
Smart Decisions in Tough Times: Keeping the Focus on Students

A Report from the 7th Annual North Carolina Legislators Retreat



\$839.00	\$236.00	\$299.00
\$820.00	\$107.00	\$240.00

Budget





INTRODUCTION

The past year has proven to be a challenging one, as North Carolina confronted a significant budget shortfall and the loss of jobs across the state. Even though difficult decisions were made to balance the state's budget, legislators have made it clear that the educational needs of children remain a top priority, and all students deserve the opportunity to succeed in school and graduate prepared for college and the workforce.

If these economic difficulties continue, as many predict they will, it will be increasingly difficult for states to improve the quality of public education, much less maintain it, with limited funds. Fortunately, the influx of federal dollars through the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act* provides an invaluable opportunity for state policymakers to carefully examine their education systems and consider which reforms will help more students excel.

Since 2003, the Hunt Institute has brought together state legislators with national experts annually to discuss the most urgent issues facing North Carolina's public schools. In that tradition, the 7th *Annual North Carolina Legislators Retreat*, **Smart Decisions in Tough Times: Keeping the Focus on Students**, presented key strategies to improve education for all of North Carolina's students.

This year's *Retreat* was framed around four key components that are essential to the success of students: high-quality standards and assessments, comprehensive data systems, effective teachers and principals, and support for low-performing schools. These areas are also the focus of the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act* and the *Race to the*

Top grant program. This report summarizes information shared and discussed in *Retreat* sessions and highlights potential implications for North Carolina.

The content of this report has been drawn from *Retreat* presentations, which were made by the following resource experts:

June Atkinson, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

David Coleman, Student Achievement Partners

Mike Edwards, Knoxville Chamber of Commerce

William Guenther, Mass Insight Education and Research Institute

William Harrison, North Carolina State Board of Education

Gerry House, Institute for Student Achievement

Sandy Kress, Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP

Bill McDiarmid, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Education

Karla Oakley, The New Teacher Project

Lieutenant Governor Barbara O'Brien, Colorado

Scott Palmer, EducationCounsel LLC

Governor Beverly Perdue, North Carolina

Baron Rodriguez, Data Quality Campaign

Jon Schnur, New Leaders for New Schools

David Spence, Southern Regional Education Board

THE FEDERAL POLICY LANDSCAPE

The *Retreat* began with an overview of the changing federal education policy landscape led by Scott Palmer. Palmer is a managing partner and co-founder of EducationCounsel LLC, a national policy and advocacy organization. He previously served as a senior official in the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights during the Clinton Administration.

Palmer explained that the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act* (ARRA) provided a needed influx of funding for states in a year of economic challenges. The ARRA established a new, one-time funding stream, the *State Fiscal Stabilization Fund* (SFSF), to help states improve education and raise student achievement. The SFSF includes the competitive *Race to the Top* and *Investing in Innovation* grant programs, which are designed to promote innovative education practices. North Carolina is expected to receive approximately \$1.1 billion from the SFSF to support local and state education initiatives; the state has also applied for the *Race to the Top* (RttT) competitive grant program.

States that receive financial support through the ARRA must demonstrate a commitment to four education reform assurances:

1. Adopt internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the workplace
2. Recruit, develop, retain, and reward effective teachers and principals
3. Turn around low-performing schools
4. Build data systems that measure student success and inform teachers and principals how they can improve their practices

RACE TO THE TOP

Reform is a consistent theme throughout the ARRA, and it is particularly evident in the \$4.35 billion RttT program. This initiative is structured around the four core assurances of the ARRA, as previously stated. The goal of RttT is to incentivize states to implement comprehensive reform and to create models for the rest of the nation. Palmer emphasized that states are being encouraged to craft bold, innovative proposals that will lead to dramatic improvements in student achievement.

The RttT funds will be awarded in two phases. Forty-one states submitted applications for Phase 1 of the competition, and awards were announced in April 2010. North Carolina was one of 16 finalists for Phase 1 of the *Race to the Top* competition, but did not receive a grant award. States that were not funded or did not apply in the first phase will be able to submit applications for Phase 2 in June 2010. These awards will be announced in September 2010. The U.S. Department of Education has indicated that individual RttT awards may range from \$20 million to \$700 million based on a state's size and the strength of its application. Palmer predicted that the competition will be very selective and only a handful of states will win in each round of the competition.

At the Hunt Institute's 2009 *Governors Education Symposium*, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced that \$350 million of the RttT funds will be earmarked for the development of common state assessments. This competitive program will support groups of states that are working to create and implement new assessments aligned to a common set of K-12 standards. Guidelines for this program were released in April 2010.

