

Pennsylvania School Boards Association

 Education  
Research &  
Policy Center

**schools**<sup>SM</sup>



# Raising achievement in underperforming schools

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# Raising achievement in underperforming schools

## Executive Summary

Education reform initiatives that began in the 1980s have seen several iterations, and have culminated most recently with an all out push for school choice options for parents and school-aged children. Charter schools, and to a lesser degree school tuition vouchers that provide funding for students looking for educational experiences outside the district of residence or in non-public settings, have begun to gain support from a variety of school choice proponents nationally. The number of charter schools around the country has grown into the thousands, and several states have begun to test the tuition voucher waters to various degrees.

A number of legislative voucher proposals have emerged in Pennsylvania for 2010-11. The scope of the proposals differs to some degree, but the basic elements aim essentially to provide tuition vouchers for private or public schools to low and middle income Pennsylvania students.

The concept of school improvement is essential to meeting the needs of children in the com-

**The concept of school improvement is essential to meeting the needs of children in the commonwealth, and necessary under the requirements of No Child Left Behind.**

monwealth, and necessary under the requirements of No Child Left Behind. Fully 96% of all school districts, and 83% of all schools in Pennsylvania achieved Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for the 2009-10 school year. But there is still work to be done in order to ensure that all students are provided the best possible public education experience.

Voucher proponents have touted school tuition vouchers as a “solution” to academic underperformance in Pennsylvania’s public schools. With claims of improved outcomes for students along with overall school improvement based on the notion that competition induces excellence, school choice advocates have vociferously worked to put in place one of a number of costly and nationally unprecedented voucher programs currently under consideration at the legislative level.

As the voucher issue is not a new one, and because of a relatively solid base of voucher programming available for research purposes, edu-

cation experts studying the issue have had ample access to voucher data. Despite the availability of data, definitive conclusions related to the positive impact of tuition vouchers on student outcomes remains elusive. The question of effect of competition on public schools is also very much unanswered. What is obvious after looking at the many analyses of voucher impacts is that time and time again, the promises made by supporters and proponents of voucher programs have failed to consistently materialize. Recently, analysis of Milwaukee's \$1.1 billion voucher program – the oldest in the country – showed public school students outperforming voucher students on the state's Wisconsin Student Assessment System tests. Even when adjusting for socio-economic status, voucher students in the 20-year-old program performed far below all public school students in the state, and below peers in the Milwaukee public schools system.

Voucher proponents have consistently relied on the unfounded argument that the introduction of competition to public schooling will have the inevitable effect of school improvement, especially in the schools most at risk for exodus. While a limited body of scientifically interesting work exists in this area, questions related to methodology, interpretation and generalizability. A recently reworked report that purports to collect the “results of all available empirical studies using the best available scientific methods to measure how school vouchers impact academic outcomes for participants, and all available studies on how vouchers affect outcomes in public schools” has been widely touted by voucher advocates to support the notion of competition-induced school excellence. Voucher advocates have claimed the report, titled, *A Win-Win Solution: The Empirical Evidence on How Vouchers Affect Public Schools*, shows “crystal clear” evidence related to voucher effectiveness. However, even this comprehensive and highly publicized effort has been called to question for its “unrestrained” efforts “in pursuing the conclusion of ‘positive effects’ when a fair reading of [the] studies would conclude there is minimal to no effect” (Lubienski, 2009, Mathis, 2011).

Evidence that vouchers improve student outcomes is consistently inconsistent. Voucher proponents often point to modest improvements for

certain subgroups of students in some situations as justification for a move toward vouchers. But the fact is that academic gains for voucher students have been sporadic at best. Further, because no voucher program has ever been attempted that is similar in scope to what is being proposed in Pennsylvania, assumptions related to impacts on students, community and public schooling itself could be nothing more than conjecture.

With hopes of directing state policy focus to areas more firmly associated with school improvement, PSBA undertook a multi-faceted approach to analyzing school improvement research, strategies and needs. After regarding available research literature related to the topic, PSBA gathered and sorted data from a wide range of case studies and success stories detailing immediate school improvement and school reform. The organization then conducted interviews with local and national education professionals representative of a variety of educational capacities. Information gathered through the process was utilized to create a set of 11 Research Elements that are the basis for three recommendations for consideration among public policy makers. These recommendations, tied to the 11 Research Elements, are representative of a variety of school improvement strategies, school improvement research and input from educational practitioners. Because they are based on research-grounded school improvement strategies, PSBA feels strongly that the recommendations made in this paper, if implemented fully and made available to struggling schools, will be most effective in moving in the direction of improved educational outcomes for all students in the underperforming system.

PSBA's 11 Research Elements are divided into three areas determined to be critical to school success. These are:

### **Recruiting, preparing and improving teachers**

1. Development of strategies for recruiting and cultivating top graduates to the teaching profession should become a priority in Pennsylvania.
2. Emphasis should be placed on efforts to encourage the best teachers to work and stay in underperforming schools.

3. Superior teacher evaluation including multiple evaluative components and formative elements is needed, especially in underperforming school environments.
4. Instructional coaching is a fundamental tool for inexperienced teachers as well as teachers working in extraordinarily challenging environments.
5. On-site professional development opportunities customized to localized needs and based on research-grounded approaches to improving teaching, management, leadership and collegiality can assist education professionals in underperforming schools throughout Pennsylvania.

#### **Preparing students for academic success**

6. Development of early childhood education elements should continue to be a priority in Pennsylvania, and should be highlighted as a necessary improvement component for underperforming elementary schools.
7. Outreach to, and partnerships with, parents must become standard components to improvement efforts in underperforming schools.
8. Support for quality Out-of-School-Time programming should be consistently supported via funding and research.

#### **Providing schools with tools for success**

9. Use of PDE's Framework for Continuous School Improvement is most effective in schools when supplemented with ongoing on-site support.
10. On-site data analysis should be available to underperforming schools, along with a school improvement database that hosts best practices for school reform/school turnaround, and school improvement models that can be tailored to localized needs.
11. Strategic use of existing school and student data should continue to be highlighted as the basis for making school-wide decisions.

PSBA's recommendations for supporting underperforming schools are based on the 11 Research Elements.

#### **Recommendation # 1 – Create specifically focused, comprehensive school improvement teams**

The Pennsylvania Department of Education should create a Comprehensive School Improvement Evaluation Team that will be responsible for assisting underperforming schools with identifying areas for improvement. Areas analyzed should be those closely associated with both immediate and long-term strategic improvement strategies.

#### **Recommendation #2 – Create a clearinghouse of model improvement strategies**

The Pennsylvania Department of Education should establish a clearinghouse of available immediate and long-term improvement strategies, models, literature and resources that is supplemented by teams of content experts who are available for on-site assistance for underperforming schools.

#### **Recommendation #3 – Ensure funding and support for early childhood and out-of-school-time programs**

The Pennsylvania Legislature should ensure funding to establish and maintain early childhood education programs and sustainable out-of-school-time programs for children.

PSBA acknowledges Pennsylvania's efforts in the area of early learning and school improvement. The creation of early learning standards, credentialing for educators and performance standards for multiple early childhood programs has positioned Pennsylvania to become a national leader in this area. PA Early Learning Standards, Early Intervention, PA Pre-K Counts, Head Start, Kindergarten, Child Care Programs, Child Care Works and Keystone STARS are representative of the vast array of resources available to families throughout the commonwealth. The state, through its Title 22, Chapter 4 regulations, also has provided guidelines for schools that voluntarily offer pre-kindergarten programs. Pennsylvania should regard the gains in the area of early childhood education as successes, and should cautiously monitor funding shortfalls that threaten the sustainability or availability of these types of programs. It is crucial that Pennsyl-

vania provide adequate funding for the establishment and maintenance of early childhood and out-of-school programs for Pennsylvania's students.

Pennsylvania's existing school improvement tools provide educators with resources that assist in supporting quality instruction. Requirements under Act 55 of 2005 support academic performance of students in eligible school districts, such as those identified for corrective action and other similarly underperforming schools, by providing a clearinghouse of school improvement strategies. Pennsylvania's Standards Aligned System works alongside PDE's Framework for Continuous School Improvement to provide a variety of instructional supports for educators working in schools. And until recently, Pennsylvania's Distinguished Educator Initiative prepared school leaders to assist underperforming schools in a variety of capacities related to school improvement. However, a more comprehensive database of current school reform and immediate school improvement resources should be readily available to underperforming schools, and a

fully staffed team of experts should be prepared to work with schools in all areas of school improvement. The clearinghouse of comprehensive school reform models as well as case studies and documented strategies for whole school improvement should be staffed at the Department of Education level by intervention specialists who can regularly visit underperforming schools to assist with issues identification and implementation.

