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How D.C. Could Become National Model for Improving Low-achieving Schools under ESSA

By Gary M. Ratner

Introduction

This is a crucial moment for the District of Columbia's disadvantaged public school children. In December 2015, Congress replaced the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) with a new law, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the new name of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). ESSA shifts federal policy on school improvement and accountability away from the punitive policy of NCLB toward a supportive policy of helping low-achieving schools improve by doing what works.

Mayor Muriel Bowser is expected to select a new Chancellor in October to replace Chancellor Kaya Henderson and lead the next stage of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). The first of three community forums to gather input into what kind of Chancellor D.C. residents want will be held Tuesday evening, August 30th.¹

So, two critical questions arise: (1) what strategy for implementing ESSA should the new Chancellor be hired to lead?; and (2) what kind of vision, experience and skills should the new Chancellor have to carry out this strategy?²

During the Michelle Rhee-Kaya Henderson period, 2007-2016, DCPS made progress in some areas. School system management was stabilized. Test scores went up. Enrollment and graduation rates increased. New courses and extracurricular opportunities were offered and facilities built or modernized.

But the Rhee-Henderson approach — including teacher and principal evaluations based significantly on students' standardized test scores, removing large numbers of teachers and principals because of low scores, closing many schools in poor neighborhoods, tightening headquarters' control of schools and not concentrating on turning around the low-achieving schools — has fundamental problems.

DCPS has failed to effectively educate the vast majority of its black students and there remains a severe achievement gap between black and white students. A recent National Research Council report, requested by the D.C. Council, concluded: "The primary objective of the District of Columbia for its public schools should be to address the serious and persistent disparities in learning opportunities and academic progress across student groups and wards."³ These students are disproportionately concentrated in schools in Wards 7 and 8 and other neighborhoods east of Rock Creek Park.

¹ See Perry Stein, *Search for New Schools Leader Starts*, The Washington Post, pp. B1,6 (August 6, 2016).

² This article addresses only schools administered by DCPS, not charter schools.

³ National Research Council, *An Evaluation of the Public Schools of the District of Columbia: Reform in a Changing Landscape*, p. 208 (2015).

Magnitude of the Problem

The proficiency level of DCPS's black students is low in absolute terms. In 2015, the 4th and 8th grade average percentage of DCPS black students who were "Proficient" on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was only 14% in reading and 13% in math. (NAEP is the nation's most reliable K-12 academic assessment.)

Further, there remains an extreme achievement gap between black and white students. While in 2015 only 14% of black students were "Proficient" in reading and 13% in math, 79% of white students were "Proficient" in reading and 79% in math. So, DCPS black students have less than one fifth the likelihood of being academically proficient as its white students.

Even more seriously, in 2015, a majority of DCPS's black students were "Below Basic" on NAEP, i.e., they didn't have even "partial mastery of [the] knowledge and skills" required for their grade level. The 4th and 8th grade average of black students "Below Basic" was 55% in reading, 53% in math; for white students, only 5% were "Below Basic" in reading, 6% in math.

Imagine sending these youth into the world to get a decent job and function as productive members of society: a prescription for dropping out of school, unemployment, drugs, crime and the "school-to-prison pipeline."

How ESSA Changes NCLB's Strategy on School Improvement and Accountability

When ESSA replaced NCLB, media attention was heavily focused on how much it was shifting K-12 policy-making authority from the federal government to the States and localities. However, at least equally significantly, ESSA profoundly shifts the federal approach to school improvement and accountability, adopting a virtually opposite theory of change.

NCLB had implicitly assumed that pressuring Title I schools to raise test scores at pain of being labeled failing and subjected to escalating sanctions would induce them to work harder and do whatever was necessary to dramatically improve learning. This was a false premise because typically low-achieving schools do not then have the knowledge, skills and other resources to turn themselves around on their own.⁴

By contrast, ESSA recognizes, in effect, that to turn around low-achieving schools, it's necessary for districts to collaborate with stakeholders to provide them structure, technical assistance and support for making comprehensive changes in the school's operations and help them focus on what works.

Two Programs for Turning around Low-achieving Schools

Comprehensive Support and Improvement

The "comprehensive support and improvement" program, ESEA, 1111(c)(4)(D)(d), seems to be essentially what Congress developed to replace NCLB's escalating sanctions requirements for all Title I schools failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress and the Race to the Top (RTTT) turnaround models.

