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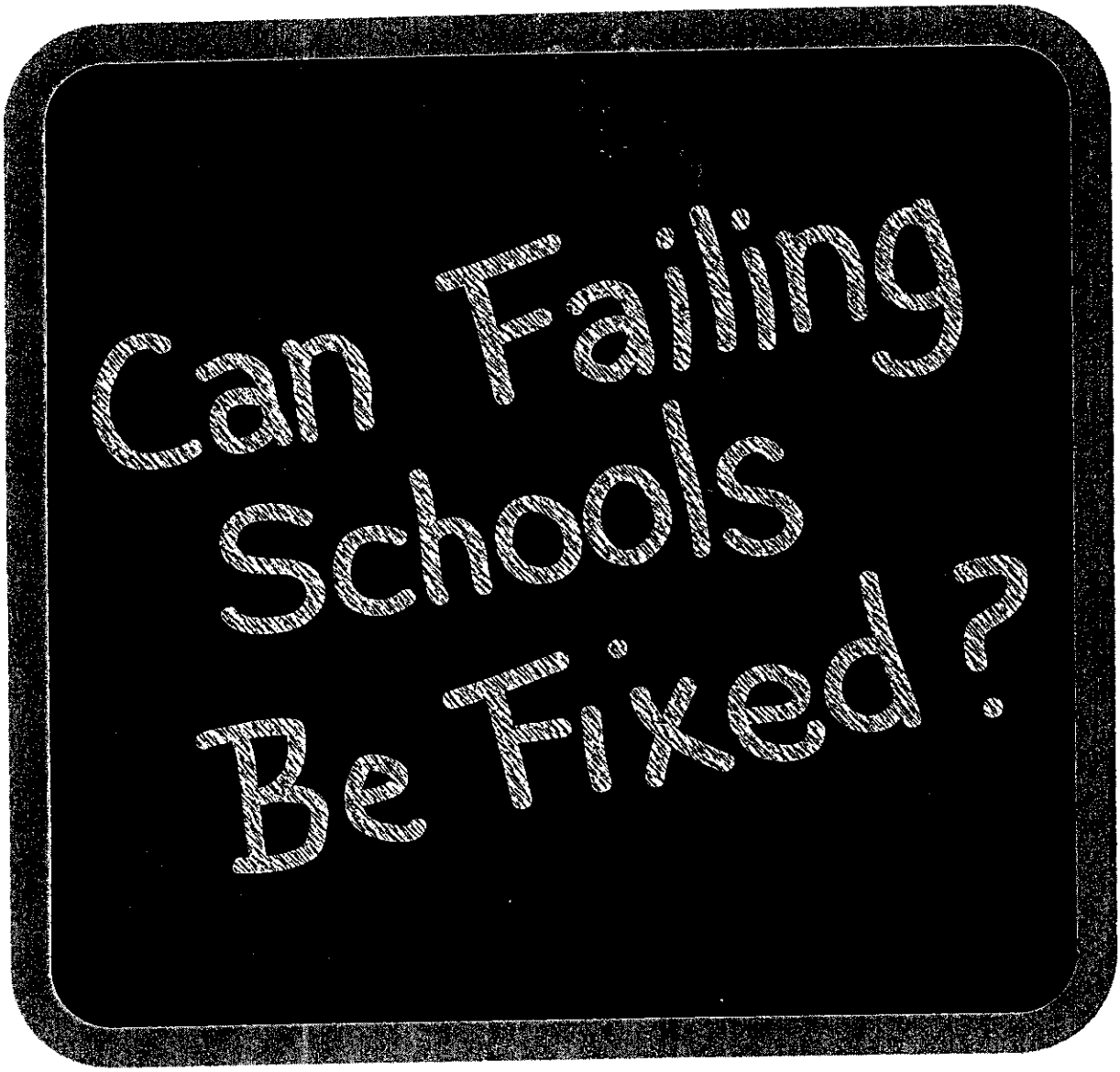

Can Failing Schools Be Fixed?

by Ronald C. Brady

JANUARY 2003

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FOREWORD

When the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was signed into law, attention instantly focused on its centerpiece provisions dealing with testing and accountability. NCLB requires that all states install school and district accountability systems based on the results of student scores on annual tests. The Congressionally mandated accountability arrangements are elaborate, complex, and prescriptive. The goal is to press states and districts to act decisively to turn around failing schools and boost pupil achievement, particularly in reading and math. Millions of U.S. youngsters presently attend schools that are not educating their students to meet acceptable standards. Many schools have lingered on the failure list for years. No Child Left Behind is meant to change this.

