

A Critical Analysis of School Improvement Grants and Turnaround Policy

&

**A Proposal for a Paradigm Shift in Imagining the Possibilities for “Persistently Low
Achieving Schools”**

Submitted to Dr. Nick Michelli & Dr. Tony Picciano on May 22, 2012

Educational Policy

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Abstract/Executive Summary

In order to receive federal funding targeted for persistently low achieving Title 1-eligible schools, state and local educational agencies must adopt prescriptive educational reform in the shape of four under-researched models. Schools facing deep cuts in this recession rely on supplemental funding, such as School Improvement Grants, to stay afloat. The New York City Department of Education, under the control of Mayor Michael Bloomberg, has utilized the stringent language of SIGs simultaneously to push forward an educational agenda focused on union-busting, privatization, and centralizing power at the detriment of community influence. The authors present an alternate vision of how to empower students in targeted schools that invigorates and connects students to urban webs, rather than subjecting them to superficial reform.

Key terms

School Improvement Grants, Turnaround, New York City Department of Education, Ecosystems Framework, Persistently Low Achieving Schools

Statement of Problem

Federal funding to improve persistently low achieving schools in the form of School Improvement Grants (SIG or SIGs) is based on a competitive, productivity model of education reform. Funding to states and local education agencies is heavily mandated and states must select from among four school improvement models (1) transformation – replace school principal (unless he/she has been serving for fewer than three years) and other specific reforms (extend the learning time, new teacher evaluation system, provide operating flexibility, use data-driven instruction); (2) turnaround – replace the principal and much of the school staff; (3) restart – close and reopen as a charter school or privately managed school; (4) closure. These grants and the four models required for use of funds lead to competition among states and local school districts for precious resources,

punish school staff by replacing principals and teachers, place the responsibility for improvement on the school staff alone, incentivize privatization of education through charter and education management organizations, circumvent due process for teachers and principals, and finally, fail to recognize the complex interrelationships that exist in schools among the multitude of interests including students, parents, community partners, teachers, and principals. The failure to address the challenges to turning around failing schools and the oversimplification of fixing these schools through punitive approaches has led local school districts, like the New York City Department of Education, to use SIGs to close 33 schools leading to displacement among students and the firing of over 1800 teachers at a cost of more than \$78 million over three years (2010-2013). These “improvements” have lead many New Yorkers to react with outrage as the unions, local community organizations and parents associations defend their schools against the onslaught of the Department of Education plans. This brief presents the history of the Schools Improvement Grant Program, the national impact of this policy, and its unique and often fickle implementation in New York City. It also attempts to offer an alternative vision of school improvement that values the learning communities inside and outside of schools through an ecosystem model and suggests areas for collaboration that can improve schools in more sustainable ways.

Key History and Trends in Federal Education Reform

Efforts to address the degrading symptoms of poverty through grants to schools have been sanctioned by the United States Department of Education since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. As part of President Lyndon Johnson’s comprehensive “War on Poverty”, Title 1 under ESEA, “Financial Assistance To Local Educational Agencies For The Education Of Children Of Low-Income Families,” was designed with the assumption that the inverse relationship between student achievement and student poverty could be remedied through a

compensatory program whereby the federal government distributes money to state educational agencies (SEAs), who in turn distribute money to local educational agencies (LEAs), who finally distribute to schools with a high percentage of students living in low-income conditions.

Reauthorized as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, the Act provides a School Improvement Fund in Title 1, section 1003(g), which issues renewable grants for schools who are eligible for Title 1 funding and are under improvement, undergoing corrective action, or restructuring as part of NCLB. Prior to President Obama's administration, the School Improvement Fund distributed modest sums of money, labeled School Improvement Grants (SIGs), to SEAs. As a point of comparison, Fiscal Year 2007 allocated \$200 million to the fund (USDOE, 2007). The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) significantly increased the funding appropriated to the School Improvement Fund to a staggering \$3.546 billion (a onetime stimulus of \$3 billion added to the regular appropriations of \$546 million). SIGs, together with Race to the Top (RTTT), articulate President Obama's vision for federal education reform – a competitive, largely inflexible, and ultimately misguided approach to transforming, shuttering, or privatizing institutions in the care and service of educating children.

The design of the SIG-funded school reform model relies on the assumption that schools that are persistently low achieving suffer from layers of deeply embedded and perpetuating problems that necessitate “extensive and multi-faceted” reforms rather than those are “marginal or targeted.” Sweeping reforms that mandate new leadership and staff, new instructional practices and technical resources, and staff evaluations based on student outcomes imply two theoretical perspectives: one, an issue of “imperfect information,” or rather that “principals and teachers in underperforming schools may have limited information on what constitutes effective practices as well as underpowered incentives to identify and implement them” and two, an issue of imperfect alignment, in which the disjointed efforts of principals and teachers in underperforming schools

undermines the attempts to cooperatively support “a culture of school effectiveness.” Whether or not persistently low-achieving schools suffer from information/incentive deficits or misalignment, the theory driving external, top down school reform is that money coupled with expansive transformation can be an effective antidote to a school’s history of low scores on standardized tests or poor graduation rates.

Unfortunately, there is little evidence that illustrates how schools that have been labeled underperforming or persistently low achieving can reverse their outcomes in a short period of time (Dee, 2012). The Herman report, cited within the National Bureau of Economic Research’s working paper, indicated that no studies met internal validity. Previous reforms aimed at transforming whole schools, such as the “school-wide program” (SWP) option available to Title 1 schools or the “Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration” (CSR) showed mixed results. Indeed, when change is fast and furious, it is difficult to measure the efficacy of any one specific reform. Notwithstanding the hurdles of evaluating schools in reform flux, the NBER paper cites a meta-analytic review of specific Comprehensive School Reform models that identifies three that demonstrated strong evidence of positive impacts if the models were implemented over several years. To a large extent, the background literature on school turnaround efforts is inconclusive and foggy, providing no clear directives or generalizations for policymakers to heed.