PSBA's report identifies several key elements for which there is broad consensus among education researchers that have been determined to be most likely extant in successful school environments. Case studies and successful school improvement literature are examined, and key commonalities are coded and presented. Finally, the report summarizes a set of interviews conducted with school leaders locally and nationally who are representative of multiple roles in education practice, academia and advocacy. Eleven Research Elements are presented as a basis for the creation of three recommendations for state policy focus.

# Raising achievement in underperforming schools

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## Introduction

A significant wake-up call rang for public education in 1983 with the release of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. The landmark report was released by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. *A Nation at Risk* highlighted deficiencies in teaching and learning, and strongly suggested America's schools were rife with mediocrity that put United States' graduates at a significant disadvantage on the worldwide stage.

A major wave of public education reform efforts followed as a result, leading to calls for merit pay through the mid 1980s, as well as a push for standardization of educational programming. An emphasis on cultural literacy took hold through the late 1980s and 1990s as many states began to move toward a focus on student outcomes while creating vetted content standards developed by subject matter experts. *The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001*, more commonly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), was the result of a combination of a focus on outcomes-based education and an expanded interest in education reform at the federal level.

Through the early part of the 21st century, NCLB has dominated the educational landscape while school reform proponents have pushed for an expanded array of schooling options for American students. The ideas of open enrollment, school tuition vouchers, charter schooling and the creation of magnet schools are not new. But political

leaders as well as organized efforts on behalf of these types of schooling options have combined to produce national interest in charter schools and tuition vouchers in particular.

The first charter school opened in Minnesota as a result of legislation passed in 1991. Since that time, thousands of charter schools have sprung up in states that allow chartering authorization. Voucher efforts have begun to gain momentum in a number of areas including Vermont, Maine, Wisconsin, Ohio, Florida, The District of Columbia, Utah, Arizona, Georgia, Indiana, and now, Pennsylvania.

PSBA does not dismiss an appropriate place for school options in the educational arena. But the organization highlights a need for caution in this area. PSBA's 2011 legislative platform specifically states:

*It is resolved that PSBA support parental options within the public school system. PSBA believes that constitutional restraints must be upheld and that choice programs should not impose financial hardships on taxpayers. Commonwealth funding should be provided to support the costs of public school choice initiatives, only after the state fulfills its commitment to adequacy and equity. – PSBA, 2011*

## Public education works – The need for support

Throughout Pennsylvania and across the United States, public schools provide children with the

tools to grow into adulthood ready to contribute to local and broader communities as informed and responsible adults. Despite a multitude of challenges, Pennsylvania's education professionals successfully work to ensure all students graduate with the skills necessary to live and achieve in the 21st century. Fully 96% of all school districts and 83% of all schools in Pennsylvania achieved Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for the 2009-10 school year. One hundred eighty schools that failed to achieve AYP for the 2008-09 school year, as well as five school districts, advanced to Making Progress status for 2009-10. Pennsylvania public schools are credited with a 90% graduation rate for 2009-10. Seventy-five percent of all students in the state scored at a proficient or advanced level in math on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) test for that year, while 72% of all students performed at a proficient or advanced level in reading. These numbers are well ahead of the goals of 56% and 63% respectively for math and reading that were in place for the 2010 school year. Pennsylvania's schools and Pennsylvania's students are achieving. In the face of Pennsylvania's successes, some school reform proponents suggest the public education system that has served millions over the years is broken.

Granted, there is work to do. The challenges associated with meeting the needs of a group of students as diverse as the commonwealth itself are, and will continue to be, significant. There will always be room for improvement as Pennsylvania educators tailor efforts to the needs of each individual child. Some of the challenges faced by districts, schools and educators tend to have greater impact on a student's ability to succeed. Poverty, violence, bullying and ignorance all have the potential to pollute the educational opportunities provided in public schools. But with focus in the right areas, state governments are positioned to provide the types of supports that can help educators and students to be successful.

### **Structure and methodology**

In order to investigate various means for supporting and improving public schools in Pennsylvania, PSBA undertook a multi-faceted approach to analyzing school improvement research, strategies and

needs. First, the organization reviewed available research literature related to school improvement and elements considered necessary for schools to succeed and/or improve. Analysis of this literature identified a well-supported set of factors for which there seems fairly broad consensus related to key ingredients for successful teaching and learning.

PSBA next analyzed case studies, stories relating successful immediate school improvement and school reform efforts, and interviews with school leaders nationally who have demonstrated records associated with successful school improvement efforts. This set of data was analyzed for commonalities across instances as well as themes that were related as crucial to the efforts of the school improvement change agents. Common elements were coded and assembled to assist PSBA in creating what the organization calls later in the paper, Research Elements.

In an effort to create a qualitative portrait of the types of needs and supports, as well as successes associated with underperforming and transforming/transformed schools, PSBA set up and conducted a series of interviews with school leaders serving in multiple capacities both locally (in Pennsylvania) and nationally. Local school leaders interviewed were associated at the district and school building administration levels. Local school leaders interviewed are consistent with a representative sampling of the school districts targeted in one of the early passes at a piece of 2011 Pennsylvania voucher legislation (Senate Bill 1). The interviews focused on the types of issues faced by struggling schools and districts, as well as school climate and culture. Interviewees were asked directly what types of legislative supports would be most helpful to their efforts in the area of student achievement.

Finally, an additional set of interviews with school leaders serving in various capacities from around the United States were conducted in order to gain further perspective on school improvement efforts. Authors, academic researchers, practitioners, successful school reformers, and representatives from multiple statewide and public education advocacy organizations lent their expertise via interviews on questions ranging from problems plaguing schools, to recommendations for state policy focus.

All data collected through PSBA’s literature review, analysis of case studies and school success stories, and interviews with school leaders is synthesized in this paper into Research Elements. These Elements may stand alone to highlight a relatively wide-ranging set of areas for which there is support related to school improvement effectiveness. These Research Elements are not the answer to the many challenges and struggles faced by education professionals working in public institutions of learning every day. There is, of course, no one answer that can address the many needs of the millions of students who are representative of our diverse commonwealth. The Research Elements presented in this paper are simply a starting point for the conversation of how to help struggling schools. These Elements have been identified in research as well as anecdotally as areas for focus that have the potential to move underperforming schools toward improved student outcomes. In this case, PSBA has used them as a basis for the creation of recommendations that the organization hopes will earn sincere consideration from those in a position to influence public policy in support of public education.

### **School reform/School turnaround\*/ School improvement efforts**

By analyzing research that evaluates successful schools and by examining the many stories of schools that succeed in the face of adversity, it is possible to identify key areas of focus for policy makers and school improvement proponents. Thirty years of research literature suggests common elements that must exist in order for schools to succeed. Academic researchers in this area, including Marzano, Scheerens and Bosker, Sammons, Levine and Lezotte, and Edmonds, identify a number of school-level factors that contribute to student success. These factors include creating a strong focus

on teaching and learning; ensuring that high expectations for students are maintained; involving parents in the learning process; ensuring that students have safe and orderly environments in which to learn; and making sure that educators work in an environment where collaboration, professionalism and visioning exist at high levels.

### **Turnaround and reform**

Efforts to improve schools can be regarded from turnaround and reform perspectives that seek to initiate immediate and/or sustained change respectively. Some in the educational research community regard the issue of school improvement not as a single idea, but instead as one that should be broken into two distinct parts. This school of thought breaks out the need for school turnaround or reform from the goal of student improvement in such a way as to suggest individualized strategies

*“People can be encouraged to change, but if the structure of the system in which the individuals work does not support them or allow enough flexibility, improvement efforts will fail.*

*Similarly, if the organization’s governance, policies, structures, time frames and resource allocation are changed but the individuals within the organization do not have opportunities to learn how to work within the new system, the improvement effort will fail.”*

– Todnem & Warner (1994)

\*The term “school turnaround” is commonly used to represent a variety of strategies for instituting fairly immediate change within school environments. Turnaround strategies generally focus on improving leadership, school-based systems including culture and behavioral or academic risk; and effective interventions from the classroom to the administrative levels. The use of the term “school turnaround” for this paper is differentiated from its specific use as defined under No Child Left Behind or any other public policy initiative; instead, it refers to the commonly accepted wider school efforts associated with immediate school improvement. The terms used in this paper in no way reflect PSBA’s position for any specific proposal or agenda that is part of a public policy or legislative discussion.

for each. Contemporary school improvement watermarks as they exist for the purpose of determining school effectiveness are most often measured by outcomes, however, resulting in the demand for improved test scores as the standard by which improvement is measured in a political landscape.

