

Escalated Interventions

Ideally, school improvement efforts — especially those grounded in evidence-based strategies addressing the types of challenges highlighted in other advocacy guides in this series — will result in substantial improvement in student outcomes. History shows, however, that this doesn't always happen. Structural issues, from the rules and operating procedures established by the district to the composition of the school's leadership team or staff, can make necessary changes in practice near impossible. Changing those structural conditions can be politically difficult.

In recent years, federal policymakers have tried to prompt change and give cover to state and local leaders to act on those tough issues. Between 2010 and 2015, states and districts receiving federal school improvement grants (SIG) were required to make [significant changes](#) to the operation of the school through actions ranging from replacing the principal to taking the school out of district control entirely. Although these approaches led to [improvement in some](#) schools and districts, results have been, at best, mixed. Moreover, there has been significant and legitimate critique that these efforts have not fit the actual needs of the schools and their communities — and that decisions about what to do regarding low performance were often made behind closed doors, with no input from the people most affected by them.

The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides state and district leaders far more flexibility in how to approach school improvement, creating an opportunity for leaders to implement interventions that best fit each school's context and needs. But this flexibility also carries the very serious risk of inaction if — and inevitably, in some places, when — improvement efforts don't actually improve student outcomes, leaving young people to languish in schools that continue to underserve them year after year.

If several years of efforts yield, or have yielded, no improvement, what should the state or district do?

Advocates have a key role to make sure there's an answer to this question — and to ensure that answer is informed by the perspectives of the students, families, and communities it affects.

This guide equips advocates with evidence on some of the most common strategies for escalating interventions that your state or district might consider. These include **changes in staffing** — replacing the principal, and in some cases, a substantial number of teachers — as well as **changes in governance**, such as charter conversion or state receivership. While none of these changes guarantee improvement, they can make it easier to improve school culture, working conditions, and instructional quality. This guide also addresses **school closure** — a strategy districts sometimes use for financial reasons, or to improve achievement for students who used to attend the closed school.

This guide highlights what each escalated intervention strategy entails, what problems it seeks to solve, and what the research says. And because the success of each of these strategies is contingent on the knowledge, skill, and capacity of the [people making the change](#), this guide also suggests key questions to ask leaders if your state or district is considering any of these changes.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT ANY SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INTERVENTION

1. What interventions has state or district leaders tried in the past and what were the results?
2. Why do state or district leaders think the proposed intervention will work?
3. How will state or district leaders plan for and implement the intervention?
4. How will state or district leaders know if this approach is working?
5. What will state or district leaders do if it doesn't work, and when?

What does ESSA require?

Although ESSA gives states lots of leeway in how to approach improvement, the law does require additional action when schools do not improve. Specifically, ESSA requires that:

- If a Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) school does not meet exit criteria within four years, the state must take “more rigorous action.” (1111(d)(3)(A)(i)(I))
- If a Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI) School does not improve within a district-determined number of years, the district must take additional action. (1111(d)(2)(B)(v))
- If an Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI) school fails to meet exit criteria within a state-determined number of years, it must be reclassified and treated like a Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) school. (1111(d)(3)(A)(i)(II))

Staffing Changes

What is it? Staffing change refers to replacing the principal and, in some cases, also a substantial percentage of teachers within a school. Done right, such staffing changes can help create a stronger, more growth-oriented school leadership team that can catalyze and accelerate improvements to school climate, classroom instruction, and student outcomes.

What problem is it trying to solve? [Research shows](#) that quality school leadership is key to school improvement. If a principal who has been at a school for several years has not been able to create a collaborative culture that sets teachers and students up for success, it may be time to bring in a new leader. What’s more, making big changes to practice can be challenging if the practitioners are invested in the status quo, or if they don’t have adequate skill or support.