Yet, policymakers hardly rely on research alone to inform their decisions (Nelson, Leffler & Hansen, 2009). Recent trends in education point overwhelmingly to a vast neoliberal agenda shaping the landscape of public education. Political economy and education scholar Jean Anyon (2011) has written of the importance to update Marxist criticism to understand how neoliberalism affects school policy. By explaining David Harvey’s sense of ‘primitive accumulation,’ Anyon shows how the privatization of our public resources (such as public education) has led to the concentration of money in the hands of a select few, who are usually exempt from public

accountability (84-87). Encapsulating the neoliberal “assault” on public education, Russom (2012) identifies five central features that function as market-based maneuvers intended to fulfill the social Darwinism project. According to her, austerity, the obsession with producing a select cadre of 21st century workers via sorting and tracking students, using school as a method of social control, rampant privatization, and the centralization of power over school systems in the hands of a single individual, such as a mayor are all measures intended to erode the public element of public education and to ultimately fortify the position of the elite.

Why is this neoliberal agenda dangerous? Anyon (2011) argues that increased financialization has led to municipalities’ entanglement with hedge funds and banks with resulting losses of billions of dollars. As neoliberalism’s guiding force is market freedom/rule and less governmental oversight, public resources held in public trust or ownership become vulnerable to speculative deals. Public education remains one of the greatest fields spared rampant commodification. In order to impose market rule on education, policymakers and their underwriters import business practices that value the cold, bottom line at the expense of nurturing relationships. While teachers, students, parents, and others have largely protested the punitive language of accountability for failing to acknowledge the complicated sociological processes that are factors in student achievement and are virtually unsolvable by the schools alone, schools that have been labeled persistently lowest achieving become the sites of entry for profits to be made, whether in the form of charter schools or endless gadgets designed to raise test scores.

Furthermore, Janine Wedel (2009) has written about the qualities and politics of the modern age and how, if one wants to thrive, one needs to become a “flexian,” or an influential individual of infinite adaptive powers whose loyalty shifts according to various contexts. As power becomes centralized with the elite, non-state actors have immense power and little accountability to the public. These flexians have infiltrated school sites through the cracks of broken schools, pledging

reform with private money, but often ignoring the will of the people. Additionally, much profit stands to be made with privatizing public resources.

The Language of the SIG Policy

According to the United States Department of Education, the School Improvement Grants are described as competitive grants available to state educational agencies, who in turn offer competitive subgrants to local educational agencies (LEA) that “demonstrate the greatest need for the funds and the strongest commitment to use the funds to provide adequate resources in order to raise substantially the achievement of students in their lowest-performing schools.” (Office of School Turnaround)

To truly understand how the USDOE believes that SIGs will help improve failing schools, it is crucial to examine their definition and criteria for identifying persistently lowest-achieving schools:

A-1. What is the definition of “persistently lowest-achieving schools”?

“Persistently lowest-achieving schools” means, as determined by the State

(a) Any Title I school in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring that —

- (i) Is among the lowest-achieving five percent of Title I schools in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring or the lowest-achieving five Title I schools in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring in the State, whichever number of schools is greater; or
- (ii) Is a high school that has had a graduation rate as defined in 34 C.F.R. § 200.19(b) that is less than 60 percent over a number of years;

and

(b) Any secondary school that is eligible for, but does not receive, Title I funds that —

- (i) Is among the lowest-achieving five percent of secondary schools or the lowest-achieving five secondary schools in the State that are eligible for, but do not receive, Title I funds, whichever number of schools is greater; or
- (ii) Is a high school that has had a graduation rate as defined in 34 C.F.R. § 200.19(b) that is less than 60 percent over a number of years.

A school that falls within the definition of (a) above is a “Tier I” school and a school that falls within the definition of (b) above is a “Tier II” school for purposes of using SIG funds under section 1003(g) of the ESEA. At its option, an SEA may identify additional schools as Tier I or Tier II schools (see A-20 through A-29).

A-3. What factors must an SEA consider to identify the persistently lowest-achieving schools in the State?

To identify the persistently lowest-achieving schools in the State, an SEA must take into account both—

- (a) The academic achievement of the “all students” group in a school in terms of proficiency on the State’s assessments under section 1111(b)(3) of the ESEA in reading/language arts and mathematics combined; and
- (b) The school’s lack of progress on those assessments over a number of years in the “all students” group.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, School Improvement Grants Updated SIG Guidance, March 2012

There is much ambiguity in the federal language that is left open for States to decide, including “secondary schools,” “number of years” for high school graduation rates, and “number of years” for determining “lack of progress”.

Schools that are eligible to receive SIG funding must select from among four improvement models based on an assessment of the school by the LEA. The four models are outlined in Figure 1.

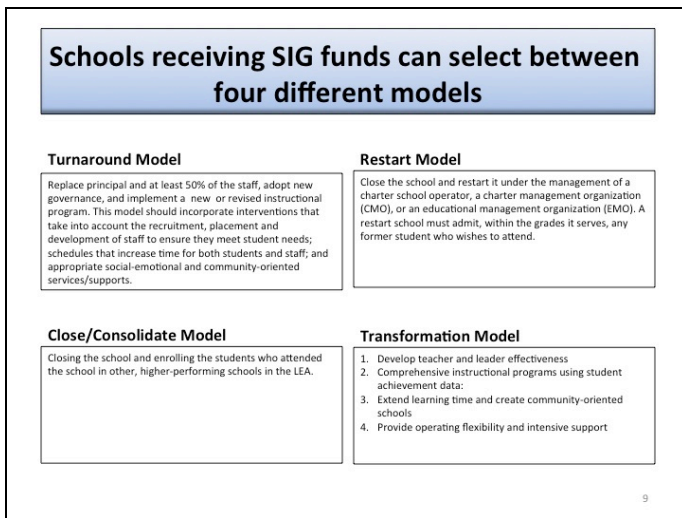


Figure 1. Four models for school improvement (Source: U.S. Department of Education School Improvement Grants)