School improvement efforts nationally take various forms and are most effective when tailored specifically to individual environments. There are many examples of successes related both to school turnaround and to sustained school reform over time. While common elements exist that are transferable across multiple case studies, broad consensus among school practitioners and school improvement researchers exist, indicating improbability of success for one-size-fits-all models aimed at producing easily replicable results consistent across multiple school improvement landscapes. School leadership and reform researcher Kenneth Leithwood identifies in a 2010 report, titled *Turning Around Underperforming School Systems: Guidelines for District Leaders*, seven of what he refers to as “knowledge claims” for which he submits there is “reasonable, but still quite variable...evidence.” Among his “knowledge claims” are assertions that:

*Commonly used sequences of district turnaround strategies have been identified in a small body of research but their value to a district depends on similarities in the causes of district underperformance; and*

*District turnaround strategies need to be differentiated for each school in the district based on the causes of its underperformance and the turnaround stage in which the district and school finds itself.*

It can be an appealing notion to assume that what works in location “X” will be easily transferred to location “Y.” And in fact, the outcomes of efforts to create generalized school improvement frameworks based on analysis of demonstrated successes in localized environments are readily available. School improvement models, or Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) models for instance, seek to provide a method of raising student achievement

by “employing proven methods and strategies” (USDOE 2011). No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has, in fact, allowed for funding for schools that adopt reform approaches outlined in the legislation. In essence, CSR models used by schools have been required to adhere to the following:

- Employs proven methods and strategies based on scientifically based research
- Integrates a comprehensive design with aligned components
- Provides ongoing, high-quality professional development for teachers and staff
- Includes measurable goals and benchmarks for student achievement
- Is supported within the school by teachers, administrators and staff
- Provides support for teachers, administrators and staff
- Provides for meaningful parent and community involvement in planning, implementing and evaluating school improvement activities
- Uses high-quality external technical support and assistance from an external partner with experience and expertise in school-wide reform and improvement
- Plans for the evaluation of strategies for the implementation of school reforms and for student results achieved annually
- Identifies resources to support and sustain the school’s comprehensive reform effort
- Has been found to significantly improve the academic achievement of students or demonstrates strong evidence that it will improve the academic achievement of students (USDOE 2011)

While CSR types of options are research-based and available, selecting one appropriate to the individual needs of a school should be attempted only after careful consideration of specific challenges associated with underperformance locally.

### **Evaluation of established school improvement stories**

Analysis of effective strategies employed by other successful reform agents may prove useful in determining improvement approaches or areas for focus.

There are components to school improvement that seem through analysis to be present in many of the stories of success identified in improvement literature. While the individual circumstances may vary, it seems a number of common elements jump out as consistently identified as crucial components to school improvement. Often, these items match closely with research-grounded findings made public by school reform researchers. While an Institute of Education Sciences practice guide titled *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools* (2008) expresses concerns related to weak causal validity when regarding common features for the purpose of transferability, analysis of case studies may still be helpful to school leaders seeking guidance related to school improvement efforts. Further, conversations and interviews with school leaders who have demonstrable success records may be useful in highlighting areas of focus, crucial tipping points, or specific strategies that can be or are attributed to localized change.

The United States Department of Education What Works Clearinghouse practice guide mentioned above (*Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools*) is an attempt to “formulate specific and coherent evidence-based recommendations for use by educators aiming to quickly and dramatically improve student achievement in low-performing schools” (IES 2008). The guide was created for use by superintendents and building-level administrators for help with planning school turnaround efforts in struggling or underperforming schools. Authors of the document regarded 10 case studies concerning 35 schools that were able to improve student achievement in a one-to-three-year period of time in order to create four recommendations for school leaders in a position to affect positive change. The authors stress the potentially limited value of the recommendations, pointing out “the level of evidence is low because none of the studies examined for [the] practice guide is based on a research methodology that yields valid causal inference” (IES 2008). However, the four recommendations provided may serve, if implemented with consistency and as a group, to assist school leaders in realizing improvements in student outcomes in a relatively short period of time.

Recommendations in this report include:

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

It is important to note that the recommendations made by authors of the USDOE report are based on necessity for immediate turnaround, and should not necessarily be associated with long-term outcomes consistent with sustained improvement over time. The document summarizes evidence based upon the case studies for each recommendation, summarizes potential roadblocks to administrators, addresses how to carry out each recommendation and includes a checklist related to each recommendation.

Analysis of another compilation of stories and interviews documenting immediate school improvement or school turnaround (Learning First Alliance 2010) identifies a sampling of different strategies undertaken by school leaders to effect change while appropriately capturing a picture of the types of issues faced by professionals in struggling schools.

Non-English speaking students, immigrant populations of students and parents, both rural and urban schools with few resources, disconnected and unskilled teachers, and general lack of funding are all problems identified by school leaders interviewed for this document that can be readily found in many of Pennsylvania’s public schools. Similarities in the strategies used to create positive change identified by school leaders interviewed include:

1. Building a sense of community within the school
2. Making connections with the community
3. Creating a focus on healthy students who come to school well-fed and ready to learn
4. Creating safe environments for students to learn
5. Focusing on making students feel connected to schools
6. Reconstitution of teachers and/or administrative staff members
7. Creating an environment within the schools where collaborative or shared leadership is encouraged

8. Empowering teachers and focus on collegiality
9. Requiring frequent and meaningful assessment for all students
10. Focusing on academic rigor and implementation of appropriate curriculum
11. Outreach to and training for parents including training parents to conduct school/community workshops
12. Establishing high expectations for students and staff
13. Creating a shared vision in the school
14. Linking teaching to established curricular standards
15. Focusing on student discipline
16. Applying use of appropriate data for district, school, and classroom decisions

Nationally recognized efforts by the Baltimore City Public Schools system are consistent with strategies identified in the Learning First Alliance document, and have been widely lauded by National School Boards Association Council of Urban Boards of Education among others. The Baltimore City Public Schools system credits extraordinary academic gains and improved graduation rates particularly for African American males on a range of strategies that focus on student achievement and promote a wide variety of community engagement efforts extending to visiting the homes of students who drop out in an effort to encourage re-enrollment.

A comprehensive or full-service community schools model is discussed at length in the 2010 Learning First Alliance document, and is credited as being the impetus for positive change across multiple interviews. Full-service schools require extraordinary community partnerships that transform the total learning experience for students, teachers and parents. In a book titled, *Inside Full-Service Community Schools*, Joy Dryfoos and Sue Maguire develop a picture of what a full service school might look like.

A community school, operating in a public school building, is open to students, families, and the community before, during, and after school, seven days a week, all year long. It is jointly operated through a

partnership between the school system and one or more community agencies. Families, youth, principals, teachers, and neighborhood residents help design and implement activities that promote high educational achievement and positive youth development.

The school is oriented toward the community, encouraging student learning through community service and service learning. A before- and after-school learning component encourages students to build on their classroom experiences, expand their horizons, contribute to their communities, and have fun. A family support center helps families with child rearing, employment, housing, immigration, and other issues and problems. Medical, dental, and mental health services are readily available. College faculty and students, business people, youth workers, neighbors, and family members come together to support and bolster what schools are working hard to accomplish – ensuring young people’s academic, interpersonal, and career success.

Ideally, a full-time community school coordinator works in partnership with the principal. The coordinator is a member of the school’s management team and is responsible for administering the services brought into the school by community agencies. Over time, most community schools consciously try to integrate activities in several areas to achieve the desired results: quality education, positive youth development, family support, family and community engagement in decision making, and community development. In this process, the school emerges as a community hub, a one-stop center to meet diverse needs and to achieve the best possible outcomes for each child (Dryfoos & Maguire 2002).

Community schools are not new in the United States. One particularly well-publicized example of

a successfully integrated community schools model continues to thrive in New York City via a project that has been titled the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ). This project has incorporated the idea of a full-service school model and expanded on it to address the whole child through early childhood and beyond college. The HCZ's comprehensive system of programs begins with a series of workshops for parents of children between the age of 0-3. Social and health services combine with community-building programs to encourage both children and families to do well. Key elements of the program include:

- broad authority to hire and remove professional staff,
- creative use of time including nearly year-round schooling and extended school days, and
- strictly enforced disciplinary expectations.

