

Testimony to the Pennsylvania State Senate Education Committee

Submitted by Catherine Brown, Vice President of Education Policy, Center for American Progress

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I'm Catherine Brown, Vice President of Education Policy at the Center for American Progress. I want to thank Senator Smucker, Senator Dinniman and the members of the Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee for inviting me to join you today to discuss evidence-based measures to turn around underperforming schools. The question of how to improve Pennsylvania's most persistently failing schools is a critical one with important implications for Pennsylvania's economic competitiveness and for the life opportunities of thousands of children, largely poor and minority, throughout the state. I commend you for your leadership in this area and am grateful for the opportunity to be here today.

The Center for American Progress is an independent, nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans through bold, progressive ideas, strong leadership and concerted action. CAP is a multi-issue think tank aimed at providing actionable solutions to a wide range of policy challenges.

I'd like to start by telling you the story of Frederick Douglass High School in Baltimore, Maryland. Established in 1883, this school was the second-oldest integrated public high school in the United States. For decades, it had a reputation for excellence and the loyalty of the families it served. But by 2008, after decades of financial and administrative struggles, Frederick Douglass High had become one of the most challenged schools in the city. As featured in the HBO documentary, *Hard Times at Douglass High*, the school suffered from low academic performance and graduated less than 25 percent of its students. The former principal, Antonio Hurt, described the school at the time he took over in 2010 as "an education cemetery."

That same year, Baltimore City Public Schools launched an effort to turnaround Frederick Douglass by focusing on talent recruitment and management, school culture, and higher academic standards. The school leadership prioritized staff development and provided increased planning time for teachers and learning time for students. The principal also created a dual-enrollment program through which students could earn college credit at Baltimore City Community College.

As a result, something dramatic happened between the 2010-11 and 2011-12 school years: proficiency rates in English language arts rose from 41 percent in 2011 to 53 percent in 2012. Math proficiency rates also increased from 32 percent to 44 percent. And Douglass High's less than 25 percent graduation rate became history: in 2014, the graduation rate was 57 percent. While the school still has room for improvement, this anecdote illustrates that within a very short time period it is possible to change the trajectory of a school and in doing so, the life prospects for its students.

Frederick Douglass High is one among many such examples of similar efforts around the country. And while many turnaround schools have taken different approaches and operate in different contexts, some common themes have emerged.

First, research suggests that school turnaround can't be done on the cheap. When districts and schools are given targeted funding to improve their lowest performing schools, they are better positioned to achieve significant change. According to a study released in January by the Council of Great City Schools, about 70 percent of low-performing urban school districts that received School Improvement Grants – federal funds targeted for school turnaround – over the past three years have shown progress.¹ Data from the U.S. Department of Education illustrates the same point: approximately two-thirds of schools receiving SIG funds showed improvements in math proficiency rates, with a significant number of those schools improving at least 10 percentage points, and a similar percentage showed improvements in reading.²

Additional resources for chronically failing schools are especially important in Pennsylvania because your school system is the most inequitably funded in the country. Here, the wealthiest school districts spend a full third more per pupil than districts with the highest poverty rates. This discrepancy amounts to more than \$3,000 per pupil, which is more than twice the national average and 15 percentage points greater than the gap in the state with the next most inequitably funded system, Vermont.³ In Philadelphia, where many schools targeted for turnaround are located, schools receive a full \$10,000 less than the highest spending district in the state, Lower Merion⁴.

Money alone won't lead to better student outcomes, but evidence on the power of fair funding is clear: investments in low-income schools produce significant positive outcomes for economically disadvantaged students. According to a recent National Bureau of Economic Research study, "For poor children, a 20 percent increase in per-pupil spending each year for all 12 years of public school is associated with nearly a full additional year of completed education, 25 percent higher earnings, and a 20 percentage-point reduction in the annual incidence of poverty in adulthood."⁵ A 2014 study of the Massachusetts education system found that school finance reforms that increased funding and directed more funding to the highest-need districts "led to a substantial increase in student performance across all districts."⁶ Yet, the U.S. is one of only three OECD countries to spend less educating poor students than affluent ones.⁷

We applaud Governor Wolf's commitment to working with the legislature to develop a weighted student funded formula.⁸

In order to achieve results, additional investments in school turnaround should be coupled with aggressive and sometimes disruptive changes. Research suggests that schools that successfully turned around addressed the problem as a whole, rather than tinkering around the margins. "Implementing stand-alone programs that target a specific subset of the student population tend to have a limited impact and cannot revive a struggling school," said researchers at MDRC in an evaluation of school turnaround efforts.⁹

