



pennsylvania
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Testimony
Senate Education Committee
Debbie Reeves, Acting Deputy Secretary
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Chairman Smucker, Chairman Dinniman, and members of the Senate Education Committee, my name is Debbie Reeves and I am the Acting Deputy Secretary for Administration at the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). Thank you for giving me the opportunity to submit comments regarding Senate Bill 6 – Senator Smucker's Educational Opportunity and Accountability Act. Acting Secretary Rivera sends his regards and apologies for not being able to be here in person.

I want to also thank Chairman Smucker for his efforts to move the conversation about accountability in failing schools forward.

The Department of Education shares the goal of Senate Bill 6 – to make meaningful change in low-performing schools and to ensure that every child has access to a high-quality public education. While we support the intent of this bill, we believe in a different implementation strategy.

Senate Bill 6 is ambitious and comprehensive in its recommended approach to the complex issue of addressing persistent school failure. While my testimony today will focus on a specific proposal – namely, the creation of a statewide Achievement School District – the Department would welcome the opportunity to discuss our concerns regarding other areas of the proposed legislation.

Put simply, we believe the goals of Senate Bill 6 will have the greatest chance of success if PDE – not a newly-created entity such as the Achievement School District – is empowered to serve as the lead change agent in supporting local efforts to turn around failing schools.

Since assuming his role in January, Acting Secretary Rivera has focused on creating a culture of accountability at all levels of the Department, including a renewed focus on responsiveness to students, parents, school districts, and community leaders.

Success and accountability go hand in hand, and as we invest more in our schools, we will expect more. At PDE, we believe our role is not just enforcement, but providing critical resources to support children and teachers in classrooms.

As part of our work, we are exploring models of accountability that have demonstrated effectiveness in other parts of the country. Research shows that recent turnaround success stems from common characteristics, including:

- A collaborative leadership approach with buy-in from students, parents, teachers, administrators, and the larger community;
- A clear, precise picture of the factors that are keeping individual schools from succeeding;
- A plan of action that is tailored to those identified root causes; and
- Adequate resources and support to help make that plan a reality.

PDE's commitment to accountability and successful turnaround of failing schools is coming into sharp focus in the York City School District. We are working closely with students, parents, teachers, principals, administrators, and other community members to chart a better path for York City – one that achieves both financial and academic success.

The recovery efforts in York City begin with thoughtful leadership and governance. The next step is a careful analysis of the barriers to success. As part of the state's oversight of recovery efforts in York City, a third party organization will perform a root-cause analysis that identifies core financial, academic, and climate issues. These findings will be shared with local leaders in the community and form the basis for recovery plans developed by the district.

An influx of focused resources – expertise, support, money – will help York City move from data analysis to action, with targeted interventions that address the specific needs of each school.

Accountability is at the heart of these considered interventions. The Department of Education is setting expectations and working with administrators to align with accounting and academic best practices; however, this process is school district driven. While the state provides critical resources and centralized support, improvement plans and interventions are developed and implemented through local leadership.

Other states' models, such as Tennessee, take a top down approach to improving failing schools. This can leave those who live, work, and learn in those communities feeling marginalized. Local community buy-in is critical for long-term turnaround success. Turning over authority to the state, charter operators, or a mix of the two strips away power and control from the individuals and organizations who are ultimately in the best position to affect long-term change. The top down approach also has not demonstrated significant successes.

In Tennessee, for instance, the Achievement School District recently lost three national charter operators who pulled back from plans to take over failing schools after learning they would have to take a neighborhood approach instead of a magnet approach. The movement to charterize education in Memphis has also led to community pushback.

Other states have developed models that balance state-level interventions with local control.

In Massachusetts, all school districts are classified using a five-level framework for accountability and assistance. These classifications are built using a composite Progress and Performance Index and drive the levels of state intervention and support.

The five-level classifications go hand-in-hand with a robust, tiered system of supports that benefits all districts, with a focus on serving those with the greatest need. Regional District and School Assistance Centers bring together teams of math and literacy specialists, former superintendents who serve as support facilitators, data specialists, and a professional development coordinator. These multidisciplinary teams provide coordinated assistance to districts and schools with a priority to assist low-performing schools.

Top level schools – 1 and 2 – receive incentives and recognition, while lower performing schools – Levels 3 through 5 – receive focused interventions and support.

Because the model is built on a continuum of success and needs, Level 3 schools – those teetering in between high-performing and low-performing levels – receive specific supports to help them move in the right direction. Level 3 schools use a self-assessment tool developed by Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to identify challenges and revise district and school improvement plans.

At the lowest levels – 4 and 5 – districts must work closely with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to develop and implement redesign plans. Level 5 districts – the state’s poorest performers – operate under a joint district-state governance model.

This model is designed to help districts reimagine their approach to failing schools from the ground up. No two approaches are necessarily the same, as each district plan requires input and buy-in from the state, district leaders, as well as stakeholder groups. After evaluating their unique needs, one district might opt for a charter operator, while another looks to a local teachers’ union for management. At all levels, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education works directly with districts to support, monitor, and improve their turnaround efforts.

We believe a similar approach holds promise here in Pennsylvania. Rather than the separate entity proposed in Senate Bill 6, PDE recommends creating a dedicated role within the Department to coordinate school turnaround efforts and support local, on-the-ground teams of experts, practitioners, and community leaders in recovery efforts.

A dedicated School Improvement Specialist would work with the Acting Secretary to establish a long-term plan for distressed school district recovery efforts and, ultimately, a vision for successful turnaround efforts in other low-performing schools. This role requires a visionary leader with an extensive background and knowledge of leadership, curriculum, governance, community involvement and fiscal management.

It’s a tall order – especially considering that identifying, recruiting, and retaining skilled “turnaround leaders” is a challenge shared by districts across the country. But this kind of leadership is necessary to create the lasting impact and support system our struggling schools desperately need.

The creation of a School Improvement Specialist is a necessary first step. But we know that school accountability isn’t a job for just one person. It is a shared responsibility that requires collaboration, commitment and leadership at the state, district, school, and community level.

While there are many accountability systems employed in states across the U.S., we believe the Department has a unique opportunity to create a model accountability system here in Pennsylvania. Our hope is that the lessons learned in York City and in our work with districts across the state will help PDE develop appropriate, measurable intervention strategies that keep responsibility in the hands of districts and communities.

At PDE, we want to build on what works, not what’s new, and we welcome the opportunity to work with the legislature to find a more holistic approach to address chronically underperforming schools.

Thank you for your attention, and I will be happy to address any questions you may have.