

What really works

A comprehensive approach to our most seriously challenged communities and schools

While Pennsylvania's public education system well serves the vast majority of the Commonwealth's students, there is no doubt that far too many students and schools are struggling to meet basic educational objectives. Overwhelmingly, they are concentrated in urban communities that have long lacked the social and economic means to provide a nurturing educational environment. Some of these communities have already experienced unsuccessful takeovers of their school districts by state boards of control. Recently, with the Commonwealth's quest to obtain Race to the Top (RTTT) funding, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) has used Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) scores to identify what it calls "the bottom 5 percent" or "failing public schools." If only it were so simple.

PSSA scores provide a very crude signal of what is occurring within a school. The overwhelming part of the variance in PSSA scores (a status measure) is accounted for by non-school socio-economic status (SES) variables such as the proportion of students eligible for free or reduced price lunches. That reality cannot be ignored if educational interventions are to succeed. The identification of schools as part of the "bottom percent" begs for a closer, onsite audit of the condition of each school by a team of experts. It begs for a detailed review of the challenges faced by each of those schools' students.

It is noteworthy that using the PSSA data set, supplemented with other state data, PSEA was able to determine that some of the school districts containing these "bottom 5 percent" schools also contained schools that were among the most positive outliers, i.e., schools that "beat the odds." This too, is a situation that suggests we need to know much more before deciding if a school is failing.

Experience tells us that it will be very difficult to turn around the lowest performing schools using school-based methods alone. PSEA strongly believes in the measures advocated in this document, and will work within our communities to make them successful. Communities need stability, and new growth will coalesce around institutions in which we build social and economic capital. This will happen when policymakers, elected officials, educators, and community leaders place a priority on educational achievement and work together to make it happen.

Research shows that partnerships of schools, families, and community organizations dedicated to student success can play a vital role in closing achievement gaps among students of similar

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ability. As the Annenberg Institute for School Reform concludes in its analysis of multiple research studies extending over six years, *Building Partnerships to Reinvent School Culture*, such partnerships consistently contribute to:

- better attendance;
- higher test scores;
- completing high school; and
- aspiring to a college education.¹



In order to maximize the chance for successful reform, PSEA believes the state should create a demonstration project in a small number of target schools as community learning centers. These school facilities would be redesigned to allow them to not only educate students but also provide an array of after school social services that would help provide stability and necessary social support. In short, target schools would be redesigned to become a source of social capital and engagement for the community.

One version of this idea was the “Lighted Schoolhouse” proposal of Alex Molnar and his colleagues. In their conception, targeted urban schools would be redesigned for additional functions, such as housing day-care centers, or providing adult education and job training – for example, teaching English to adults at night in communities with large immigrant populations.²

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Given current economic and budgetary constraints, such a project should be undertaken on a demonstration basis in a small number of schools. PSEA believes that by targeting resources, employing many of the school-based reforms we described earlier with this expanded community center concept of schooling, the prospects for turning around chronically low scoring schools will be the greatest.

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¹ Annenberg Institute for School Reform. (2009). Building Partnerships to Reinvent School Culture. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

² Molnar, A. (2000). "Reinventing Neighborhood Schools: A comprehensive Plan for Reform." The Center for Education Research, Analysis, and Innovation. University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee). CERAI 00-99.