Impact of Policy: National Research and Media

Since 2009, the USDOE has provided more than \$4 billion to over 1,300 schools across the country in the form of SIGs. Recent reports evaluating the SIG Program indicate some common

trends and challenges for SEAs and LEAs. Arne Duncan, in a recent release of student achievement data from 700 schools that implemented SIG Program in the 2010-2011 school year, stated that nearly one in four schools saw double digit increases in math proficiency while roughly one in five schools had double-digit increases in reading proficiency. Additionally, in nearly 60 percent of SIG schools, the percent of students who were proficient in math or reading went up in the first year (Klein, 2012).

A March 2012, Center on Education Policy report, surveyed state department personnel to gauge their impressions on implementing the new SIG requirements. The CEP research found that, overall, states support the SIG Program but are hesitant about the short timeline and principal and teacher removal. Transformation, the least disruptive of the models, is the most popular choice for schools. In addition, most states (32 out of 46) reported that external providers played a role in implementing the SIG program during the first year of funding (McMurrer and McIntosh, 2012).

The Council of the Great City Schools report on SIGs from February 2012 looked specifically at urban districts. While transformation accounted for 74 percent of schools overall, 54 percent of urban schools chose the transformation option. Furthermore, while 20 percent of schools used turnaround nationally, 36 percent of urban schools chose to implement the turnaround model. Challenges to the implementation of SIG awards include the removal of ineffective teachers, community resistance to closing schools, negotiating with teachers unions, recruiting high quality and reform-oriented teachers, and ensuring adequate school resources are in place. This report also included examples of how schools are implementing the four models. A range of initiatives are cited; however, common reforms included: increased learning time, effective teachers and principals in schools, data driven instruction, tutoring, and a culture of high expectations (Lachlan, Naik & Casserly, 2012).

Criticism of SIGs includes the inflexibility and lack of research for the four options to improvement and the top-down approach implemented by the federal and state competitive grants to schools. The U.S. Government Accountability Office stated, “Successful SIG implementation posed a number of challenges. Specifically, state and district officials were challenged to build staff capacity and commitment for reform, facing difficulties such as recruiting and retaining strong staff members. In addition, the SIG requirements to develop teacher evaluations and increase student learning time were difficult to implement quickly and effectively because they required extensive planning and coordination.” This report also cited the lack of accountability for outside contractors including lack of federal requirements to review contractor performance (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012).

The National Bureau of Economic Research recently released a working paper on school turnaround focused on California schools. The report found that typical low performing schools closed 23 percent of the achievement gap in the first year; however, the report did state that although the models are prescriptive, there are a variety of ways in which implementation is taking place across all schools, and in order to determine the broader implications of the SIG policy, the effectiveness of these implementations must be better understood (Dee, 2012). Although this seems promising for the future of the SIG program, it is still early in the implementation of this program and several years of data will be needed to see if schools are able to sustain these kinds of performance gains. Some critics state that quick gains in the first year of a policy implementation are common and that the next few years will be more telling about the effectiveness of the SIG program.

Local Implementation in New York City

The Federal Government (2009) American Recovery and Reinvestment Act allocated \$3 billion in addition to over \$500 million from regular appropriations for the 2009-2010 school year to the SIG Program. Over 2,000 schools were identified as SIG eligible. New York State applied for a SIG award requesting \$308 million in April 2010 for 67 PLA schools in New York State. Local school districts were able to apply for grant funding up to \$2 million per school per year for a three-year period. The New York City Department of Education had 43 PLA schools identified. After submitting a successful application, NYCDOE was awarded \$19,800,003 for 11 PLA schools and in the second year was awarded \$58,569,883 for 44 PLA schools (See Figure 2)

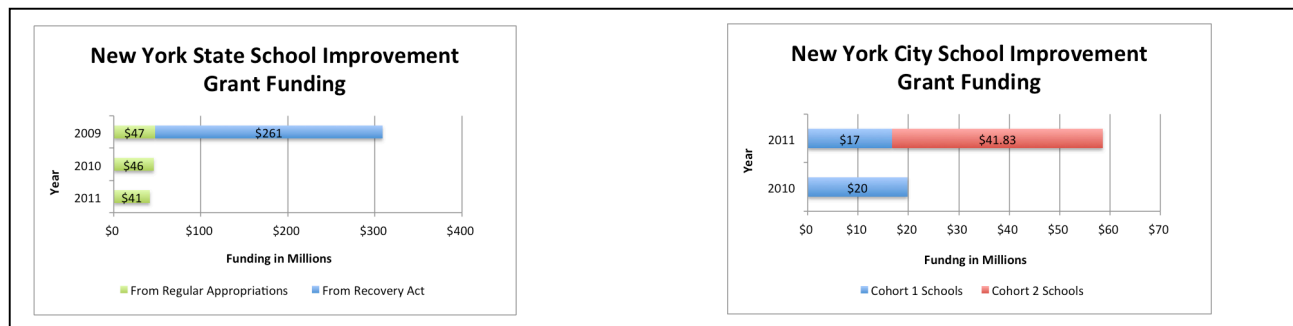


Figure 2. School Improvement Grant Awards received by New York State and New York City from 2009-2011.

