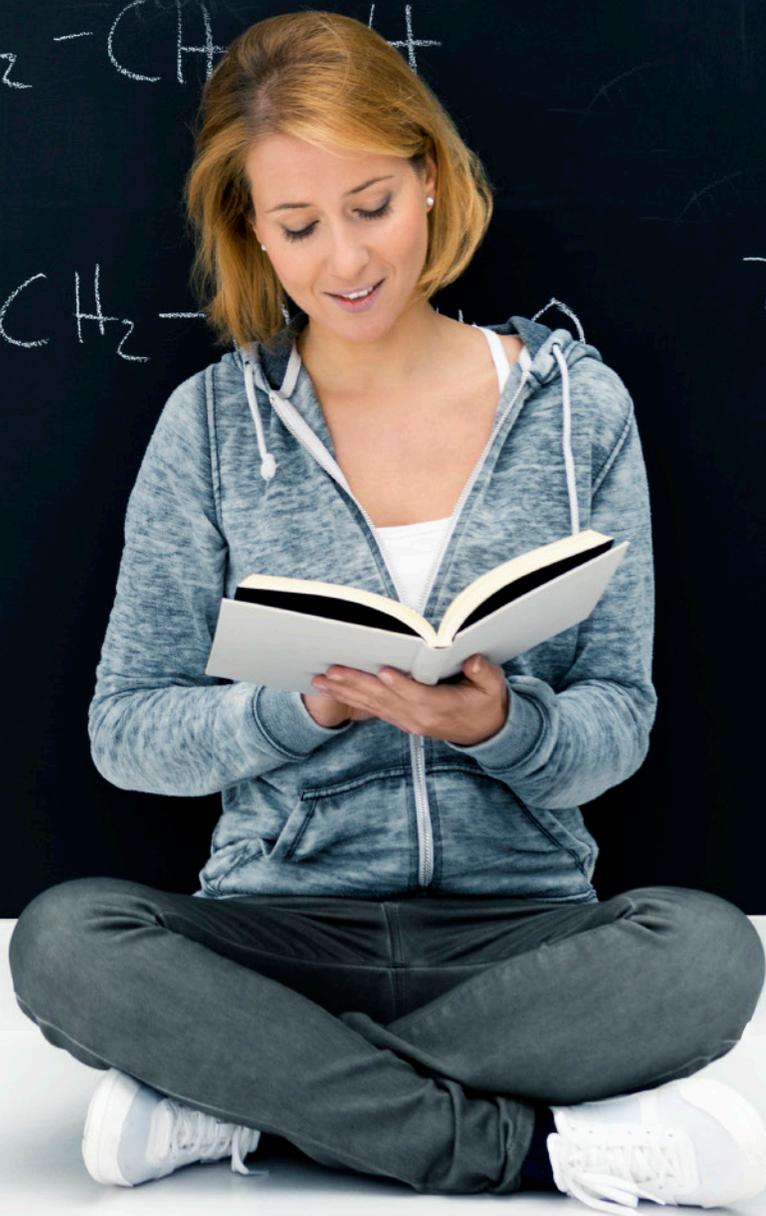


PSBA SPECIAL REPORT:

STARTING THE CONVERSATION:
Strategies for Achievement
and Accountability





The Pennsylvania School Boards Association is a nonprofit statewide association representing the 4,500 elected officials who govern the commonwealth's public school districts. PSBA is a membership-driven organization that is pledged to the highest ideals of local lay leadership for public schools. We work to support reforms for the betterment of public education and to promote the achievements of public schools, students and local school boards.



A PSBA Special Report

STARTING THE CONVERSATION: Strategies for Achievement and Accountability

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	
Exploring What Works and What Doesn't in Achievement Strategies	1
Summary of School Improvement Success.....	5
Evaluation of Established School Improvement Stories.....	7
Pennsylvania School Leader Perceptions.....	11
Key Areas Recommended for Policy Focus.....	13
Early Learning Opportunities.....	15
Leadership Training	17
Data Usage and Data Tools.....	19
Schools and Communities	21
Testing Relief	23
Employer Flexibility	27
Conclusion	29
Appendix A.....	31



INTRODUCTION

Exploring What Works and What Doesn't in Achievement Strategies

The enactment of the federal **Every Student Succeeds Act** (ESSA) in December 2015 replaces the No Child Left Behind Act, bringing fresh opportunities for state policymakers and local school leaders for a conversation about accountability systems, goals and student success. Gone are the restrictive requirements and punitive sanctions of meeting goals based on standardized test scores under the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) system under NCLB. Pennsylvania will submit a new state plan looking not only at test scores but other indicators that includes both targeted and comprehensive support for underperforming students and schools to help them improve.

The ESSA gives states more flexibility to establish goals and measures of school progress and student achievement. Overall, Pennsylvania's new state plan will be centered on four areas: accountability, standards and assessment, school intervention, and educator evaluation.

Regarding school intervention and improvement, the fixed, limited options for aiding low-performing schools under NCLB have ended. Under the ESSA, states now have the opportunity to define their accountability system, and can establish objectives and measures for performance progress. Intervention is required for the lowest-performing 5% of schools, and states can now define the interventions to help those schools as part of their accountability systems. States will also determine timelines for improvement and exit criteria for low-performing schools.

Pennsylvania is considering these issues, with an emphasis on developing meaningful ways for the state to help schools and students. Legislators,

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.



state policymakers, local school leaders, teachers, parents and other stakeholders will work together to draft the new plan for increasing achievement.

As discussions to consider possible changes to the state's accountability system take place, questions abound: How should we measure school quality and what students have learned? What broader range of indicators beyond test scores should be used? What should be the consequences for schools, students and teachers who are not meeting the expectations? What strategies and supports can be given to help struggling schools and students?

Policymakers and stakeholders will be examining interventions and turnaround models used in various states across the country. Any models being considered should be thoroughly researched before being considered or adopted in Pennsylvania. It is important to understand that any specific approach or process that may be used in one state does not make it automatically transferable to another. Further, some strategies initially promised to create significant improvements have been shown otherwise.

