

Testimony for the Pennsylvania House and Senate Education Committees

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and Turnaround Schools

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**Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools - The Bottom 5%**

Respectfully Submitted by

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Thank you for this opportunity to provide a working perspective on the very challenging process of turning around extremely low performing public schools in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

My name is Richard Wertheimer. I am testifying today as a recently retired 35-year public school educator who spent his career working with low achieving schools as they attempted to "turn themselves around."

I am not representing a non-profit organization, or a policy group, or an educational institution, or a teachers' association or a charter school. I am here today because I believe I can offer insight into the nature of Pennsylvania's bottom 5% schools, the greatest challenges to "turning them around" and what they would look like if they became quality educational institutions.

Since 1975 I have worked in public education in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania as a:

- Mathematics Teacher at Upper St. Clair HS, Brashear HS and Peabody HS,
- Mathematics Supervisor for all Pittsburgh Public High Schools,
- Education Technology Coordinator for all Pittsburgh Public Schools,
- Member of the Pittsburgh and Pennsylvania Federation of Teachers,
- Member of the Pittsburgh Administrators Association,
- Co-Founder, CEO and Principal of City Charter High School in Pittsburgh,
- Adjunct Faculty Member at the University of Pittsburgh School of Education,
- Parent of two children who graduated from urban public schools, and as
- A 35-year resident of Wilkinsburg, PA.

Educating impoverished children has been my life's work.

In my testimony today, I want to talk about four simple, yet very important truths that seem to get lost in the conversation about our lowest performing public schools. These four truths are:

- 1. THE BOTTOM 5% SCHOOLS IN PENNSYLVANIA WORK WITH STUDENTS THAT ARE DEVASTATED BY LIFE'S CIRCUMSTANCES.**
- 2. TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE NOT DESIGNED TO ADDRESS SUCH A NEEDY POPULATION.**
- 3. WE KNOW WHAT SUCCESSFUL "TURNAROUND" SCHOOLS LOOK LIKE.**
- 4. THE WORD "TURNAROUND" IS THE WRONG WORD.**

**1. THE BOTTOM 5% SCHOOLS IN PENNSYLVANIA WORK WITH STUDENTS THAT ARE DEVASTATED BY LIFE'S CIRCUMSTANCES.**

Students who attend the lowest achieving schools are suffering from poverty, family disintegration, mental, physical, and emotional health deficits, poor nutrition, lack of hope and lack of successful role models.

These students are often living in conditions that one might compare to a war zone – daily gunfire, violence and crime. Many are suffering from depression, anxiety and Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Students at the lowest achieving schools feel abandoned.

Let me provide you with an informal data study we did at City Charter High School in Pittsburgh. Upon opening the school in 2002 it became apparent that our student body was at risk due to many of the factors I mentioned above. A review of our student database came up with the following statistics:

- 75% of our students did not have a father at home.
- 25% of our students did not live with their mother or father. They lived with a relative, often a grandmother.
- 4% of our student body (after the 2008 economic downturn) were homeless.
- 65% received a Free/Reduced Lunch.
- 14% had Special Needs.

City Charter High School has two full time social workers, one full time nurse and four administrators (two with counseling degrees) that work almost exclusively with the mental, physical and emotional needs of our students. Students have the ability to avail themselves of the support staff as needed. Here is what we found.

Close to 70% of all students see the social workers more than once during the year. Many see them once a week. And a small group of students see them daily. In addition to our social workers dealing with the usual adolescent issues (bullying, peer pressure, struggling with parents/adults, managing a sibling and depression,) much of the social worker's time is spent helping students deal with sexual abuse, physical abuse, self abuse, death of a sibling or relative, drug addiction, mental illness, personality disorders and homelessness.

The following table lists the poorest 5% of Pennsylvania school districts (based on 2014 US Department of Education Census poverty data by LEA). These PA school districts are a combination of urban and rural, but they have one thing in common. They are all post-industrial centers that typify a rust belt scenario. This scenario began in the 1970's with the downfall of the steel industry. It is all too familiar - loss of jobs, loss of businesses, loss of families who move away, empty homes, the proliferation of drugs and illegal activity... and failing schools.

