

Stimulus Rules on 'Turnarounds' Shift

Stimulus Guidelines Changed for Turning Around Schools

By [Lesli A. Maxwell](#)

The final rules for the \$4 billion Race to the Top competition give states and districts more leeway in how they intervene in chronically underperforming schools, a subtle but important change that raises new questions about whether the push to turn around struggling campuses will succeed in rehabilitating large numbers of them.

Under the [guidelines issued last month](#) by the U.S. Department of Education, states and districts using the federal grant money could opt, as a first resort, to use a turnaround approach that many educators favor: providing professional development and coaching for a school's current staff members and making changes to curriculum and instruction.

No More Last Resort

Originally, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan had sought to make that "transformation" model a last resort for school turnarounds if three other, more aggressive methods—replacing the principal and at least half its teachers — reopening the school under a charter operator or other outside manager — or shutting the school down—were not feasible. He had also called for charter school operators to take the lead in turnaround work, a role that the new rules play down.

Although the principal of a targeted school would still have to be replaced, the department's revised rules on turnaround strategies are a welcome shift, some observers say, from what they think has been an excessive focus on eliminating or radically changing the teaching corps and leadership teams inside troubled schools.

"Missing from this whole debate on turnarounds has been the question of what is the cause of these problems in these schools," said John Simmons, the president of [Strategic Learning Initiatives](#), a nonprofit organization in Chicago that has partnered with that city's school system since 2006 to turn around 10 K-8 schools.

"We really don't see much in the research that says the people in the buildings are the problem," he said. "What we find is that it's the systems that are the problem."

'Note of Realism'

To others, though, the shift portends more of the same type of overhaul efforts seen at schools identified as failing under the federal No Child Left Behind Act—a tack that critics say has produced few success stories.

“This seems like states and districts are going to be able to do what they have been doing already,” said Andy Smarick, a visiting fellow with the Washington-based Thomas B. Fordham Institute. “This could allow for the lightest touch possible.”

Interventions for Low-Achieving Schools

The U.S. Department of Education says these four models of intervention may be used under the Race to the Top, State Fiscal Stabilization Fund, and Title I School Improvement Grants of the stimulus package.

1. TURNAROUND: A new principal is named and receives operational flexibility for staffing, budgets, and the school calendar. The school’s teachers must reapply for their jobs, but no more than 50 percent can be rehired.

2. RESTART: A school is converted or closed and reopened under a charter school operator or a for-profit education management organization.

3. CLOSURE: The school is closed, and students are enrolled in better schools.

4. TRANSFORMATION: The principal is replaced, but most of the school’s staff members remain. Major steps are taken to revamp school culture. Schools that take this approach must, at a minimum, establish a “rigorous” performance-evaluation system, along with more supports, training, and mentoring for teachers; strengthen curriculum and instruction; increase learning time; and give leadership teams more flexibility to make budgeting, staffing, and calendar decisions. Districts with more than nine “persistently low-achieving schools” may not use this model in more than 50 percent of their schools.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education

In [a recent article](#) in *Education Next* magazine, he argued that the best way to turn around the thousands of schools deemed to be failing under the NCLB law is to close them and replace them with new, better options.

But one urban superintendent—who has closed schools, opened new ones, and replaced principals as part of a districtwide strategy to overhaul low-performing schools—called the changes to the final turnaround guidelines a “note of realism.”

“Look, there’s just not the capacity to turn around the lowest 5 percent, or even the lowest 1 percent, of our nation’s schools without having a greater flexibility of options for doing so,” said Andrés A. Alonso, the chief executive officer of the 83,000-student Baltimore school district. “I don’t see this as dilution. I see it as pragmatism.”

Turning around low-achieving schools is one of four areas in which states must make a persuasive case for their brand of reform in order to win a piece of the Race to the Top prize, the biggest discretionary pool of education money under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the economic-stimulus package passed by Congress in February. School turnaround plans are worth up to 50 points, out of a total of 500. ("[Rules Issued for State Fiscal Stabilization Aid, Round 2.](#)" Nov. 18, 2009.)

Education Department officials have made the final guidelines for those interventions consistent across the Race to the Top competition, the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund, and the Title I School Improvement Grants, all of which received funding under the stimulus law.

Mr. Duncan initially had hoped charter school operators would be dominant players in the turnaround push, but the final rules move charter schools from the turnaround section to the "general" section, where states must demonstrate a reform-friendly environment.

"While the department believes that charter schools can be strong partners in school turnaround work, it does not believe that charter schools are the only or preferred solution to turning around struggling schools," says a summary of the major changes made to the proposed application guidelines.

The shift also reflects a still-raging debate within the charter sector over how much, if any, turnaround work it should shoulder.