One such initiative that has gained attention in a few states is Tennessee's five-year old Achievement School District (ASD) plan, modeled after Louisiana's post-Katrina Recovery School District (RSD). The process calls for the takeover of struggling schools identified by the state as "failing" by removing them from the governance of the local school district and community. Instead, the schools are transferred to a new state entity that must take various recovery steps that largely include conversion to, or creation of, privately-operated charter schools. In Georgia, a similar plan under the name Opportunity School District (OSD) was passed by its legislature and in November 2016 will be offered to voters for approval as a constitutional amendment.

In this move to privatize public education, models such as the ASD have not been proven to be successful. Research now shows that student achievement in ASD charter schools has not been significantly boosted, and has even shown negative effects. Recent reports from Vanderbilt University¹ regarding Tennessee's ASD and the Southern Education Foundation at Annenberg Institute for School Reform² concerning Georgia's proposed OSD raise red flags with the approach.

The Vanderbilt study found that the schools that remained under the control of the local school district but given greater autonomy to implement reforms showed positive, statistically significant and meaningful effects on student achievement across all subjects. The effects in the ASD schools were

¹ Zimmer, Ron, Adam Kho, Gary Henry, and Samantha Viano. *Evaluation of the Effect of Tennessee's Achievement School District on Student Test Scores*. Rep. Vanderbilt Peabody College, Dec. 2015. Print.

² Dingerson, Leigh. *Investing in What Works, Community-Driven Strategies for Strong Public Schools in Georgia*. Southern Education Foundation, Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown U, Dec. 2015. Print.

³ Oosting, Jonathan. "Senate Leader: EAA Set to Be Eliminated." *The Detroit News*. The Detroit News, 3 Feb. 2016. Web. 16 Feb. 2016. <<http://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/politics/2016/02/03/aaa-eliminated-meekhof/79790400/>>.

mainly statistically insignificant – sometimes positive and sometimes negative depending on the subject, cohort and academic year.

The Southern Education Foundation (SEF) report urges voters in Georgia to take into account lessons learned from past takeovers in Louisiana and Tennessee, which have not proven effective. Further, the SEF report states that “the results have been highly stratified institutions and deepened segregation, and widened gaps in achievement, and further disadvantaging schools that already struggle to keep pace with their counterparts.”

Worse, decisions about how their public schools are operated, how students are taught and how tax dollars are spent were taken away from the community without local input from the local school board, the students, parents, classroom teachers, and taxpayers. In Tennessee, parents and community members are angry – they feel disregarded as the ASD continues to give their neighborhood schools to charter management organizations that are making money from state and local taxpayer dollars with little improvement. The ASD has become viewed as a charter school authorizer that is diverting much-needed resources from the traditional public school system; with charters focused on markets and profits through the attainment of high student enrollment buildings rather than high-quality reform.

Michigan created a state takeover plan in 2011 called the Education Achievement Authority (EAA), largely acknowledged as a failed experiment that took 15 struggling schools, converted some to charters and put the remainder under a state-controlled program. Student achievement actually declined and a 2014 state audit showed poorly maintained budgets, vendors being paid without contracts and a lack of oversight in purchasing. In February 2016, The Detroit News³ reported that the controversial EAA was slated to be eliminated and legislators are considering the next steps.

The challenges of creating a strong support system to meet the needs of a diverse group of students are significant. Some of the challenges faced by districts, schools and educators tend to have greater impact on a student’s ability to succeed. Poverty, violence and access to social services outside of the school building all have the potential to influence the educational opportunities provided in public schools. By focusing on the right areas, state governments may be positioned to provide the types of supports and impetus for change that can allow students and educators to be successful.

Starting the Conversation

In the fall of 2015, in anticipation of finalization of the ESSA through Congress, and as interest in school turnaround models began to gain traction in the state General Assembly, the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) invited comment and feedback from superintendents from around the commonwealth. After carefully analyzing available research and practitioner-based literature on the topic of school improvement, including case studies documenting turnaround and improvement strategies, PSBA

designed a survey that asked respondents to assign value to 23 separate potential areas for education policy focus aimed at providing school leaders and their students the necessary resources for taking achievement to the next level. The survey was given to 200 randomly sampled superintendents from rural, urban and suburban districts, and responses were used as the basis for follow-up conversations in the form of focus groups and interviews.

The information collected through the survey, focus groups and interviews led to a series of recommendations under six key areas that are addressed in this report. The areas include:

- Early Learning Opportunities
- Leadership Training
- Data Usage and Data Tools
- Schools and Communities
- Testing Relief
- Employer Flexibility

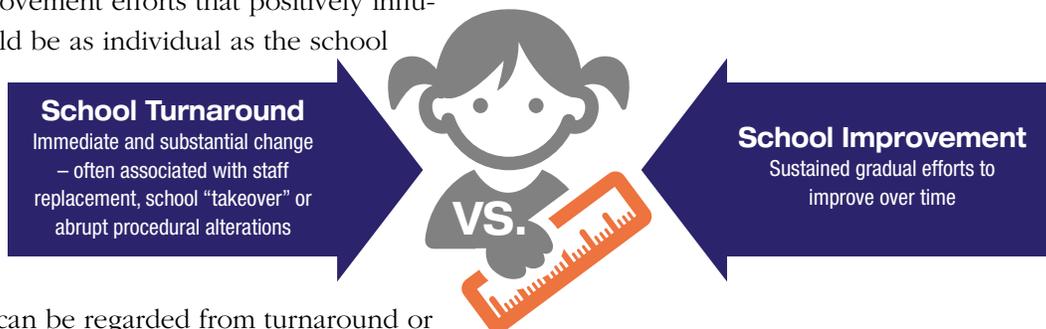
These are areas that have been established by Pennsylvania school leaders as best places to start conversations about policies that impact public education. There is no single way to address the multitude of issues faced by education professionals today. Instead, these are starting points in the conversation about how to promote success in Pennsylvania's public schools.



Summary of School Improvement Success

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.