What does it entail? Staffing changes involve the first — and sometimes both — of the following actions on the part of state or district leaders:

- Replacing the school principal and giving the new principal more autonomy
- Replacing both the principal and many teachers within the school. State or district leaders can:
 - Require the school to replace a specific percentage of teachers (e.g., half or more).
 - Require all teachers to reapply for their jobs, not setting specific limits on the percentage of teachers who should be replaced.

What does the research say?

Research is clear that strong school leadership and high-quality teaching are critical to student achievement. Talented school leaders have the [greatest impact in the highest-needs schools](#). Moreover, schools are more likely to close achievement gaps if they have a [leader who is explicitly focused on equity](#).

Research specifically on **principal replacement** is quite limited, in part because low-performing schools have such high rates of principal turnover that it’s hard to study the impacts of purposeful replacement. However, that said, research shows:

- Without talented leadership, a school a school is very [unlikely](#) to improve; and,
- [Studies](#) of improvement efforts in several states also suggest that districts struggled to find principals qualified to lead improvement efforts, especially in rural areas.

There is more research on the effectiveness of replacing the principal and a substantial number of teachers. Low-performing schools that replaced the principal and half or more of their teachers were [more likely to show improvement](#) in student achievement. Research also shows:

- **Quality matters.** Just shuffling low-performing teachers from one school to another (as was the case in at least one Detroit school where the applicant pool consisted entirely of teachers fired from other turnaround schools) is unlikely to make a big enough difference to the quality of instruction that students receive. While teachers tend to teach better in a supportive, collaborative environment, improving their practice takes time, and one goal of changing the teaching force is to spare students that teacher learning curve.
- **Teacher replacement isn't always necessary.** Studies of school improvement efforts in Ohio and in [Lawrence, Massachusetts](#) show that strong school leadership coupled with professional development for existing teachers can lead to gains.

▶ QUESTIONS TO ASK DISTRICT OR STATE LEADERS CONSIDERING *staffing changes*

1. What evidence is there that principal and/or teacher replacement is necessary?

Look for:

Specific answers, such as:

- Pervasive student and/or parent perceptions of a culture of low expectations (based on surveys or focus groups), persistently high student discipline or absenteeism rates, unusually and persistently high teacher turnover rates
- Evidence (based on principal or teacher evaluation results) that the school leader is not developing teachers, despite extensive support from the district
- Continuous lack of improvement in student outcomes, despite extensive coaching and support for teachers
- Documentation of teacher resistance to changes that call for them to continuously improve their practice

Watch out for:

- No clear evidence of how the principal's shortcomings contribute to the lack of improvement
- No clear evidence that teachers are unwilling or unable to improve their practice

2. Do the proposed new principal and/or teachers have a track record of success working with similar schools?

Look for:

Demonstrated success working in similarly challenging schools or with historically underserved groups of students:

- **Principal:** Has successfully led improvement in similar schools and/ or completed a preparation program with a track record of preparing principals to lead improvement
- **Teachers:** Have a track record of raising achievement and building strong relationships with similar student populations

Watch out for:

- No experience, or experience only in lower-need schools

3. How are states and districts incentivizing principals and teachers to take on challenging assignments in these schools? What types of supports will they offer the new principal and/or teachers?

Look for:

- Opportunity for a principal to bring staff or for teachers to transfer with a team with no forced placement of teachers
- Principal flexibility in how to use people, time, and money to focus on improvement, including exemption from non-aligned district-wide initiatives
- Concrete incentives, e.g., increased compensation or a lower student to staff ratio
- Clear district signals that helping turn around a struggling school is prestigious
- Principals are supported by [principal supervisors](#) or coaches who have a reasonable case load, are well matched to schools, and are equipped to support the individual needs of the principals they oversee
- District is responsive to school leaders' requests (e.g., facilities requests) so that principals can devote their time to improving instruction in their buildings

Watch out for:

- No changes in operating conditions or no additional supports following staff replacement

Governance Changes

What is it? Governance change refers to transferring control of a school from its local district to another governing body. Changes in governance, in and of themselves, do not guarantee improvement. But under the right circumstances, governance changes can help break through bureaucratic barriers that impede improvement.