According to Palmer, the implementation of the ARRA and RttT has laid the groundwork for the reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) in the upcoming year. The progress of this legislation will depend in large part on the pace of other federal legislation focused on health care and job creation. Palmer predicted that the four core assurances required by the ARRA will continue to be a focus in the revised ESEA legislation. These recent initiatives should provide states with a clear vision of how the federal policy landscape will be shifting in the years to come.

The 7th *Annual North Carolina's Legislators Retreat* included a special presentation by Governor Bev Perdue, who shared remarks regarding her vision for education in North Carolina. "The world has changed around us," she said, "and many do not understand how hard it is to compete in a global economy." Governor Perdue emphasized that the state's work to create jobs and attract businesses is closely linked to education. State leaders must work together as a team to improve the public school system and ensure that every child in North Carolina graduates from high school ready to succeed in a career or college.



"I believe that the opportunity that comes with a high-quality education must be the birthright of every child born in North Carolina. When every child succeeds, North Carolina succeeds."

— GOVERNOR BEV PERDUE

There is universal recognition that in today's global economy students must be internationally competitive. Unfortunately, research has revealed stark differences between the world-class expectations in top-performing nations and standards in most U.S. states.¹ Much of this difference can be credited to the broad, overly-shallow focus of American academic standards. At the *Retreat*, David Coleman, Founder and CEO of Student Achievement Partners, presented information from a recent report by the *American Institutes for Research* on the rigorous standards of high-performing Asian countries. The countries that excel on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) share a common, narrow focus on core math concepts in the early grades. For instance, the curricula of these countries focus on three inter-related math topics in grades K-5: whole numbers, operations, and units of measurement. By comparison, those three topics make up only a portion of the elementary school content in the United States.²

Research also demonstrates a significant variability among state standards. In 2008, the Hunt Institute commissioned a study by the National Research Council to examine the quality of state standards. That report, *Assessing the Role of K-12 Academic Standards in States*, found that many states have not prioritized among their numerous standards and include too many topics and excessive repetition within and between grades.³ Content standards that are too broad fail to provide teachers with enough information to focus and drive instruction. Teachers instead perceive that standardized tests provide a more reliable roadmap than standards documents, even though these assessments can be equally unwieldy. According to Coleman, the typical state comprehensive exam contains roughly 40 questions and covers as many as 40 to 60 standards, making it very challenging for teachers to determine what information will be tested and what to teach.

STANDARDS AND COLLEGE READINESS

Panelists at the *Retreat* discussed how low reading and writing standards have failed to adequately train students for college and the workforce. Recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results show that reading performance at the 8th grade level has been stagnant during the last 10 years, while 12th grade reading performance has declined. In 2005, only 35 percent of 12th grade students scored at the proficient level on the NAEP in reading. David Spence, President of the Southern Regional Education Board, suggested that students need more exposure to complex material throughout their time in school. All middle and high school teachers, regardless of the subject, should incorporate the reading of complex texts into their classrooms. An ACT study on college readiness indicates that only half of ACT-tested high school students in the United States are ready for college-level reading.⁴

Today, growing numbers of students need extra assistance as they enter college to build basic academic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. From 1999 to 2008, the percentage of North Carolina community college students needing remediation grew from 49 percent to 54 percent.⁵ Spence emphasized that the ability to read complex text is a necessary skill for all students, whether they plan to read textbooks in college or technical manuals in the workforce.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS INITIATIVE

In recognition of the need for higher-quality, streamlined standards across the United States, three territories and 48 states have voluntarily committed to an initiative to develop a common set of state standards. Through the *Common Core State Standards Initiative*, states are collaborating to define the knowledge and skills students should have to succeed in college and the workplace; many state applications for RttT

include a commitment to adopt these common standards. The development of the Common Core State Standards is an entirely state-led process, with administrative support provided by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO).

The first set of standards, developed by a team of national experts, defines the knowledge and skills students need to succeed in entry-level college courses and workforce training programs. Following input from states, the Common Core State Standards for college and career readiness in English language arts and mathematics were approved by a validation committee in fall 2009.

Committees of experts are now back-mapping to develop initial drafts of grade-level K-12 standards in English and mathematics that build to these “end point” college and career readiness standards. These standards will present the most essential elements students need to know at each grade level to graduate ready for college or the workforce; they will also be internationally benchmarked. The standards were made available for public comment in March 2010.

STANDARDS WORK IN NORTH CAROLINA

North Carolina has signed on to the *Common Core State Standards Initiative* and, presumably, will move to adopt the standards when the appropriate time comes. Meanwhile, the state continues to move forward with its own Accountability and Curriculum Reform Effort (ACRE). ACRE is a five-year initiative that aims to redefine the North Carolina Standard Course of Study for K-12 students, the student testing program, and the school accountability model.⁶ As part of the ACRE initiative, the North Carolina State Board of Education has approved a new set of essential standards for K-12 Mathematics, English 10, the Occupational Course of Study, and K-12 Information and Technology; the standards will go into

effect in the 2011-2012 academic year. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) is currently drafting essential standards for K-9 and 11-12 English Language Arts, K-12 science, K-12 social studies, foreign languages, healthful living, and fine arts. Once approved, these standards are scheduled to go into effect in the 2012-2013 academic year.