Advancing school improvement efforts that positively influence student learning should be as individual as the school system where they are implemented. There is no “magic pill” or cookie-cutter process that will guarantee success in every instance. Generally, efforts to advance schools can be regarded from turnaround or improvement perspectives. A turnaround strategy is often a more dramatic plan, perhaps quickly implemented as a result of a state takeover or other change in operational leadership, such as to a charter school. Improvement strategies, however, are developed and implemented at the local level and include sustained, gradual collaborations over time to facilitate a high-quality learning environment for students.



School improvement efforts across the country 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 exists, 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.” 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. 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 measureable 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 (U.S. Department of Education, 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 also prove useful in determining improvement approaches or areas for focus. There are components to school improvement that seem to be present in many of the success stories identified in improvement literature. While the individual circumstances may vary, a number of common elements consistently jump out as crucial components to school improvement. Often, these items match closely with research-based 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 to 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 recom-

English language learners, 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.

mendations 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 consistently and comprehensively, 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 improvement process
4. Build a committed staff

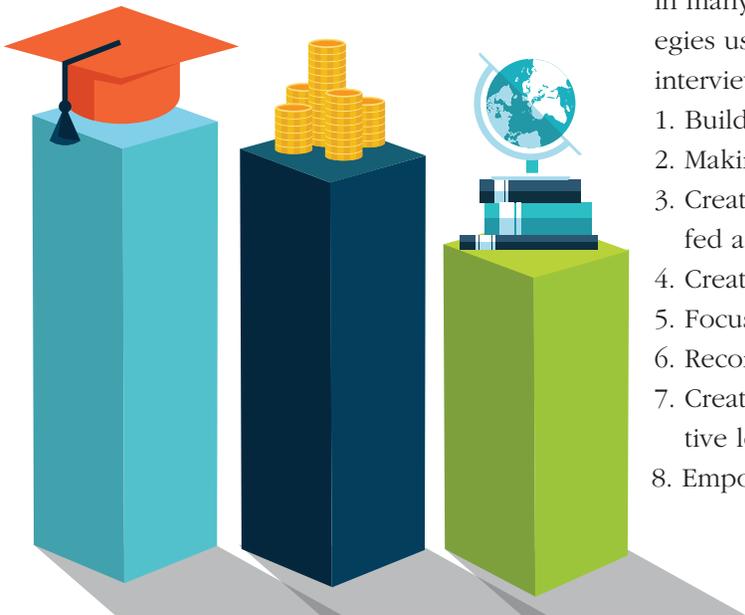
It is important to note that the recommendations made by authors of the ED report are based on necessity for immediate turnaround, and should not necessarily be associated with long-term outcomes consistent with sustained improvement over time. The document summarizes evidence based upon the case studies 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.

English language learners, 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 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 for 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

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).

Elements of some or all of the strategies discussed have genuine demonstrated potential to positively impact school outcomes. 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:

- Help the people on the front lines by providing them with better and sharper tools
- Create opportunities for professional growth
- Encourage connections between schools and communities
- Provide resources for fundamental tools and avenues for finding successful strategies for school improvement



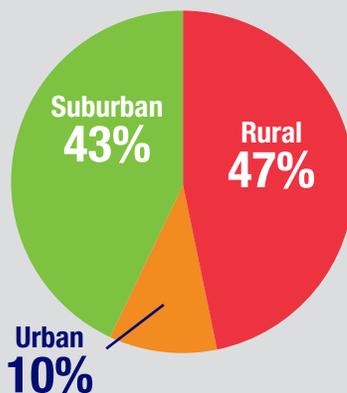
Pennsylvania School Leader Perceptions

Taking into account that no one model is a perfect solution for improving student achievement, PSBA recently asked Pennsylvania superintendents about the types of legislative and policy changes they felt could positively impact public education in Pennsylvania. PSBA's survey was distributed to 200 randomly sampled districts, and was completed by nearly 50 superintendents. Responses were split fairly evenly between rural (47%) and suburban (43%) respondents. Urban districts represented about 10% of the total responses.

Many respondents and interview participants indicated a growing level of frustration with the direction of education policy nationally and here in Pennsylvania. Of primary concern is an apparent disconnect between educational leaders currently working in schools and the policymaking process. It is acknowledged that while well-intentioned Pennsylvania lawmakers have worked to initiate school reform through policy changes, many school leaders have felt alienated and largely left out of the conversation.

"Collectively," commented one respondent, "superintendents working in Pennsylvania's 500 school districts have more than 11,000 years of experience working with students. Shouldn't that entitle us to be a part of the conversation?" Additionally, many survey respondents reported frustration at all professional levels of the school environment as practitioners work to

Districts by Rural, Urban and Suburban Location



Collectively, superintendents working in Pennsylvania's 500 school districts **have more than 11,000 years of experience working with students.** Shouldn't that entitle us to be a part of the conversation?

– PSBA Survey Respondent

Authentic improvement occurs when it is a shared responsibility and value. Community members and educators work together to provide optimum learning conditions, opportunities, and supports. **Addressing the core needs of students, parents, and communities** would go a long way toward getting children to a place where they are ready and able to learn.

- PSBA Survey Respondent

keep pace with one-size-fits-all changes that provide a moving target with regard to performance and accountability.

The comments included below provide a sampling of the types of frustration noted by respondents in the survey and in interviews.

School improvement doesn't occur because it is mandated and/or schools are shamed into doing something. Authentic improvement occurs when it is a shared responsibility, and when community members and educators work together to provide optimum learning conditions, opportunities, and supports.

Politics has no place in schools, but every year we risk being held hostage by politicians. Somehow this needs to be fixed.

Please listen to educators. We didn't get where we are because we want to be reelected. We got here because we want to help children succeed.

Legislators need to work with educators to solve social and home problems before real change can take place.

Consistency is lacking across the board. We change everything and then change things again, almost annually.

Legislators need to remove their influence and return to local control.

