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The Hidden Equation In School Improvement

Lessons Learned About
Governance-Based Strategies



LESSONS LEARNED

About Governance-Based Strategies

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Persistently struggling schools are among the most troubling challenges in education, resulting in massive wasted potential for the nation's most vulnerable young people. But effective solutions have proven elusive, and years of federal investment have produced little evident impact. Yet chronically low-performing schools — and even districts — can experience major and lasting change when the right conditions are in place. The information is preliminary, but a careful scan of several types of school improvement efforts — turnaround zones, receiverships, and charter-school expansion — shows there is real promise when leaders and educators come together around a clear vision of the conditions that can fundamentally alter the classroom experience.

This report is about the principles that underlie that promise, and what bold leaders can do to accelerate that kind of change.¹

The result of such thoughtful, coordinated efforts has been improvements where they matter most — in outcomes for kids. In Louisiana, for example, [128,000 fewer students](#) today attend schools rated D or F than in 2011, in part because of turnaround successes. In places where schools were identified for intensive improvement in Massachusetts, students gained a full year more learning in both math and English than did those in schools that were not identified. Our nation must learn lessons from these successes.

The moment for new thinking is now. The federal School Improvement Grants (SIG) and their limited use options have been eliminated. States have submitted their plans for the Every Student

Succeeds Act (ESSA) and have the opportunity to use Title I funds for evidence-based school improvement. These funds give states the flexibility to take bold, innovative actions on behalf of their most educationally disadvantaged students.

Chiefs for Change [members](#) are committed to a core set of [beliefs](#) and share a vision that all American children can lead fulfilling, self-determined lives as adults. When it comes to school improvement, they are leveraging governance-based measures in particular to develop strategies in service of this vision. Among three types of possible school improvement efforts — turnaround zones, receiverships, and charter-school expansion — our members have found the following:

- **Turnaround zones have mixed results when it comes to improving failing schools;**
- **Receiverships, or state-run school districts, have seen great success in places like Massachusetts and Camden, New Jersey, but the success depends on the leaders and conditions in place; and**
- **Charter-school expansion has been limited as an improvement effort because chartering authority has not been closely tied to turnaround strategies, except when involved with a turnaround zone or receivership.**

¹Chiefs for Change is grateful to Nelson Smith and Chief-in-Residence Kevin Huffman for their research and analysis for this brief.

While the contexts for these change efforts vary, key patterns emerge. This report explores lessons on the conditions that are fundamental to improving schools through governance strategies:

- 1 Leadership:** Every success we've seen involves breaking through inertia and empowering a new leader to make decisions that unflinchingly put the needs of students first.
- 2 Autonomy:** Radical improvement requires school leaders have control over staffing, budget, schedules, teacher collaboration opportunities, and school culture in ways that are often politically difficult in traditional school systems.
- 3 A third-party player:** Nonprofits external to the school system have helped guide nearly every real transformation we've seen, because they provide not just guidance and support, but also political insulation and durability.
- 4 Flexibility given community conditions:** While they require a key set of principles, successful changes aren't one-size fits all models; they vary depending on the community and thus require local engagement.

- 5 Accountability:** It must be clear who is responsible for achieving results and what happens in the event improvement goals are not met.

When these conditions are in place, leaders can begin to implement their changes and should establish interim measures that show a school is adopting a healthy culture, getting students back in class and all the way to graduation, and retaining teachers.

While patterns may exist, there are no cookie-cutter solutions.

In both Louisiana and Massachusetts, the schools were able to improve because they met those conditions and tailored their plans specifically to the areas they were serving. Change must begin with a deep understanding of the community. In these cases, the courage and dedication of local leaders to challenge the status quo led to innovative ways to help their students, and that is the foundation for success.

That combination of pattern recognition, cooperation across all levels from the statehouse to the classroom, and tailoring to local conditions has produced changes that positively affect students' lives. And while not conclusive, these preliminary findings are worthy of careful consideration as the nation takes on one of education's most vexing challenges.

