

SUCCESS FOR EACH STUDENT

Achieving success for each and every student is an elusive goal, particularly among schools addressing the needs of underserved, underperforming students. There is no silver bullet, but there are key characteristics that often contribute to success. Successful schools focus on elements they can control that have impact, and apply these levers for change to the fullest, from a focus on high expectationsⁱ, to creating strong principalsⁱⁱ, to increasing capacity among students, teachers and staffⁱⁱⁱ. There is also a call to engage more aggressive federal intervention and structure to drive improvements^{iv}.

Research that compares schools that are succeeding with challenged students to those that are delivering average results finds that leading factors in success include a focus on preparing students for life, college and careers, rather than solely driving towards graduation requirements^v. These schools focus on academics, rather than solely rules. The administration and teachers at these schools are engaged in assessments and create new ones to help improve learning, rather than solely tolerating the requirement to do so. These schools encourage students to take on academic challenges, rather than keep challenging classes out of reach for most. School administration and teachers have integrated early warning systems, enabling them to take responsibility for struggling students.

An examination of successful middle schools that had improved the performance of previously low-performing students found a similar focus on high expectations for all students^{vi}. These schools reward students and teachers for commitment to high expectations by recognizing their efforts and integrating such recognition in the schools' culture. Underscoring findings of other research, these successful schools focused on the individual student and provided targeted interventions and extra services to ensure that no child slipped through the cracks. These schools also fully utilize data, training staff to use such assessments to make meaningful improvements.

Other characteristics of successful schools include setting high expectations for all students, fostering collaboration among teachers, encouraging teacher development and capacity building—utilizing data and teacher input to do so, and intervening as necessary to provide services that meet the needs of individual students (from study skills workshops to an extended school day).

An examination of outcomes for Latino students in Arizona not only reiterates the need for teachers and administrators to take responsibility for student outcomes, but also highlights the value of strong principals who can serve as “turnaround specialists,” calling for greater empowerment of principals. While a strong principal is key, so is a culture that embraces collaborative solutions, sharing responsibility for school improvement among teachers and staff, rather than a few top administrators. There is also discipline in the approach to finding solutions that work; these schools find a program with potential, and stick with it^{vii}.

Taking a step back, the massive challenge of addressing America’s lowest-performing high schools with effective options for all students – either by transforming them, closing them, or replacing them with multiple other schools – requires the involvement of stakeholders and policymakers at all levels. A recent publication calls for a systemic effort, led by states and districts, based on detailed information about student and school performance, and tailored to meet the individual needs of students and schools^{viii}. Success will depend upon increased capacity at the state and district levels to support and manage these efforts. In this context, the goal of federal policy should be to leverage and support a systemic approach for addressing the problems in the nation’s lowest-performing high schools.

Changes would potentially include improving national indicators for measuring high school performance, creating more comprehensive data, and ensuring that these accountability systems respond to the lowest-performing high schools. For example, this might involve establishing a benchmark, such as a graduation rate below 50 percent, to identify chronically low-performing high schools that need the greatest attention and new approaches. Such changes to federal action would, of course, require increased investment in America’s capacity to address the lowest-performing high schools^{ix}.

ⁱ Education Trust. (2005) [*Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground: How Some High Schools Accelerate Learning for Struggling Students*](#). Washington, DC: The Education Trust.

ⁱⁱ Waits, M, Campbell, H., Gau, R., Jacobs, G., Rex, T., and Hess, R. (2006) [*Why Some Schools with Latino Children Beat the Odds...and Others Don't*](#). Arizona Board of Regents.

ⁱⁱⁱ Picucci, A., Brownson, A., Kahlert, R., & Sobel, A. (2002). [*Driven to succeed: High performing, high poverty turnaround middle schools. Volume I: Cross-case analysis of high-performing, high poverty, turnaround middle schools*](#). (Report No. UD 035 515). University of Texas, Austin, TX: Charles A. Dana Center. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED476107).

^{iv} Alliance for Excellent Education. (2009) [*Action Required: Addressing the Nation's Lowest-Performing High Schools*](#)

^v Education Trust. (2005) [*Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground: How Some High Schools Accelerate Learning for Struggling Students*](#). Washington, DC: The Education Trust.

^{vi} Picucci, A., Brownson, A., Kahlert, R., & Sobel, A. (2002). [*Driven to succeed: High performing, high poverty turnaround middle schools. Volume I: Cross-case analysis of high-performing, high poverty, turnaround middle schools*](#). (Report No. UD 035 515). University of Texas, Austin, TX: Charles A. Dana Center. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED476107).

^{vii} Waits, M, Campbell, H., Gau, R., Jacobs, G., Rex, T., and Hess, R. (2006) [*Why Some Schools with Latino Children Beat the Odds...and Others Don't*](#). Arizona Board of Regents.

^{viii} Alliance for Excellent Education. (2009) [*Action Required: Addressing the Nation's Lowest-Performing High Schools*](#)

^{ix} Alliance for Excellent Education. (2009) [*Action Required: Addressing the Nation's Lowest-Performing High Schools*](#)