What problem is it trying to solve? School districts do lots of things that affect day-to-day operations of their schools, from hiring staff and negotiating collective bargaining agreements to managing finances and providing support services to schools (such as facilities management and transportation). Sometimes, these district-level practices can undermine improvement. And district-wide resource allocation rules can make it hard for principals to change how they use people, time, and money to support improvement. In these cases, governance changes may be necessary to enable changes in staffing, or even to change the structure of the school day so that students can receive additional reading instruction or so teachers have time to collaborate.

What does it entail? State education leaders may choose to change the governance of a single school, a set of schools, or an entire district. Approaches states (and some districts) have recently tried include:

- Converting **a single school** to a charter
- Removing a school from local district oversight and placing it into a state-run district or under a state appointee. A single state-run district may oversee **a set of schools** that previously belonged to different local school districts
- Transferring control of the **entire district** to a state appointee¹

Some districts have also been experimenting with changing operating conditions for a subset of their schools without outright changing governance. These **Innovation** or **Empowerment Zones** allow school leaders to control some decisions that are normally made at the district level, including decisions regarding budgets, staffing, curricula, and schedules.

What does the research say?

The research on the impact of governance changes on student outcomes shows **mixed results**, and suggests that success of these interventions depends on **how they are implemented**, and what they enable district and school leaders to do.

- For example, in New Orleans, where the vast majority of schools were converted to charters and placed under a **state-run Recovery School District** after Hurricane Katrina, [studies show](#) substantial, positive impacts on student achievement. In [Tennessee](#) and [Michigan](#), similar interventions did not yield positive results.²
- While there is plenty of research comparing charter and traditional public schools, there are few studies on the effectiveness of **charter conversion**, partly because [most charter operators prefer to start new schools, rather than taking on an existing school](#). That said, there is at least [some evidence](#) that charter operators with a track record of success can successfully take on and improve a struggling school.
- There is also little research on the impacts of **state receivership** (i.e., direct state takeover of a district). However, [one study](#) of Lawrence, Mass., shows significant improvement in student achievement under the leadership of a state-appointed receiver who was [able to leverage](#) this governance change to renegotiate teachers' contracts and other district agreements to allow for shifting to a performance-based compensation system for teachers and extending learning time, with stipends for that work.
- Early research on **within-district Empowerment or Innovation Zones** suggests promising results. In both [Tennessee](#) and [Massachusetts](#), zone schools are showing improvement in student outcomes.

► QUESTIONS TO ASK DISTRICT OR STATE LEADERS CONSIDERING *governance changes*

1. Why is the state pursuing a governance change? What evidence is there conditions under local control are preventing improvement?

Look for:

State leaders to name specific barriers to the school's success, such as:

- Bureaucracy that makes it harder to hire and retain strong teachers (e.g. a later or longer hiring timeline than the state average, or failing to protect high-need schools from disproportionately being impacted by districtwide layoffs); or
- Requirements that schools budget for specific programs, regardless of the needs of the school or students

Watch out for:

- A lack of clarity about why the state is pursuing governance change

2. How will the change result in the operating conditions necessary for improvement?

Look for:

State leaders to provide specific answers about the types of changes the governance shift will allow, such as:

- Enabling schools to create instructional coach positions
- Extending the school day
- Providing professional development to teachers on implementing a system of positive behavioral intervention

Watch out for:

- Answers that treat the governance change itself as a solution to the problem

3. Does the entity taking over the school have a track record of success with similar schools?

Look for:

State leaders can provide data that shows that the entity taking over governance — charter operator, receiver, leader of state-run district, etc. — has a track record of success in improving similar schools

Watch out for:

- No demonstrated success with improving schools

School Closure

What is it?

Closing a low-performing school and distributing the students across other schools in the district or replacing that school with a new school or schools that may or may not be in the same location.

What problem is it trying to solve?