In another example of successful urban school reform, the Virginia Portsmouth Public Schools system has seen remarkable improvement since 2003 that has led the formerly struggling system to full accreditation from the state as well as four consecutive years of meeting goals associated with Adequate Yearly Progress. In a 2011 interview conducted by Pennsylvania School Boards Association, Portsmouth Public Schools superintendent Dr. David Stuckwisch echoes the need for accountability, highlighted as a crucial component to success in HCZ, and cites the ability to regulate teacher salaries as a key component to improved outcomes in the urban Virginia school district. Consistent with a variety of education improvement literature, Dr. Stuckwisch also cites effective teaching as the "most important ingredient of a quality school system."

These specific and summarized examples of successful reform share many similar elements, and match nicely with the findings of school reform researchers based on years of research in the area. Interviews with school leaders, analysis of case studies summarizing successful school reform efforts, and the findings of school researchers all make clear that there are demonstrable areas for focus related to a desire to improve school and student outcomes.

There is no magic bullet. There is no one-size-fits-all model or piece of legislation that can work in all places and in all instances. At the front line there are parents, teachers, administrators and community members who are working with the tools they have to create a better educational experience for their children. Public policy will not by itself solve the problems faced by educational professionals. Instead, policy should be intended to help the people at the front lines by providing them with better and sharper tools. Public policy should create opportunities for professional growth. Public policy should encourage connections between schools and communities. Public policy should highlight fundamental tools and avenues for finding successful strategies for school improvement.

### **Pennsylvania focus – What is needed in Pennsylvania schools?**

Who can have a better sense for the needs of Pennsylvania public schools than the people at the front lines of the educational system? Practitioners are individuals who work in the districts and in the school buildings to ensure that students are provided with the best possible public education. Analysis of case studies and research may provide consistently highlighted areas for focus intended to support and improve the experiences of children in Pennsylvania schools. In an effort to go one step beyond this analysis, PSBA interviewed school leaders from schools and districts identified with a "persistently lowest performing" designation in a recently introduced attempt at school tuition voucher legislation. Eleven of 23 districts on the SB 1 list were contacted specifically for interview purposes, providing an appropriate sampling of those targeted for voucher legislation. PSBA believes the information collected is valuable as it provides a qualitative snapshot of some of the individualized needs, challenges and successes in schools labeled as "persistently lowest achieving."

### **Summary of interviews with Pennsylvania school leaders**

Interviews with school leaders from school buildings and districts identified as "persistently lowest achieving" resulted in information indicating

*A request for fair comparisons when determining school successes and failures was common among larger, more diverse urban districts that often cater to much more racially, economically, and academically diverse populations of students.*

school improvement efforts consistent with research-grounded practice, as well as federal requirements, are ongoing. A request for fair comparisons when determining school successes and failures was common among larger, more diverse urban districts that often cater to much more racially, economically and academically diverse populations of students. Administrators from some of these types of schools and districts expressed frustration that their efforts were being directly compared to those of schools and districts in which many fewer subgroups of students exist for AYP purposes. Currently, the “persistently lowest achieving” designation is applied to a district or school based on student performance on PSSA tests. The evaluation of a school’s success or lack of success does not take into account whether a school has a few or many subgroups of students representing a homogeneous or heterogeneous student population.

Often, students representing various subgroups of students from English Language Learners to students with Individualized Education Plans come to districts specifically for the services offered by the district. Many of these students enter the school year without the skills to be successful on PSSA tests. Until the district is able to get them up to speed, they negatively impact the overall academic assessment of the school or district. One request from administrators in these districts is for the use of direct subgroup to subgroup comparisons for determination of failing or achieving designations, instead of an overall student performance comparison that does not adequately capture the demographic consistency of the school.

Comparisons of schools labeled with “persistently lowest achieving” designations showed both similarities and differences. Personalized interviews with school leaders both at the executive and

school building level highlighted the fact that there is no “normal” for a school in Pennsylvania. Staff perceptions of student ability related to expectations for success differed from school to school throughout the interviews. Some school leaders acknowledged that traditionally, teacher perceptions and expectations had been low. The ability to be successful professionally strongly influences how one regards the professional experience. In many of these schools, a culture of low achievement coupled with few developmental and formative supports combined to create a polluted culture in which low expectations were prevalent, and levels of professional dissatisfaction were high. Behavioral incidences among students also contribute to professional dissatisfaction in many schools. One administrator referenced a survey targeting teacher attitudes that was given to a mostly young teaching staff in a specific school for the 2009-10 school year in which 85% of the responses were negative.

However, many of the administrators referenced current and ongoing school improvement efforts immediately after mentioning prior polluted climates in schools. This is because struggling schools have in many cases already begun to implement a variety of school improvement efforts. In almost every school in which low expectations were identified as problematic, low expectations were identified as problems that existed in the past, or that existed at dramatically lower levels currently than it had in the past. In the same school that mentioned the survey with 85% negative responses for school year 2009-10, the exact same survey elicited 90% positive responses for school year 2010-11. This is because school districts have realized that change is necessary in struggling schools, and have begun to implement plans for improvement. Especially in resource-rich, large urban districts (resource does not necessarily refer to money and may include access to outside programs or experts), expansive reform efforts are already in place. These reform efforts range from implementation of comprehensive evaluation processes for all teachers, to collaboration with outside agencies, to extensive reconstitution of professional staff.

According to PSBA’s interviews with building-level and district-level administrators, improvement

efforts focusing on restructuring of administrative and teaching staff are in fact, fairly common. The extent of these efforts ranged in focus and scope from targeting and replacing building-level administrators only, to requiring large numbers of teachers to reapply for currently held positions. Some schools replaced as much as half of the existing teaching staff in an effort to bring in new top talent. An executive administrator from one large, urban Pennsylvania district described a classroom-by-classroom approach to evaluating effectiveness of currently employed teachers that is intended to systematically weed out ineffective professional staff members. This approach serves the dual purpose of identifying teachers most in need of professional supports or replacement, while concurrently empowering the most effective instructional leaders by acknowledging and formally recognizing superior performance.

An ideological shift from management to leadership was described in this district, with a strong emphasis on curricular modeling by the building level administrators. A collaborative leadership approach that provides leadership opportunities to teachers and allows participation in decision-making was indicated by both building level and executive level administrators as a crucial component to school improvement. The development of a comprehensively formative evaluative process has also been integral to the process of improving student outcomes, along with a specifically targeted approach to recruiting the best teachers from within the district for struggling schools.

Multiple interviewees highlighted a need for leadership and teaching improvement as areas most necessarily crucial for improved outcomes. When asked directly what types of legislative efforts would be most beneficial to struggling schools, multiple respondents asked for expanded opportunities for the development of effective leadership practices in struggling schools; especially for new school leaders. Interviewees indicated principals want to be effective in their positions, but need more opportunities to learn how to transition from management to leadership.

Effective instruction is consistently highlighted as the key to student learning. Inexperienced teach-

ers and high levels of teacher turnover were identified as two of the problems faced in many struggling schools. Without a means of attracting effective teachers to come to and stay in the most needful schools, there is little chance for continuously effective instruction over time. There are multiple avenues to improving instruction. Curricular modeling from building leaders is important, as is expanding opportunities for teachers to experiment and enjoy a wider than traditional array of school leadership experiences. But pedagogical improvement strategies also were cited as necessary for struggling schools, especially with regard to teacher mentoring programs. Because teacher populations in the most challenging schools tend to be somewhat younger than those in schools with fewer behavioral, educational and other problems, real collaborative approaches to professional improvement and classroom management skills are critical. Providing incentives for highly qualified master teachers to join the ranks of the newly initiated in high needs schools was suggested as another area of focus for public policy makers.

Effective teaching, improved leadership and high expectations are only part of the equation that leads to student success. One interviewee went so far as to say that two specific problems, if addressed in full and supported appropriately with funding and with the opportunity for schools to be creative, would go a long way in the direction of improving student outcomes in struggling schools. These issues were remediation and student discipline.

Schools are currently not given the flexibility to remediate students who come to school without the skills to be successful on a level consistent with their peers. School officials, particularly in struggling

*When asked directly what types of legislative efforts would be most beneficial to struggling schools, multiple respondents asked for expanded opportunities for the development of effective leadership practices in struggling schools; especially for new school leaders.*

*Struggling schools should be allowed flexibility with regard to graduation and grade level requirements in order to be best able to create academic schedules that are appropriate to the learning needs of individual students. These efforts should be supported with proven remediation strategies at the state level, and the strategies should be made available to struggling districts and schools.*

schools, should have the latitude to be creative in making schedules that will prepare all students for success. According to an executive level administrator in one district, Pennsylvania schools do a great job of meeting the needs of college-bound students. The school system prepares them with foreign languages, music, and advanced courses in science, math and reading. But our current system does not allow schools to tailor the educational experiences of the lowest performing students in such a way as to prepare them to be successful upon graduation. Struggling schools should be allowed flexibility with regard to graduation and grade-level requirements in order to be best able to create academic schedules that are appropriate to the learning needs of individual students. These efforts should be supported with proven remediation strategies at the state level, and the strategies should be made available to struggling districts and schools.