We are now 36 years removed from 1980. We have two generations of children who have grown up in communities without jobs, without intact families and with a severe drop in social services, community organizations and extended family support. These children live in communities where there is a Dollar Store, a pizza parlor, a gas station, possibly a library and a church. That's it.

So what are the assumptions we should make when designing a school for students who attend the bottom 5% of the schools in the Commonwealth? The following are based on my experiences in schools that work with the poorest and most needy students in the Pittsburgh area.

	Name of Local Educational Agency (LEA)	Ages 5 - 17 Poverty Percentage
1	Duquesne City School District	49.28%
2	Clairton City School District	48.19%
3	Reading School District	48.03%
4	Sto-Rox School District	46.87%
5	Wilkinsburg Borough School District	42.42%
6	Salisbury-Elk Lick School District	41.90%
7	Greater Johnstown School District	41.05%
8	Harrisburg City School District	40.17%
9	York City School District	39.24%
10	Lebanon School District	36.30%
11	Alquippa School District	35.99%
12	Philadelphia City School District	35.82%
13	Chester-Upland School District	35.78%
14	Farrell Area School District	35.16%
15	Carbondale Area School District	34.69%
16	Shenandoah Valley School District	34.31%
17	McKeesport Area School District	33.91%
18	Erie City School District	33.69%
19	Sharon City School District	33.41%
20	Steeltown-Highspire School District	32.92%
21	Allentown City School District	31.97%
22	Big Beaver Falls Area School District	31.93%
23	New Kensington-Arnold School District	31.88%
24	Albert Gallatin Area School District	30.92%
25	New Castle Area School District	30.75%

- Students in deep poverty will not respond to adults unless they trust them, respect them and are treated in a caring manner by them.
- Students whose families have a history of failure in schools (drop outs) live in fear of failure, embarrassment and feelings of inadequacy.
- Schools cannot rely on home for support – not due to lack of concern or love or desire to help, but due to a lack of resources, time and availability. Often the single parent or guardian is working multiple jobs to make ends meet and has little time to provide necessary school support.
- School must be a safe zone – emotionally, physically, mentally and educationally.
- Mental, physical and emotional support must be provided on site in real time.
- Students need consistent adult relationships over extended periods of time.
- Students must learn how to interact, collaborate and rely on other people including their peers.
- Students must learn how to self advocate and take ownership of learning.
- Students need and want structure and clear directions. Nothing should be left to the imagination.
- Learning must be relevant to the students either through active learning scenarios or because a clear connection is made between what they are doing and jobs or college. A perfect example is obtaining a MS Office Certification.

In essence I am describing a public school, not simply as an accredited institution of learning, but as a safe haven that meets the physical, emotional, behavioral and cognitive needs of all children.

**2) TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE NOT DESIGNED TO ADDRESS SUCH A NEEDY POPULATION.**

Traditional schools in America are based on a factory model of education that teaches the basic skills believed necessary to empower students to continue into college or employment. Their focus is on content, not process. The focus is on Reading and Mathematics, not the individual needs of the child. The focus is on teacher accountability, not teacher empowerment.

Consider the traditional elementary school that you and I attended. We worked in a classroom with 25 students and one teacher. We sat in rows, with everyone learning at the same speed, at the same level and with the same expectations. Our teachers taught us to read, write and do basic arithmetic. Most of the students came from the same neighborhood, were the same race or ethnicity and exclusively spoke English. And there were no special services for a student whose family was struggling or had special learning needs or couldn't sit still.

Consider the high school that you and I attended: 7 periods a day, 45 minutes per period, an academic track and a vocational track. The school was built on a factory model. Homework was assigned and completed at home. We had different teachers every year and seldom built a relationship with them. It was up to the student alone to rise to the challenge and succeed. And more often than not, it was the parents, the community and the common support of friends and family that would not allow students to fail.

How can a school that is focused on content, a one-size-fits-all school, a school where teachers present information and students passively absorb it, possibly attend to the needs of a student body whose life experience is one of poverty, abuse and lost hopes? It can't.