North Carolina’s application for *Race to the Top* seeks to build upon the common standards work and develop common assessments that can be used in partnership with other states. State Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. June Atkinson shared that the states plan to develop ‘rich’ assessments that allow students to apply their learning through projects and constructed responses. A balanced assessment system that includes formative assessments will allow teachers to evaluate their students’ performance early on and target their instruction appropriately. According to Atkinson, collaborating with other states to create common assessments would allow states to use resources more efficiently and increase student achievement at a faster rate.

Implications:

1. States should take a systemic approach when creating new standards.

Implementing strong standards is only the first step in strengthening the rigor of students’ education. New curriculum and assessments must also be aligned to these standards to ensure comprehensive change throughout the system.

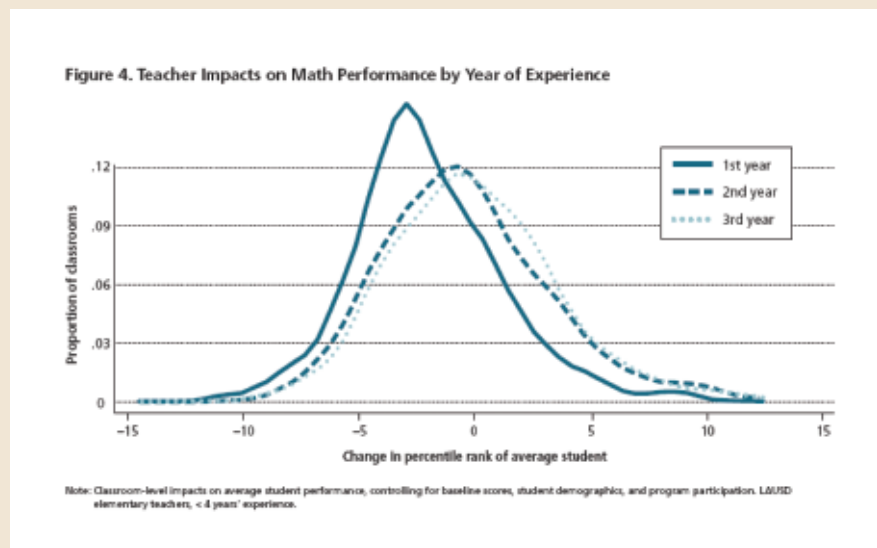
2. Standards-based assessments should focus on critical thinking and

involve complex material. As previously discussed, the ability to read complex material is a necessary skill for all students to master what they need to know to be college and career ready. Assessments should incorporate 21st century skills and real-world situations that engage students in complex analysis.

EFFECTIVE TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS

It is impossible to consider how to improve student performance without addressing the teachers and principals who interact daily with students. Research indicates that effective teachers and principals are the most important school-based factors affecting student achievement. One year with an ineffective teacher can cost a student up to one and a half year's worth of achievement.⁷ Teachers also need the support of principals who are able to serve as instructional leaders, equipping the school team to improve classroom instruction. Building on the standards discussion, the *Retreat* next explored how to improve the effectiveness of teachers and principals through clear evaluations and usable data systems.

Karla Oakley, Vice President of Teacher Quality Innovations at The New Teacher Project, challenged the common assumption that a teacher's effectiveness improves as his or her years in the classroom increase. Oakley presented data showing that a teacher's effectiveness, measured by improvement in student math performance, increases as a teacher gains a second year of experience. As seen in the chart below, there are much smaller gains in teacher effectiveness in the third year. It might seem logical to assume that a teacher with 15 years of experience is more effective than a teacher with five years of experience. Numerous studies, however, show that a teacher's classroom experience matters at the beginning of his or her career and has significantly less effect on student achievement with additional years of experience.⁸



Source: *The New Teacher Project 2009.*

TEACHER TRAINING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The quality of a prospective teacher's training program plays a critical role in preparation for the classroom. A recent report by the Brookings Institution found that the route a teacher takes towards certification holds almost no power to predict the individual's effectiveness, as measured by student achievement, in the classroom. Students of teachers certified through traditional programs performed similarly to students of teachers who pursued alternative certification routes.⁹ Although many high-quality alternative certification programs such as Teach for America have proven to be successful, Oakley emphasized that alternative certification programs must be carefully evaluated to ensure that teachers are provided with the skills they need to be effective. According to Oakley, too many alternative certification programs are no more than "warm body" programs that require little work from participants before awarding certification.