Why is my district being compared to other districts that have a completely different socioeconomic make-up? Not all districts are the same. Yet we are being compared. If we are going to be compared, we need to establish fair comparables.



Key Areas Recommended for Policy Focus

School Leader Value Assessment

The survey asked superintendents to assign value to each of 23 different research-generated strategies for school improvement policy focus related to academic outcomes in public schools. The 23 areas for policy focus were selected from research and case study literature documenting demonstrated methods for improving outcomes in schools, and included site-based, community-based and development-based approaches.

Through the survey, PSBA created a value assessment chart that documented how Pennsylvania's school-based education leaders perceived each of the school improvement strategies. The most highly valued items from the value assessment chart were also discussed in follow-up interviews, and later developed into the recommendations found at the end of this report. Appendix "A" provides a full summary of the superintendents' value assessments.

PSBA also asked superintendents to identify public school policy needs in Pennsylvania. The survey also provided open-ended opportunities for comments that were used as discussion points in post-survey interviews. Some comments were consistent with the usual calls for education policy reform. Changes to testing requirements were the most popular area for policy change focus raised by superintendents. Fair funding, addressing unfunded mandates, and changes to charter school funding also stood out as needed areas for reform among respondents.

But superintendents responding to the survey also pointed out that changes are needed in other areas. Many suggested a holistic approach to school improvement that acknowledges the unique needs of individual

communities, addresses the issue of poverty, and ensures that needed social and health services are available to students and families.

Items that scored highest on the value assessment chart and policy needs that were identified by the highest number of school leader respondents were then used to develop the six key areas for which recommendations were generated in this report:

- Early Learning Opportunities
- Leadership Training
- Data Usage and Data Tools
- Schools and Communities
- Testing Relief
- Employer Flexibility

Again, these key areas for policy focus and related recommendations are starting points for conversations about how to realistically change the way Pennsylvania's children are educated and increase their likelihood of academic success. These key areas were identified by school superintendents, and the recommendations provided for each are based on follow-up interviews with survey participants. PSBA intends to use these research-based school improvement theories as the foundation for practitioner-supported and flexible policy that will improve achievement and education for all students.



Early Learning Opportunities

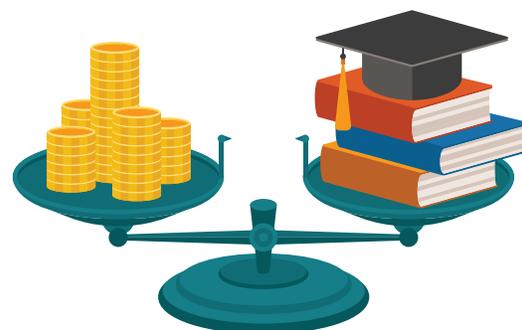
A well-established body of research has demonstrated various benefits associated with structured early learning programs for students prior to formal access to kindergarten programs.

It is known that children 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 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 all grades.

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, school leaders from around Pennsylvania have pointed out that these types of programs are still limited in availability, particularly in communities where they are most needed.

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC), a non-profit children's advocacy organization, notes on its website that "high-quality early learning programs can help level the playing field, especially for low-income children, by boosting school performance and self-sufficiency over a lifetime. High quality pre-kindergarten is a proven investment – every dollar spent returns \$16 in reduced crime, education, and welfare savings as well as higher earnings and increased taxes paid in adulthood. But fewer than 18% of Pennsylvania's 3- and 4-year olds have access to high-quality, publicly-funded pre-K." (www.ppartnerships.org/work/early-learning)

High quality pre-kindergarten is a proven investment – every dollar spent returns \$16 in reduced crime, education, and welfare savings.



Recommendations

Streamline compliance and reimbursement procedures for early learning program operators in communities with low-performing schools.

Establish procedures for ensuring adequate funding for early childhood education programs in communities with low-performing schools.

Develop improved processes for intervention and detection between the early childhood education program providers and primary care physicians, particularly in communities with high levels of poverty and/or low-performing schools.

Allow for flexibility with regard to participation and age for children in communities with low-performing schools – When identified as needed, allow children to participate in early learning programs through age 5 in communities with low-performing schools.

Insufficient staffing, funding, and available physical space all are considerations reported as barriers to establishment of early learning programs in many locations. Often, early childhood education programs struggle to meet annual onsite financial obligations. A recent analysis conducted by Nonprofit Finance Fund suggests this occurs as early childhood educator operators work to balance discrepancies between fixed costs for staffing and facilities with fluid revenues that depend on enrollment and government payments. Competition among providers and insufficient government subsidies tied to confusing and onerous bureaucratic processes additionally combine to limit sustainability of programs as providers work to generate revenues sufficient to cover costs. Funding, including streamlining of compliance processes for early learning education programs in Pennsylvania, should be carefully evaluated to ensure access to children in areas of highest need.

Transportation and actual access to children are also reported as problematic in many areas, as students in need of services may not be formally “child found” and identified as eligible until they register for kindergarten. Efforts should be made to establish better processes for intervention and detection between the school and primary care physicians who often are the first to identify children most in need of services.

Finally, specifically helpful for students in areas where these programs do exist, would be a level of flexibility with regard to participation and age. Students who would benefit from additional time in early learning environments should be allowed to participate through 5 years of age with kindergarten beginning at age 6.



Leadership Training

Effective school leaders have an impact on student achievement in any school environment. In underperforming schools, the challenges are greater, and strong leadership is the catalyst to the successful implementation of meaningful reform.

What are the essential ingredients of successful leadership? What knowledge and skills do leaders need to become more effective in improving the learning environment for teachers and students, particularly for low performing schools?

In higher performing school districts, the superintendent is expected to move the district in the direction of student growth and achievement by working closely with the school board to establish annual and long-term objectives for the district. Those plans may aim for smaller, incremental improvements continuously over many years. The superintendent is also expected to act as an advocate for the district within the community, and to model best practices for instruction, supervision, curriculum development and many other areas important to the success of students, staff and schools.