A growing body of research illustrates the potential power of aggressive, comprehensive action to turnaround persistently failing schools. A 2014 Harvard University study conducted in 20 public schools in Houston examined the extent to which low-performing traditional public schools that implemented the practices of high-performing charter schools improved student achievement. The best practices included (1) recruiting and retaining effective leaders and teachers; (2) increasing learning time; (3) differentiating among students; (4) making data-driven decisions; and (5) implementing a culture of high expectations.¹⁰

The study found that infusing these best practices had a statistically significant effect on low-performing traditional public schools in math achievement. In elementary schools, it was enough to “eliminate the racial achievement gap in math in Houston elementary schools in approximately three years.”¹¹ In high schools, the effect narrowed the achievement gap in math by 50 percent over the length of the study.¹²

Nearly a decade before, New York City transformed some its lowest performing, most dysfunctional large high schools into 100 small, nonselective ones. This approach realized significant improvements in graduation and college-going rates at a lower *cost per graduate* than the high schools in the control group.¹³ The researchers concluded that “successful system-wide reform through the creation of new schools is possible and that comprehensive whole-school reforms can turn around struggling high schools, improve student achievement, and put more students on a successful path to graduation.”¹⁴

In addition to taking a comprehensive approach, research unequivocally suggests that schools that replaced ineffective leaders showed the greatest gains in student learning. A study commissioned by the Wallace Foundation found “no documented instances of school turnaround without an effective principal.” Indeed, leadership is second only to effective classroom instruction as the most important in-school factor affecting student achievement. At the same time, research also supports investing in developing current staff to increase their effectiveness.

Other research-based practices include a strong focus on school culture and nonacademic supports for disadvantaged students. Schools that most successfully turn around work purposefully and deliberately to create collaborative, positive, and enriching school cultures with high expectations for all students.

The specific examples of successful school turnaround efforts that I described today all occurred in traditional public schools. I note this because at CAP we believe – based on the analysis that we have conducted and the rigorous studies that we have read – that school turnaround is absolutely possible and indeed, must be undertaken, by traditional public schools. Converting failing schools to charter schools has shown success too, but most of the successful school turnaround efforts we’ve studied occurred in traditional public schools. Therefore, it does not appear to be a pre-requisite to convert a failing school to a charter in order to realize improvement. Chronic failure and dramatic success is occurring today all over the country within different governance structures. But the combination of a comprehensive and aggressive approach coupled with significant resources can result in good schools regardless of the context.

In closing, I would like to thank you for your attention today and let you know that the Center for American Progress is happy to provide any information you might need as you move forward. This work

is challenging but it is also crucial for providing a pathway to the middle class for future generations of Pennsylvanians.

Endnotes

¹ Council of Great City Schools, "School Improvement Grants: Progress Report from America's Great City Schools," February 2015, available at:

<http://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/87/SIG%20Report%202015.pdf>.

² U.S. Department of Education, "School Improvement Grant (SIG) National Assessment Results Summary: Cohorts 1 and 2" (Washington, DC: February 14, 2014) available at: <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/assessment-results-cohort-1-2-sig-schools.pdf>

³ Emma Brown, PA. Schools are the nation's most inequitable. The new governor wants to fix that," *The Washington Post*, April 22, 2015, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/pa-schools-are-the-nations-most-inequitable-the-new-governor-wants-to-fix-that/2015/04/22/3d2f4e3e-e441-11e4-81ea-0649268f729e_story.html.

⁴ Pennsylvania Department of Education, "Annual Finance Report data: Summary Level" (2005-2006).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Phuong Nguyen-Hoang and John Yinger, "Education Finance Reform, Local Behavior, and Student Performance in Massachusetts," *Journal of Education Finance*, 39 (4), Spring 2014: 297-322.

⁷ "Education at a Glance 2013, OECD Indicators," available at: <http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag2013%20%28eng%29-FINAL%2020%20June%202013.pdf>

⁸ "Governor Wolf's 2015-16 Proposed Education Budget—Fast Facts," available at http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/news_and_media/7234/p/1089220 (last accessed May 2015).

⁹ William Corrin, "Reforming Underperforming High Schools" (New York: MDRC, 2013), available at http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/High_School_Reform_030513_0.pdf.

¹⁰ Roland G. Fryer Jr., "Injecting Charter School Best Practices into Traditional Public Schools: Evidence from Field Experiments" (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2014), available at http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/fryer/files/2014_injecting_charter_school_best_practices_into_traditional_public_schools.pdf.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Rebecca Unterman, "Headed to College: The Effects of New York City's Small High Schools of Choice on Postsecondary Enrollment" (New York: MDRC, 2014), available at http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Headed_to_College_PB.pdf.

¹⁴ Ibid.