When districts attempt to "reform" their schools to help students achieve, modest changes are made that don't come close to meeting the needs of the students. It's as if we believe that an after school tutoring program, or a Saturday makeup class, or an I-Pad will change a student's belief as to whether they can achieve. Just the mere fact that a student is told they should attend after school tutoring makes the at-risk child believe they are deficient intellectually.

In the bottom 5% schools, students often enroll with little or no preschool experience, not knowing their alphabet or basic counting. Poorly skilled students quickly become frustrated by their lack of success. Teachers become frustrated at their lack of success with their students. Neither the teachers nor the students are succeeding. Overall morale is extremely low.

Staff is all too aware that the students' needs are far greater than what a public school was ever intended to provide.

Veteran teachers in successful high poverty schools often describe how their students want, in fact almost demand a relationship with them. I've heard the following comment hundreds of times during my career:

*"What these children need is love, discipline, support and consistency... It is not unusual for my students to call me 'Dad' or 'Grandpa'."*

Traditional schools are set up as meritocracies. If you work hard, buckle down and pay attention you will succeed. We rank order QPAs. We let the top students speak at graduation. We split the school up and track the brighter kids into special classes or nicer schools and track the "slower kids or bad kids" into separate classes or low achieving schools. Achievement then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

As traditional schools in poor neighborhoods slide into mediocrity, two things happen. First, students learn to accept low expectations, bad behavior and failure. Second, failure permeates the school and eventually drags the staff down to the point of despair.

The staff feels abandoned just like the students. And since the teachers get blamed for low test scores, they often leave the school or leave education entirely.

### **3) WE KNOW WHAT SUCCESSFUL "TURNAROUND" SCHOOLS LOOK LIKE.<sup>1</sup>**

Many people are shocked when I tell them that we already know how to run successful schools that serve at-risk students from impoverished communities. Such schools exist in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, across our state and our country. Successful "Turnaround" schools share a common "culture" that is supportive, accountable and passionate about student success. The following aspects of school culture, in one form or another, are common to these schools.

- **Teachers Are Intensely Committed to Student Success** - Teachers are prepared with dynamic, powerful lessons within their classrooms and are expert at classroom management and instructional methodology. There is a constant focus on student learning throughout the school. Teachers work collaboratively and reflectively to deliver excellence in the classroom.
- **Teachers Stay with Students for Repeated Years** - Looping is the concept of teachers working with the same students for multiple years. It provides a continuum of service that allows for trust, understanding of learning styles and meeting individual student needs. It increases accountability on

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from work done by Schools That Can - Milwaukee  
<http://www.stcmilwaukee.org/why-education/what-is-a-high-quality-school/>  
and Research Conducted at City Charter High School - Pittsburgh  
<http://cityhigh.org/research/>.

students, teachers and principals. Looping has a profound effect on teachers' content knowledge, pedagogical skills, awareness of learning styles and insight into early warning signs of student disengagement leading to quick and timely interventions.

- **Time on Task** - The academic day includes a minimum of 90 minutes of mathematics and 90 minutes of English Language Arts instruction. The school calendar and day are often extended. Students are expected to be on task at all the time. Some schools use a trimester schedule allowing for year round schooling.
- **Academic Intensity** - Schools incorporate a more intense academic approach geared toward dramatically improving students academically. Regardless of the age of the students, there is an intensely rigorous approach to academics driving students to achieve above grade level, no excuses. School leaders and teachers are relentlessly committed to achieving dramatic academic gains with their students and constantly agonize over results.
- **Sweat the Details** – Students must comply with the following:
  - Be on Time for School and Class. Leaders and teachers relentlessly enforce punctuality and take issue with any tardy for any reason.
  - Adhere to the Dress Code. Leaders and teachers relentlessly enforce dress code and uniform requirements, paying attention to the smallest detail.
  - Complete all homework daily.
  - Be silent when others are speaking.
  - Be on task and engaged in academic work at all times especially when teachers, leaders, or peers request it.
  - Sit up or stand in a respectful and appropriate manner.
  - Refrain from “tisking,” “eye rolling,” or any verbal or non-verbal disrespect of teachers.