But while the law energetically and precisely outlines a cascade of interventions and other consequences for persistently failing schools, surprisingly little is known about what kinds of interventions are most likely to turn faltering schools into successful educational institutions. Although many states and districts have sought in recent decades to overhaul their failing schools, up to now there have been few systematic efforts to glean lessons from their experiences. This report attempts to do exactly that.

It begins by describing the interventions set forth for state and local policymakers as part of No Child Left Behind. It then categorizes and reviews 17 interventions that have been attempted by states or school districts since 1989, interventions that resemble those mandated (or offered as options) by NCLB. Finally, it takes a close look at three interventions in particular: the Schools Under Registration Review process in New York State, the implementation of comprehensive school reform in Memphis, Tennessee, and the reconstitution of schools in Prince George's County, Maryland. These efforts are examined with an eye to understanding what works under what circumstances and assessing how likely NCLB is to succeed in its effort to ensure that failing schools are turned around.

Author Ronald C. Brady is admirably suited to this task. A graduate of Bowdoin College and Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, he is a veteran of state-level intervention efforts who formerly headed New Jersey's office of state-operated school districts and worked closely with that state's former Education Commissioner, Leo Klagholz. He has

worked on school reform and intervention at the district level, too, first as an assistant to former New York City school chancellor Ray Cortines, and currently under the State District Superintendent in Paterson, New Jersey, Edwin Duroy, one of New Jersey's most accomplished urban superintendents. Brady has also done distinguished service for the Edison Project (now Edison Schools), where I came to know, like and respect his intellect, his integrity, and his passion to better the education prospects of poor and minority youngsters languishing in inadequate urban schools.

Brady's conclusions are sobering. While the United States can boast a number of examples of successful turnarounds, it appears that no particular intervention strategy has a success rate higher than 50 percent, and most interventions yield positive results in less than half of the schools they touch. No one strategy can be counted upon to succeed in all contexts. In most cases, solid school-level leadership seems to be critical to success—yet that is precisely what's missing in many failing schools.

The author warns that interventions can be difficult, costly, unpredictable, and hard to sustain. He argues that the experience of the past decade suggests that there are limits to what can be accomplished by any wholesale intervention strategy, including the one enshrined in No Child Left Behind. Brady suggests that NCLB may expect too much improvement (as gauged by results) too soon. Given that many interventions are unlikely to yield improved schools, he urges policymakers to consider additional options for children trapped in failing educational institutions.

We are pleased to publish this important study. Heartily as we applaud NCLB's magnificent vision of a nation in which every child is proficient in core academic skills, sound public policy argues for a measure of candor when it comes to appraising the likelihood that a single intervention sequence can work everywhere in this vast nation. Time may show that the intervention quiver needs more and more varied arrows. In the meantime, those charged with aiming the arrows that have already been provided should benefit from this insightful study of which past archers have hit their targets and the circumstances that accompanied their success.

The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation is a private foundation that supports research, publications, and action projects in elementary/secondary education reform at the national level and in the

Dayton, Ohio, area. Further information can be obtained at our web site (www.edexcellence.net) or by writing us at 1627 K Street NW, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20006. (We can also be e-mailed through our web site.) This report is available in full on the foundation's web site, and hard copies can be obtained by calling 1-888-TBF-7474 (single copies are free). The foundation is neither connected with nor sponsored by Fordham University.

Chester E. Finn, Jr., President
Thomas B. Fordham Foundation
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) requires states and school districts to act aggressively to turn around failing schools. NCLB lists 31 different interventions of varying degrees of severity that are available to state and local policymakers when faced with schools whose students fail to make sufficient academic progress. It sets forth a sequence by which various of those interventions are to be put into practice.

Yet NCLB's accountability systems and intervention tactics are not brand new. As of August 2002, 38 states already had some form of accountability system for schools, and since 1989 at least 30 jurisdictions across 22 states have sought to intervene in failing schools.

Such well-intended efforts begin with a paradox. Much is known about how effective schools work, but it is far less clear how to move an ineffective school from failure to success. This report describes twenty different kinds of interventions into failing schools, seventeen of which have already been tried. It provides examples of where they have been attempted. These range from simple identification of failing schools, to technical assistance for school staff, to longer school days or years, to replacement of the principal, to closing down the school or having the state take over the entire district. While the milder interventions have often been tried, examples of the more intrusive reforms are rare.

The report examines three interventions in detail: the Schools Under Registration Review process in New York, comprehensive school reform in Memphis, Tennessee, and school reconstitution in Prince George's County, Maryland. In each of those cases, roughly half or fewer of the schools that were subject to the intervention showed real improvement when gauged in terms of pupil achievement.