Leaders face unique challenges in creating positive outcomes for underperforming schools. While a leader in effective higher performing schools may aim for smaller, incremental improvements over time, leaders of low performing schools look to make faster, more dramatic improvements. They analyze data, create an action plan focusing on priority goals, and measure and report progress more frequently. Additionally, they must often also consider other factors that affect student achievement – poverty, the need for adequate health services, lack of family and community support, and more.

Recommendations

Revise curriculum requirements for superintendent certification programs, and develop professional development opportunities and resources in the areas of:

- human resources
- financial operations
- arbitration and labor negotiations
- facilities management and construction
- governmental subsidies, and
- legal issues

Implement school mentoring programs that match low performing schools with demographically similar high performing schools.

Provide opportunities for leadership training and tools for school board members focused on the specific needs of low performing schools.

In addressing how leadership influences student learning, PSBA asked superintendents to assign value to programs that might provide training for superintendents and other school leaders in low performing schools. When asked, nearly all superintendents indicated leadership training would be valuable for superintendents working in low-performing districts.

Respondents also indicated a distinction between leadership as a trait and the need for assistance in providing leadership in a number of key areas. While general “leadership” training is most often a part of superintendent preparation coursework offered by colleges and universities, surveyed superintendents reported they felt that better training was needed for superintendents and other school leaders.



Data Usage and Data Tools

While federal law may have set the stage for the age of accountability in schools, most school leaders understand that data collection is more than just a requirement for reporting purposes. Use of technology in particular has made it easier to manage and understand the data that has been collected in schools for decades. And test scores are only the tip of the iceberg. Student wellness, community perceptions, school climate, parental participation, resource usage and allocation, and student demographic data all can help to better inform the decisions and actions of school leaders. Ideally, data can be used to replace guesses with facts that assist with understanding needed changes. School leaders should be able to use data to find and identify gaps between current and desired outcomes. Data can also be helpful in determining needs, eliminating ineffective practices, improving efficiencies, generating answers for community members, and predicting future successes and failures.

However, the mass of data collected can make it difficult to understand how to effectively decipher and use the tools and information available. While superintendents in data-driven districts work collaboratively with school boards, principals and teachers to quantifiably move in the direction of student success, staff at all levels in struggling districts may find it difficult to sort out which information should be used for which purposes. Some superintendents interviewed by PSBA indicated that while collecting student and other information has become an accepted part of the job, making the jump to understanding what to do with all of the information is at times difficult.

Individuals accustomed to working outside the education arena can find this difficult to accept. While business and private sector professional cultures thrive on the use of comparables for understanding practice

Recommendations

Develop and provide additional professional development opportunities for superintendents and other school leaders on understanding how to use existing school data.

Provide additional funding for technology infrastructure and training on use of data tools to school leaders and professional staff in low-performing schools.

Develop customized data training resources for superintendents and leadership teams in low-performing districts.

Provide additional funding or grants for data resource experts in low-performing districts.

Revise/improve curriculum requirements to include/include better training on understanding and use of data.

Provide better resources that show how data is used at the state level.

and tactical decisions, the established culture in education is often one that places emphasis on students as individuals rather than numbers and outputs. For this reason, and because of the extraordinarily rapid increase in availability of data tools due to technology growth, training on use of data has largely developed as an afterthought or recent addition in educator preparation programs.

This is mirrored in the traditional formal and informal expectations assigned to educators and school leaders. Few school personnel, until fairly recently, have seen data collection or use of data included in position descriptions, and a transition in recent years to expectations for largely decentralized decision-making processes in schools can create a disconnect between school-based functions and a need for consideration of district-wide information. This is often coupled with knowledge that policy and administration changes influence the collection methods, intended use and type of data collected with an unsettling and confusing level of frequency. Also problematic in schools is the technology aspect of data collection and utilization. In districts where technology infrastructure is weak – as is often the case in high-poverty environments where low academic performance is common – access to technology tools that assist with the use and understanding of data may be limited. In these environments, training and access to additional technology tools may assist school leaders in effectively utilizing available data resources.

Availability of or access to effective professional development opportunities may also be problematic in districts with little money for training or access to developed materials. Grants to assist school leaders with participation in formative learning opportunities would be helpful, especially in schools where low performance is common.



Schools and Communities

More than a century of research has shown that the problem with under-performing schools is not in the schools or classrooms. It is outside the buildings, in the neighborhoods where poor parents have no time or resources to spend with their kids when they are young. It is in the buildings that are poorly maintained and under equipped. It is in an environment where the relevance of book learning cannot stand up against the skills required to survive on the street.

– PSBA Survey Respondent

Quality of life is tied closely to quality of education.

This is true for individuals and for the communities in which they live. In some communities, students are provided with the supports that prepare them to be successful in the public schooling environment. Early learning programs and supportive adults instill children with the notion that learning is an important part of growing up. Social services are readily available to families in need, and community partners see value in investing time and resources to support local schools.

But in most communities, at least some children experience barriers to learning. Children may be impacted by abuse, poverty, neglect, and poor access to health and social services. In many disadvantaged neighborhoods, children may come to school unprepared to learn, lacking attention to their basic needs and suffering from fragmentation of services endemic in poverty areas.

While it can be difficult for school leaders to cultivate positive community partnerships and to address outside community factors that limit student success, it is possible. School leaders interviewed by PSBA

Recommendations

Develop better processes for improving intervention and detection procedures for students and families in need of social services, and assist schools with connecting children with services.

Create better statewide programs for establishing economic and learning partnerships between schools and local businesses.

Develop opportunities or incentives for implementation of full-service community schools models that address student needs both in and outside the learning environment, and provide technical and financial assistance for districts that employ a full-service approach.

Consider demographic and economic factors when assessing school performance and assigning performance ratings.

had a variety of suggestions related to communities and impact on student outcomes. Many superintendents suggested including factors outside of the school's control into any type of assessment of the school. Addressing these factors in School Performance Profile scores and overall proficiency ratings would likely cast a different light on school performance in many high-poverty areas.

Some school leaders suggested supports and policy changes that could be designed to facilitate or streamline community partnerships and access to community services.