Chiefs for Change is proud to share these findings in honor of Mitchell Chester, the late Commissioner of Education for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, who was a critical member our governance work and whose important contributions are chronicled here.

INTRODUCTION

For decades, states have taken over failing school districts, often beset by both corruption and academic failure, but the results have been mixed, with greater impact on operations than classroom instruction. Not only is it extraordinarily difficult to turn around a low-performing school, much less a whole district; it's also a challenge to run schools and districts from an office in the state capitol.

Two 21st century policy innovations have sought to change that. One has run its course, and the other still shows promise.

The first — School Improvement Grants (SIG) — were overhauled by the Obama Administration in 2009 and provided massive turnaround funds to states that districts then directed to individual schools following a prescribed menu of school improvement options. While there were some bright spots, [national evaluations](#) of SIG showed small and inconsistent gains overall, and provided a political pretext for the program's elimination when the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was passed in 2015.

The second — governance-based strategies — offer an alternative to challenge the stubborn persistence of low-performing schools

and are garnering national attention for good reason. Beginning in 2003 with Louisiana's enactment of its Recovery School District (RSD), states have been making explicit use of governance-based reforms. These include state-appointed receivers exercising a wider range of interventions, and "turnaround zones," in which a freestanding state agency or district takes over operation of individual low-performing schools for a period of time — notably, often in partnership with local authorities. The focus on governance stands in contrast to SIG, which did little to encourage bold shifts in the oversight of schools. When implemented thoughtfully and in concert with community voices, governance-based strategies have the flexibility and broad power to catalyze the dramatic change necessary to boost student achievement in chronically failing schools.

By eliminating SIG's four models (turnaround, transformations, school closures, and restarts) and rules on permissible uses of turnaround funds, and instead transferring the funding into a more flexible but mandatory 7% set-aside of Title I funds for school improvement, ESSA expands the potential for states to take bold actions on behalf of their most educationally disadvantaged students

The Bottom Line

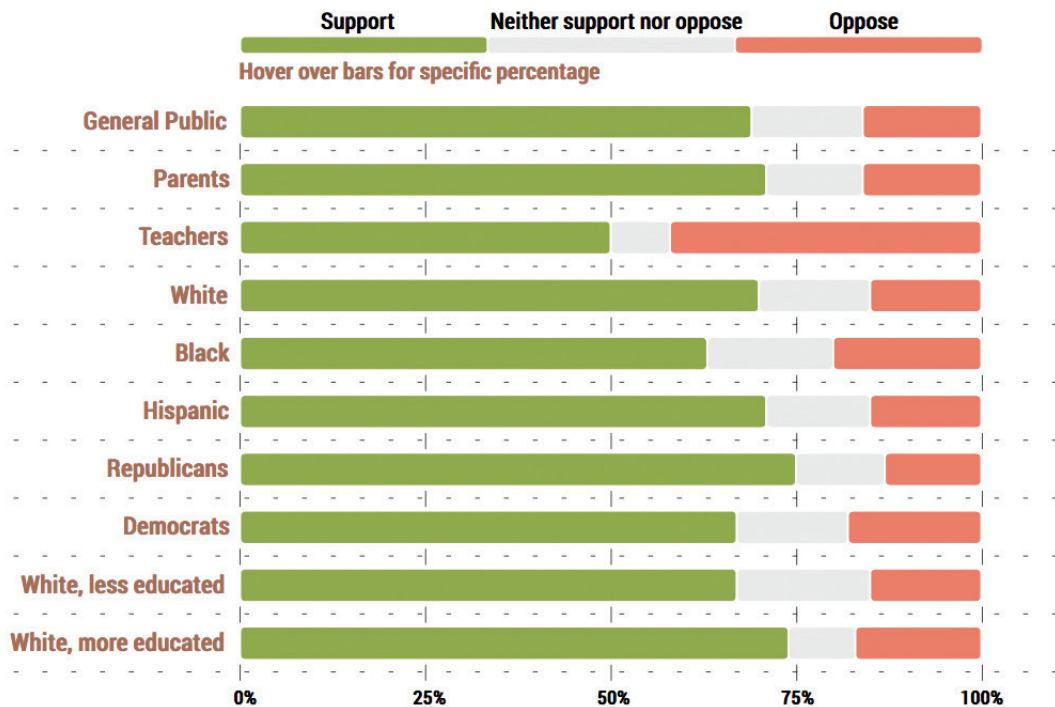
- Governance-based strategies for school improvement (turn-around zones, receiverships, and charter-school expansion) are gaining momentum and leading to positive results in Chiefs for Change member states and districts.
- These governance reforms can be funded through the 7% Title I set-aside as part of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and offer more flexibility than did School Improvement Grants (SIG).
- Governance-based strategies are a means to an end, not the end itself. They must lead to changes in leadership, instruction, and school culture.
- Five key lessons on what leads to the conditions needed for success of these strategies are: leadership; autonomy; a third-party player; flexibility given community needs; and accountability.
- Governance reforms should ultimately expand choices and opportunities for families, thus relying on three assurances (1) fairness in enrollment and admissions; (2) transparent indicators of quality; and (3) equitable and adequate funding, as outlined by the CFC [choice principles](#).