Overall, the quality of people admitted to a training program matters as much as the quality of the program and the experiences it provides. Dr. Bill McDiarmid, Dean of the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, argued that the strongest teacher training programs present multiple opportunities for engagement in real classrooms. These programs also provide closely supervised clinical experiences that run parallel to students' coursework. Teacher training courses should also be closely aligned with the curriculum that current teachers use in their classrooms.

TEACHER EVALUATION

Currently, there is no national consensus on how teacher effectiveness should be evaluated. Many states, including North Carolina, use classroom observations to evaluate teachers against a set of teaching standards. Other states have implemented value-added models that consider the individual contributions of teachers to raising student achievement. Karla Oakley suggested that the strongest measurement of a teacher's effectiveness is how much students have learned while in the teacher's classroom.

The New Teacher Project recommends that a measure of student achievement be included in regular teacher evaluations. In its 2009 report, *The Widget Effect*, the organization examined 12 districts in four states and found that teacher performance was only taken into account in decisions around remediation and dismissal in nine of the 12 districts.¹⁰ Only one district took teacher performance into consideration when hiring and placing teachers. None of the 12 districts considered teacher performance in decisions regarding recruitment, professional development, retention, or layoffs.¹¹

In June 2007, NCDPI adopted a set of new teaching standards that drew heavily from the work of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills and research from the Teacher Working Conditions Survey. NCDPI contracted with Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) to develop a new evaluation instrument aligned with these standards. The instrument was piloted in 2008-09 and will be phased into all districts in the 2010-2011 school year. Although North Carolina's current teacher evaluation tool does not directly include student achievement, the state's RttT application proposes adding a student growth component to the teacher evaluation process for those who teach subjects that are part of the North Carolina accountability system.

Revised Professional Teaching Standards Adopted by the North Carolina State Board of Education, June 2007

STANDARD
1. Teachers demonstrate leadership
2. Teachers establish a respectful environment for a diverse student population
3. Teachers know the content they teach
4. Teachers facilitate learning for their students
5. Teachers reflect on their practice

EFFECTIVE TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS

PRINCIPAL EFFECTIVENESS

Building on the discussion of teacher effectiveness, panelists at the *Retreat* also discussed the important role principals play in improving student achievement. Jon Schnur, CEO and Co-Founder of New Leaders for New Schools, emphasized that districts and states must focus on the qualities of effective principals to successfully recruit and retain good principals.

Effective principals are especially needed in low-performing schools, many of which serve large numbers of students of low socioeconomic status.

New Leaders for New Schools is recognized nationally for its high-quality, alternative training program for principals. Based on its work recruiting and training new principals, the organization has identified four consistent qualities among great principals. These include:

- **Relentless focus on improving the teacher effectiveness.** Traditionally principals have focused on school operations, parents, and discipline; today they must also make supporting and improving instruction a top priority.
- **Careful management of school talent.** Principals must be responsible for differentiating which teachers are effective and providing support to those who could be great.
- **Creating a culture of high expectations.** A great principal sets a culture of high expectations for every student and personal responsibility for every adult.
- **Strong personal and instructional leadership.** Effective principals are able to model what they expect from teachers and are actively involved in providing regular feedback to teachers about their instruction.¹²

In 2009, New Leaders for New Schools established a partnership with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools to train more than 50 principals during the next six years. In return for the free training, each principal is expected to serve the district for at least five years. These principals also commit to achieving ambitious achievement goals, including having 90 to 100 percent student proficiency in core academic subjects.¹³

The North Carolina State Board of Education has recently adopted new standards for the evaluation of principals. The standards and companion evaluation tool identify seven aspects of leadership, which come from a Wallace Foundation study on school principals: strategic, instructional, cultural, human resource, managerial, external development, and micropolitical leadership. A new principal evaluation instrument was approved by the Board in 2008 and was effective with the 2008-09 school year.





DATA SYSTEM SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS

Discussion at the *Retreat* also centered on the important role of data in improving teacher and principal effectiveness. According to Oakley, districts need strong data systems to ensure that every reform implemented can be measured by an outcome. Data also allow schools to benchmark student performance to appropriately target interventions to those who need them most. McDiarmid emphasized that teacher training programs must do a better job of equipping teachers to interpret student data to improve classroom practice. Both teachers and principals need ongoing professional development throughout their careers to effectively use tools such as formative assessments and longitudinal data systems.

McDiarmid also suggested that teacher training programs should be driven by data rather than by vague notions of what makes a good teacher. Programs need to drill down into data and find out which information is most useful for prospective teachers as they enter the profession. Unfortunately, many institutions lack sufficient funding to build complex data systems that can perform this type of fine-grained data analysis.