Student discipline is not an uncommon issue in many of the lowest performing schools in Pennsylvania. Teachers and school leaders need to be effectively trained to address discipline problems in the school. There needs to be an expectation of consistency and accountability with regard to discipline issues. Teachers need to enforce an established code of conduct. And teachers need to be able to count on support at the administrative level. Specialized professional development opportunities specific to student discipline, or combined with mentoring and induction programs through which new teachers are partnered with experienced and effective classroom

leaders would be beneficial to teachers in many of the lowest performing schools.

Schools and districts also would like greater latitude with regard to their options for suspension, expulsion and alternative education settings. Because discipline is often a critical component with struggling schools, alternative educational settings end up diverting funding from instructional dollars. When school districts are forced to spend time and resources on finding and funding appropriate alternative education settings, the educational opportunities for the remainder of students is negatively impacted. Adequate state funding for alternative education programs is another of the requests made by executive level school leaders from around Pennsylvania.

Special education came up in a variety of capacities in speaking with school leaders in Pennsylvania. A number of the school leaders interviewed indicated their schools or districts attracted higher than usual populations of special needs students. In effect, because of the excellent work schools or districts do in order to meet the needs of children with special needs, they end up being punished financially as more and more special needs students migrate to nearby learning environments with effective special needs services. Because of the variety of additional costs associated with meeting the needs of these populations of students, appropriate funding tied to the actual numbers of students as well as the actual cost of educating these students is necessary.

Fewer mandates for schools, especially with regard to special education, were requested by school leaders at all levels and across multiple interviews. School leaders note there is a mistaken notion that suggests schools are not servicing students appropriately. Instead, a more accurate understanding of how schools are forced to operate would acknowledge that, particularly with regard to high needs students, the constraints and requirements placed upon schools do not allow them to appropriately service students.

Interviewees from the largest urban school district interviewed talked about a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach to improving the struggling schools in the district. Reform efforts in this district have been ongoing and have been targeted to

*One suggestion from both executive-level and building-level administrators in this district, when asked how public policy makers could help improve schools, was for a re-evaluation of the requirements surrounding teacher furloughs and layoffs.*

underperforming schools for six years. Elements to this reform strategy focus on leadership and teacher improvement, and include recruiting the best teachers from throughout the district to the schools that are most in need, and empowering teacher effectiveness through comprehensive formative evaluative process while providing opportunities for experimentation. Teacher furloughs have also been used in this district, although seniority rules have prevented the use of furloughs from targeting the most poorly performing teachers and have been a source of frustration both among administrators and the teaching staff. One suggestion from both executive-level and building-level administrators in this district, when asked how public policy makers could help improve schools, was for a re-evaluation of requirements surrounding teacher furloughs and layoffs.

Community and parental involvement was identified as lacking by some district and school leader interviewees, while others indicated strong and supportive involvement from both. Yet a third perspective, offered by administrators from one district, nicely captures the importance of meaningful programming in this area. According to the interviewee, in a short period of time from the hiring of a new administrative team, an entirely new comprehensive perspective on the struggling high school has begun to emerge. Before, during a time of negative teacher attitudes, high instances of disciplinary issues and a low student performance on PSSA tests, the culture of low expectations for students permeated not only the school, but also the surrounding community. This high school was well-known throughout the district as an undesirable location for learning. Parents had low expectations for students, and com-

munity members joked about the dangerous and fruitless nature of the learning environment.

However, with the hire of a new administrative team to support the existing principal, a new climate was able to emerge almost immediately as expectations for students, teachers and parents were made clear. As the teachers became successful in reaching out to parents, the district also has made efforts to establish community partnerships that address such issues as school/community violence, college readiness and availability of technology during out-of-school-time hours. In a relatively short period of time the school has begun not only to see improvements in student achievement, but also in student, parental and community perceptions. This interview highlights the importance of community and parental relationships with schools. The school was able to take advantage of a variety of community resources while benefiting from the new capacity added by a new administrative team. Many schools are not so lucky. Particularly

*Adequate funding for K-12 education is essential for the success of Pennsylvania's public schools.*

in resource-poor areas of the state, attention should be directed to providing school leaders with the tools and connections that will enable effective partnerships with parents and communities.

Finally, budget cuts resulting in loss of staff and/or programs were identified consistently as negatively impacting schools and districts. Almost every school leader interviewed indicated being forced to make cuts to programs, staff or both as a result of the 2011-12 budget situation. Adequate funding for K-12 education is essential for the success of Pennsylvania's public schools.

### **Research Elements for focus in developing recommendations for supporting school improvement**

A synthesis of the data reviewed and collected for this paper leads to 11 Research Elements that are divided into three sections. The purpose of the Research Elements is not to provide fixes for problems in Pennsylvania's public schools. Instead, the 11

Elements are intended act as a basis for furthering the discussion on school improvement by identifying potential areas for focus by public policy makers and educational professionals alike. These 11 Research Elements have been identified from the review of all data used for this paper. The three key areas under which the Elements fall are recruiting, preparing, and improving teachers; preparing students for academic success; and providing schools with tools for success.

### **Recruiting, preparing and improving teachers**

Research Elements included under *recruiting, preparing and improving teachers* focus on strategies for identifying the best and brightest individuals for the job of educating children and giving them the ongoing support that will ensure they are able to successfully meet the needs of every student. Elements in this section highlight the need not only for professional development strategies that are customized to the needs of students, learning environments and communities, but also the critical importance of formative feedback for educators seeking to improve professional capacity.

#### **1. Development of strategies for recruiting and cultivating top graduates to the teaching profession should become a priority in Pennsylvania.**

While much of the literature related to teacher effectiveness focuses specifically on those already teaching, a growing body of literature suggests the value of identifying the best and brightest, and enticing them to the teaching profession. Experiences in countries that regularly receive high international educational rankings suggest strategies for recruiting and developing top graduates to the teaching profession may be valuable to efforts to produce raised levels of student achievement. It is no coincidence that the world's best school systems have strategic approaches to finding the best and brightest graduates, and recruiting them into the teaching profession. Pennsylvania should develop and invest in innovative approaches to identifying the best and brightest from all graduates in order to develop a teaching force that is able to meet the needs of challenging students.

#### **2. Emphasis should be placed on efforts to encourage the best teachers to work and stay in underperforming schools.**

Flexible incentive packages that provide alternatives to traditional pay structures and that are designed to meet localized needs, research-based teacher mentoring and new teacher induction programs, and Department of Education-level consulting teams should all exist as components of programs that get the best teachers to come to and stay in underperforming school environments.

#### **3. Superior teacher evaluation, including multiple evaluative components and formative elements, is needed, especially in underperforming school environments.**

While evaluation of professional staff may not immediately be identified as an instructional support, if implemented with consistency, comprehensiveness and the use of multiple evaluative components, it may be regarded as one of the most important methods for supporting quality instruction. It is important to remember that evaluations may serve multiple roles. Effective evaluation can be a valuable tool not only for summative purposes, but also as a method of providing formative feedback that can promote professional growth and improve the quality of instruction. But in order to be effective, evaluations need to be rigorous and objective. Evaluations may include a student performance component, and should be conducted frequently enough to support reliable analysis of professional aptitude. In some instances, it may be appropriate to use specially trained observers to assist in the evaluation process. Research-grounded training in this area for building-level administrators should be readily available.

#### **4. Instructional coaching is a fundamental tool for inexperienced teachers as well as teachers working in extraordinarily challenging environments.**

Teachers who are supported by an instructional coach or peer mentor are more likely to implement new teaching practices, and demonstrate a greater likelihood that they will show continued use of new practices when compared to teachers who access

professional improvement content via more traditional professional development methods (Cornet and Knight, 2009). Instructional coaches improve teaching and learning by modeling evidence-grounded methods for improving delivery of content and sharing ideas for strengthening pedagogical proficiency. Recruiting highly qualified teachers to work closely with or serve as formal mentors/coaches to new and developing teachers enhances collegiality, promotes collaboration and positively influences the overall effectiveness of instruction.