As part of receiving SIG funding, goals must be set for each school that address performance on ELA and Math State Assessments and graduation rates. Specific goals for New York State schools are:

1. By the end of the grant period 100 percent of identified High schools that have completed implementation will have graduation rates above 60 percent, 50 percent will have graduation rates above 70 percent and 25 percent will have graduation rates about 80 percent.
2. By the end of the grant period, the percentage of students that are NOT proficient in ELA or math will be reduced by a minimum of 33 percent in all PLA schools.
3. By the end of the grant period all of New York States 243 schools currently in restructuring status will have “In Good Standing” or in the process of implementing an intervention

model. 100 former PLA schools will attain “In Good Standing” and in 33 percent of these schools, performance in ELA and Math will exceed State averages. (Schwartz, 2011)

LEAs outlined comparable academic achievement goals for each of their PLA schools. SEAs and LEAs were encouraged to use external providers for curriculum materials and data tools to diagnose student needs, to help teachers create individual professional development plans, and to develop teacher evaluation systems.

The first round of SIG awards in New York City was for \$19,800,003 and went to 11 schools. All were high schools and all were planning to implement the transformation model according to their Education Impact Statements (EIS). One of the requirements for the transformation model is a teacher evaluation system that uses as “rigorous, transparent, and equitable evaluation systems for teachers and principals that take into account data on student growth as a significant factor” (USDOE, 2012). In the second year of the first cohort of schools, an additional \$16,743,701 was granted to the New York City Department of Education and two of the original eleven schools were switched to the restart model (Automotive High School and Bread and Roses High School). In the second round of SIG applications submitted in May 2011, NYCDOE applied for an additional 33 PLA schools at a cost of \$41,827,182. This application proposed that 10 schools would adopt the transformation model, 11 schools would adopt the turnaround model and 12 schools would adopt the restart model (School closure was never a possibility for New York City due to the size of the population served). In total, the NYCDOE applied for over \$58 million dollars from New York State for the 2011-2012 school year.

Impact of policy: The Case Study of New York City

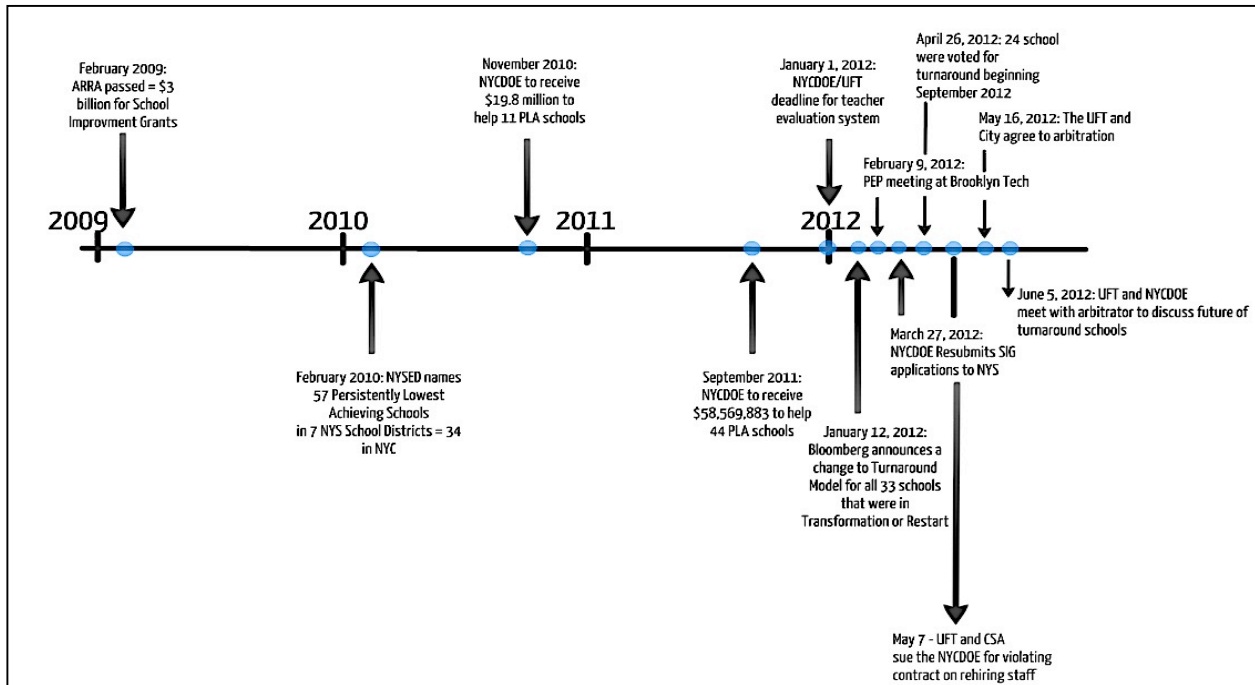


Figure 3. A timeline of events in New York City for implementation of School Improvement Grants.

As of January 1, 2012 the New York City Department of Education and the UFT had not come to an agreement on a teacher evaluation system that incorporated student growth. At that moment, the DOE was in violation of the SIG grant applications, and the state threatened to withhold the funding. In his State of the City speech on January 12, 2012, Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced that in order to keep the \$58 million in grant funds, all schools that were slated for transformation and restart would be closed and reopened under the turnaround model. The mayor justified this switch since the turnaround model did not specifically require a comprehensive teacher evaluation system, unlike the transformation model. However, the turnaround model does require measurement of staff using school-based competencies. Presumably, the turnaround schools would close and then rehire no more than 50% of the dismissed staff using that school-based metric (Cramer, 2012a).

At a Panel for Education Policy (PEP) meeting on February 9, 2012, 44 resolutions were presented to adopt significant changes in school utilization. This meeting held at Brooklyn Tech highlighted the resistance that many parent and community groups had to the top down school closure policies. In the end, 22 schools closed for Fall 2012 (Cramer, 2012b). The PEP has never rejected a city proposal, as the majority of the PEP members are Bloomberg appointed. Since these events, many Community Education Councils (Community School District) have signed a resolution to require that respective community education councils approve a co-location or school closure/phase out proposal before it may be presented for a vote by the PEP (Cramer, 2012d).

