for Family Involvement in Education**. The mission of the Partnership for Family Involvement in Education is to promote children’s learning through the development and use of family-school-community-business partnerships that strengthen schools and improve student achievement. A growing grassroots movement of more than 4,000 schools, employers, and community and religious groups has emerged to support local and national efforts, including adopting family-friendly business practices; providing before- and after-school activities for children; giving parents the resources, training, and information they need to help children learn; and promoting family and community involvement in student learning. The **America Reads Challenge** is an initiative to further support that goal by encouraging school and community partnerships to provide high-quality reading instruction through linking in-school and out-of-school reading programs. The Department also supports 57 **Parent Information and Resource Centers** that provide parents with training, information, and support to help them better understand their children's developmental and educational needs, and that strengthen partnerships between parents and schools to enable children to achieve to high standards.

### *Models*

The U.S. Department of Education provides support for schools that want to use schoolwide reform models. **Title I** of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the **Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD)** program emphasize the need for schoolwide reform in high-poverty, low-performing schools. The CSRD program, begun in 1998, is helping raise student achievement by assisting public schools across the country to implement effective, comprehensive school reforms that are based on reliable research and effective practices, and that include an emphasis on basic academics and parental involvement.

The CSRD program supports a number of research-based models and designs that schools can adopt to help address these multiple aspects of school effectiveness. For example, about 14 percent of the 1,800 schools with CSRD grants are using Success for All, a program of reorganized reading instruction, to help all students meet challenging standards. The program provides for at least 90 minutes of daily reading instruction in classes grouped according to performance. One of the key elements is continual assessment of student progress. The frequent assessments allow teachers to develop instructional plans for students with special needs and to move students into and out of groups as they make progress. Many models such as Success for All provide intensive professional development focused on curriculum and content, and many provide technical assistance to help schools implement the designs.

### *Flexibility*

Failing schools need to be able to choose reform strategies that meet their specific needs. The U.S. Department of Education offers a number of programs designed to meet specific needs. Two areas of particular emphasis are literacy and early childhood education.

Many low-performing elementary schools require assistance with literacy training. The **Reading Excellence Act** provides assistance to help 500,000 children learn to read well and independently by the end of the third grade. Under the program, local education agencies provide professional development for teachers based on the best research and practice; operate tutoring programs after school, before school, during non-instructional periods during the school day, on weekends, and during the summer; and provide family literacy services by forming partnerships with community-based organizations, early childhood organizations, adult education programs, family literacy organizations, public libraries, colleges and universities, and other organizations to improve the teaching of reading and the reading achievement of children and their families.

In some districts and schools the preparation that young children receive before they start kindergarten is a particular concern. Early childhood education can help children develop broad knowledge and higher-level skills, as well as help educators identify children at risk of school failure and take steps to ensure their readiness for school and their success at learning in the early grades. In recognition of this fact, states and school districts can help ensure that more children benefit from early childhood services. In addition to providing pre-kindergarten for children, many local education agencies are partnering with community organizations to implement family literacy programs, such as **Even Start**, that support early childhood education, school readiness, and parent involvement in learning activities. **Title I** funds may also be used to support early childhood programs.

### Evaluation and Feedback

Strong accountability systems can provide the necessary impetus for schools to engage in regular self-evaluation and continuous improvement planning. No school improvement can succeed without real accountability for results. Across the country, states and

districts are raising stakes by establishing procedures and standards to define expectations for students, identify poor performance, and hold schools and students accountable for achievement. The goal of school accountability measures in **Title I** of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, an \$8 billion program targeted at communities that serve low-income students, has been to support states in developing a rigorous accountability system for holding schools accountable for making continuous and substantial gains in student performance; publicly reporting on school performance; identifying and providing assistance to low-performing schools; and intervening in persistently low-performing schools.

In addition to policies to hold schools accountable for results, the U.S. Department of Education has called for an end to the practices of social promotion and traditional grade retention. Research indicates, and common sense confirms, that passing students on to the next grade when they have not met standards neither increases student achievement nor prepares students for college and future employment. Both being promoted without regard to effort or achievement and being retained without extra assistance send a message to students that little is expected from them, that they need not work hard, and that they do not warrant the time and effort it would take to help them be successful in school.