**5. On-site professional development opportunities customized to localized needs and based on research-grounded approaches to improving teaching, management, leadership and collegiality can assist education professionals in underperforming schools throughout Pennsylvania.**

Struggling schools are challenging schools. In instances where poverty or violence are at issue, these challenging environments may be undesirable destinations for teachers, leaving the schools populated with the least experienced and least skilled professional staff members. Despite the expanded array of challenges associated with teaching high-needs students, new teachers and overwhelmed administrators can find themselves isolated without support, feedback or more seasoned staff members to emulate, especially in schools without established mentoring or induction programs. On-site professional development that is customized to the needs of educators and administrators working within the most challenging districts can serve to provide the educators with the skills needed to be successful in meeting the needs of diverse groups of students.

**Preparing students for academic success**

Research Elements included under *preparing students for academic success* draw attention to a growing awareness that education does not begin and end at the doors to the school building. Ensuring that students come to school with the tools to be successful, and with the implicit support of parents and community, has increasingly become the foundation of some of the most dramatic and inspiring school improvement stories around the

United States. Students must have safe places to study and exist during out-of-school times in order to resist the pressures associated with a multitude of outside factors that show the potential to negatively influence learning and growth.

**6. Development of early childhood education elements should continue to be a priority in Pennsylvania, and should be highlighted as a necessary improvement component for underperforming elementary schools.**

Learning doesn't begin in kindergarten. A substantial body of research has highlighted the link between language and literacy in the early years of life and academic achievement, higher graduation rates, productivity as an adult and even likelihood to commit crimes. Pennsylvania's commitment to early childhood education programs has become evident as the commonwealth has worked to develop the Early Learning Standards and credentialing programs for Early Childhood educators. Pennsylvania has also worked to expand the number and quality of early childhood education programs available to parents and children. However, budgetary considerations put into question the sustainability of the positive gains Pennsylvania has been making in this area. It is known that students who come to school lagging behind peers in the areas of oral language and literacy are likely to continue to lag throughout early grades and often beyond. Early childhood programs that build on the early language experiences of children, allow them to use pre-existing knowledge to build upon new experiences and provide opportunities for formative outreach excursions are likely to prepare young students with the tools to be successful as they mature through early and later grades. Pennsylvania should continue to value, grow, and fund existing and new programs targeted toward pre-K children.

**7. Outreach to, and partnerships with, parents must become standard components to improvement efforts in underperforming schools.**

Despite the knowledge that research has consistently shown a positive relationship between parents' engagement in a child's education and student outcomes, programs designed specifically to improve

relationships between schools and parents continue to face significant challenges. In interviews with school leaders who have been effective in generating significant improvement in struggling schools, improving relationships between the school and the parents comes up time and again as playing a crucial role in the improvement process. But despite existing frameworks for bolstering these relationships, school leaders including teachers and administrators are often faced with hurdles particularly with regard to families with two working parents and as children get older. Support should continue for programs that bridge the gap between schools and parents. Underperforming schools in particular should be assisted with creating and maintaining meaningful relationships with community members including parents. Professional development opportunities should be made available for school leaders related to fostering parental involvement including assistance with monitoring and review of existing parental involvement policies and practices.

**8. Support for quality Out-of-School-Time programming should be consistently supported via funding and research.**

Analysis of the value of out-of-school-time programming shows that children who participate in after- and before-school programs are safer, better behaved and more respectful, less likely to use tobacco, drugs and alcohol, and less likely to commit crimes. The need for high-quality, research-grounded out-of-school programming is clear in the face of the knowledge that in today's world, many children live in homes with two working parents or a single parent who works. Without constructive activities that provide young people with drug-free, gang-free and violence-free environments particularly during the times of day when parents are absent, children are less likely to complete homework assignments and remain active participants in the school environment.

**Providing schools with tools for success**

School improvement can seem a daunting task for teachers and administrators overwhelmed with the unique challenges that are often evident in low-performing schools. Tools for change are helpful in moving schools to improved outcomes. But a tool

is only helpful when you know how to use it. Research Elements included in the *providing schools with tools for success* section show the need for a multi-faceted approach to school improvement that helps education professionals know not only what is available, but also how to effectively implement strategies locally. There should be a focus at the state level on working closely with schools and districts to ensure that all administrators and teachers understand what is available and how best to use tools to inform decisions related to improved teaching and learning.

**9. Use of PDE's Framework for Continuous School Improvement is most effective in schools when supplemented with ongoing on-site support.**

Schools and districts need support at the state level with understanding and implementation, as well as consistent on-site monitoring of underperforming schools' progress in the direction of improvement.

**10. On-site data analysis should be available to underperforming schools, along with a school improvement database that hosts best practices for school reform/school turnaround, and school improvement models that can be tailored to localized needs.**

If implemented thoroughly, school improvement models or comprehensive school reform models may be a valuable tool for underperforming schools. These models focus on educational practices, pedagogy, curriculum and governance in order to provide a framework for school improvement either immediately or over time. However, the degree to which any program is appropriate varies from location to location. Further, significant buy-in and intense commitment to implementation are required throughout the school system in order to ensure the highest likelihood of success for any program. Local educational professionals must understand the types of challenges specific to each environment, and with appropriate guidance from school leaders, develop attitudes and skills that are supportive of the overall improvement efforts. On-site guidance is necessary, related to understanding and achieving short- and long-term goals associated with improvement efforts.

**11. Strategic use of existing school and student data should continue to be highlighted as the basis for making school-wide decisions.**

Reliable data is an essential component in making school-based decisions. Collected as a regular part of district operations, data is intended to inform all decisions from the selection of textbooks to the development of budgets. Data can be information related to student performance on standardized tests, or teacher performance as a part of the regular performance evaluation cycle. Data can be used to track spending, record student discipline incidences or monitor staff absences. Data is any information that helps with understanding. If analyzed appropriately, it can lead to answers to questions about what is going on in schools, districts and classrooms.

**PSBA recommendations**

Pennsylvania schools provide an exemplary level of service to public school children throughout the commonwealth. Public schools and children have shown demonstrable growth related to expected outcomes every year since the implementation of NCLB. Some schools and districts face obstacles often associated with poverty, transience, violence or lack of resources. Children living in economically disadvantaged communities can succeed – there is no doubt – but they face a complex set of challenges that must be addressed in order to move in the direction of success. These challenges are real. These challenges are significant. And these challenges result in tangible impacts on the quality of the educational services provided to students.

PSBA does acknowledge a need for improvement, especially in areas where these types of challenges exist at high levels. The organization hoped when researching for this paper to investigate avenues to school success for the purpose of creating recommendations for public policy makers that, if considered and implemented fully, have the potential to result in real change. A review of relevant literature was the first step in this process. Fortunately, there exists a number of commonly identified elements that academic and other researchers in the area of education note as critical or most often present in successful schools. These

commonly identified areas should be a starting point for school leaders, as well as individuals and groups seeking to effect change in educational outcomes.

Throughout the school reform/school turnaround literature, there are many stories of success. Analysis of these stories can add an additional layer to the picture of what is needed to create a successful learning environment. PSBA's conversations with school leaders in a variety of capacities added a final layer that allowed the organization to identify Research Elements that have ultimately been the basis for formal recommendations.

**Recommendation # 1 –  
Create specifically focused comprehensive school improvement teams**

The Pennsylvania Department of Education should create a Comprehensive School Improvement Evaluation Team that will be responsible for assisting underperforming schools with identifying areas for improvement. Areas analyzed should be those closely associated with both immediate and long-term strategic improvement strategies.

The evaluation is intended to assist local (school building) improvement efforts by analyzing areas of need that support elements identified as necessary for school improvement in research literature. The evaluation will be highly individualized, and will address challenges specific to the community and local school, as well as teaching, leadership and management issues ranging from professional development needs to assistance with implementation of school improvement strategies. The team will present the school board and administrators in evaluated schools with findings from the evaluation along with guidance related to obtaining, utilizing and implementing appropriate improvement supports/resources from PDE and/or other sources.

The evaluation will be conducted by a team of education professionals supported and staffed at the Department of Education level who are not associated with or under the employ of the school district. The evaluation team may be additionally supplemented at the governance level by appropriate personnel. The evaluation is intended to

highlight areas of local need so that supports at the Department of Education level may be focused and made available to school leaders and school staff for the purpose of transforming school culture and student outcomes.

Elements that will be examined during the evaluation should include localized strategies for recruiting, retaining, developing and supporting teachers; evaluative process including formative linkage to professional improvement; in-place and needed collaborative teaching processes; development of expanded leadership opportunities throughout the school building; early learning opportunities for students; community and parental engagement efforts; use of data as a basis for planning; opportunities for student learning outside of the regular school day; and strategic use/level of implementation of PDE's Framework for Continuous School Improvement. These elements should assist underperforming schools in viewing a complete picture of areas for improvement for the purpose of focusing localized efforts. In essence, this approach to "quality management" will allow districts to design systemic improvements to key educational and operational processes, which will sustain student performance over an extended period of time.

