

Who Helps the Schools and Students Struggling the Most to Succeed?

By Ashley Festa

Late last year, President Obama told an audience at a Virginia middle school that four out of five schools in this country would soon be labeled as failing. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan told Congress the same thing.

While some observers have since called those figures overstated, the underlying message is clear: The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, and its mission to bring education in the United States up to par with other industrialized countries, is struggling – just like many of the students the law is supposed to serve.

Since NCLB was enacted in 2001, the number of schools identified as failing has been on the rise. Frustrated educators blame the law's reliance on constantly improving standardized test scores as the primary measure of a school's success.

Here's why:

NCLB's goal is to have all students reach

“proficient” levels of reading and math skills by 2014 – a goal measured by standardized test scores in individual states. The law requires that students be tested yearly in grades 3-8 and at least once during high school. Each year's test scores are then compared with the previous year's scores to determine whether students are making “Adequate Yearly Progress.”

While each state is allowed to determine what defines Adequate Yearly Progress, the law requires that 95 percent of students at any school meet this objective. Failing to meet it lands a school on the “needs improvement” list, and continued failure could result in more drastic measures, such as restructuring or, in some states, even a state takeover.

It's a challenging goal, even for comparatively successful schools. And some observers complain that NCLB focuses more on negative sanctions on a school as a whole than on solutions for helping the individual students there.

Other Efforts to Help Failing Schools

Beyond the NEA's Priority Schools Campaign, other programs and organizations are addressing the needs of failing schools. Below is a sampling:

■ Race to the Top

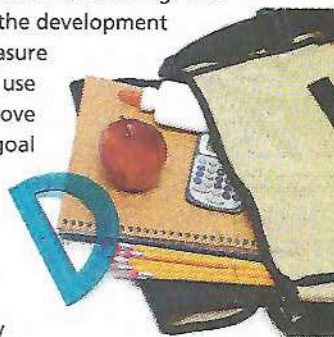
Race to the Top is an annual competition, created by the Obama administration in 2009, to spur reform in public schools. This year, school districts are challenged to show the federal Department of Education how they can improve student success through criteria like adding and enhancing charter schools, linking teacher evaluations with students' standardized test scores, and more.

This year's competition makes \$400 million in grant funding available to school districts that win. Similar to the Priority Schools Campaign described in the main article, Race to the Top is "aimed squarely at the classroom level and the all-important relationship among teachers and students," U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has said. Learn more at www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/fact-sheet-race-top.

■ Gates Foundation

To ensure a "college-ready education," one goal of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (founded by Microsoft chairman Bill Gates and his wife) is to help all students be prepared for life after grade school, especially those from minority and low-income families. Through multi-million-dollar grants to public schools and organizations working to improve education, the foundation invests in the research and reform of teacher effectiveness, consistent

standards for student achievement, new technology, and innovative approaches to learning. The foundation supports the development of better ways to measure student progress and use the data to help improve student success. The goal of its investments is to make sure all students are ready for college and to remove any barriers to top-quality education. Learn more at www.gatesfoundation.org.



■ Competency-Based Learning Systems

New Hampshire implemented competency-based learning systems in its schools in 2008, earning the state the Education Commission of the States' 2012 Frank Newman Award for State Innovation.

Under the new systems, students earn credits toward graduation based on their ability to master academic skills, not simply the amount of time they spend in a classroom each year. The idea is to allow students to learn at their own pace, regardless of how little or how much time they need to grasp the concepts.

New Hampshire's teachers, counselors and high school students work together to develop customized plans for students' education, which include in-school classes, online classes and mentorships.

— Ashley Festa

Help from the Nation's Teachers

Fortunately, some big educational players have stepped in to support the schools, developing campaigns and programs to help them improve – among them the nation's largest teachers' union.

The National Education Association (NEA) (www.nea.org) has been targeting schools most in need of assistance with its Priority Schools Campaign (<http://neapriorityschools.org>) since 2009, dedicating time and resources to help them turn around. It's a good option for struggling schools that can't afford the alternative of paying a private consulting company to come in and recommend improvements.

NEA spokesperson Stacey Grissom says the union provides hundreds of thousands of dollars

in resources to failing schools at no cost. It's not direct financial support – "you can't buy your way out of problems that you're in," notes Ellen Holmes of the NEA-affiliate Maine Education Association and a senior policy analyst for the Priority Schools Campaign.

Instead, the campaign seeks input from educators, communities and state and national policymakers to develop new ways to measure student success and teacher quality. It works to attract and retain exceptional teachers and resources for struggling schools. And it links these schools with programs and resources that can help.

But its most effective work involves relying on the low-performing school itself – and specifically, the teachers there – to identify the problems its

students are having and find solutions. The teachers know their students, and they know what's going on in their classrooms, the NEA reasons. Instead of waiting for an outside expert to tell them how to fix a problem, teachers lead the effort and work together to address students' struggles.

"We believe that every single student deserves a great public school," says Holmes, who taught third and fourth grade and alternative education before going to work for the association.

Accentuate the Positive

The campaign also encourages teachers at a struggling school to emphasize their students' strengths rather than weaknesses. "If a teacher or school is focused on what a student doesn't have, you're going to lose that student," Holmes says.

At a school in Marysville, Wash., with a high Native American population, for example, teachers used the students' cultural strengths to help them learn better. Because Native American culture relies heavily on hands-on teaching between elders and youth, teachers harnessed the knowledge of older students to help instruct the younger ones.

"They began leveraging what the older students know and harvesting the resiliency of the native culture to improve," Holmes says. If a young student had trouble understanding proper behavior in a library, for instance, an older student would accompany the younger one and provide the model for appropriate behavior. As teachers identify their students' weaknesses in the classroom, the campaign encourages them to adjust their instruction methods daily to make sure everyone is up to speed—rather than waiting until the end of the year to evaluate what they've done and discover that not all children learned the same material.

They also align the curriculum from grade to grade, working together so that when kids move to the next grade level the curriculum is more similar and familiar, Holmes says. It creates a sense of community among teachers that ultimately helps their students.

"When they think 'our students' rather than 'my students,' it makes a huge difference for struggling students," Holmes says.

Is It Working?

Currently, the NEA Priority Schools Campaign is working with 39 troubled schools. They were identified among more than 1,200 that applied for an Obama administration grant to help the country's lowest-performing 5 percent of schools. The NEA picked 39 that needed the most help but that were also already working to find good teacher-led improvements.

The chosen schools represent a wide range—from the smallest rural, most isolated school in Maine to one of the largest schools in Nevada, Holmes says. They have one big thing in common: All are poor.

As a senior policy analyst for the campaign, Holmes visits the priority schools as often as they request her assistance and has seen marked improvement. Attendance and graduation rates are up. Test scores in math and reading are up. And teacher retention has improved, she says.

The campaign's efforts to improve struggling schools have relied on several research-based programs. One of them, called Response to Intervention

(RTI), focuses heavily on students in grade school to help them catch up to their grade level. Studies have found that students are more likely to drop out of school if they struggled from kindergarten through third grade, Holmes says.

At a school in Dayton, Ohio, teachers have had success using the method to cultivate a culture of hard work so that students feel motivated to succeed. "The teachers focused on what it means to be a successful student," Holmes says. Instead of allowing struggling students to carry the belief that some are "born smart" and others are not, teachers focused attention on the effort required to succeed. As a result, the school has seen dramatic increases in math and reading scores and its graduation rates, Holmes says, a good example of just how much a school's own teachers can really make a difference.

"It's relying on the teachers' expertise" to understand what students need, Holmes notes. "What they did is not complex, but it is powerful." ■



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