The problem of social promotion, whereby students are promoted from grade to grade when they are unprepared and have not yet met challenging academic standards, is a hidden but potentially large problem in the U.S. Although most teachers agree that promoting students who are unprepared is a burden for teachers and classmates and lowers standards, more than half of teachers surveyed in a recent poll indicate that they have promoted unprepared students. Research evidence also indicates that the most common alternative to social promotion—retention, or holding students back in grade—is often both ineffective and harmful. Retention in grade also greatly increases the likelihood that a student will drop out of school, and being held back twice makes dropping out a virtual certainty.

U.S. Department of Education programs are designed to assist states, districts, and schools in pursuing a comprehensive approach to helping students meet standards so that neither social promotion nor retention are needed. Strategies include multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate that they can meet the standards performance, well-prepared teachers, early identification and intervention for students who need extra assistance, smaller class sizes, after-school and summer programs for students who are not making progress to meet the standards, and intensive intervention with appropriate instructional strategies for students who do not meet promotion standards on time.

### Responses to Schools that Fail to Turn Around

Research tells us that high-performing schools align curriculum, classroom practices, and professional development with high academic standards for all students. These schools also build a sense of teamwork among staff, work in partnership with parents and the community, and use performance data to inform choices and create a cycle of continuous improvement. Support for these practices is key for building the capacity of schools to

improve student achievement. Yet, low-performing schools are sometimes embedded in troubled school systems that cannot or do not support the school improvement process. Individual school efforts can be thwarted by districts that fail to provide leadership and that lack the focus and long-term commitment necessary for turning around low-performing schools.

Therefore, part of the process of building the capacity of low-performing schools involves setting priorities on the district level, such as ensuring strong leadership at the school; helping schools make tough choices about the ways they allocate their resources if they are to focus on improving teaching and learning; helping schools use performance data to drive improvement; and providing incentives for change and support for innovation.

Measures in **Title I** of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act place pressures on school systems to address such systemic problems. Schools receiving Title I funds are to be identified for improvement if they fail to meet performance goals. If Title I schools identified for improvement fail to make progress for two consecutive years, states and districts must take corrective actions, including reconstitution. The reauthorization proposal for Title I, which was not passed in the 106<sup>th</sup> Congress, would have required states to set aside a portion of their Title I allocation to help low-performing schools implement sound programs that improve student performance. However, the 106<sup>th</sup> Congress did, during the appropriations process, require school districts with one or more Title I schools identified for improvement to provide all students in those schools with the option to transfer to another public school in the district that has not been identified for improvement unless such a transfer option is prohibited by state or local law, including local school board-approved district policy. As a result, many local educational agencies will be implementing school improvement activities and public school choice concurrently, so that all students—both those who transfer out of schools identified for improvement and those who remain—learn to high academic standards.

## School Choice and FY 2000/2001 School Improvement Funds

Both the FY 2000 and FY 20001 appropriations acts contain public school choice requirements. The FY 2000 appropriations act requires that school districts accepting Title I school improvement funds provide students attending Title I schools identified for improvement with the option of transferring to another public school in the district not identified for improvement. The appropriation act also provided that if school districts could demonstrate to the satisfaction of the State educational agency that they lack the capacity to provide all students with the option to transfer to another public school, then the district was to permit as many students as possible to transfer selected on an equitable basis. The FY 2001 provision expanded the applicability of the public school choice by specifically requiring that all school districts with one or more Title I schools identified for improvement provide all students in those schools the option to transfer to another public school in the district that has not been identified for improvement unless such option was prohibited by State law or local law, which includes school board-approved local educational agency policy. The FY 2001 appropriation statute retained the authority for States to set criteria that districts must meet in order to demonstrate that they “lack the capacity” to provide the transfer option to all students in schools identified for improvement and also exempted states receiving a Title I minimum basic or concentration grant.