**Recommendation #2 –  
Create a clearinghouse of  
model improvement strategies**

The Pennsylvania Department of Education should establish a clearinghouse of available immediate and long-term improvement strategies, models, literature, and resources that is supplemented by teams of content experts who are available for on-site assistance for underperforming schools.

The clearinghouse will serve as a resource for underperforming schools, school leaders, and

school districts that hope to address various issues associated with immediate school improvement (school turnaround) and school reform. The clearinghouse will be created and staffed at the Department of Education level. It should be supported by ongoing research in the area of school improvement, and should be continuously updated. The clearinghouse should be staffed by content experts and school improvement researchers who will be available to underperforming schools remotely and for on-site assistance with implementation. The clearinghouse should work closely with the Comprehensive School Improvement Auditing Team. Underperforming schools, appropriate school leaders, and school districts may choose to use the resources within the clearinghouse.

**Recommendation #3 –  
Ensure funding for early childhood  
and out-of-school time programs**

The Pennsylvania Legislature should ensure funding to establish and maintain early childhood education programs and sustainable out-of-school-time programs for children.

The focus of early childhood education programming should be to provide high quality early childhood programs and effective prevention strategies in order to mitigate challenges faced by families that affect school readiness and academic success. The Legislature needs to support the current and ongoing efforts that work to serve the diverse needs of young children. Out-of-school time programs should focus on supporting research-based educational activities and providing an effective mitigation to challenges faced by students in need of additional educational supports.

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# Appendix A

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## PSBA Research Elements

Development of strategies for recruiting and cultivating top graduates to the teaching profession should become a priority in Pennsylvania.

Emphasis should be placed on efforts to encourage the best teachers to work and stay in underperforming schools.

Superior teacher evaluation including multiple evaluative components and formative elements is needed, especially in underperforming school environments.

Instructional coaching is a fundamental tool for inexperienced teachers as well as teachers working in extraordinarily challenging environments.

On-site professional development opportunities customized to localized needs and based on research-grounded approaches to improving teaching, management, leadership and collegiality can assist education professionals in underperforming schools throughout Pennsylvania.

Development of early childhood education elements should continue to be a priority in Pennsyl-

vania, and should be highlighted as a necessary improvement component for underperforming elementary schools.

Outreach to, and partnerships with, parents must become standard components to improvement efforts in underperforming schools.

Support for quality Out-of-School-Time programming should be consistently supported via funding and research.

Use of PDE's Framework for Continuous School Improvement is most effective in schools when supplemented with ongoing on-site support.

On-site data analysis should be available to underperforming schools, along with a school improvement database that hosts best practices for school reform/school turnaround, and school improvement models that can be tailored to localized needs.

Strategic use of existing school and student data should continue to be highlighted as the basis for making school-wide decisions.

# Appendix B

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## PSBA Recommendations

### **Recommendation # 1 – Create specifically focused comprehensive school improvement teams**

The Pennsylvania Department of Education should create a Comprehensive School Improvement Evaluation Team that will be responsible for assisting underperforming schools with identifying areas for improvement. Areas analyzed should be those closely associated with both immediate and long-term strategic improvement strategies.

The evaluation is intended to assist local (school building) improvement efforts by analyzing areas of need that support elements identified as necessary for school improvement in research literature. The evaluation will be highly individualized, and will address challenges specific to the community and local school, as well as teaching, leadership and management issues ranging from professional development needs to assistance with implementation of school improvement strategies. The team will present the school board and administrators in evaluated schools with findings from the evaluation along with guidance related to obtaining, utilizing, and implementing appropriate improvement supports/resources from PDE and/or other sources.

The evaluation will be conducted by a team of education professionals supported and staffed at the Department of Education level who are not associated with or under the employ of the school district. The evaluation team may be additionally supplemented at the governance level by appropriate personnel. The evaluation is intended to highlight areas of local need so that supports at the Department of Education level may be focused and made available to school leaders and school staff for the purpose of transforming school culture and student outcomes.

Elements that will be examined during the evaluation should include localized strategies for recruit-

ing, retaining, developing and supporting teachers; evaluative process including formative linkage to professional improvement; in-place and needed collaborative teaching processes; development of expanded leadership opportunities throughout the school building; early learning opportunities for students; community and parental engagement efforts; use of data as a basis for planning; opportunities for student learning outside of the regular school day; and strategic use/level of implementation of PDE's Framework for Continuous School Improvement. These elements should assist underperforming schools in viewing a complete picture of areas for improvement for the purpose of focusing localized efforts. In essence, this approach to "quality management" will allow districts to design systemic improvements to key educational and operational processes, which will sustain student performance over an extended period of time.

### **Recommendation #2 – Create a clearinghouse of model improvement strategies**

The Pennsylvania Department of Education should establish a clearinghouse of available immediate and long-term improvement strategies, models, literature and resources that is supplemented by teams of content experts who are available for on-site assistance for underperforming schools.

The clearinghouse will serve as a resource for underperforming schools, school leaders, and school districts that hope to address various issues associated with immediate school improvement (school turnaround) and school reform. The clearinghouse will be created and staffed at the Department of Education level. It should be supported by ongoing research in the area of school improvement, and should be continuously updated. The clearinghouse should be staffed by content experts and school improvement researchers who will be available to underperforming schools remotely and for on-site assistance with

implementation. The clearinghouse should work closely with the Comprehensive School Improvement Auditing Team. Underperforming schools, appropriate school leaders and school districts may choose to use the resources within the clearinghouse.

**Recommendation #3 – Ensure funding for early childhood and out-of-school time programs**

The Pennsylvania Legislature should ensure funding to establish and maintain early childhood education programs and sustainable out-of-school-time programs for children.

The focus of early childhood education programming should be to provide high quality early childhood programs and effective prevention strategies in order to mitigate challenges faced by families that affect school readiness and academic success. The Legislature needs to support the current and ongoing efforts that work to serve the diverse needs of young children. Out-of-school time programs should focus on supporting research-based educational activities and providing an effective mitigation to challenges faced by students in need of additional educational supports.

# Appendix C

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## Voucher Proposals in Pennsylvania

### **Senate Bill 1 –**

#### **Sponsor – Senator Jeffrey Piccola**

Senate Bill 1 of 2011, also called the Opportunity Scholarship and Educational Improvement Tax Credit Act, was proposed as a way of providing school choice options for students in Pennsylvania. The bill would create an opportunity scholarship program to help low-income children currently attending a public school to pay tuition to attend a nonresident public school or a participating non-public school. In the first year, the program would be available to low-income children who attended a “persistently lowest achieving school” during the 2010-11 school year, or would be a kindergarten student and who will reside in the attendance boundary of a “persistently lowest achieving school” during the 2011-12 school year.

In the 2012-13 school year, the scholarship program would be expanded to include not only those students who qualified for the program for the 2011-12 school year, but also to low-income children already enrolled in a nonpublic school. SB 1 would allow students who attended a non-public school during the 2010-11 school year and would reside within the attendance boundary of a “persistently lowest achieving school” as of the first day of classes of the 2012-13 school year to receive vouchers. In the third year phase-in, the 2013-14 school year, the tuition program would be available to all low-income children residing in the commonwealth regardless of residency or the academic success or failure of the school from which the child seeks transfer. The aggregate amount of all vouchers awarded for the 2013-14 school year and thereafter to students who do not reside within the attendance boundary of a low-achieving school could not exceed \$250 million. Beginning in 2014-15, the program would be expanded to in-

clude a “Middle-Income Scholarship.” In this year, vouchers would be available to children whose family income is at 130-300% of the poverty level.

### **House Bill 1708**

#### **Sponsor – Pennsylvania State Representative Jim Christiana**

HB 1708, the “Students and Schools Rescue Act” (which is also currently proposed as an amendment to HB 1454), would provide taxpayer-funded tuition vouchers to students from low-income families to be used to attend public, private or parochial schools. The voucher program would be phased in over two years, beginning by providing vouchers to students who attended a low achieving school and expanding in the second year to provide vouchers to all eligible students within the attendance boundary of a low achieving school. HB 1708 also increases the amount of tax credits available under the Educational Improvement Tax Credit program to \$100 million.