Implications:

- 1. Teacher training, professional development, and evaluation should focus on student achievement.** As mentioned earlier, teachers are the most important school-based factor for student success. They should, thus, be treated as professionals and receive support and continued feedback throughout their careers to improve their ability to increase student achievement. Teacher evaluation tools should be nuanced and capture a full perspective of a teacher's performance, including how his or her students perform in the classroom.
- 2. Additional high-quality, flexible teacher training programs are needed to attract individuals with a wide range of experiences to teaching.** As Karla Oakley emphasized, these programs should be regularly evaluated to ensure that they are providing prospective teachers with "real-world" skills and knowledge. Teachers must be prepared to set high expectations and adapt their instruction so that all students excel in the classroom.
- 3. Principals need higher-quality training and support focused on improving student achievement.** Today, principals are not only responsible for managing school facilities and staff, but they also play an essential role as instructional leaders for their teachers. Principal training programs and professional development offerings must adapt to help principals understand how to raise student achievement in all types of schools.

LOW PERFORMING SCHOOLS

Current projections show that by the end of 2010, approximately five percent of all public schools in the United States will be identified as chronic failures in need of restructuring under *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). This figure includes 5,000 schools in the United States and approximately 2.5 million students.

Efforts to devise and implement accountability systems have helped identify struggling schools; however, the number of chronically low-performing schools continues to grow and few districts have the capacity to meet their needs. There are few examples of full-scale, statewide efforts to turn around low-performing schools, although certain school districts have succeeded in improving failing schools. As states work to address this growing challenge, it will be important to identify scalable reforms that have proven successful in districts across the United States.

CHALLENGES TO SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION

Bill Guenther, President and Founder of Mass Insight Education and Research Institute, argued that too often school transformation efforts are disparate and poorly coordinated. Schools, districts, and state agencies tend to address failing schools by implementing new programs, rather than stepping back to focus on a broader strategy. Dr. Bill Harrison, a former district superintendent and current Chairman of the North Carolina State Board of Education, sees this in many districts where schools are overwhelmed with well-intended programs and lack coordinated plans for improvement.

Many low-performing schools serve large numbers of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who, according to research, often enter school two years behind higher-income classmates. Guenther suggested that there are still many high-performing, high-poverty schools that are breaking the mold, proving that poverty is not an impossible barrier to

student success. He recommended that school turnaround efforts should strongly consider the key elements of these high-performing schools.

Echoing earlier sessions, the panelists agreed that effective teachers and principals are necessary to turn around low-performing schools. A number of research studies, however, show that high-poverty, high-minority schools are more likely to employ inexperienced teachers than more affluent schools.¹⁴ A 2007 study of high-poverty schools in North Carolina found that these schools had fewer National Board Certified Teachers and were more likely to employ teachers with less than three years of experience.¹⁵

Recruiting and supporting highly talented teachers and administrators are vital components to strengthening school quality, yet simply placing these educators into broken systems will not solve the greater problem of failing schools. According to Guenther, districts must also consider how broader systems and bureaucratic cultures need to transform to improve school quality. Sustainable school turnaround efforts are very difficult to implement in inefficient school districts.

States with significant numbers of rural schools, including North Carolina, must adapt school turnaround efforts to meet the capacity of these more isolated schools. Harrison identified a number of challenges that struggling schools in rural areas face, including recruiting and retaining high quality teacher and principal candidates. Rural schools may also lack the technology or training to make full use of data systems that can help educators target their instruction. School closure is often not an option in rural areas, as there are no alternate schools nearby for students to attend. Although rural schools face a unique set of challenges, Harrison emphasized that all students are entitled to a great education, no matter where they live in North Carolina.

SCHOOL TURNAROUND STRATEGIES

Policymakers must now develop strategies that incorporate changes in operating conditions around people, time, money, and program design.¹⁶ The table below, drawn from the Mass Insight report *The Turnaround Challenge*, provides a comparison between the marginal changes used in traditional school improvement and the changes in operating conditions that are necessary for comprehensive, lasting turnaround.