⁴ Gary M. Ratner, *What's Wrong with NCLB? False Premises and Harmful Effects*, Huffington Post, (March 7, 2011). http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-m-ratner/no-child-left-behind_b_830635.html

But this program takes a radically different approach to seeking to turn around low-achieving schools. It doesn't impose rigid, increasingly harsh sanctions over seven years, as NCLB did, nor four strict turnaround models, like RTTT.

Instead, this program requires each local educational agency (LEA), normally a school district, to work with each lowest-achieving school, as identified in 1111(c)(4)(D), "in partnership with stakeholders (including principals and other school leaders, teachers, and parents) [to] locally develop and implement a comprehensive support and improvement plan for the school to improve student outcomes[.]" 1111(d)(1)(B)

So, far from the top-down, narrow, sanctions-driven approach Congress had mandated in NCLB and Race to the Top, ESSA requires districts to closely collaborate, as partners, with stakeholders to prepare and implement a comprehensive plan for improvement.

Beyond that, the plan must (a) be "based on a school-level needs assessment," (b) include information from an indicator of school quality or student success, not just test scores and graduation rates, (c) describe "resource inequities," and (d) include interventions that are supported by "evidence-based" practices, 1111(d)(1)(B)(i)-(iv) with 8101(21).

School-wide Programs

Under 1114, a local educational agency may operate a "school-wide program[] ... to upgrade the entire educational program of a school" in any school in which at least 40% of the students' families are low income, its "attendance area" has at least 40% such children, or, if less than 40%, the State has granted a waiver. 1114(a)(1).

The improvement process ESSA prescribes for school-wide programs is analogous to that for comprehensive support programs. There must be a "comprehensive plan," 1114(b), based on a "needs assessment," 1114(b)(6), and prepared with the "involvement" of stakeholders. 1114(b)(2). The plan needs to promote a richer curriculum, 1114(b)(7)(A)(ii), may include "professional development [to] improve instruction," 1114(b)(7)(A)(iii)(IV), and may provide mental health and other services to enhance students' non-academic skills, 1114(b)(7)(A)(iii)(I). The plan must be "revised as necessary based on student needs," 1114(b)(3), and, unlike comprehensive support, is to be prepared by "the school," 1114(b), rather than the LEA, 1111(d)(1)(B).

In short, with ESSA, Congress lays out two pathways for DCPS to address its fundamental problem: how to turn around its individual low-achieving schools and dramatically improve learning for their low income and minority students.

Congress' Apparent Rationale: What Works

While ESSA doesn't explicitly explain the basis for its new school improvement approach, it appears from the nature of expert advice that the Congressional education committees received and the language that Congress legislated, what the central rationale was. In ESSA, Congress was replacing the unfounded and ineffective test and punish strategy of NCLB with what research and experience have shown actually works to turn around low-achieving schools.

Thus, for example, ESSA's overall comprehensive, collaborative, supportive approach to improving low-achieving schools and many of the specific policies it endorses, are supported by the *Common Elements of Successful School Turnarounds: Research and Experience*, Gary Ratner with Monty Neill (May 14,

2010), <http://www.citizenseffectiveschools.org/successfulschoolturnarounds>. This paper was invited by the House Education & Labor Committee to prepare it for its May 19, 2010 hearing on “Research and Best Practices on Successful School Turnaround.”

<http://www.gpoaccess.gov/congress/house/education/index/html>

The paper identifies five common elements that research and experience found low-achieving schools implemented, collectively, to turn themselves around successfully: leadership, instructional improvement, curriculum, school climate and parent and community involvement and support. Under each element, it identifies specific common practices these schools instituted.

Common practices included, for example, (a) providing a leader with vision for the school to dramatically improve student learning who got buy-in from stakeholders and worked with a leadership team, including key teachers, and (b) mentoring and peer collaboration for teachers.⁵

Since a school is a complex organization of many different people — principals, teachers, staff, students, parents and involved community members — turning around a poorly functioning, low-achieving school isn’t easy. It requires significantly changing the expectations, beliefs and practices of many diverse individuals, although people normally resist having to make major changes. In short, turnaround requires changing the school’s culture.