(see the [appendix](#) for recommendations on administering the set-aside). There are far fewer strings attached, so long as states — and the district applying for the funds — can demonstrate that their interventions meet federal [evidence](#) standards.

By addressing governance-based reforms, the survey shows solid support among teachers, parents, and the general public for state intervention when districts have been unable to improve failing schools:

A recent [survey](#) by *Education Next* suggests that the time is ripe for action on chronically low-performing schools. Although not direct-

Some states have laws allowing the state to take control of local school districts where academic performance has been low for several years. Do you support or oppose this policy?



Education Next "The 2017 EdNext Poll on School Reform" by Martin R. West, Michael B. Henderson, Paul E. Peterson and Samuel Barrows.

Chiefs for Change (CFC) members are committed to leveraging governance-based measures for school improvement. These encompass a variety of promising models, in various stages of implementation. This report focuses on three types of school improvement efforts that can be funded through the 7% Title I set-aside: turnaround zones, receiverships, and charter school expansion. From these models in member states and districts, we've distilled several important lessons on the conditions needed to launch impactful governance reforms:

- 1 Leadership:** Every success we've seen involves breaking through inertia and empowering a new leader to make decisions that unflinchingly put the needs of students first.
- 2 Autonomy:** Radical improvement requires school leaders having control over staffing, budget, schedules, teacher collaboration opportunities, and school culture in ways that are often politically difficult in traditional school systems.
- 3 A third-party player:** Nonprofits external to the school system have helped guide nearly every real transformation we've seen, because they provide not just guidance and support, but also political insulation and durability.

- 4 Flexibility given community needs:** While they require these principles, successful changes aren't one-size fits all models; they vary depending on the community and thus require local engagement.
- 5 Accountability:** It must be clear who is responsible for achieving results and what happens in the event improvement goals are not met.

The governance reforms described in this report are by no means easy to implement, but we've seen that radical changes are [doable](#). They're also a means — not an end. As strategies, turnaround zones, receiverships, and charter school expansion must lead to improvements in leadership, instruction, and school culture for them to drive and sustain improved student outcomes. They should also expand choices and opportunities for families, relying on [three assurances](#) that CFC members believe: (1) fairness in enrollment and admissions; (2) transparent indicators of quality; and (3) equitable and adequate funding and resource distribution.

This report spotlights how seven CFC state and district members are leading the way in governance-based school improvement strategies. It details their promising early findings, as well as examples from other states and districts across the nation that have launched impactful governance-based reforms.