Important Elements of Turnaround Design¹⁷

OPERATING CONDITION	TRADITIONAL SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT	COMPREHENSIVE TURNAROUND
Program	Improve quality of current strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consulting support • Curriculum, instruction, assessment tools, and strategies 	Re-invent program and entire school approach to suit needs of high-challenge enrollments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coherent, whole-school plan • Deep commitment and strategies to address impacts of poverty on students • Focus on the individualization of learning through transformed instructional approaches completely integrated with assessment
People	Help current staff perform at a higher level <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff development, coaching • Leadership development 	Establish professional norms for human capital management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turnaround leaders have the authority and resources to staff the school as needed to fulfill the turnaround plan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incentives to recruit highly capable teachers • Flexibility on staff hiring, allocation, work rules • Flexibility, time to make staff development coherent
Money	No real impact on budgetary authority in most cases <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional resources (usually staff development) 	Authority to reallocate budget to support turnaround plan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to reallocate budget strategically • Sufficient additional resources to support the plan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pay for extra time • Pay for incentives • Pay for partner support
Time	Some initiatives adjust schedule within same-length school day and year <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Block scheduling • Extra common planning time for educators 	Expand school day and year and reinvent schedule to implement turnaround plan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significantly more time for teacher collaboration, instruction • Review and re-engineering of schedule to support plan

Source: Mass Insight Education & Research Institute

SCHOOL TURNAROUND IN NORTH CAROLINA

In 2006, North Carolina implemented a new Turnaround Initiative that emphasized the importance of capacity building in struggling schools and districts. This model increased the support that schools in turnaround received from one year to three years. With help from the Boston Consulting Group, NCDPI refined its plan and established a District and School Transformation Division to lead this work. The 5-Step Turnaround Design (see box) is supported by a system of Regional and Agency Roundtables which provide ongoing monitoring. The initiative has seen some early success: Of the 100 schools identified as low-performing in the 2007-2008 school year, only 37 were still identified as low-performing in the 2008-2009 school year.¹⁸

North Carolina's 5-Step Turnaround Design¹⁹

1. Professional development for leadership teams of schools and central office staff
2. Leadership coaching for principals
3. Instructional coaching for teachers
4. Guidance in planning and implementing the school improvement plan
5. Requirement to choose or create a model of school reform or design (high school only)

In its RtT application, North Carolina indicated that it has revised the criteria for turnaround status. From 2006 to 2009, NCDPI provided intervention and monitoring to schools with performance composites below 60 percent. Under the new plan, support will now be provided to an increased number of low-achieving schools, including the lowest 5 percent of elementary, middle, and high schools and those with performance composites below 50 percent. In 2008-2009, the 132 lowest performing schools included 64 elementary, 22 middle, and 46 high schools.

In addition to the schools supported through the District and School Transformation Program, the North Carolina State Board of Education and NCDPI are currently involved in the turnaround of Halifax County Public Schools. After reviewing the poor end-of-grade reading test scores among Halifax County students, Judge Howard Manning issued a consent order that requires the district to operate under the direction of the state. In 2009, approximately 70 percent of the district's middle school students were not proficient in reading, and only one-third of Halifax high school students were proficient on end-of-course tests.²⁰

“The issue is not whether or not we can make this happen for all students in North Carolina, it’s whether or not we want to do it.”

— BILL HARRISON



Implications:

- 1. Funds targeted to increase student achievement will bring the greatest gains for low-performing schools.** Panelists at the *Retreat* agreed that too often resources for low-performing schools are allocated inefficiently. Support for low-performing schools should build on the best practices of high-performing, high-needs schools and specifically target the systems and people that are demonstrated to increase student achievement.
- 2. The strongest school turnaround strategies take a comprehensive approach and reinvent schools to address student needs.** These schools need effective principals and teachers who are well-trained and prepared to set high expectations for all students. Creating additional incentives and support programs for teachers and principals in high-needs schools may help to attract top talent and improve student performance.



It will be difficult for North Carolina to make significant progress in any of the areas covered at the *Retreat* without a usable, comprehensive data system. Teachers and principals need clear data to evaluate student achievement and make decisions about how to help students learn. Districts will not be able to target support for low-performing schools without the ability to identify the greatest needs. And, without strong data systems in place, the state will not be able to assess how well all students do in meeting more rigorous standards. As North Carolina continues to invest in building longitudinal data systems, it will be equally important to develop tools that allow teachers to use data to improve instruction.

Sandy Kress, a partner at the law firm of Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld and former senior advisor to President George W. Bush, emphasized that many schools “are swimming in data but thirsting for information.” There is an overwhelming amount of data available to teachers and administrators, but these systems often fail to provide useful, real-time information about how schools and students are doing. The strongest data systems are built with the user in mind and consider which pieces of information will be most helpful to those who are on the ground working with students. As Kress stated, the challenge for states is to develop systems that transform data into usable knowledge.

BUILDING HIGH-QUALITY DATA SYSTEMS

The Data Quality Campaign (DQC) provides support to states that are developing comprehensive data systems. DQC’s Director of State Data Systems, Baron Rodriguez, emphasized that although states have made impressive progress implementing comprehensive statewide data systems, too few have taken the necessary steps to ensure that the information produced by these data systems is harnessed to inform and improve the processes and outcomes of educational efforts.²¹ Developing these

systems and linkages requires political leadership; a single, shared, statewide vision for the state’s human capital development system; interagency collaboration; and a strategic plan for developing new data governance and management systems. The ARRA presents a unique opportunity for leaders to focus on needed educational improvements while also providing critical funding to make these changes possible.