### **House Bill 1678**

#### **Sponsor – Pennsylvania State Representative Curt Schroder**

HB 1678, the “Failing Schools Student Rescue Act”, proposes to provide taxpayer-funded vouchers to all students who attend or reside within the attendance boundary of a persistently low achieving school, regardless of household income. Under HB 1678, students in low achieving schools, which are defined as the bottom 5% of schools, would be eligible to receive a \$5,000 voucher to attend the private or parochial school of their choice, while for students who wish to use their voucher to attend a nonresident public school, the state would pay the receiving school an amount based upon the cost of educating a student from outside the district.

**House Bill 1679****Sponsor – Pennsylvania State Representative  
Curt Schroder**

HB 1679, the “Opportunity Scholarship and Education Improvement Tax Credit Act,” provides all students attending a low achieving school a \$5,000 taxpayer-funded tuition voucher, which could be used to attend a private, parochial or nonresident public school, just like HB 1678. Unlike HB 1678, however, HB 1679 greatly expands the breadth of the voucher program during the 2013-14 school year, and provides tuition vouchers to all students in the state regardless of whether they have attended or live within the attendance boundary of a low achieving school. HB 1679 limits the total dollar amount of vouchers that can be given to students who do not attend or live within the attendance boundary of a low achieving school to \$2 billion a year. HB 1679 also proposes to increase the amount of tax credits available under the Educational Improvement Tax Credit program to \$100 million.

**Amendments**

In addition to SB 1 and HBs 1708, 1678 and 1679, two additional voucher amendments have

been posted to HB 1454, an unrelated bill. These voucher amendments contain many of the same elements as many of the other voucher program proposals, however, they contain small, yet significant changes that differentiate them from the other bills. These amendments are Amendment 4013, the “Opportunity Scholarship Act” and Amendment 4103 the “Opportunity Scholarship and Education Improvement Tax Credit Act.” Both amendments provide taxpayer-funded tuition vouchers to low-income students (with a household income of not more than 130% of the poverty level) to attend the private, parochial or nonresident public school of their choice. Both of these amendments provide vouchers to students attending or living within the attendance boundary of the bottom 5% of schools during the first years of the programs. In the seventh year of each program, however, all students attending a school in which 50% or less of students are proficient in math and reading are also eligible for vouchers. The only difference between the amendments is that Amendment 4103 also proposes to increase the amount of tax credits available under the Educational Improvement Tax Credit program to \$100 million.

# Appendix D

## Cost of Vouchers

The total cost for the proposed voucher program in Pennsylvania can only be estimated at this point because it is impossible to be able to predict how many students and schools might participate in the tuition voucher program. What we can predict, however, is that the cost will be significant to staggering. Below is a chart representing a likely financial scenario for the proposed voucher program in Pennsylvania. It is also important to understand that, even with the substantial dollars estimated to be expended for vouchers, at the end of the fourth year an estimated 80% of the students will still remain in the under-performing schools.

As shown in the Estimated Cost Table, the Year 1 cost is \$54.38 million and is based on the assumption of 10% of the eligible students using vouchers. This will be the amount of subsidy reduction for the 22 school districts with the 144 buildings. In Year 2, the total cost will be \$210.7 million and is based on 15% of the eligible students from the 144 buildings plus 100% of the eligible nonpublic students in the 22 districts. Year 2 represents a cost increase of \$156.3 million. The district subsidy reduction in Year 3 will be \$81.6 million. Year 3 total cost will be \$1.31 billion (assumes 20% of eligible students from all districts plus 100% of eligible nonpublic students). Year 3 is an increase of \$1.1 billion. The Year 4 costs to districts will be \$668.3 million.

**Estimated Cost Table  
(January 2011)**

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Estimated % use eligible public school students	10%	15%	20%	20%
Estimated % use eligible nonpublic school students	N/A	100%	100%	100%
Number of vouchers	7,202	28,297	210,103	210,103
Total cost of vouchers	\$54,381,046	\$210,719,721	\$1,308,448,709	\$1,308,448,709
Yearly increase	\$0	\$156,338,675	\$1,097,728,988	\$0
Subsidy reduction to districts	\$0	\$54,381,046	\$81,571,572	\$688,270,091

When the voucher exceeds the tuition, the excess money is retained in the “Excess Scholarship Fund” (SB 1 Section 2506-B (c) (1)). If a student withdraws from the voucher program, the participating school must refund a pro-rata share of the voucher to the parents who must return it to the state for deposit in the “Excess Scholarship Fund” (SB 1 Section 2505-B (3) (i) (b)). Once the subsidy has been removed from a district, it will not be returned even if the student returns to the district.

Money leaves the district as the result of vouchers under the SB 1 calculation, but costs are expected to remain. Voucher costs will be passed back to the district by means of subsidy reductions, but the costs that were supported by the subsidy dollars will remain. If a student returns to the public school, the voucher money remains with the state in the “Excess Scholarship Fund” even if the student returns to the public school.

# Appendix E

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## Interview Questions

Initial interview questions were tailored to schools and districts based on demographic data reviewed prior to the interview. All interview questions were intended to explore the following areas:

1. Tenure of staff (educators and administrators)
2. Staff perceptions related to student success
3. Community support for schools and staff perceptions related to community
4. Unique or individual obstacles that stand in the way of student successes or improved student outcomes
5. Types of supports that would be helpful to individual schools and districts in achieving improved student outcomes
6. Perceptions related to safety and learning environments
7. Levels of parental support

The following questions were used as a starting point for school leader interviews.

For building-level administrators:

1. How long have you been a principal in the building in which you are currently working? Were you a teacher in that building? Have you had any other roles in that building or within the district?
2. How would you describe the staff perceptions within your building related to student abilities and student capacity? Is there a general sense that all students are capable of success? What expectations exist among professional staff members related to student outcomes?
3. Describe the level of community support that exists in the area surrounding your building? Would you characterize the level of community interaction and support as high, average, below average or poor? How active

are community members in the educational processes specific to your school? In what types of ways are community members active within your school?

4. What specific challenges stand in the way of improved outcomes for students in your school?
5. What types of supports (currently extant or otherwise) are or would be helpful to your efforts related to improving student outcomes?
6. Describe the level of parental support that exists at your school? How do you work to include parents in the educational process?
7. Describe the climate in, and surrounding your school? Would you say that your school provides a safe learning environment that is conducive to learning? Would you say that the community surrounding your school provides a safe environment where children can learn and grow?

For executive-level administrators:

1. What specific challenges stand as the most significant impediments to student success within your school district?
2. What types of legislative efforts, supports, initiatives or changes would be most helpful to your work as a school leader? In what areas would you suggest legislative efforts be focused to be most helpful to your work?

The following questions were used as a starting point for interviews of school leaders outside of the school or district.

1. What do you see as the biggest challenges contributing to poor academic performance in schools?
2. What can school boards in rural areas do to

- encourage and promote improved academic outcomes?
3. What do you think are the keys to success for school leaders in underperforming locations?
  4. Can you identify three to six hard, transferable ideas that you believe will help school reform leaders be successful in their school improvement/reform efforts?
  5. Have you identified specific policies that need to be in place that you feel are crucial to student success?
  6. In what ways is community involvement important to success in reforming or improving student outcomes?
  7. What role do you feel state government should play in working to reform or improve academic performance in schools?
  8. What specific recommendations would you make for public policy leaders working to affect positive change in public education today?

The following questions were used as a starting point for interviews of school leaders with demonstrable school improvement records.

1. What would you say is the most important thing you have done in the district specific to reform or improvement efforts?
2. What was the first thing you wanted to accomplish, and how did you do that?

3. In what areas do you suggest other aspiring school leaders devote the most attention? What is most crucial to improving/turning around/reforming a school?
4. What do you think are the keys to your success as a school leader?
5. What was the biggest challenge you faced coming into the district, and how have you addressed it?
6. Describe your relationship with the board? What has been the board's role through your reform/improvement efforts?
7. Can you identify three to six hard transferable ideas that will help other school reform leaders be successful in their school improvement/reform efforts?
8. Are there specific policies that needed to be created, improved or put in place that you feel have been crucial to your success?
9. In what ways has the community played a role in your school reform/improvement efforts?
10. Has your state department of education played a role in your success?
11. What specific recommendations would you make for public policy leaders working to affect positive change in public education today?

## Notes

Pennsylvania School Boards Association



The PSBA Education Research & Policy Center is an affiliate of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association. The PSBA Education Research & Policy Center is dedicated to the purpose of in-depth research and analysis of issues affecting public education in Pennsylvania.

Questions about the contents of this report may be directed to: PSBA Education Research & Policy Center, (800) 932-0588, ext. 3363.