The school has a consistent and diligent system in place to positively reward students who follow these expectations and to enforce consequences when expectations are not met.

- **Focus on Student Performance Data** - Leaders and teachers regularly use data to review student progress and to drive instructional decisions for individual students, both on the micro level with daily checks for understanding and on the macro level with interim assessments. Leaders and teachers accept responsibility for student achievement and are persistently designing new ways to support students who are not reaching benchmarks and challenge those students who are.
- **Joy** - The school is filled with thematic motivational signs and slogans; teachers and school leaders use chants, poetry, recitation, singing and other

tools to bring a sense of joy to the learning process. School-wide management tools are used to positively frame expectations. Teachers and students are happy to be at school. Students are taught that the pursuit of academic success and success in life, while not always easy, is a joyful process. During the school day, teachers smile and regularly direct appropriate expressions of love and kindness toward students.

- **Student Attendance** - All attendance is taken and recorded in the school office within 60 minutes of the start of the school day. When a student is absent, the absence is challenged. All school office personnel and leadership team members share this mentality. Unless the illness is severe, a student must be in school. If there has been no notification to the school, the school leadership team takes action to get the student to school.
- **Alumni are Tracked** - Leaders track 100% of the school's alumni as a measure of the school's success and as a means for offering students continued support through high school into college.
- **Open and Transparent Communication** - Leaders regularly provide open, transparent, respectful and honest communication to all stakeholders.
- **Mental/Physical/Emotional Health Services** - A full time Nurse, Social Workers, Title I support and Teaching Assistants in every classroom are integral to creating a supportive educational environment. The school takes a mental and emotional health approach to behavioral issues and discipline. Behavioral incidents are opportunities to connect with students, teach appropriate behaviors, develop alternative strategies and build emotional strength.
- **Teachers are organized into Collaborative Teams** - Empowering teachers, developing teachers and building school leadership is a key component of the schools HR plan. The same commitment that is used to support and develop students should be made to support and develop teachers.
- **Teacher compensation is tied to Professional Proficiency** - Compensation is dependent on attainment and proficiency in well-articulated Professional Standards. The program for professional growth must be well communicated, consistent, followed with great diligence and rewards must be commensurate with professional attainment. Salary is not dependent upon time served. Compensation should be at prevailing rates with competitive benefits.
- **Selfless Leadership whose role is to empower staff, students and parents** - School leaders should be experienced, veteran educators who



understand all aspects of school operation and education quality. Their job is empowerment.

- **The Principal must be considered the Educational Leader of the school, not simply as the building administrator or disciplinarian** – School leaders must be experienced and successful teachers/educators in order to gain the confidence of staff, parents and students.
- **Workforce Orientation** – There should exist constant reinforcement of proper workforce readiness including behaviors, habits, attitudes and metacognitive control.

Quality schools (that work with high poverty students across America) can be public or private, union or non-union, charter or independent, secular or religious. What is common to all successful schools is they are built on a student-centered culture and a success-at-all-costs approach. The modern successful school must have a student-centered culture if it hopes to address the circumstances that exist in the toughest schools in the poorest communities.

#### **4) IT IS LIKELY THAT THE WORD “TURNAROUND” IS THE WRONG WORD.**

My 35 years of experience in Pittsburgh schools has led me to believe that it is nearly impossible to reform an existing school and make it successful. As I have stated, traditional schools are not configured to meet the needs of the poorest and most at-risk students and communities. The following is a list of barriers to “turning around” a traditional low achieving school:

- Often teachers in the lowest achieving schools have little or no experience with poverty, students of color or failing communities.
- Staff attitudes are often entrenched in a belief that “what worked for me should work for my students”.
- Existing policies, handbooks, curriculum guides and “ways of doing things” are deeply embedded in the school’s operation.
- Politically, existing adversarial relationships (union vs. administration, administration vs. school board, educators vs. community, school staff vs. central office staff) are hard to overcome.
- Past issues pertaining to trust, honesty and working as a team are often impossible to overcome.
- Pressure to provide proficient test scores may trump any local effort to help students grow and gain confidence as learners.
- Leadership turnover can destroy any efforts for reform.
- The existing physical plant may be limited in terms of modern school methodologies.