GOVERNANCE-BASED STRATEGIES

Before considering some of the lessons learned from CFC members, we provide an overview of some promising governance-based strategies already underway. They offer a starting point for thinking about how states might structure their own strategies for intervention where existing governance of local schools has tolerated long-standing failure.

Turnaround Zones

What they do: Turnaround zones transfer governing power of individual low-performing schools (or in some cases whole districts) to a freestanding state agency or district for a defined period of time.

Promising models of turnaround zones as a governance strategy have emerged across the country. The most convincing gains have occurred in the first such zone: Louisiana's Recovery School District (RSD), with leadership by CFC members Kunjan Narechania (CEO of the RSD and member of the first cohort of CFC [Future Chiefs](#)) and John White (State Superintendent). The RSD was cre-

ated in 2003, but grew quickly to take in most New Orleans public schools after the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. A 2016 [report](#) from the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans found substantial improvements in student performance after the reforms: "Between 2005 and 2012, the performance gap between New Orleans and the comparison group closed and eventually reversed, indicating a positive effect of the reforms of about 0.4 standard deviations, enough to improve a typical student's performance by 15 percentile points." The effects are also large when compared to other strategies for school improvement, such as reducing class sizes or offering intensive preschool.

Tennessee's Achievement School District (ASD) has also [shown gains](#) — particularly for schools in the district the longest — yet student achievement measures have not moved as emphatically as in the RSD. But the ASD's enabling legislation also funded and seeded [Innovation Zones](#) (i-Zones) that allowed districts to retain some low-performing schools and grant charter-like autonomy over staffing, curriculum, and schedules. With vigorous leadership, strong competitive pressure from the numerous ASD schools in Memphis, and significant financial support from the state, the i-Zone run by Shelby County Public Schools has scored [particularly strong gains](#). The state has transitioned to a new, more rigorous statewide as-

assessment and overcome initial challenges with online test administration; [data](#) analyzed by the Tennessee Education Research Alliance in fall 2017 demonstrates that overall, Priority schools (the state's lowest-performing schools) have improved in both absolute terms and relative to the rest of the state.

Original state turnaround zones were conceived as freestanding entities outside the parameters of conventional district governance. But they have encountered strong local resistance and have not proven to be a silver bullet. Prompted in part by ESSA's new flexibility, states are returning to making the district the prime locus of responsibility for managing turnarounds, while compiling a menu of supports and sanctions to prompt action where needed. In Tennessee, these turnaround options and supports include the ASD, i-Zones overseen by districts with Priority schools (like Metro Nashville and Shelby County), a planned shared governance model between the state and school district (modeled in part after the Springfield Empowerment Zone in Massachusetts, described below), and a range of additional programming and structural changes available to districts and schools where no special governance adjustment is made.

Both Louisiana's Recovery School District and Tennessee's Achievement School District are evolving, but for different reasons:

- ➔ After years of activism for return to local control, the 2016 passage of SB432 in Louisiana put the RSD's schools on track to be under full Orleans Parish School Board authority by July 1, 2018. The RSD is returning to its original purpose as the state's "emergency room" for failing schools, which will be eligible for placement in the RSD after attaining an "F" rating four years in a row.
- ➔ ASD operations in Tennessee, which were largely independent of the state beginning in 2012, have returned to the state education department. The ASD will now focus on monitoring and supporting schools, rather than authorizing.

These morphs in the size, shape, and purpose of state turnaround zones reveal stresses in the original model of neatly-defined, nearly-autonomous entities with broad power to select schools and apply turnaround strategies. With the opportunity for rethinking afforded by ESSA, states like Louisiana and Tennessee are now situating these entities as a last-resort measure along a spectrum of other interventions. Some additional states are learning from this experience and launching their own Zones based on lessons learned from the ASD and RSD as predecessors:

- ➔ Nevada is taking a similar approach to the Tennessee model, but faces additional pressure to create a multi-track system of supports and interventions due to its Achievement School District's statutorily-limited capacity. Only six schools can be taken in per year, which means that the zone can affect just a small

proportion of the state's 78 schools classified as underperforming. While Nevada's [ESSA plan](#) calls for a four-tiered set of supports and interventions, the legislature has not acted on the SEA request to create a new category of autonomous but district-managed "A+ Schools" that would [expand turnaround capacity](#) beyond the ASD.