State applications for FY 2000 funds show that actually implementing choice can present challenges. All states established criteria which districts must demonstrate to indicate that they “lack the capacity” to provide public school choice to all students attending Title I schools identified for improvement. For example, states with large number of small, rural school districts reported that intra-district choice was often not an option because districts did not have local alternatives for students. In other cases, small districts reported that all schools at a given grade level were in improvement, again leaving no alternatives for transferring. In other cases, the physical isolation of local communities made switching to other schools impractical for families and too expensive for districts in terms of transportation costs.

Urban schools also present challenges. State applications point out that many of the better-performing urban schools to which students might transfer do not have space for additional students. Most states indicated that lack of space in higher performing schools was one of the ways that a district could demonstrate that it “lacked the capacity” to provide choice. In some states, districts could demonstrate “lack of capacity” to carry out choice by showing that they did not have the staff and resources for outreach to parents, a necessary ingredient for choice. A few states also reported that some districts were not able to implement choice plans because court-ordered desegregation plans made moving students difficult.

The U.S. Department of Education also supports the re-thinking of education system organization in other ways, including the **Public Charter Schools** program and the **Magnet Schools** program. Of the more than 500 federally funded charter schools

operating in the nation, many serve students who are at risk of dropping out, are low achievers, or are in adjudication. Thirty percent of federally funded charter schools serve a high-poverty student population, 20 percent are alternative schools, and many focus on the needs of students with limited English language skills. Charter schools, as well as magnet schools, provide additional educational choices for families.

## **Implications**

It is the assumption throughout this report that future efforts to assist low-performing schools will be based on the existing decentralized education system, without national standards or a uniform national assessment for all Title I schools. This means that states will have primary responsibility in the tasks of identifying and assisting low-performing schools. Federal efforts should be aimed at assisting states in this work. Some measures to improve upon the current situation should be seriously considered by both the federal government and the states.

### ***Balancing the Need to Strengthen State Title I Performance and Accountability Systems with the Need to Stabilize Them***

This report makes clear that some elements of the current Title I performance and accountability systems need to be strengthened in important ways. The present system is fragmentary, data quality and reporting are not satisfactory, states need coherent improvement plans, and the federal government should carefully evaluate how well its programs support school improvement.

While Congress and the incoming Administration consider ways to strengthen accountability, however, they should also recognize that the current state of affairs in the 50 states, however varied it appears to be, took each state five years to achieve. States will be unable, in all probability, to make abrupt changes in systems they are just now struggling to complete. To force them to do so through major changes in Title I legislation might well mean that states take several steps backward on accountability, failing to fully implement the changes required in 1994, and failing to hold schools seriously accountable for results for another five years. In addition, substantial changes will be politically difficult for states to make because their systems reflect strong commitments and significant compromises that have been negotiated for state purposes, not just Title I purposes. Consequently, as Congress considers changes to the current law, it may want to phase changes in, require states to meet the requirements of the current law until the phase-in deadline, and fund needed development work and technical assistance in order to speed the process and improve the quality of the resulting systems.

### ***Aligning Title I and State Accountability Systems***

Too many states have dual accountability systems, one for Title I schools and one for other schools. It is clear that having two systems is fundamentally unworkable. Dual systems cause confusion by having two different sets of criteria for what is considered low performing. It appears that when states have two systems, the state system, which is generally less rigorous, is the one that takes precedence; in fact Title I schools in states

with dual systems often report being unaware of the Title I criteria that lead to schools being designated as low performing. A more fundamental problem with having a dual system is that it violates the basic assumption behind standards based reform by failing to hold all schools and all students accountable to the same standard.

The federal government should seriously consider removing or revising elements in ESEA that foster the development of dual systems. There are two options for accomplishing this goal:

- ESEA could be revised to require that all states have only one accountability system. The advantage of this approach is that confusion about conflicting criteria for the low-performing designation and about sanctions resulting from it would be eliminated. Additionally, all schools, both Title I and non-Title I, would be held to the same standard. The disadvantage of this approach is that states could create systems that are less rigorous than what is currently required by Title I.
- A more stringent approach would require states to have a single system that conforms to the current requirements for Title I accountability systems. This approach would eliminate the problem of adopting systems less rigorous than Title I currently requires, but has the disadvantage of decreasing states' flexibility in making decisions about education policy.