On March 27, the NYCDOE submitted revised proposals to the New York State Department of Education requesting changes from the transformation model and restart model to the turnaround model. Throughout March and April, school closure hearings were held at all of the impacted high schools. During this period, seven schools were taken off the turnaround list in early April as a result of receiving top grades on the city's internal assessment of school quality. In the morning of the April 26 PEP meeting two additional schools were taken off the closure list with the justification "after listening to public comment and reviewing performance data that Bushwick and Cleveland didn't need major changes after all" (Cromidas and Cramer, 2012). That evening the PEP voted for the closure of the remaining 24 schools.

A Closer Look at Turnaround and the UFT

The turnaround model for school improvement includes the removal of the principal unless he/she has served fewer than three years at the school and the removal of half of the teaching staff upon reopening. The New York City Department of Education circumvented unions by choosing the turnaround model, which in theory closes a school and reopens the school under a new name. The NYCDOE cited that under Article 18-D of the DOE's collective bargaining agreement with the

UFT, when a new school is created to replace a school that is being phased out or closed, the principal of the new school must develop and implement school-based competencies for hiring teaching staff. The federal SIG guidelines provide the following examples as competencies: (1) acting with initiative and persistence (2) planning ahead (3) flexibility (4) respect for and sensitivity to norms of interaction in different situations (5) self-confidence (6) team-leadership (7) developing others (8) analytical thinking (9) conceptual thinking (USDOE, 2012). However, the union states that 18-D does not apply to turnaround schools and is fighting the city on this issue.

A personnel committee made up of two representatives appointed by the UFT president and two representatives appointed by the chancellor and the principal of the school make hiring decisions. So long as 50 percent of the staff of the school is replaced, the school is eligible for the SIG funding. Recently positions in the turnaround schools have been posted and qualifications for teachers include “willingness or ability to learn”, “ability and/or willingness to utilize technology to communicate with community members,” and a willingness to work as an advisor to a small group of students using a curriculum developed by Brown University’s Education Alliance (Cramer, 2012e).

On May 7, the UFT and the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators (CSA) filed a joint lawsuit in the State Supreme Court challenging that city’s view that giving a school a new name and a new number makes it a new school. The lawsuit argues that turnaround amounts only to “sham” closures meant to circumvent the union’s collective bargaining rules in order to overhaul the schools so that they can win federal turnaround funding (Cramer and Cromidas, 2012).

Impacts and Questions around NYC school closure

The shift from transformation and restart to school turnaround was on the surface financially motivated. But it is possible to imagine other motivations by the NYCDOE including circumventing

federal and state accountability requirements and forcing the UFT to agree to a rushed teacher evaluation system. There is no longer any data for a closed school and no need to worry about meeting Adequate Yearly Progress under NCLB. There are not enough students in subgroups to meet the accountability measures. Is the finagling of these unofficial NCLB “waivers” in the form of school turnaround a suspect move?

Many questions remain about the future of the over 40 new schools that will reopen in September 2012. New principals at the Turnaround Schools Institute held weekly at Tweed grapple with and draft fundamental identifiers like the name of the school, its mission, and its theme. “The principals’ first tasks, after getting an introduction to the turnaround concept, were to define their mission and vision for the new school; identify what should be preserved from the old one; and sketch out what to add next year. Some of that thinking made it into the detailed ‘Education Impact Statements’ that the city released this week and some could wind up in the formal turnaround applications that the city must submit to the state in order to get federal funding to support the school overhauls.” (Cramer, 2012c)

Some of the many other questions and red flags connected to SIG implementation naturally revolve around expenditures:

- In the first year alone, the Leadership Academy was budgeted \$550,000 to work with the 11 schools
- Over \$150,000 for SES from Citizen Schools
- The following are all vendors that have received contracts: Kaplan, AVID, Brienza, Achieve 3000 to name but a few
- Additional textbooks are often synonymous with "test prep" materials
- Education Software in the second years was \$1.95 million for both the first cohort budget and the second cohort budget

- Transportation of non-contracted staff is paid out of SIG budget
- Education and Curriculum consultants make over \$5 million for their advice
- Creation of new positions - Transformation Mentor Principal (making over \$150,000), Master Teacher, Turnaround Teacher, School Implementation Manager (making \$106,000), Director for Turnaround and Transformation schools (\$106,000), and many more...
- A group called Urban Teachers Residency United is getting \$4 million as consultants to Central
- SMARTboards in every classroom to improve "teacher effectiveness;" i.e., differentiation.

All contracts need to be ARRA approved but there is little to accountability for these outside vendors. (Conteras, 2011; Rencher and Vida, 2010)

Resistance

“This simple and linear approach to education reform is sinking underneath the weight of its own faults. Educational improvement is not accomplished through administrative or legislative mandate. Educational improvement is only accomplished with attention to the complicated, idiosyncratic, and also paradoxical and difficult nature of measuring learning. How can we expect to produce revolutionary minds to shape the structure of our foundations, like Martin Luther King...if the very foundation that is responsible for shaping the minds of our youth is utterly corrupt? And so I turn to you, the future leaders of the world, it is up to you to rise up and say, “We are not your experimental test subjects! We are the essence of biological and psychological complexity! We are not bound by instinctive nature. We are free to feel and think as we please. We are a fast and ever evolving people with innovative and revolutionary minds. We are humans and I think it’s time you started treating us as such!” (Daniels, 2012)