Several lessons can be drawn from America's previous experience with state and district-level interventions into failing schools:

- Many decisionmakers are more inclined to accept failing schools than to intervene
- Some turnaround efforts have improved some schools, but success is not the norm
- No particular intervention appears more successful than any other
- Interventions are uneven in their implementation and always hard to sustain
- It is nearly impossible to determine which interventions offer the most bang for the buck because they are attempted in very different situations
- School leadership is a common thread in most successful turnarounds

Policymakers faced with failing schools should not be paralyzed by the number of intervention strategies that may lie at their disposal. Rather, they should know that the specific strategy they select is less important than the right mix of people, energy, and timing. They should also resist urgings to pass judgment too fast, as it may be several years before even a successful intervention shows results. No Child Left Behind may expect too much too fast. And because even the strongest interventions specified in No Child Left Behind are not likely to turn some schools around, policymakers need to consider other options for children trapped in such places.

Introduction

Today, some 4 million American children attend over 8,000 public schools that are not educating students to meet state academic standards. In many of these schools, fewer than half of the pupils pass state tests, and in some cases fewer than one-third do. In many, failure has become a habit, even a norm, lasting many years and denying educational opportunities to generations of youngsters.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB or the Act), the education cornerstone of the George W. Bush administration, is designed to try to change this. NCLB's goal is to provide every student in America with the opportunity for a high-quality public education.

The Act contains many elements meant to improve schools, but perhaps the most sweeping are its provisions that require districts and states to act more aggressively to improve or overhaul failing schools.[1] Left to their own devices, experience shows that states and districts are frequently slow to intervene in such schools. For example, in 2001, after an average of nine years of demonstrated failure, New York State finally closed 14 of New York City's lowest performing schools.[2] In several of these schools, the state had dawdled for a dozen years, enough time for a child to complete his or her entire elementary and secondary education. In contrast, NCLB requires states and districts to act decisively within five years, and mandates that students in failing schools be given the chance to receive tutoring or to attend a better school rather than enduring the improvement process. The Act does this through a set of graduated actions—called interventions—to be taken by local school systems and states to ensure that failing schools improve.

Some 4 million American children attend over 8,000 public schools that are not educating students to meet state academic standards.

NCLB's intervention provisions were enacted against the backdrop of much experience at the state level with efforts to transform low-performing schools. In some states, this has been going on for the better part of twenty years. New York, New Jersey, North Carolina, Texas, and other states have been at the forefront of interventions into faltering districts and unsuccessful schools to try to turn them around. In addition to state actions, such districts as Chicago, Memphis, Houston, and Prince George's County (in Maryland) have engaged in aggressive efforts of their own to overhaul failing schools. NCLB takes these strategies, policies, and practices and weaves them into a federally driven accountability system that applies to every state and district. In doing so, it both highlights the number of failing schools and creates greater pressure to address them.

As America grapples with the challenges of implementing NCLB's ambitious reform menu, we do well to take stock of what has been learned from state and local efforts to turn schools around. The problem of failing schools has been with us for some time and we have a body of real-world experience and knowledge upon which to draw.

This report seeks to reveal some of those lessons. It summarizes and analyzes the state and local intervention experience based on a review of efforts undertaken in almost two-dozen states since 1989.

NCLB offers state and district decision-makers 31 interventions designed to improve educational options for students (see Appendix A). Most of these interventions deal with how districts should improve schools, while some address the role of the state in troubled districts. Still others address the question of what to do with students whose schools are failing during the period when district or state officials are seeking to rectify matters.

The report starts by reviewing the intervention provisions of NCLB. It describes the graduated nature of the interventions and the options available to district and state decision-makers. To frame the discussion of previous intervention efforts, it then describes what is known about successful schools, particularly those serving lower-income students, the assumption being that this is what formerly failing schools should look like after they have been set right. The report goes on to outline the framework that policymakers use when designing an intervention process. It then sketches almost two-dozen discrete interventions that have been employed by states or districts since 1989, categorizing them by the degree to which they intrude upon business-as-usual in schools. Collectively, these interventions cover most of the ground contemplated by NCLB. We then look more closely at how several of these interventions played out on the ground by examining the Schools Under Registration Review (SURR) process in New York State, the district-wide implementation of Comprehensive School Reform in Memphis, Tennessee, and the reconstitution of schools in Prince George's County, Maryland.

After this review of what has been tried, the report seeks to explain "What has worked?" and "What has not?" The answers to these questions then allow us to draw two sets of conclusions. First, it gives us a sense of what district and state administrators should include in an intervention decision matrix. Second, it allows us to venture a prediction of how likely the intervention policies of NCLB will lead to the desired results.