SUCCESSFUL STATE AND LOCAL DATA SYSTEMS

The strongest data systems provide real-time, user-friendly information to teachers and principals. Lieutenant Governor Barbara O’Brien of Colorado underscored that her state’s new data system was specifically designed to be transparent and easy to understand for parents, teachers, and community members. As Colorado entered the process of building the data system, leaders held multiple meetings with parents, principals, and teachers to determine which pieces of information would be most useful to their work. The state also had the support of a strong business partner who was vocal about the need for better student data. O’Brien explained that gaining the support of these stakeholder groups was a critical first step and allowed the state to minimize ideological battles as it moved forward.

The support of the business community has been especially important in developing the district data system in Knoxville, Tennessee. Mike Edwards, President and CEO of the Knoxville Chamber of Commerce, highlighted how his organization has partnered with Knox County Schools (KCS) to create a flexible system that supports both day-to-day management and instructional improvement. A primary goal of this project was to develop a data system that would provide usable data for teachers, principals, and school counselors. Prior to the new data system implementation, KCS collected and stored data in more than 20 electronic databases that were unable to communicate with one another. In 2007, the Chamber began to

collaborate with the school district to design and implement a data system that would both help the district identify the instructional needs of students and help it use its resources more effectively.²²

DATA SYSTEMS IN NORTH CAROLINA

North Carolina is one of eleven states to have implemented eight of ten essential elements for a comprehensive, longitudinal data system, according to the DQC. At the time of the DQC survey in 2009, North Carolina did not yet have a unique student identifier in place to connect student data across state databases. Since the survey, NCDPI launched the unique student identifier and is currently ensuring that all students have a randomly assigned number. The unique student identifier is a key element of the North Carolina Common Education Data Analysis and Reporting System (CEDARS). CEDARS is a statewide longitudinal data system composed of various NCDPI data collection systems (including NCWISE), a student and staff identification system, a centralized data repository, and associated reporting and analysis tools.²³ In addition to the student identifier, CEDARS also features a unique statewide identifier for every teacher, providing the capability to match student and staff-level data over time. Full implementation of the system and its reporting and analysis tools is scheduled for summer 2010.

The other essential element that North Carolina has yet to develop is the collection of student-level SAT, ACT, and Advanced Placement exam data. Tracking student performance data on these college admissions and readiness tests will allow the state to evaluate how prepared its high school students are for college and careers. Governor Perdue has repeatedly emphasized the importance of developing a P-20 longitudinal data system to better track the success of students after they graduate. NCDPI, in partnership with the state's institutions of higher education and the North Carolina Employment Security Commission, has applied for a

federal grant to develop a P-20 state data system that will track students from preschool to college and into the workforce.²⁴

Implications:

1. New data systems must focus on the needs of the users.

Comprehensive data systems must be designed to be usable for teachers and administrators to facilitate the analysis of student and school performance. Data from formative assessments are especially helpful to teachers working with students. Professional development must be provided to teachers so they can use this data to adapt their instruction for struggling students.

2. The usefulness of a comprehensive data system depends on whether its information remains timely, accurate, and usable.

It is essential for state leaders to consider how these complex systems will be maintained and improved. For example, before Colorado began to build its statewide data system, it approached the state legislature to create a statutory framework to allow for further development and improvement of the data system in future years.



CONCLUSION

North Carolina is known nationally as a reform-minded state, and it can continue to lead the nation with thoughtful investments in what matters most for children. The federal stimulus funds and the *Race to the Top* grant program offer an opportunity to think boldly about which reforms and programs will make the most difference for the success of North Carolina's students.

The state must establish clear and rigorous standards to ensure that every student graduates ready for college and the workforce. The *Common Core State Standards Initiative* offers an invaluable opportunity for North Carolina to combine resources with other states and create a set of standards that will establish a solid education foundation for all students. These standards, however, will not be effective unless they are incorporated into new curricula, assessments, and teacher professional development.

Every student in the state deserves to have an effective teacher, and every school needs a high-quality principal. Further work is needed to consider how student achievement data might be used to identify effective teachers and assist those who need improvement. Both traditional and lateral entry teacher training programs must adapt to provide teachers with more useful, applicable skills and training.

Strong teachers and principals play an essential role in transforming low-performing schools. School transformation efforts must be better coordinated to help districts use resources more effectively. High expectations must be set for all schools, regardless of where they are located.

Comprehensive data systems provide essential information for all aspects of school reform. A statewide data system will allow teachers and principals to better track the performance of students and target assistance where it is needed most. It can also equip state leaders to identify those schools that require additional support and better manage the state's investments in education.