- ➔ North Carolina's legislature created its Innovative School District (ISD) in 2016, but even in startup mode it has already taken on dual responsibilities. The statute limits the ISD to five schools at a time, with no more than one from a given district. [The original measure](#) allowed districts losing a school to the ISD to create a locally-managed Innovation Zone for additional schools that would enjoy charter-like flexibility. Under 2017 amendments, that provision was expanded so that any district participating in the ISD with more than 35 percent of schools classified as low-performing can put all those schools into the local Innovation Zone. As a result, in addition to matching charter operators with schools under its own jurisdiction, the state ISD will also provide technical support to the local iZones.

Receiverships

What they do: Receivership interventions transfer governance of a set of struggling schools to a "receiver," usually a state-appointed individual or a non-profit entity.

Although about half of states have laws that allow a state to take over struggling schools, there are few examples of states applying this intervention. Nevertheless, some early receivership models offer promising results. Massachusetts placed Lawrence Public Schools under state supervision in 2011 and appointed veteran educator Jeffrey Riley to lead the effort in 2012. The receivership [statute](#) allowed Riley "full managerial and operational control over schools in need of turnaround." He engaged nonprofits, charter operators, district leaders, and the teachers' union in the task of improving outcomes across the district. The experiment has produced [strong improvements](#), including a five-year jump in graduation rates from 52.3 percent to 71.4 percent. Success may be owed to the fact that Riley did not want to portray this as a state takeover, seeking what he called a "third way" between local and state control, with maximum flexibility at the school level.

The Lawrence receivership spawned an innovative [offshoot](#), the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP), in 2014. Keenly aware that the state was ready and willing to take over their district, local leaders in Springfield, MA brought in the nonprofit organization [Empower Schools](#) to create a [zone](#) of low-performing middle schools that enjoy high degrees of autonomy, feature Teacher Leadership Teams that have a prominent role in school

decisions, and include partnerships with support organizations such as The Achievement Network (ANet) and Teach for America. SEZP is most remarkable for the local leaders' dedication to its success. Although the state plays a supportive role, the Zone is neither a traditional turnaround zone nor is it under receivership. With [deep local support](#), the Zone is run by a board comprised of three local and four state appointees, including the vice-chair of the Springfield School Committee and, until his retirement in June 2017, the head of the Springfield Teachers Association. Mayor Domenico Sarno, born and raised in Springfield, has championed the Zone as well. SEZP board chair Chris Gabrieli [reported](#) modest gains in the Zone's first full year, but has high expectations looking ahead.

In New Jersey, the Department of Education placed Camden Public Schools under receivership in 2002. A decade later and with few improvements in the district to point to, the state appointed CFC member Paymon Rouhanifard as superintendent in August of 2013. With less than half of Camden students graduating from high school, even fewer reading and doing math at grade level in grades K-8, and over half the school buildings constructed before 1928, Rouhanifard initiated programs and policies that have led to improvements in student academic outcomes and access to 21st century schools. Rouhanifard has redirected district resources to develop principal talent, offer intensive reading and math interventions, and provide increased individual teacher coaching. Additionally, he has introduced new high quality "renaissance schools," a district-charter hybrid operated by proven non-profit CMOs to turn around failing schools and invest in new facilities. Over the past four years, the district's graduation rate has [risen](#) from 49 to 70 percent, student proficiency rates are increasing faster than the state average, and suspensions have fallen by 53 percent. And in a city where 95 percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch, Rouhanifard is using innovative approaches to empower families and address the factors outside of school that impact student achievement. A single city-wide enrollment system offers families an easy, equitable way to choose the best school for their child, and a newly expanded trauma-informed care [home visit](#) pilot provides holistic family support to those students at the highest-risk of dropping out.