Essential to successful turnaround is getting the support of the people whose expectations, beliefs and practices need to be changed for the school to improve — the stakeholders. For that, it’s critical to reach out to them, gain their support for a new vision for the school, and engage key representatives in leadership teams to help lead the changes.

Recommendations

How Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) Should Implement ESSA

1. State Plan – Consultation with Stakeholders

ESSA implementation requires action by both the “state educational agency” — in D.C., OSSE — and the “local educational agency,” DCPS. To provide the required “timely and meaningful consultation” on State plan preparation, 1111(a)(1)(A), I believe OSSE needs to not only timely notify teachers, principals and parent organizations of its own ideas for the plan and meet to solicit their views, but engage in serious, forthright and comprehensive discussions with them seeking to find common ground on the key matters. Where common ground isn’t reachable, OSSE decides.

⁵ See Lindsay Hodges Anderson, *New Study Examines How High Schools Can Become Exemplary*, Interview with Ronald Ferguson, Faculty Co-Chair and Director, Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University (August 11, 2010), <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/news-events/news/articles/agi-wiener-ferguson-report-aug10> (five steps “underachieving high schools” typically took to dramatically improve student learning); Cf. Linda Darling-Hammond, Ruth Chung Wei, Alethea Andree, *How High-Achieving Countries Develop Great Teachers*, Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education – Research Brief (August 2010), <http://edpolicy.stanford.edu> (ways to promote effective teacher mentoring, collaboration, professional development and preparation of curriculum and assessments).

2. School Quality or Student Success Indicator

For school improvement purposes, a broad school climate indicator is the most valuable type of indicator to satisfy ESSA’s accountability requirement that States adopt an “indicator of school quality or student success.” 1111(c)(4)(B)(v). Specifically, OSSE should select the School Climate Assessment Instrument (SCAI) from California State University, Los Angeles. Because of SCAI’s unique analytic trait structure, highest correlation with student achievement, and measurement of vital practices for successful school turnarounds, SCAI is the most informative and useful climate indicator for improving low-achieving schools.⁶

3. State Reporting

To satisfy the accountability requirement that the school quality or student success indicator be disaggregated for student sub-groups, 1111(h)(1)(C)(iv), OSSE should report the SCAI student survey results for each DCPS school in its “Annual State Report Card,” 1111(h)(1). OSSE should also administer SCAI’s teacher surveys to get invaluable information about teaching and leadership not available from students and should include that in its annual reports as information to “best provide” the public about each school’s progress. 1111(h)(1)(C)(xiv).⁷

How DCPS Should Implement ESSA

1. LEA Plan – Comprehensive and School-wide Programs, with Common Elements

Substantially improving individual schools serving disadvantaged students is ESSA’s principal strategy for achieving Title I’s purpose: “provid[ing] all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement gaps.” ESEA, 1001

DCPS should make the top priority of its LEA plan under 1112(b) implementing the “comprehensive support” and “school-wide” programs in every Title I school to which they apply, as its chief means for improving learning for its disadvantaged students.

Overall, in implementing both programs, DCPS would need to move beyond implementing system-wide policies to concentrating on what’s necessary to create the 5 common elements in individual low-achieving schools, given each school’s unique strengths, weaknesses and personalities. Further, DCPS would need to move from top-down, centralized control to consulting and partnering with stakeholders and their representatives about improvement plan content and implementation and to delegate broad authority to each turnaround school’s principal.

2. SCAI School Climate Indicator

DCPS should urge OSSE to adopt the SCAI school climate survey for students, teachers, and parents as its school quality indicator under Title I. This would be an invaluable tool for identifying each school’s strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, it would begin the turnaround process by having

⁶ Gary M. Ratner, *States’ Crucial Choice under New Federal Education Law: Selecting the Best Survey to Measure and Improve School Quality*, Huffington Post (May 25, 2016).

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-m-ratner/states-crucial-choice-und_b_10127094.html

⁷ Gary M. Ratner, *Open Letter to States and Localities: How to Implement “Every Student Succeeds” to Significantly Improve Low-achieving Schools*, Huffington Post (February 1, 2016).

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-m-ratner/open-letter-to-states-and_b_9119334.html

stakeholders collectively realize certain specific expectations, beliefs and practices that they need to change at their own school and guide them toward what to do differently.