No Child Left Behind Act

The No Child Left Behind Act requires that all states implement statewide school and district accountability systems designed to ensure regular improvement in student performance. For those schools that participate in the federal Title I program—58 percent of the public schools in the country—NCLB spells out the accountability structure that states must adopt.[3] Through this structure, NCLB shines light upon failing schools and districts; informs parents of their schools' performance; offers alternatives to failing schools; and threatens to withhold partial funds from Title I districts, and their respective states, that fail to act decisively to address the failures. As a precursor to such interventions, alternatives, and sanctions, NCLB mandates that states meticulously track student performance in multiple grades and subjects on state-administered (or sanctioned) achievement tests. As a result, states, districts, schools, and the broader public can gauge how schools and districts are doing against an established performance measure.

These NCLB-mandated structures are similar to those already implemented in many states. Indeed, as of August 2002, 38 states had some form of graduated school or district accountability system with elements akin to those in NCLB.[4] NCLB establishes both school and district level accountability systems, though their elements differ slightly. We look first at the system for failing schools.

Schools

At the school level, the new federal system involves seven steps as shown in Table 1.

Step 1 – States establish performance standards for all schools

No Child Left Behind requires that states establish annual performance standards for all of their schools with a goal of bringing 100 percent of their students to academic proficiency (i.e., passing the relevant state test) by the end of the 2013-14 school year.[5] All schools must make "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) in the percentage of students who pass these tests. In addition to the testing require-

Table 1. Steps mandated by No Child Left Behind

Step	Action	Applicable
1	States establish performance standards for all schools	Immediately
2	States identify failing schools	Immediately
3	Schools develop their own improvement plans and districts provide public school choice	Year One
4	Districts make available tutoring services to low-income students	Year Two
5	Districts take corrective actions to secure the desired performance improvement	Year Three
6	Districts create plans to restructure schools	Year Four
7	Districts implement restructuring plans	Year Five

ment, states must monitor the graduation rates of all high schools and at least one other indicator of elementary school performance (e.g., attendance rates).[6] NCLB expects gains on these measures from the base year 2001-02 to cumulate to universal student proficiency in all low-performing schools twelve years later, with the requirement that schools show some progress by 2004-2005 and incremental increases at least every three years.[7] Beyond these requirements, each state must define what, if any, additional measures of incremental progress are satisfactory for its schools and the U.S. Department of Education must approve that definition as well as the state's testing and tracking systems.

Step 2 – States identify failing schools

NCLB requires states to identify for "school improvement" those Title I schools that fail for two consecutive years to make adequate yearly progress as the state defines it.[8] Beginning in 2002, states are required to make these decisions based on scores on mathematics and reading tests administered at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Beginning in 2005, testing is to be expanded throughout grades 3–8. In 2007, science is to be added to the subjects tested.[9]

In June 2002, the U.S. Department of Education released a report that identified approximately 8,600 schools for school improvement. The number of schools identified by each state varied widely because of the states' different performance standards. Thus, those with higher expectations for their schools, such as Michigan, California, and Ohio, identified 1,513, 1,009, and 760 schools, respectively, for school improvement. By contrast, Arkansas and Wyoming identified no schools as failing, the District of Colombia a meager 12, and West Virginia only 13.[10]

Step 3 – Schools develop their own improvement plans and districts provide public school choice

Within three months of being identified for school improvement, schools must develop their own improvement plans. Such plans are to be developed in consultation with parents, school and district staff, and outside experts, and are supposed to address the issues that led to the school's low performance.[11]

NCLB envisions that schools and districts will include at least one of several interventions in these plans. It identifies five examples. One is to provide professional development for the school's teachers and principal, targeted at the problems or shortcomings that caused the school to be low performing.[12] Another is to implement a "comprehensive school reform" model in the school—a thorough program designed to change multiple key curricular, planning, communications, and other processes in schools in coordinated fashion around a coherent school design or philosophy.[13] Yet other interventions contemplated for inclusion in the school improvement plan include strategies to promote effective parental involvement, the addition of instructional time (through before and after school, summer, and extended year programs), and the development of teacher mentoring programs.[14]

In addition, NCLB requires that local districts provide technical assistance to their low-performing schools. This may include assistance in analyzing achievement data, developing professional development programs designed to address weaknesses in the school's instructional program, and reworking the school budget. NCLB further indicates that technical assistance may come directly from the district or the state, or from other experienced providers, including colleges and universities, non-profit providers, and for-profit entities, although in every case (at this stage) it is the district's obligation to see that it is provided.[15]

Finally, NCLB requires districts to provide students in failing schools with the option to transfer to other public schools within the district, including charter schools.[16]

Step 4 – Districts make available tutoring services to low-income students

If any of the above actions succeeds in securing adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years, the school is freed from the balance of the requirements. Once identified for school improvement, however, if the school fails to make adequate yearly progress for an additional year, NCLB requires yet another intervention: districts must offer students the opportunity to obtain extra tutoring from parent-selected and state-approved providers.[17]

Step 5 – Districts take corrective actions to secure the desired performance improvement

Up to this point, from the school perspective, the NCLB interventions can be characterized primarily as collaborative assistance. For schools that still do not produce adequate yearly progress after two years under "improvement" however, NCLB mandates that districts select from a menu of more severe interventions, and schools become subject to involuntary solutions. At this point, failing schools are now designated for "corrective action."