Charter School Expansion

As a third method of governance-based interventions for school improvement, the expansion of charter schools to intentionally draw students from low-performing district schools has been far less explored — perhaps because growth of charter schools is driven by parent choice. As the Chiefs for Change [statement](#) on school choice outlines, successful expansion of choice programs (including charters) relies on three assurances (1) fairness in enrollment and admissions; (2) transparent indicators of quality; and (3) adequate and equitable funding.

Charter schools in general continue to expand, particularly in urban areas where new options are desperately needed and waiting lists are long. A recent [study](#) from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools found that 58 districts now enroll more than 20 percent of their public school students in charters, including 19 that enroll more than 30 percent. But chartering authority has not been prominently linked to *turnaround strategies*, except where turnaround zones and receivers bring in charter operators to run schools.

This reflects a similar trend under the prior school improvement regime; according to a federal program [evaluation](#), less than 3 percent of SIG grants awarded in 2010 were used for the "restart" option, which featured charter conversions. Relatively few charter operators and networks actually specialize in "turnarounds" — taking on an existing school with students staying in place. The vast majority prefer startups, where they can instill a defined program and culture from the outset. The "expansion" strategy would rely on these operators to create sufficient numbers of new, high-quality seats to accommodate students needing to move from low-performing schools.

With every chartering state pursuing the small group of top-notch charter networks that have national reach and are willing to take on turnarounds, fears are rising about the depth of the operator pool. This may improve with increased funding for the federal Charter Schools Program, which supports startups. It's not yet clear whether states can use ESSA's Title I set-aside funding to set up infrastructure for using charters as an explicit part of its turnaround strategy; this may hinge on whether they are restarting a school identified as low-performing and in need of comprehensive or targeted support under ESSA.

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT GOVERNANCE-BASED STRATEGIES

Perhaps it's the pressure of grant-evaluation deadlines, or the need to show results within election cycles, but reform is impatient. Nowhere has this been truer than in efforts to improve performance in the nation's lowest-achieving schools. But Chiefs for Change members' experiences with these three models of governance-based school improvement strategies offer several lessons on the conditions needed to launch impactful governance reforms that can lead to faster and farther gains:

- 1 Leadership:** Every success we've seen involves breaking through inertia and empowering a new leader to make decisions that unflinchingly put the needs of students first.
- 2 Autonomy:** Radical improvement requires school leaders having control over staffing, budget, schedules, teacher collaboration opportunities, and school culture in ways that are often politically difficult in traditional school systems.
- 3 A third-party player:** Nonprofits external to the school system have helped guide nearly every real transformation we've seen, because they provide not just guidance and support, but also political insulation and durability.
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- 5 Accountability:** It must be clear who is responsible for achieving results and what happens in the event improvement goals are not met.

1 Leadership

As Louisiana State Superintendent John White and the late Massachusetts Commissioner Mitchell Chester wrote, radical change is [reliably doable](#), but requires "a bolder and more disciplined approach than much of what was supported under SIG." ESSA provides the kind of patient capital that frees states to adopt long-range strategies aimed at fixing the fundamentals — the same kind that got the best results under SIG.

Among the [first states](#) that submitted ESSA comprehensive plans to the U.S. Department of Education, most rely on fairly traditional fund-and-train models rather than using state authority to change the structures and people who have overseen failure. Habits are hard to break, and as one state chief put it, "inertia has tended to drive uses of Title funds" — even though the new law removes prior constraints.

Once the philosophy and approach for a turnaround strategy is clarified, capacity is critical to making it work. States need a deep bench of talent at all stations, including the SEA (with support as needed from the governor and other state agencies); the person selected to lead the turnaround effort, whether Receiver or Zone Superintendent; the on-the-ground staff that provides coordination, training, and liaises with the state; and the local schools themselves. Capacity can be hired anew, recruited from local sources, or engaged by contracts with partner organizations — but the state's strategy must give serious attention to getting the right leaders in place to meet the challenge. And of course, that effort needs to be backed by financial and political capital as well.