So I would suggest that you cannot “turn around” an existing 5% low achieving school if you assume the building, the staff and the leadership remain. This is why so many of our previous reform or “turn around” efforts have failed. The more appropriate word to use might be “recreate” or “reimagine” or “startup.”

### **FINAL THOUGHTS**

For a number of years, the federal government has allocated 4% of the states’ Title I allocations to be used for School Improvement Grants (SIGs). Pennsylvania has used this money to provide the lowest achieving schools (that submit applications) with grants to improve their program and student achievement. The SIG program has not worked. The lowest 5% schools remain the same year after year with little improvement. In fact, many of the lowest schools don’t even apply.

I would suggest the problem with the current SIG program is that both the state department of education and the local school districts continue to work around the edges. The proposed changes to these Title I schools leave the traditional school intact. They offer remedial fixes – after school programs, modest changes in curriculum, professional development or a few more Title I paraprofessionals. An influx of money that puts in place remedial programs does not work.

It is the culture of the school that has to change. Changing the culture – the values, attitudes, beliefs and customs – of a traditional school is next to impossible. In 35 years, I’ve only seen this done by the most charismatic and talented leaders often working in relative autonomy from their districts. This is truly rare, and often fails after the leader retires or moves on.

In my opinion, the lowest 5% schools cannot be fixed. They need to be closed, redesigned, staffed from scratch and opened as new schools. Here are two strategies to consider as Pennsylvania contemplates how to address the ESSA goals regarding “Turnaround Schools.”

#### **Strategy One: Statewide Competitive Request for Proposals (RFP)**

The first strategy is to use the newly allowed 7% SIG allocation as an incentive to encourage low achieving schools to be reinvented. In this strategy, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) would send a Request for Proposals (RFP) to the lowest 5% schools and their districts. The RFP would explicitly require applicants to spell out their brand new school design, staffing model and achievement goals. Potential applicants would be required to partner with a successful Title I school (public or charter) that works with a similar high poverty population. The RFP would be designed to force applicants to create a new school model based on quality school attributes, experienced/proven leadership and the district’s willingness to commit resources and support to the effort. Sign offs from all stakeholders (the school board, union, administration and community) would have to be included in district proposals. Grants to the winning proposals should be substantial (I would

suggest 5 year, \$2.5 million grants.) The grants would be used for staff development, curriculum development, development of forward thinking student and staff handbooks, leadership development, creation of a robust student support team, educational technology and improvements to the physical plant. In addition, monies must be allocated annually for data collection and evaluation. This would allow the state to help create model "redesigned" schools that have a record of achievement. Future RFPs could be used to scale successes to additional schools and districts.

### **Strategy Two: Use the Charter School Law**

The Pennsylvania Charter School Law was created to encourage local education entrepreneurs to create quality public schools based on innovative practices. Using this strategy, PDE would encourage local school districts to put out an RFP to charter local failing schools. The charter school approach eliminates many of the barriers to starting a school from scratch. Since the school would be brand new, it would have an entire new faculty, a program that is aligned with the needs of poor at-risk students and a culture that is aligned with best practices in successful schools. The charter group should either have a proven track record, or it should put forth a plan that is based on a proven program with documented success. This strategy allows for a quick restart for these schools. Grants from the state (through the SIG program) would help to provide the necessary resources (as mentioned in the first strategy) to build a quality school. Another benefit to this approach is that five-year charters allow for much closer analysis of achievement, increased accountability and recourse if the charter needs to be revoked.

In conclusion, let me state unequivocally that we know what a "Turnaround" school looks like. We do not have to reinvent the wheel. Both strategies put forth necessitate that the design teams visit successful schools across the Commonwealth and the country that work with the most needy and at-risk students. They must learn from successful models and build on proven best practices. They must understand that it takes 3-5 years to solidify a turnaround school and create a culture of success. They must implement a school culture that is student-centered, supportive of teachers and driven to succeed.

The question is not whether we can do this. The question is whether we are willing to change, whether we are generous enough to provide adequate resources, and whether we have the passion and desire to save the lives of the most needy children in Pennsylvania.