In this phase, districts may replace staff who are thought to be the cause of a school's continued low performance, institute a new curriculum, significantly decrease management authority at the school, appoint an outside expert to advise the school, extend the school day or year, or restructure the school's internal organization.[18]

Step 6 – Districts create plans to restructure schools

After one year of "corrective action," schools that still fail to make adequate yearly progress become subject to "restructuring." District decisionmakers must choose among reopening the school as a public charter school; replacing all or most of its staff (i.e., reconstituting the school); outsourcing its operations to an external provider (for-profit or otherwise); turning it over to the state department of education, or "any other major restructuring of school governance." Districts have one year to choose an option and then prepare an implementation plan.[19]

Step 7 – Districts implement restructuring plans

Districts must implement the planned restructuring noted in Step 6 before the beginning of the next school year.

Districts

The accountability structure for districts resembles that for schools. NCLB requires states to define the adequate yearly progress that districts must make in improving the performance of their students.[20] As with schools, when a district fails to make adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years, the state identifies it "for improvement."[21] Thereafter, the district must develop an improvement plan; implement scientifically based research strategies to strengthen its academic program; provide targeted professional development for instructional staff; and provide before and after school activities, summer programs, or an extended school year, as appropriate. In addition, the state must provide technical assistance to the district.[22]

If two additional years pass and the identified district still does not make adequate yearly progress, NCLB mandates that states take "corrective action." These include deferring or reducing district funding; imposing new curricula; replacing select district personnel; removing schools from the jurisdiction of the district; appointing receivers or trustees to run the district in place of the local superintendents and boards of education; abolishing or restructuring the district; or allowing students to transfer from district schools to schools in other districts.[23] As with schools, if a district makes adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years, it becomes free of these accountability requirements.

To summarize, NCLB requires districts and states to identify, monitor and then incrementally intervene in failing schools and districts. If failing schools do not begin to make satisfactory progress in student learning, then, in as little as five years, districts must take strong actions to turn them around. States are obliged to take a similar approach with regard to districts.

Successful Schools and the Theory Behind Interventions

While the purpose of NCLB is to guarantee educational opportunities for all students in each school in every district, its intervention provisions invariably guide the policy discussion to the issue of fixing low-performing schools that serve a largely low-income student body. In 1998, the U.S. Department of Education released a report entitled *Turning Around Low-Performing Schools: A Guide for State and Local Leaders.* It framed the issue of low-performing schools as one inextricably linked to the issue of better educating children in schools "in impoverished communities where family distress, crime, and violence are prevalent." The report went on to argue that "[t]hese and other circumstances make it hard for children to come to school prepared to learn."[24]

Aggregate data on student performance bear out this challenge. As a group, fewer than half of the nation's low-income students meet the minimum standard on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test in Mathematics, while 58 percent of low-income 4th graders, 44 percent of 8th graders, and 43 percent of 12th graders do not meet the minimum criteria in Reading.[25] But growing up in a high-poverty neighborhood does not always relegate one to attending a low-performing school. High-performing schools in low-income communities are not only possible, but are a phenomenon of sufficient import to receive significant scholarly attention. Research on these schools has identified the characteristics of high-poverty schools that are simultaneously high performing, and thereby suggests models for what a turned-around formerly failing school would look like.

In 1979, Ron Edmonds, often termed the nation's first expert on high-performing, high-poverty schools, identified the "most tangible and indispensable characteristics of effective schools" as:

- Strong administrative leadership;
- High expectation for all students;
- An orderly and quiet, though not rigid and oppressive, atmosphere;
- Clear focus on academics;
- Readiness to divert school energy and resources from other matters to academics; and
- The frequent monitoring of student progress.[26]

More recently, Samuel Casey Carter highlighted 21 successful schools located in poor urban neighborhoods across the country. In *No Excuses: Lessons from 21 High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools*, published in 2000, he outlined these "seven common traits":

- Principals who are free to use their resources, financial and curricular, to run the school;

- Principals who use measurable goals to establish a culture of achievement;
- The presence of master teachers who bring out the best in a faculty;
- Rigorous and regular testing focused on continuous student achievement;
- Achievement as the key to discipline;
- Principals who work with parents to make the home a center of learning; and
- Hard work on the part of all school faculty and students.[27]

What Edmonds and Carter and other "effective schools" analysts have found, and what many educators understand, is that, however few their numbers, some schools serving low-income students work extremely well. While the characteristics of such success can be described, it is far less clear how one moves a school from failure to success and how to scale improvement beyond individual schools. *Being* a high-performing school and *becoming* a high-performing school are very different challenges. Turn-around efforts focus on this second challenge.