It's noteworthy that in two of the zones described in this report, a single individual has had a foot in both domains — the SEA and the Zone itself — which has helped facilitate alignment. In Louisiana, this is [Kunjan Narechania](#), who participated in CFC's first cohort of Future Chiefs before becoming a member herself. In Massachusetts, it's [Russell Johnston](#), a member of the second cohort of Future Chiefs. Every state chief has worked at getting local leaders on board, but not all have also worked across organizational lines to maximize support.

2 Autonomy

During a visit to the Springfield Empowerment Zone by CFC members, one middle school principal eagerly displayed the school's class schedule — developed *with* its Teacher Leadership Team — a hallmark of which is plenty of time for planning and discussion around individual student needs. Although "strategic use of staffing and scheduling autonomy" was featured as a critical element of turnaround work in a 2014 [study](#) commissioned by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, it's not the sort of thing policy wonks chatter about. Yet it was the sturdy foundation on which the principal and his team were moving the school forward. Getting the right leaders in place and letting them lead matters.

3 A Third-Party Partner

Informal and formal relationships matter at both the individual and organizational levels. Recruiting high-quality partners — including charter operators — is not easy. As more states seek organizations that can directly assist schools and districts on curriculum, school culture, and teacher professional development, they face obstacles. First, a given organization's work must meet ESSA's [criteria for evidence](#). Second, as state contracts generate more business, the organization may assign newer and less-experienced talent to your case; even if the original visionary is available at first, that leader may move on. Third, the partner must be a good cultural

match for the state's schools and political environment. Practices developed in a northeastern city may not translate well to a rural western district. All of this places a premium on “growing your own” — for example, by partnering with strong regional nonprofits, creating a [Founders Fellows](#) program like that in Springfield as an onramp to leadership, or by curating talent from universities.

4 Flexibility Given Community Needs

Schools and districts can get off-track for all sorts of reasons, and they can succumb to finger-pointing and even blaming students and families for their woes. As a first step to governance reforms, stakeholders must consider the root causes of under-performance. Getting local leaders focused on evidence and facts about the nature and causes of systemic dysfunction is the first step toward orienting the district in the right direction, and an important tool in getting local ownership of reform. The Texas Education Agency is conducting rigorous, [two-day seminars](#) with local school boards to help them identify fundamental issues and move toward solutions.

States should start by doing serious inquiry into what makes for success in improving lowest-performing schools and designing interventions that use those strategies — rather than starting with a preconceived notion of who should control or operate schools. Mississippi, for example, is using the zone concept but focusing on entire districts, not schools. As state superintendent Carey Wright explains, the state is dealing with a number of very small districts that need comprehensive work — and selecting a single school would be unrealistic.

Some communities may not even need new entities set up, but governance can still play a role. New Mexico's ESSA plan makes the most of a relatively toothless state law, which permits neither “zones” nor receiverships. Initially expanding its Principals Pursuing Excellence (PPE) program as the vector for improvement, the [state's ESSA plan](#) reserves the right to impose closure, significant

restructuring, or restart under a charter operator if schools do not adopt and implement their own strategies with success.

5 Accountability

Promising governance-based strategies rely on states creating the legal and/or regulatory structure to have them in place. Texas statute allows the state commissioner to remove local boards — which has happened four times since January 2016. The “in-district receivership” provision that facilitated the creation of the Springfield Empowerment Zone in Massachusetts, or new laws that actually create freestanding turnaround zones, give state officials important leverage, even if they do not ultimately decide to pull the takeover trigger. States can make vast resources and support available to local districts, but local leaders have to be willing and able to use them. Having a turnaround zone or a receivership option helps create new urgency.

Once the structure is in place, all parties must be clear on who is accountable for what. This relies on the state building on the earlier lessons of nurturing relationships with the local community and third-party organizations and identifying and empowering talent at the local level, to be able to set interim measures to ensure the strategies are on track.