"I think you will see that there are going to be a number of charter operators and charter networks who are interested in seeing what they can contribute on turnarounds," said Nelson Smith, the president of the [National Alliance for Public Charter Schools](#), in Washington

"But it has to be clear what that role will mean," he said. "I think it would be a mistake for a charter organization that's only done startups to walk into a turnaround situation without having the flexibility and site autonomy that they would have in a startup."

Mr. Alonso said the lack of strong interest from charter providers probably contributed to the Education Department's decision to elevate the more flexible "transformation" option.

Even as the rules grant more latitude to districts to use a transformation approach, department officials have set some boundaries. Districts with more than nine "persistently low-achieving schools" may not use a transformation strategy in more than 50 percent of the schools, a limit that would apply to most city districts.

"In most urban districts, that's still going to mean a lot of schools are going to have to be turned around by the more disruptive, and, I think, the potentially more effective means," said Tom Vander Ark, a partner in the education advocacy and strategy group VA/R Partners, in La Jolla, Calif.

And while transformation models generally avoid making drastic changes to schools' staffs, the Race to the Top rules will require that the principal in a school targeted for turnaround be replaced.

"That element has real teeth," Baltimore's Mr. Alonso said.

But to Mr. Simmons of Strategic Learning Initiatives, replacing the school leader is necessary only in rare cases. Since his organization began its work in the 10 Chicago schools, he said, it has not sought to change principals or teachers, although there has been some natural turnover in those ranks.

Instead, Strategic Learning uses a "performance management" approach that emphasizes shared leadership, professional development, ongoing support for teachers to change instructional practices based on frequent assessments of student learning, and parent engagement.

The program also organizes the schools into networks, so that teachers can collaborate and swap ideas for improvement with their colleagues at other campuses.

Mr. Simmons said the approach has produced impressive gains in most of the schools quickly enough for them to be considered "turned around."

'Dramatic, Deep Change'

Within two years, five of the schools saw students' scores on state exams increase from six to nine times more than they had in the previous six years, he said. The gains in two of the schools in 2007 and 2008 were the biggest posted by any of the nearly 500 elementary schools in Chicago, according to data analyzed for the organization by the American Institutes of Research.

"This is dramatic, deep change," Mr. Simmons said. "We've seen a change in the culture of the buildings, people are working more effectively and communicating better with higher levels of trust, and we didn't have to disrupt the community to do it."

Mr. Simmons also makes an economic argument for his program's approach, which costs roughly \$150,000 per year, per school. Compare that, he said, with the "millions that it might cost to replace a principal and all the teachers at a school."

Michael E. Ward, a former state superintendent of schools in North Carolina, is also a believer in the potential for transformation models to revive failing schools. Mr. Ward has joined a new venture called [SetPoint](#) that will offer its version of a turnaround program to low-achieving schools in Southern states. SetPoint, based in Jackson, Miss., is a joint program of JBHM Education Group and Renaissance Learning, which are for-profit companies.

“The other models, frankly, just aren’t going to be viable for a lot of districts and schools,” Mr. Ward said.

That sentiment was echoed late last month by a group of rural school leaders who were in Washington for a briefing with Secretary Duncan. They told him that even the transformation model would be impossible for districts that face tremendous recruiting challenges.

“There’s just no way we can bring in a new principal,” said Beatriz Ramirez, who is both the superintendent and the principal of the Raisin City, Calif., school district, a one-school district serving 280 students in grades K-8 in rural Fresno County.

Mr. Ward said he understands the skepticism from some quarters about what is seen as a milder approach. During his tenure as North Carolina’s state superintendent, he would send in teams to help low-performing schools, only to see them leave too soon because “we didn’t have the resources to keep them there to see it through.”

The difference this time, he said, is the “intensity, duration, and levels of service that districts will be able to get because of the resources that are going to be available.”

Some are not convinced.

“Even [for] really good providers, when they are dropped into circumstances where they don’t have control over who they can hire and how they can spend their money, it’s going to be a limited proposition for them to succeed,” Mr. Vander Ark said.

State Conditions

William E. Guenther, the president of the Mass Insight Education and Research Institute, a Boston group that designed a turnaround framework in 2007 and is helping states use its strategies, said the success of any strategy, whether it’s transformation or something else, is going to depend on the conditions that states foster for districts to do turnaround work.

Those conditions, he said, must include creating teams of in-house turnaround specialists and identifying external partners to help districts, something Illinois and a few other states have started to do. Clearing out bureaucratic constraints is another key condition that states must provide for the targeted schools, he said.

“I think it’s pretty clear that the [federal] department is going to be looking for states who are really serious about this,” said Mr. Guenther. “I don’t think that coming up with a new improvement plan, changing a principal, and bringing in more professional development is going to cut it, because none of those things by themselves are turnaround strategies.”

Assistant Editor Michele McNeil contributed to this report.

Coverage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is supported in part by grants from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, at www.hewlett.org, and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, at www.mott.org.