Being a high-performing school and becoming a high-performing school are very different challenges.

The idea behind intervening in a failing school is to transform it from failure to success—to achieve Edmonds' "indispensable characteristics" or Carter's "common traits." In crafting intervention strategies, those states and districts that have intervened to date have done so based on certain assumptions about failing schools and what must be done differently in order to transform them. First, they assume that all schools, regardless of students' backgrounds, can succeed. Second, they assume that some element or set of elements in the current school is missing or awry, thereby inhibiting success. It may be the curriculum, the leadership, interactions among school personnel, parental engagement, or any among a set of other possible inputs. Whatever it is, it is missing or not being done right. The assumption, though, is that this condition is amenable to being changed—when the missing ingredient is supplied or the school's dysfunctional features altered.

NCLB assumes that districts and states have the resources to add the missing elements to a failing school.

The third assumption underlying an intervention is that the intervening body possesses what the troubled school lacks. For example, the superintendent who changes the principal of a failing school does so based on the premise that the new leader will bring to the school the knowledge and wherewithal to improve the school's performance. Similarly, when a state department of education takes over a fail-

ing school district, it assumes that it has the capacity and determination to turn around a large and complex entity.

These three assumptions are always part of the decision to intervene. At least one more is also part of that decision.

The fourth assumption is that the current leadership and/or professionals in the school lack the requisite *skills* to achieve success. It is not that the school staff fails to realize that they are not succeeding; they are almost always keenly aware of their shortcomings. Nor is it that the school staff is not making its best effort to improve. It is simply an issue *of not knowing how* to improve. If a decisionmaker assumes that lack of *skills* is the problem, this suggests that school staff can be provided with the requisite knowledge to achieve success.

The fifth assumption is that school leadership and/or school staff lacks the *will* to improve. They may or may not have the requisite skills at their disposal, but they avoid taking some of the more challenging steps to right the failing school, even in cases where failure has long been evident and limited measures have fallen short. This assumption is not present in all interventions, but is clearly present in the strongest of them—those reserved for schools and districts that reach the "restructuring" stage of No Child Left Behind. School professionals who lack the will to take the actions required for success need either to be replaced or to be given powerful incentives to behave differently.

NCLB, in creating its accountability structures, assumes that districts and states believe that all schools can educate all of their students to high standards, that they have the resources to add the missing elements to a failing school, that they have the skills to integrate these missing elements into schools in the right mix to achieve success, and that they have the will to take all of these steps, notwithstanding any political constraints, resource limits, and other possible impediments. Some observers, it need hardly be noted, doubt that all of these assumptions are presently warranted everywhere in the United States.

Having recapped both the intervention theory of NCLB and the assumptions on which it rests, let's examine relevant prior experience in American education. To do this, we turn to the lessons from the intervention experiences in 22 states and the District of Columbia since 1989. The collective experience of past interventions can provide us with two types of guidance. First, it can familiarize state and local decisionmakers with which interventions may work better than others, and about better and worse ways to implement them. Second, with an understanding of how well specific interventions do or do not work, and of how interventions as a whole work, or do not, we can begin to predict the degree to which No Child Left Behind's accountability provisions will drive change in failing schools.

Varieties of Intervention

Since 1989, at least 30 jurisdictions across 22 states and the federal government have intervened in failing schools. Appendix B outlines these interventions. Clearly, the push for results-based accountability did not start with NCLB. Its genesis can be found in the 1983 *A Nation at Risk*[28] report and the subsequent establishment of national education goals in 1990. These catalyzed states to establish curriculum standards and testing and accountability systems to ensure that schools teach to these standards. This process was further encouraged by the 1994 amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the "Goals 2000" program, both of which provided targeted financial support to improve low-performing schools. The intervention experience to date therefore results mainly from states and districts acting on their own, not waiting for federal mandates.

Since 1989, at least 30 jurisdictions across 22 states and the federal government have intervened in failing schools.