### ***Improving Data Quality and Timely Reporting***

Having states track low-performing schools and report progress is the single most important accountability requirement for Title I, the federal government's most important elementary and secondary program. States should be expected to gather and report sound and timely data on their low performing schools; this does not always happen. Although all states have turned in their state reports, the Department of Education is still missing 1998-1999 low-performing schools counts for many states almost one year after the due date, and the data that was turned in may be questionable for some states. The states' internal reporting of this information to districts and schools is also weak in many cases; as noted, many principals do not even know their schools are identified for improvement.

At the federal level, the Department of Education needs to improve its own data collection and management. Data submitted by states are not always recorded and distributed to Department offices in an expeditious way. The Department needs a modern, electronically-based system for recording and distributing data as soon as it arrives from the states, as well as a more organized system for checking on required data that is not submitted.

To improve data quality and reporting, the Department could:

- Help states report to the federal government by creating a streamlined electronic reporting system (in the long term, the Integrated Performance and Benchmarking System would be ideal, but in the short run, electronic reporting could be instituted);

- Reduce paperwork required from states in other program areas of lower priority, leaving states more time to concentrate on high-priority data on low-performing schools; and
- Immediately notify late-reporting states and offer assistance in expediting the data collection process.

In terms of internal reporting from states to districts, schools, and parents, it would be desirable for states to

- Inform the school community (staff, parents, the community) of a school's designation as “low-performing” through a variety of means, including school report cards; and
- Inform the school community about annual progress.

### ***State Plans for Improving Low-Performing Schools***

At present, Title I does not require states to prepare or submit plans for how they will improve schools identified as low performing. This is something that states should be doing on their own, but many states are not carrying out systemic planning. It is recommended that state plans, in order to be effective, include the following:

- State plans should include provisions for prioritizing the needs of low-performing schools. Most states do not have sufficient resources to give full assistance to every school that needs it, so states must consider carefully how and where scarce funds should be targeted. This sort of priority setting cannot be haphazard.
- State plans should include provisions for informing low-performing schools of the help that is available to them, whether this help consist of additional state funds, expert help, staff development, assistance with planning, or information about appropriate assistance and programs from the federal government. At present, too many low-performing schools remain unaware of available help, and as a result, receive no help at all; state plans need to address this problem.
- State plans should contain contingency plans for schools that continue to fail despite receiving additional assistance. Consistently low-performing schools cannot be allowed operate indefinitely, and states need to have systems in place for dealing with them. Possible actions could include replacement of school personnel, reconstitution of the school, or school choice.

### ***Evaluating the Role of Federal Programs in School Reform***

The Department of Education must carefully evaluate its programs to determine whether or not they are contributing to helping states and districts do a better job of turning around low-performing schools. The Department should carefully consider whether or not federal programs are sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of individual schools and whether or not schools are able to take funds from a variety of federal sources and combine them in a coherent school improvement program. The Department should also carefully evaluate how it disseminates information about school reform models and techniques to states and districts. Since many teachers and principals feel that they do not



currently have sufficient information on how to go about changing the environment of their schools, the Department needs to find ways to better address this deficiency. The Department must also do more to benchmark best reform practices and effectively disseminate them to school level practitioners.

## **Conclusion**

There are many ways to improve low-performing schools but no simple solutions to the problem. Making changes to improve student performance can be a difficult process for schools. Strong leadership, staff commitment, and a fundamental belief that all children can learn are necessary conditions for turning around low-performing schools. Even then, the task remains great. A history of failure and low expectations can lessen the ability of low-performing schools to even hope to improve. Schools must focus, get control of the school environment, and put in place rigorous curriculum and instructional practices. In order for schools to be able to do this, education leaders on the federal, state, and local levels must support changes that will create and sustain a supportive environment for learning. School reform cannot take place outside the context of such support.

The task of fixing failing schools is not easy, but the alternative is unacceptable. As we enter a new millennium, it is time to renew our commitment to future generations—to raise our expectations for all children, to refuse to accept failure, and to work together to strengthen our schools so that *every* child can strive toward high levels of achievement and learning.