One of the problems in our district is that we don't know what we don't know – both parents and educators. Parents don't know what community services are available to them and we don't know how to make the connections. And when we do, there is so much red tape involved that everybody feels like they are jumping through hoops. If there was a better way to identify and match needed services to the people who need them the most, and then cut through the hoops, we could all benefit.

– PSBA Survey Respondent

Assistance with developing community business relationships was also suggested as an area for policy focus. Student scholarships, awards, grants and endowments may become available to districts that are staffed and knowledgeable about pursuing corporate and business partners, but in many districts staffing and time considerations limit access to these opportunities. Policies that create better programs and methods for driving unconventional funding opportunities directly to schools and districts would be helpful, especially in communities with high levels of poverty. Programs that incentivize businesses to provide career exploration and internship opportunities, and changes to academic requirements that allow students scheduling flexibility with regard to participation in these types of programs would also be helpful.

Collected comments from other school leaders also indicate a need, particularly in high poverty areas, for a generally holistic approach to educating students that focuses on the child both inside and outside of the school. Full-service community schools models that help to address the full range of health, social, emotional, and academic needs of children and families may be helpful. Incentives for schools and districts that employ full-service community models and technical guidance for school leaders who wish to employ such a model would be helpful.



Testing Relief

Editor's Note: The PSBA survey and recommendations were completed before the enactment of Act 1 of 2016, which creates a two-year delay in the implementation of the Keystone Exams as a graduation requirement. The Department of Education is now reevaluating state policy on graduation requirements, with recommendations due in August 2016.

The term “standardized test” refers to any objective, norm-referenced, and criterion-referenced test that is administered according to standardized procedures, and that allows evaluators to compare the relative performance of individual students to groups of students. The use of standardized testing is not new in the United States. In fact, they have been around since the early 1900s. However, beginning in the early 2000s, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) led the way for a wave of policy-based initiatives that have been intended to raise achievement and improve outcomes generally in American schools. As a result, for essentially the first time in United States’ history, statewide assessments became the measure by which schools were determined to be successful. The new federal ESSA ushers in a new era of assessments and accountability.

Here in Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State System of School Assessment (PSSA) and Keystone Exam requirements regularly spark contentious debates related to accountability, cost, localized control, and general angst among test takers, test administrators, teachers, school leaders and parents. The issue of testing is one that stood out clearly among the comments from superintendents who responded to PSBA’s 2015 school improvement strategies survey. When asked about education policy changes with potential to positively impact public education in Pennsylvania, super-



Poverty, high levels of crime or violence, nutrition and a variety of other factors **influence students' success** in schools and on standardized tests.

Recommendations

Eliminate Keystone Exams and Project Based Assessment as a requirement for graduation and allow districts to establish localized data indicators to meet accountability standards.

Provide a PSSA testing moratorium of no longer than two years in schools identified as low-performing.

Establish adapted assessment options (in addition to the PASA) in all schools for students with Individualized Education Plans.

Utilize better procedures for establishing reasonable and reliable cut scores for PSSA exams.

Provide more comprehensive training and preparation resources for school districts.

intendents provided 156 separate comments. Fifteen percent of those comments asked for changes to either PSSA tests, Keystone tests, or both PSSA and Keystone tests.

Of primary concern, especially in low-performing areas, is that test results fail to consider factors that are outside the control of the school and that may influence students' ability to perform. Poverty, high levels of crime or violence, nutrition and a variety of other factors influence students' success in schools and on standardized tests. School leader respondents indicated a desire to regard local demographic factors when assigning performance ratings to schools.

Another major concern among respondents highlighted in both submitted comments and in focus group discussions was the impact of testing on instructional time, with special concerns with the use of Keystone Exams or Project-Based Assessments (PBA) as graduation requirements beginning with the class of 2017. Needless to say, the provisions under Act 1 of 2016 to pause these mandates are a welcome relief.

PSBA survey respondents said that scheduling and preparing for each test requires a significant investment in time from district staff and students. A student who is proficient on all three Keystone tests will spend approximately 43 hours preparing for and taking the exams. A student who is not proficient on all three tests during the first attempt will spend, minimally, 163 hours preparing for and taking three Keystone Exams twice, completing the three online Project Based Assessments, attending three classes of remediation, and completing the other high school assessments to prepare for college.

In some school districts, Project Based Assessments themselves are competing with opportunities for student success after graduation. Because of the time requirement involved, many students are forced to forgo vocational-technical opportunities, career-focused electives, and other job shadowing and internship opportunities. In districts with meaningful community partnerships, local businesses contribute to career pathway courses and other career-based experiences that can no longer be accessed by students whose schedules are being consumed with remediation. Many districts indicate a need for more meaningful and less onerous data indicators such as the SAT, ACT or Advanced Placement exams as an indicator of college readiness.

In many districts, PSSA and Keystone Exams are believed to result in a narrowing of curriculum that occurs as course content gives way to test preparation. Unfortunately, this narrowing often has greater impact in poverty-stricken locations where parental involvement may be limited and teaching staff is less experienced. In these locations, students' learning may consist of little more than test coaching.

Superintendent respondents also noted additional costs incurred by districts. Often, costs are related to either preparation or remediation. District costs for mandated exams can be for extra staff, additional time for existing staff both in preparation for the tests and also for remedial time, for professional development for staff, and for preparation materials and courses for students.

In our district, we are actually paying for courses that teach our kiddos how to take online tests! Think about that. This has nothing whatsoever to do with any content. It just tells kids how to be successful at taking computerized tests. It takes away from class time on subjects that they SHOULD be learning about. But we don't see any other way to prepare them for the online tests.

– PSBA Survey Respondent

Finally, many superintendents drew attention in PSBA's survey to the anxiety created by high stakes tests.

The anxiety these new mandates have placed on educators is significant. This is not to say that our professionals should not be held accountable; absolutely we should be. But not by evaluating effectiveness based on a single standardized test score with a few "extra credit points" and Student Learning Objectives (SLOs). The time spent writing SLO's and teaching to the test detracts from the real work of preparing all children to be successful, life-long learners. This is very unfortunate. We are in the business of nurturing and fostering a love of learning. We hope that through the collective voices of those working with children that some changes will be made to ensure that the focus remains on what is best for the kids.