Xsavier Daniels, a student at Lehman High School in the Bronx, spoke out eloquently on April 2 at a public meeting about Lehman’s impending closure and turnaround with community members, students, teachers, and NYCDOE representatives present. His words above express the feelings of many students, who are confused and angry about the policy. A junior from Graphics High School, Kiani Martinez, attended the joint public hearing city officials held to hear feedback on the turnaround plan. The High School for Graphics Communication and Art was voted for

turnaround at the April 26 PEP meeting. Speaking about the closing of her school Martinez said, “I think turnaround is the worst thing that could happen to the school. It’s good to be funding the school more again, but there’s a chance that all these teachers and school officials are not going to be here. But they’ve been helping us since we were freshman. No one else could have that type of caring about us if they just came into the school.” (Cromidas, 2012c)

At a high school fair in early March, teachers in proposed turnaround schools struggled to keep a positive front for prospective students, knowing that turnaround could drastically change the school culture and academic offerings between now and September (Cromidas, 2012a). Parents at school closure hearings are skeptical about the improvements the city is promising under the Turnaround model. At a hearing for Long Island City High School many parents say they are worried that the city is not planning adequately for turnaround. Some say they are wary of the abrupt leadership change, which would be the third in less than four years (Cromidas, 2012b).

Parent organizer and leader, Zakiyah Ansari, of the Alliance for Quality Education and the New York City Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ) has been particularly outspoken about the lack of research connected to turnaround models. “Instead of spending tens of millions of dollars on a risky ‘turnaround’ strategy in another 23 schools, we should invest these resources in art and music programs, quality professional development for teachers, after school programs, social workers, guidance counselors and other resources that prepare our students to succeed” (Ansari, 2012). The CEJ released a report in April that was particularly damning of turnaround policy, arguing that schools slated for turnaround did not meet the profile for failure and, furthermore, that the schools served large student populations in teacher shortage areas, such as special education and bilingual students. The cost connected to hiring “at least 800” new personnel to replace existing staff will cost more than “\$60 million.” (Decker, 2012b)

In response to the city's announcement in January about abandoning the restart and transformation school models and move all schools to a turnaround model, Ernest Logan, president of the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators, sent a letter to State Education Commissioner John King urging him to reject the city's request arguing that it was meant only to sidestep a requirement that the city negotiate with CSA and the United Federation of Teachers.

Notably, Regents Chancellor Merryl Tisch spoke of the city's plan to overhaul 33 struggling schools, stating that she believes "turnaround" is a political strategy, not an educational one. She went on to say, "There's a fight going on here that has nothing to do with what's going on at the school. It's a labor dispute between labor and management and has nothing to do with the kids." (Decker, 2012a)

Resistance takes many forms. To highlight the absurdity of turnaround policy, in which neighborhood schools are closed and reopened with new shiny names, new missions, a new principal, and (at least) half of a new staff (but with all of the attendant macro-level problems associated with poverty and years of disinvestment intact), some journalists utilize parody and satire. In a mock letter addressed to a new middle school student, Skip Card of Inside Schools writes:

Dear scholar (formerly known as "student"),

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted to the Albert Einstein Academy of Integrated Sciences in the Rosa Parks Campus, formerly known as Middle School 525. The ivy-covered walls of AEAIRPC eagerly await you, and we feel sure that your class will set high standards for the five or six future classes who will attend this school before its name gets changed again.

Please note that the Albert Einstein Academy is merely one of several institutes of learning (formerly known as "schools") at the Rosa Parks Campus (formerly known as George Wallace High School for Accounting and Carpentry, and before that as Washington High). Also sharing the building will be:

- Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Academy of Dramatic Arts (formerly Laurel & Hardy High)

- Fashion School of the Bronx (formerly known as Bronx Fashion School, and briefly known as the J-Lo School for Showing You Got It Girl Fashion Academy before the department invalidated the student-run name-selection contest)
- Middle School 32 (formerly MS 23, but the stone carver was dyslexic) (Card, 2012)

According to the authors, turnaround policy is flawed and must be replaced. The next section will attempt to describe a model that, while similarly disruptive in rejecting the status quo, places the onus of reform on the shoulders of the entire community, instead of cowardly blaming teachers and principals for low graduation rates and shamefully offering the opportunity to reap profits from accountability models.

Proposed Policy Solution

What follows is a radical departure from the constraints of NCLB standardized test statutes, the rigidity of turnaround models, the lack of foresight and seeming arbitrariness with implementing models, and the hostile climate of punitive measures and derogatory labels stamped on persistently low achieving schools. It should be noted that this radical departure is a utopian vision of how education could look, and certain logistical limitations have been overlooked for the sake of a hypothetical argument. If we attempt to answer the query, “Why do we educate in a democracy?” our answers ultimately prioritize people’s voices, equity, and sustainability. Using Ivan Illich’s (1970) classic heretical work, *Deschooling Society*, as inspiration, we propose a new paradigm for conceiving education. In the words of Illich, “The educational institutions I will propose, however, are meant to serve a society which does not now exist, although the current frustration with schools is itself potentially a major force to set in motion change toward new social arrangements” (73).

What we are proposing, then, has both fantastical and real qualities and the reader would be kind to

suspend disbelief to savor the proposed solution, which draws from classic Progressivism, ecological framework theories, and critical pedagogy.

Mark Anderson and William Johnson, educators and frequent contributors to *Gotham Schools*, outlined an ecological framework to replace existing business frameworks in education.

They write:

Using an ecological design approach, reformers could not treat schools as vacant lots primed for subdivision. Instead, school revitalization would need to be a community-driven, long-term process. In an ecological framework, school reformers would need to acknowledge the complexity of school communities, rather than simply pretending that schools could be leveled, bulldozed, and magically reinvented as high performing lots of isolated land.