3. Training Principals as Turnaround Leaders – ESSA Grant

To maximize the possibility that DCPS could successfully transform the necessary schools, it would need to have experienced principals with the knowledge and skills to lead these turnarounds. School leaders are the ones who particularly need to have the vision, gain buy-in, develop leadership teams, and guide the difficult, multi-year process of changing assumptions, attitudes and behaviors to turn around low-achieving schools. The U.S. has such principals, but far too few to meet the need.

Fortunately, ESEA, Title II, authorized a grant program that could begin to meet this need. Section 2243 authorizes about \$16 million/yr. which may be used, among other authorized uses, for creation of “school leader residency programs” to train and support “current principals” to lead turnarounds in schools designated for comprehensive support. Such programs may include “cohort-based activities that build effective instructional and school leadership teams and develop a school culture, design, instructional program, and professional development program focused on improving student learning.”

DCPS is eligible for such a grant by itself, or in a consortium with other districts. A grant could last as long as 7 years. DCPS should seek one.

Because establishing such a residency program to prepare turnaround leaders would be invaluable for DCPS and its low income and minority students, DCPS should do it with, or without, a federal grant.

If DCPS did not establish such a program or, if it did, during the time before a sufficient number of turnaround leaders had been trained or recruited, it would need to provide intensive mentoring, support and peer collaboration for the principals who were charged with leading turnarounds.

Expanding Principals’ Authority

For principals to effectively lead turnarounds, they need broad authority and discretion to lead the complex changes over about a 5-year period.⁸

Districts need to enable the principals to feel secure in their positions and to do everything that they can — including providing supplemental staffing, funding, technical assistance and other resources, as necessary — to help them succeed. In this regard, it would not be viable for DCPS to restrict anyone intended to be a turnaround principal to a 1-year contract; contracts should be for at least 5 years.

Collaborating With Teachers

Having teachers’ support and active participation in the changes the schools would like them to make is essential for turnarounds to succeed. Since the Washington Teachers Union (WTU) is the lawful representative of DCPS’s teachers, to promote D.C. teachers’ support for any DCPS turnaround

⁸ Full implementation of the turnaround process “can be expected to take about five years.” Forum on Educational Accountability, *A Research-and-Experience- Based Turnaround Process*, p. 4 (June 17, 2010). <http://www.citizenseffectiveschools.org/FEATurnaroundProcessProposal.pdf>

initiatives and to recognize ESSA's call for substantial State and local collaboration with stakeholders, DCPS should complete a new contract with WTU.

Conclusion – D.C. As Potential National Model

DCPS has serious problems which have not been effectively addressed by its strategy of the last 10 years. A majority of black students not only lack academic proficiency in reading and math, as measured by NAEP, but are “Below Basic” — without even “partial mastery of [the] knowledge and skills” required for their grade level. Further, there remains an extreme achievement gap between black and white students.

There's no reason to believe that perpetuation of the same strategy will lead to significantly better results in the future.

DCPS and OSSE now need to shift their strategy to concentrate on individually turning around DCPS' low-achieving schools by imaginatively and effectively implementing in each of these schools one of the two ESSA programs intended for this purpose — including needs assessment and developing a comprehensive improvement plan with stakeholders. They should use the SCAI school climate survey as an invaluable tool in helping to identify what expectations, beliefs and practices need to be changed in each school and apply for a federal grant to train experienced principals as turnaround leaders.

If DCPS and OSSE implement this article's recommendations, D.C. will be well placed to become a national model for how to improve low-achieving schools under ESSA. Whether D.C. could become such a model will depend on whether Mayor Bowser adopts this strategy and will select as the new Chancellor someone who has the vision, experience successfully leading turnaround(s), knowledge, skills and commitment to lead, guide, and support this strategy for DCPS's low-achieving schools.

Mayor Bowser and the D.C. Council sit in the catbird's seat: she, to choose DCPS's overall strategy and select the new Chancellor, the Council to approve or not the person selected.

Let us hope they make the right decisions. D.C.'s disadvantaged students and their families, especially in Wards 7 and 8, are depending on it.

Gary Ratner is the executive director and founder of Citizens for Effective Schools, www.citizenseffectiveschools.org and has a blog on education in *The Huffington Post*, www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-m-ratner/.