– PSBA Survey Respondent

I have never had a university leader or the owner of a business ask me for a student's PSSA or Keystone score, let alone whether he or she can complete an online project based assessment.

– PSBA Survey Respondent

Act 1 of 2016

Signed into law Feb. 3, 2016.

Creates a two-year delay in the implementation of the Keystone Exams in Algebra 1, Biology, and English/Language Arts as a graduation requirement or a benchmark for the need to participate in a project-based assessment (PBA) until 2019.

Requires the PA Department of Education to investigate alternatives to the use of the Keystone Exams as a requirement for graduation and issue a report by Aug. 3, 2016 to the House and Senate Education Committees.

The report must contain a plan to implement alternative methods to demonstrate proficiency for graduation in addition to the Keystone Exams and PBAs; and improve and expedite the evaluation of PBAs.

The plan also must ensure that no student is prohibited from participating in vocational-technical education or elective courses as a result of taking required supplemental instruction.

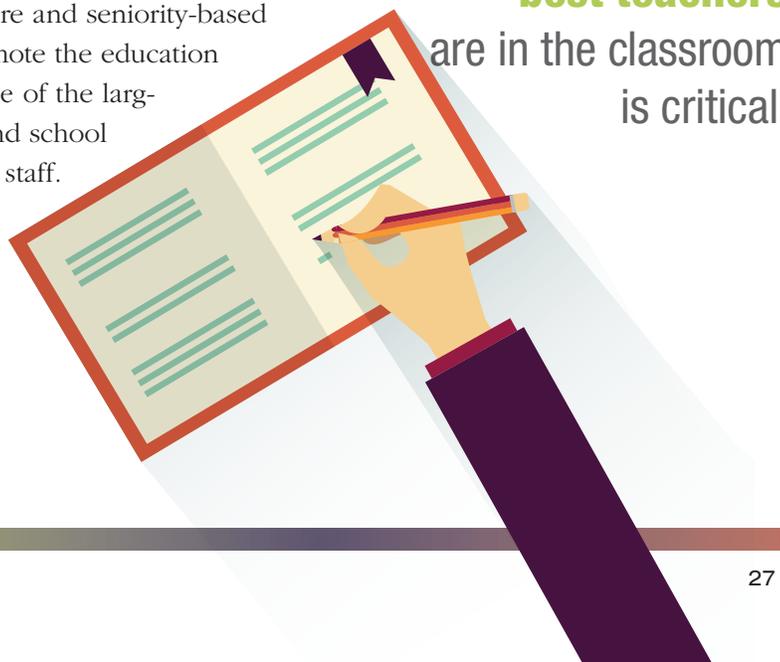


Employer Flexibility

School leaders often request local control and flexibility to better meet the needs of their unique districts and student populations. Leadership teams work within the constraints of unfunded mandates and sometimes antiquated and/or burdensome requirements that now stand as barriers to academic and whole school improvement. PSBA believes that mandate relief is an integral part of reforming the system of funding public education. On average, about 60-65% of school district budgets are allocated toward personnel costs. This is money well-spent because education is a human resource-focused industry and having experienced, dedicated staff is vital to student achievement. However, there are many legislative mandates in the area of school personnel that cost districts millions of dollars and are often better left to local bargaining. Now, more than ever, school districts have to carefully scrutinize every expenditure of their budget, forcing them to make difficult decisions regarding cuts to programs. Providing flexibility from burdensome requirements can help school districts save taxpayers money and result in more efficient operation.

Especially for under-performing schools, the need to ensure that the best teachers are in the classroom is critical. Tenure and seniority-based furloughs are job protections that do little to promote the education or serve the needs of children. Labor costs are one of the largest budget line items that school districts incur, and school boards need maximum flexibility to manage their staff. This includes the authority to furlough existing professional employees in order to best meet the needs of the students. It also includes the ability to attract, evaluate and maintain qualified

The need to ensure that the **best teachers** are in the classroom is critical.



Recommendations

Provide school districts with the ability to use student and teacher evaluation data to make staffing decisions rather than basing these decisions solely on seniority.

Provide the authority to furlough existing professional employees without regard to seniority.

Continue to refine a reliable, fair, and effective professional staff evaluation system that incorporates extensive input from experienced education professionals and uses multiple measures of assessment.

Enact reforms for other staffing mandates that are not in the best interest of students.

teachers and other staff and manage employee benefits, sabbatical leave and other requirements.

To achieve this, additional measures of flexibility to deal with laws that restrict a district's personnel management are necessary. Providing employer flexibility is not about forcing tenured teachers out of the classroom. It is about giving school districts the flexibility to manage their personnel in a manner that is responsible, and responsive to the needs of the students. To accomplish this, lawmakers must enact reforms to lift employer mandates that leave little flexibility regarding tenure, furloughs, employee benefits, sabbatical leaves and any other requirement that restricts entities' authority to manage, support and compensate its employees.



Conclusion

Pennsylvania is at an exciting crossroads for public education. The enactment of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December 2015 brings fresh opportunities for state policymakers and local school leaders for a conversation about accountability systems, goals and student success.

PSBA believes that legislative policy may, if clearly connected to demonstrated school improvement strategies, contribute to continued success in Pennsylvania's public schools. This can be accomplished if policies are developed to provide tools and supports for educational professionals rather than punishments and punitive measures. Additionally, if policy-makers work to take into consideration the experience and knowledge of those working in educational settings, legislative policy may create opportunities to succeed instead of mandates to fulfill.

As various interventions and turnaround models used in other states are examined, it is important to understand that an approach or process that may be used in one state does not make it transferable to another, and some strategies initially promised to create significant improvements show otherwise.