(Anderson and Johnson, 2012)

The authors develop the concept of teacher as “environmental steward.” They write, “Instead of being trained and treated as a widget, teachers would be content experts and community leaders of their classroom and school ecosystem, responsible for all the students who inhabit it. Such stewards would necessarily need to be long-term inhabitants of these ecosystems themselves, growing more and more effective as their knowledge of the environment deepens and their relationships within the school community strengthens.” (Anderson and Johnson, 2012)

Others have written about the value of sustainability in schools. Michael Stone, an editor at the Center for Ecoliteracy, writes about the persistence, perseverance, and magical thinking of applying natural frameworks to education processes:

To stay useful, sustainability must mean more than merely surviving or trying to keep a degraded world from getting worse. Otherwise, why bother? Invoking nature's capacity for sustaining life, as Fritjof Capra suggests, is critical. A sustainable community worth imagining is alive, in the most exuberant sense of that word —

fresh, vital, evolving, diverse, and dynamic. It cares about the quality as well as the continuation of life. It is flexible and adaptive. It draws energy from its environment, celebrates organic wholeness, and appreciates that life has more to reveal than human cleverness has yet discovered. It teaches its children to pay attention to the world around them, to respect what they cannot control, and to embrace the creativity with which life sustains itself. (Stone, 2009)

The model we propose may be considered a “fifth option” to existing School Turnaround models, but it is also much more than a policy change since it attempts to incorporate real social justice and an alternate vision of learning outside of the confines of the school building. While we believe this model is an improvement over existing models, we also believe that much work is needed in challenging the neoliberal agenda in public education and the world over, and this is, unfortunately, outside the scope of this policy brief. We have therefore designed this model as an empowering attempt to envision how to educate in a *capitalist* democracy, and specifically in an *urban* space that has been the battered site of flawed policy. We have divided the components of this model into seven subsections: Research & Development; Educational Liaison; Financial Incentives; Community Revitalization and Partnerships; Teachers; Program of Study; and Evaluation.

As an overview, this model offered to supplement or even supplant SIG models to improve PLAs (typically the lowest “achieving” schools are within the bottom 5% of all schools), known hereafter as New School (in the charming tradition of the EIS statements of the PLA schools), is a year-long program, which runs on a different calendar than the September-June traditional model. We imagine trimesters, with two-week breaks between each. Time in school will increase by approximately 30 days. New School has been designed to serve students in grades 7-12, so hypothetically a 9-12 PLA school may admit younger students it would normally not. The most glaring difference between New School and traditional schools is that notions of school space are

fanned outwards to resemble but not duplicate vocational education. No longer is it necessary or even worthwhile to limit education and learning to the confines of school classrooms for fully half of each school day will be spent at participating educational sites, including, but not limited to offices, hospitals, court rooms, entertainment complexes, police precincts, retail operations, and parks. What we have blown up are existing restraints on NCLB standardized testing requirements, UFT and CSA contracts, and the continued emotional trauma of disparaging labels and uninspired curriculum. We do not suggest that the following is aligned to Common Core standards, nor does it presuppose that every student should demonstrate college readiness. What we do suggest, however, is that treating students with dignity, melding theoretical knowledge with applied knowledge through on-site interaction, and radically extending the resources of the city to students in a systematic and adaptable fashion will energize and transform the process of learning far greater than the personnel swapping “makeovers” currently en vogue in turnaround policy. What follows is our attempt at detailing a city-as-school.

Research & Development

In order for this model to thrive, significant research must influence its design. We challenge schools of education to lead the charge in confronting inequity with real empowerment, concrete relationships with sites of employment, and curricular reform that demolishes the divide between school space and urban space. Schools of education should partner with the department heads of every major offered at connected colleges and universities in order to offer pedagogy classes (perhaps in the form of education minors) to college students who have an interest in sharing their craft and knowledge with others, but who do not envision becoming traditional classroom teachers.

A concrete example of this is offering the undergraduate, graduate, or doctoral molecular biology student who has demonstrated interest and propensity to teach science the opportunity to obtain education credits. The student, upon graduation, would be considered a key resource in

biology jobs for their educational program and be known as a Field Site Supervisor. She would be able to mentor and instruct students who attend New School, work directly with New School teachers, and provide an invaluable service to underprivileged youth. Her educational program would supplement her normal career responsibilities.

Schools of education in urban settings should conduct needs assessments of city jobs in order to stay abreast of relevant and current opportunities to forge new partnerships. Schools of education should be at the forefront of research on how the political economy affects institutional learning. Extreme pressure should be placed on policymakers to overhaul statutes that are antiquated, inequitable, or designed to frame education in the purview of fortified knowledge, rather than the open and accessible process that it should be.

Educational Liaisons

In order to facilitate the network imagined by this policy, the position of an Educational Liaison would be created to connect teachers with participating businesses, services, and assorted outside field sites. The Educational Liaison (EL), the New School Teacher (NST), and the Field Site Supervisor (FSS) would be responsible for creating educational programs for student body populations ranging from grades 7-12.

Financial Incentives

The amount of money spent on existing models in Turnaround Policy is truly staggering. Whether money is spent on rapidly accelerating and increasingly obsolete technologies, testing company giants, or to support propaganda spouted from the mouth of the Leadership Academy, students themselves are never considered as potential direct recipients of funds. Reimagining the budget then might involve students assuming financial agency and receiving an income while in school. While the amount could be a token or symbolic sum, this slight financial incentive offered to students could be issued in the form of a trust, deposited into an interest-accruing savings account

at a local credit union, with the further option of being able to access up to 20% of the yearly sum for personal use, and finally, becoming fully accessible once the student turns 18. Assuming that the student begins her journey at New School in grade 7, and the yearly payment is \$1000.00, she may “earn” up to \$6,000.00 plus interest if no money is withdrawn by her final year of high school. We further propose that students who pass New School’s graduation requirements be offered a \$4,000.00 bonus if their “Year 13” confirmed plans include higher education, full-time work, or even global travel or volunteer work. We theorize that the 18-year-old high school graduate with an accessible “future fund” of ~\$10,000 will have a small, but significant bank of wealth to ensure continued success. These figures are illustrated merely as examples: We would allocate more than \$1,000 annually if feasible.