The most efficient way to classify these interventions is in terms of their intrusiveness. We have chosen to fit them into three categories: Mild, Moderate, and Strong. Mild interventions do not significantly disrupt the basic structure of the school. They require that programs or initiatives be added to the existing school structure and implemented by existing school staff. Moderate interventions typically retain existing staff but call on them to adjust to changes in some of the basic structures and processes in the school. Strong interventions are, naturally, the most disruptive. They often result in changes in school staff and always result in significantly changed school structures or processes. Using this typology, we can sort the interventions into 17 different types that states and districts have used to turn around failing schools.

Note in advance, however, that while these interventions can be described as discrete and categorized into particular types, this description is primarily for heuristic purposes; it is *not* strictly reflective of how these interventions have played out in practice. Turnaround efforts do not typically employ individual interventions in a unique or isolated fashion. Rather, as we will see, when states and districts have sought to turn around failing schools and districts, they have typically devised multiple simultaneous intervention strategies, often mixing and blending different approaches to fit the particular context.

Mild

1. Identification

The first mild intervention is to place faltering schools on state watch, warning, or probationary schools lists. These lists have two

purposes: to clearly identify the set of failing schools so as to be able to monitor them more closely, and to create pressure, both within the school and from parents and district administrators, to seek improvement. Basically, it's a "sunlight theory"—revealing these schools as low performing should prompt schools, districts, and communities to take steps to improve them.

Examples:

- The state of Florida assigns letter grades, A to F, to schools to provide an easily understood representation of how schools are performing in teaching students to attain state learning standards.[29]

- The Schools Under Registration Review (SURR) List, comprised of those schools that have the smallest number of students passing state performance assessments, is New York's process for identifying its lowest performing schools.

2. Planning

The second mild intervention is to mandate that a school or district create a school improvement plan. Such a plan typically includes a thorough needs assessment designed to articulate the deficiencies that contribute to the school's low performance and a description of the systematic steps that the school will take to remedy these.

3. Technical Assistance

A third mild intervention is state- or district-provided technical assistance to the failing school or its district. For example a state or district staffer, or an experienced educator brought on as a consultant, conducts regular visits to the school. He or she may be in the school for a few hours or a day at a time, visiting the principal and select teachers, providing advice on school improvement efforts, ideas for school initiatives, counsel on ongoing plans, feedback on curricular matters, and possibly even monitoring and/or training in classroom practices.

Example:

- Kentucky's Highly Skilled Educator Program (formerly called the Distinguished Educator Program) is among the best known versions of this intervention. Under this program, an experienced and presumably expert educator is assigned as a consultant to the school to assist in assessing its needs, designing its improvement effort, and implementing remedial measures.[30]

4. Professional Development

A fourth mild intervention is provision of professional development to the school's instructional staff. Such training is generally meant to be consistent with the needs and remedies outlined in a school's improvement plan. It can take place during planning periods—time in the school schedule when teachers do not have students—or during specific professional development days set aside in the school schedule. District, state, or hired consultants will typically provide this training, either to lead teachers who will relay it to their colleagues, or to the entire teaching staff in a grade, subject, or school.

5. Parent Involvement

The fifth mild intervention is requiring increased parental involvement in the school. Parents may organize themselves, typically under the leadership of a small group of fellow parents, to assist in classroom activities, to provide more formal input into the management of the school, to provide after school enrichment opportunities for students, or even to take computer classes. All of these activities are designed to make parents more aware of the type of work their child is doing in school, which should more fully engage parents in supporting their children's efforts.

Example:

- In 1995, as part of a turn-around effort, Burgess Elementary School in Atlanta, Georgia decided to build up a previously limited parental involvement effort into one in which ten to fifteen parents now volunteer in the school on a daily basis.[31]

6. Tutoring

A final mild intervention is providing supplemental tutoring services for students. Such services may be provided after school, before school or on Saturdays. In many instances, students are identified for tutoring based on being at risk of failing state tests.

Example:

- In 1999, Hillsborough County, Florida collaborated with AmeriCorps Hillsborough Reads to provide 35 one-on-one reading tutors to a targeted set of 11 of the district's 103 elementary schools based on low reading achievement.[32]

The use of these milder interventions has been relatively widespread. As of August 2002, for example, 17 states had low-performing school lists that pre-dated NCLB.[33] Most of these states require some form of improvement planning on the part of low-performing schools. Several states, districts, and the federal government have provided or funded technical assistance to failing schools.[34] That these milder forms of interventions would be widely used is understandable. To a concerned public, they signal action by state and local decisionmakers to address the needs of failing schools. At the same time, such actions typically hold low political risk and require few new resources. Since no staff changes are required, they do not engender much controversy, and from the school's standpoint, may bring at least modest additional resources. Further, since these actions sometimes deliver the little push that is needed to jumpstart the internal improvement process, they can offer good benefits for relatively low costs.