We know we need better metrics for each stage of school improvement. Existing initiatives have set criteria for schools to enter and exit turnarounds, mostly grounded in state assessment results and graduation rates. But looking for such results on a three- to five-year timeline may be unrealistic. It is important to establish interim measures (“leading indicators”) that show a school is adopting a healthy culture, getting students back in class and persisting to graduation, and retaining teachers (at least after the initial transition and mission-alignment). Other leading indicators may include early academic gains by students who are new to the school and multiyear gains by returning students.

CONCLUSION

Governance-based school improvement is an innovation worth exploring further and will continue to be a focus of stakeholders across the country as states implement their new ESSA plans. There are tradeoffs that need to be weighed in each case — perhaps the most important being how to use state authority while giving local actors maximum freedom to innovate and lead in their own ways. Solutions will ultimately be in the classroom, and the governance-based strategies are only a means to this end. Whatever strategy a state adopts, it must lead to improvements in leadership, instruction, and school culture.

What this work illustrates is that states have more latitude, and more options to explore, than many state leaders are currently embracing. The districts in turn have greater opportunities to partner with the state and third-party organizations to ensure school improvement strategies are rooted in a deep understanding of the local context. ESSA not only sets out a challenge for states to raise the bar in education reform, but also offers highly flexible funding to invest in the most promising programs and practices.

Chiefs for Change hopes that this report can help inspire bold action.

APPENDIX: ADMINISTERING THE SET-ASIDE

The following recommendations may be applicable for administering the 7% set-aside:

- 1 *Compete the funds, don't put them out by formula.*** CFC state members intend to distribute their 7% set-aside funds through some form of competition using factors such as the commitment of districts that apply, quality of the plan, evidence base, and engagement of partners. This gives them the ability to target funds where they are likely to see strong results, and to encourage the development of better applications. [Nevada](#) and [Louisiana](#) offer examples of what this process entails in their states.
- 2 *Pool funds for greater impact.*** While the mandatory 7% school improvement set-aside forms a strong basis for state activities, ESSA authorizes other funding sources that can be used in support of state goals. There is, for example, an additional discretionary 3% set-aside for [Direct Student Services](#) (CFC members Louisiana, New Mexico, and Ohio have all committed to this set-aside) that can be used to offer advanced coursework, tutoring, and other customized supports for students in schools identified for Targeted Support and Intervention and Comprehensive Support and Intervention. The Title IV block grant (originally authorized for \$1.6 billion, but underfunded at \$400 million in the FY17 budget bill passed in May 2017) can also be combined with Title I funds. Title II funds can be leveraged for professional development, a key reason Chiefs for Change is [advocating](#) for the program not to be cut as the Administration [has proposed](#).
- 3 *Be clear about uses of funds.*** In the request for grant proposals from districts, or through other kinds of guidance, states should be explicit about what is and is not acceptable. Some states, for example, are compiling actual lists of partner organizations whose work meets federal evidence standards. Others are articulating principles for translating those standards into selection criteria. Either way, states have an obligation to avoid wheel-spinning misunderstandings on the part of those seeking grants.
- 4 *Prepare for change at the SEA.*** State departments of education were designed to disburse funds and affirm compliance, often in a “check-the-box” capacity. Being both an accountability agent and a real partner for schools and districts may require reorganization. For example: consolidating oversight of various Title programs for a more holistic view of schools, establishing a single-point of contact for SEA resources such as Louisiana’s new Regional Turnaround Support Managers, or creating a new “school improvement” office. All of this should be informed by research. Massachusetts offers a strong model — the state first completed deep-dive studies of its own turnaround efforts and then published a “field guide” to inform future initiatives. An SEA may have the analytical ability to do this kind of work in-house, but may wish to partner with a national provider (as [Massachusetts did](#), with American Institutes for Research), or to involve a state university — in the process helping to expand its stakeholder base.