Teachers, too, will be offered financial incentives. While we are fierce defenders of labor unions, we lack the legalese to understand how this proposal would affect the existing UFT contract since the role of the teacher, her program, and many other fundamental definitions and credentialing procedures will change. We do, however, believe that the New School Teacher will earn a higher figure than her traditional counterparts due to the time commitment of this position.

Finally, in order to provide incentives to Field Sites to build educational programs, we propose offering tax benefits to commercial and corporate entities and grants or other endowments to municipal or non-profit groups. Many organizations already have educational programs or outreach services, and the role of many Field Sites would be to create the position of a dedicated Field Site Supervisor who has both deep content knowledge and pedagogical skills to devise ways of opening up traditionally closed off employment spaces. We also anticipate that many Field Sites would either create or expand their scholarship funding to assist the apprentices who learn in their spaces with higher education.

Community Revitalization

Since PLA schools often exist in lower SES communities, it is only reasonable to conceive of ways of sparking grassroots economic growth within the actual community. Undertheorized in this brief is how to reform primary education, or grades K-6; however, we do encourage that the urban community-at-large be invited *into* these schools, as the inverse form of our 7-12 New School model. Furthermore, in redesigning the school space of New School and to account for a program of study in which students are learning at field sites during portions of the day, we suggest that any available school space be converted to a social center for the community. We imagine that health and guidance services, continuing education classes, daycare, and access to gymnasiums, libraries, computer labs, and other school facilities be offered to adults in the community as a public service.

Teachers

SIG reform has led to creating many top-level bureaucrats and turnaround henchmen in the form of “School Implementation Managers”, “Director of Turnaround and Transformation Schools”, and more central positions in the Division of Portfolio Planning in New York City at high costs. When one considers that the bottom line with all of these positions is to uphold the sanctity of the holy standardized test score, the situation takes on an air of infinite absurdity. The New School Teacher (NST) is a position that many would covet since her role is not to simply show testing results, but rather to foster an enduring relationship with six students per year within a cohort model for the six years they attend school. With a maximum “roster” of 36 students, NST is responsible for providing the type of one-one level of support unblinkingly bestowed to the elite. NSTs would be expected to practice critical pedagogy and possess deep content knowledge *across* disciplines. It is essential that NSTs be experts at conducting research, the art of writing, and developing theory, as well as fully flexible and open to the contours of their unconventional roles as academic advisors.

NSTs are master teachers who should be reasonably compensated for their dedication to social justice.

Program of Study

Reliance on standardized test scores or Regents tests as the sole indications of competency does not work for a segment of the student body population. With that said, this model may not work for all affected students either. Any student who opposes the model has the choice to enroll at another school, as is typically offered at PLA schools. We offer several assumptions that might shape the program at New School:

- Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner offered free of cost to the student
- Student attends classes at New School for a portion (at least four hours) of the day, five days a week. This could be scheduled in any number of ways, depending on the needs of the population.
- Student is apprenticed to participating Field Sites for other portion of the day.
Apprenticeships should be at least three hours daily, four days a week.
- Student has the opportunity to volunteer, take additional classes, or even earn money during a portion of the fifth day when she is not at her apprenticeship.
- The student is expected to develop exit projects that are performance-based as requirements for promotion.
- In addition to the performance portfolios, the student must pass two individualized assessments: One issued in 9th grade that measures content knowledge from the rotations at Field Sites in the first three years; the second issued in 11th grade that will take the form of a proposal for her twelfth year of school, fully synthesizing her first five years.

Evaluation

In an attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of our proposed model we find ourselves limited by the constraints of quantitative evaluation measures. However we would hope to see some signs in the community of economic improvement that may reflect programs within the schools related to improved nutrition, childcare, and adult continuing education. We welcome the criteria set forth in the National School Climate Standards as an evaluative framework for measuring the positivity and sustainability of this policy. In particular, the language directed towards “reengagement” of students and promoting practices that “promote social and civic responsibilities and a commitment to social justice” seems quite salient. Since the most important factor is student achievement, our model would have to be measured against internal criteria related to student satisfaction and success with the bridges to careers, relationships with teacher/advisors, and cultivation of a critical knowledge base necessary for higher education *if* he/she chooses to undertake that journey. The authors believe that “college readiness”, while ideal, is not the only metric by which to evaluate success.

Concluding Thoughts

We do not mean to suggest that the New School model is a fully-developed policy proposal for SIG re-conceptualization. We have obviously overlooked issues of transportation, safety & security, reorganization, economic, and numerous other crucial factors. The beauty of ecological models is that their webs extend indefinitely and mimic life in all of its spontaneity and complexity. However, we were inspired to build a dream school at the encouragement of Dean David Steiner and we believe that in order to turn around education, one must first consider place. It is reasonable to suggest that students who have been ill-served by schools and their communities be given an extraordinary education through the very machinery by which cities run and the opportunity to experience learning outside of a Kaplan test booklet or through the glossy nothingness of a

SMARTboard. Their grounding in critical pedagogy, their apprenticeships in various occupations, their savings trusts, and their meaningful relationships with their peers, teachers, and community members may ultimately not prevent incarceration, death, or any number of grim outcomes for underprivileged youth who have been denied essential experiences with real content. We believe, though, that the billions of dollars spent at resuscitating challenged schools with the poisoned air of “turnaround” and padding the pockets of private companies who offer services and gimmicks to further distort the meaning of democratic education must be redirected into having a national conversation about why we educate in a democracy.

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