There are many challenges in creating a strong support system to meet the needs of a diverse group of students, including poverty, violence and access to social services outside of the school building. These factors all have the potential to influence the educational opportunities provided in public schools. By focusing on the right areas, Pennsylvania may be positioned to provide the types of supports and impetus for change that can allow students and educators to be successful.

This report highlights a number of areas for potential policy focus that have been identified in school improvement research literature and case studies. Input from school superintendents allows readers to clearly see where investments of time, resources and money should be made. Some of the

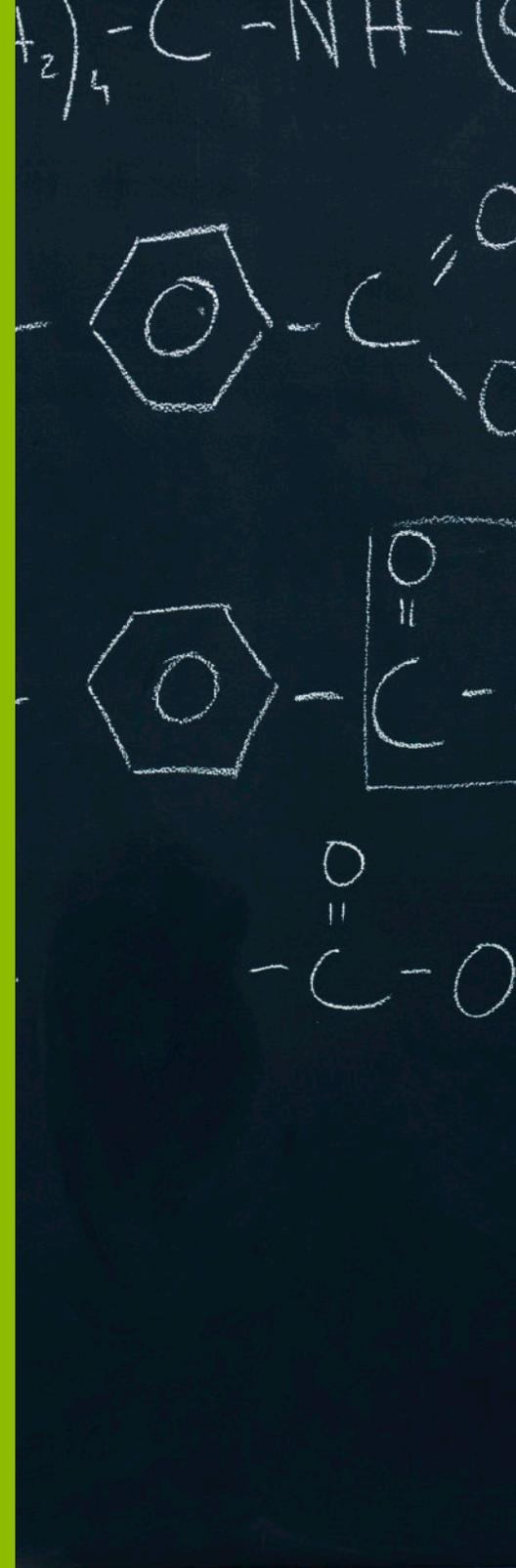
areas highlighted in this report are consistent with years of legislative advocacy efforts conducted by PSBA on behalf of our schools. Some of the areas highlighted in this report represent an expanded view of how to help schools be successful.

Ensuring appropriate early learning opportunities for all students, relief from standardized assessments, adequate funding, and assistance with understanding data and the data tools available from the Department of Education are all areas that have been the focus of PSBA's advocacy efforts for years. This report also highlights elements for focus that look holistically at the community and the learning environment in order to realize improvement. PSBA and its members advocate that these recommendations become the basis for conversations about educational improvement in all of Pennsylvania's public schools, so that students, professionals, parents and communities will all have the tools to continue in the direction of educational excellence.

Appendix A

Summary of Survey Responses: Value Assessment for Areas of Statewide Policy Focus

Strategy	Extremely Valuable	Valuable	Little Value	No Value
Programs that assist in cultivating school/community partnerships	58%	35%	6%	0%
Programs that focus on improving early learning opportunities in communities surrounding low-performing schools	58%	42%	0%	0%
Efforts to improve teacher training programs in Pennsylvania colleges and universities	57%	37%	7%	0%
Increased funding for low-performing schools	53%	40%	3%	3%
Programs that invest in developing quality out-of-school-time programming in communities surrounding low-performing schools	52%	39%	10%	0%
Policy changes that allow for flexibility with regard to replacing teachers	52%	33%	15%	0%
Programs that provide training on use of data for school leaders in low-performing schools	50%	47%	3%	0%
Programs that assist districts with developing full-service community schools models	50%	39%	7%	4%
Programs that focus training and supports to parents in communities surrounding low- performing schools	48%	45%	6%	0%
Programs that focus on economic development and community improvement in communities surrounding low-performing schools	48%	39%	13%	0%
Programs that focus on teacher mentoring	47%	41%	13%	0%
Programs that provide leadership training for superintendents and other school leaders in low- performing schools	41%	56%	3%	0%
Policy changes that allow for flexibility with regard to student scheduling	41%	50%	9%	0%
Programs that match low-performing schools with demographically similar high-performing schools for formative purposes	38%	44%	16%	3%
State-developed school improvement teams that can work directly with districts to identify and support areas for improvement	37%	26%	37%	0%
Policy changes that allow for flexibility and experimentation among teachers	35%	52%	13%	0%
Programs that provide leadership training for school board members in low-performing schools	35%	47%	18%	0%
Programs that focus on superintendent mentoring	32%	42%	19%	6%
Programs that improve technology infrastructure and access to technology in low-performing schools	23%	71%	6%	0%
Programs that provide non-monetary incentives for top teachers to work and stay in low- performing schools	17%	50%	33%	0%
Programs that monetarily incentivize top teachers to work and stay in low-performing schools	16%	39%	39%	6%
Programs that focus on student and teacher safety in low-performing schools	13%	67%	20%	0%
Efforts to limit enrollment in and number of graduates from Pennsylvania teacher preparation programs	12%	23%	38%	27%



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