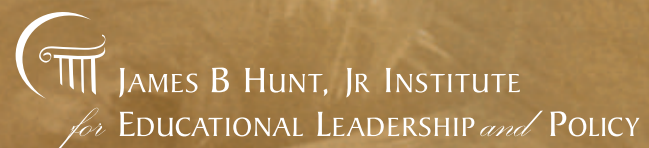
Even during these challenging economic times, North Carolina has the opportunity to take steps to enhance the quality of its education system. Doing so will require unwavering commitment from business, government, and education leaders across the state. Together, these groups can work in new ways to raise the quality of education for all of North Carolina's children.



“We can be the best and out-compete the world if we do the right things. Preparing our workforce is the most important way to do this.” — JAMES B. HUNT, JR.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Schmidt, William. 2005. "The Role of Curriculum," *American Educator* 23, no. 4. http://archive.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/fall2005/schmidt.htm
- ² Ginsburg, Alan, Steven Leinwand, and Katie Decker. 2009. *Informing Grades 1-6 Mathematics Standards Development: What Can Be Learned From High-Performing Hong Kong, Korea, and Singapore?* Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research.
- ³ James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy. 2009. *Blueprint for Education Leadership: Number 2*. Durham, NC: Author.
- ⁴ ACT. 2006. *What the ACT Reveals about College Readiness in Reading*. Iowa City, IA: Author.
- ⁵ North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research. 2009. "Community Colleges are Key to Addressing Transition in State's Economy, Says Center". Raleigh, NC: Author.
- ⁶ North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. ACRE: Accountability and Curriculum Reform Effort. <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/acre/>
- ⁷ Wesiberg, Daniel, Susan Sexton, Jennifer Mulhern, and David Keeling. 2009. *The Widget Effect: Our National Failure to Acknowledge and Act on Differences in Teacher Effectiveness*. New York, NY: The New Teacher Project.
- ⁸ DeArmond, Michael, Kathryn Shaw, and Patrick Wright. 2009. "Zooming In and Zooming Out: Rethinking School District Human Resource Management." In *Creating a New Teaching Professional*, edited by Dan Goldhaber and Jane Hannaway, 53-80. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.
- ⁹ Gordon, Robert, Thomas Kane, and Douglas Staiger. 2006. *Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance on the Job*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institute.
- ¹⁰ Wesiberg et al. (2009)
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² New Leaders for New Schools. 2009. *Principal Effectiveness: A New Principalship to Drive Student Achievement, Teacher Effectiveness and School Turnarounds*. New York, NY: Author.
- ¹³ Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. 2008. "CMS and New Schools Announce Partnership." Press Release, December 10, 2008. <http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/news/Pages/CMSandNewLeadersforNewSchoolsannouncepartnership.aspx>
- ¹⁴ Alliance for Excellent Education. 2009. *Improving the Distribution of Teachers in Low-performing High Schools*. Washington, DC: Author.
- ¹⁵ Clotfelter, Charles, Helen Ladd, Jacob Vigdor, and Justin Wheeler. 2007. *High poverty schools and the distribution of teachers and principals*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- ¹⁶ Calkins, Andrew. 2009. *Supporting Low-Performing Schools*. From a briefing prepared for the 2009 Governors Education Symposium. Durham, NC: James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy and the NGA Center for Best Practices.
- ¹⁷ Mass Insight Education & Research Institute. 2007. *The Turnaround Challenge*. Boston: Author.
- ¹⁸ North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. 2009. "Report to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee." September 17, 2009.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. 2008-2009 Report Card for Halifax County Schools. <http://www.ncreportcards.org/src/servlet/src>CreatePDF?pLEACode=420&pYear=2008-2009&pDataType=1>
- ²¹ Guidera, Amy. 2009. *State Longitudinal Data Systems*. From a briefing prepared for the 2009 Governors Education Symposium. Durham, NC: James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy and NGA Center for Best Practices.
- ²² The Knoxville Chamber of Commerce. 2010. *The Knox Model: An Education Management Information System*. Knoxville, TN: Author.
- ²³ North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. 2010. "CEDARS: Frequently Asked Questions." <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/cedars/faq/>
- ²⁴ North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. 2009. "Twelve Components of the American COMPETES Act: NC's State Longitudinal Data System." Raleigh, NC: Author. <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/fbs/arra/sfsf/reporting/datasystemelements.pdf>



1000 Park Forty Plaza | Suite 280 | Durham, NC 27713 | p: 919.425.4160 | f: 919.425.4175
www.hunt-institute.org

The James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy is a non-partisan, non-profit service entity that does not lobby for, or take positions on, state and federal legislation.

© 2010. James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy. All rights reserved.