School closures are not always related to performance issues — districts sometimes close schools purely for budgetary reasons. When low performance is the driving factor, districts may choose closure when they believe that the school environment is so toxic that nothing can be done to improve it, or that it would take more resources and political capital to turn the school around than it would to close it and send students elsewhere. Of course, closing a school doesn't improve it, but does mean that the students it served are no longer subject to that negative school environment.

What does it entail?

Closing a school as a school improvement strategy inherently involves reassigning the students to other existing district schools and/or newly opened schools.

What does the research say?

Research on school closures largely shows:

- **Students who transfer from a closed school to a [higher performing school](#) show some positive [gains in achievement](#)** after two to three years. That impact amounted to gains of about two to eight weeks of additional learning per year.
- **But [less than half](#) of students displaced from a closed school transferred to better schools.** Students who wound up in similar or lower-quality schools did worse than their peers in other low-performing schools that didn't close.
- **Re-assigning students to new schools is not easy.** Even when higher-performing schools are available for displaced students, parents [may choose not](#) to send students there because of concerns about proximity or safety.
- **Closing large schools and replacing them with multiple small ones has shown more promising results in improving graduation rates.** In New York City, for example, students attending newly created small high schools [showed higher graduation rates and higher rates of enrollment and persistence in college](#) than their peers. Studies show more [mixed results](#) when it comes to small schools' impacts on academic achievement.
- **When considering closure, it's important to take into account impacts not only on the students in the school being closed, but on the community as a whole.** In high-poverty areas, the school — even one that is low-performing — may function as the only community center. Families may [see closure](#) as something the district forced on them without first investing more resources in school improvement. And families of color, who are [especially likely to experience school closure](#) in their communities, [may recognize it](#) as part of ongoing and historical racial oppression. That may erode long-term community perception of and trust in the school district, diminishing the political capital needed for other changes.

► QUESTIONS TO ASK DISTRICT OR STATE LEADERS CONSIDERING *school closure*

1. What other options has the state or district considered?

Look for:

- A clear rationale as to why closure, rather than another strategy, is necessary
- Consideration of restarting the school with entirely new leadership and staff in the same building, or replacing it with smaller schools nearby

Watch out for:

- No consideration of other less drastic options

2. How will the closure result in a better learning environment for displaced students?

Look for:

- A concrete plan for how students from the closed school will be enrolled in higher-performing schools, how they will get to those schools, and how their new schools will ensure that they are supported in achieving at high levels (including a list of supports available at the new school site)
- Displaced students having “first dibs” in any district or intra-district choice programs

Watch out for:

Insufficient attention to the experience of displaced students, including:

- Academic supports
- Social-emotional supports
- Transportation/safety (including for co- and extra-curricular activities)

3. How will the state and district support staff in the receiving schools?

Look for:

- Specific supports, like creating coaching roles for teachers in the school who are particularly skilled in differentiated instruction; training in cultural competency, trauma, etc.; or assigning additional family engagement staff to help students and their families feel welcome in their new school

Watch out for:

- No support for the schools attended by displaced students

Additional resources

[State policies for intervening in chronically low-performing schools: A 50-state scan](#) Here, the the Institute for Education Sciences **summarizes most recent policies in all 50 states related to state interventions with chronically underperforming schools.**

[The Hidden Equation in School Improvement](#) **Chiefs for Change** shares lessons learned about governance-based school improvement strategies.

ENDNOTES

1. In some places, state policymakers have authorized a mayor to take control of a school district. However, this is generally done outside of the context of improving the schools that are most struggling.
2. There are some key differences between the New Orleans and Tennessee experiences: New Orleans allowed students to attend any school of their choosing via lottery. Meanwhile, in Tennessee, students were assigned to schools based on where they live. Further, in New Orleans, nearly all schools were part of the state-run district whereas in Tennessee, they added a handful of schools at a time. And, of course, the New Orleans reforms took place in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, one of the worst natural disasters in U.S. history, which significantly impacted the population and workforce in the city.