Moderate

7. Add School Time

The first strategy among the more moderate interventions is adding instructional time. This can be done in several ways. First, through the implementation of after-school or Saturday programs that at-risk students, or even whole classes, are required to attend. Another method is adding days to the beginning and/or end of the school year. A third method of adding time is by revising the school schedule, by introducing block sched-

uling, for instance, which sometimes allows for more instructional time or perhaps uses existing instructional time more efficiently. The identification of too little learning time, or time on task, as a ubiquitous problem of American schools goes back at least to *A Nation at Risk* and was amplified considerably in the federal *Prisoners of Time*[35] report a few years later.

Example:

- Jersey City, New Jersey implemented the Copernican Plan in all of the district's high schools. The plan moved the city's schools from the traditional schedule of 7-8 periods to block scheduling. Under block scheduling, students had longer class periods, and courses lasted a semester in length compared with a year. The longer periods permitted teachers to use different instructional methods.

8. Reorganize the School

The second moderate intervention is reorganizing schools. This reorganization is done voluntarily and is typically initiated by existing school staff. It may take the form of changing the decision-making structure, such as moving to a more decentralized and "participatory" decision-making model. It may entail altering staff assignments to move the school from a departmentalized structure to one where teachers stay with students for a longer portion of the day and teach them multiple subjects. Or the school may restructure itself so that teachers retain the same students across two grades or more. There are innumerable other ways a school can reorganize its governance, decision-making processes, personnel assignments, and teaching practices so as to boost student achievement.

Example:

- Livingston Central High School in Smithland, Kentucky is a small, rural, low-income school. Upon learning of its designation as a Kentucky school "in crisis" and then "in decline," it set up teacher-led teams around each cognitive area (e.g., reading, mathematics, and science). The teams, comprised of staff, parents, students, and others, focused on applying learning activities across the curriculum. Increased use of professional development and regular self-evaluation were also part of the effort.[36]

9. Comprehensive School Reform

The next moderate intervention is the implementation of Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) models in failing schools. The National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform characterizes CSR as having four elements:

- a systematic approach to schoolwide improvement that incorporates every aspect of a school—from curriculum and instruction to school management;
- a program and a process that is designed to enable all students to meet challenging academic content and performance goals;
- a framework for using research to move from multiple, fragmented educational programs to a unified plan with a single focus—academic achievement; and

- a product of the long-term, collaborative efforts of school staff, parents, and district staff.[37]

CSR models typically include elements of school-based planning, targeted professional development, increased parental engagement, and other strategies. Examples of some of the more prominent offerings include Accelerated Schools, the Comer School Development Program, Modern Red Schoolhouse, and Roots and Wings. Because a key element of CSR is a collaborative effort by school staff, most models require a large majority of school staff to accept the reform, often through a formal vote. Thus, while CSR makes significant changes in the school, these changes are voluntary, causing us to classify CSR as a moderate intervention.

In the early 1990s, the idea of using CSR as a strategy to improve the performance of low-income students began to take hold. In the 1994 amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Title I was revised to encourage schoolwide initiatives among schools in which at least 50 percent of the students were disadvantaged.[38] This was followed in 1997 by the creation of the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program (CSRD), also called Obey-Porter after its legislative patrons. This new program awards schools minimum grants of $50,000 to support the implementation of CSR models. In addition, the New American Schools program has advanced the CSR approach. We later take a close look at how CSR efforts played out in Memphis, Tennessee between 1995 and 2001.

10. Change Principal

The next moderate strategy is changing the school principal. Judging from discussions with superintendents, this strategy is used infrequently and the way it is done varies by state. In Florida and Massachusetts, for example, where principals do not have tenure, it is a relatively straightforward matter of not renewing the contract of the principal of a failing school. In many instances, however, a superintendent must document the failure of the principal to serve as an effective school leader, and then relieve the principal of his or her duties. Given the tenure and other rights afforded to principals in many states, these actions are often subject to prolonged legal challenges. Indeed, Barbara Byrd-Bennett, Chief Executive Officer of the Cleveland, Ohio schools found herself making frequent trips back to New York in 1999 and 2000 to participate in hearings defending her decision to remove principals in that city's Chancellor's District, where she served previously as the superintendent. (The Chancellor's District is the organizational umbrella over New York City's lowest performing schools.) Another way that principals of failing schools are removed is a subtle or not-so-subtle process where superintendents encourage them to retire or find employment elsewhere while their reputations remain mostly intact. Yet another method is to reassign failing principals to other schools or to positions in the central office of a school district.

Example:

- Shortly after Richard DiPatri was appointed the superintendent in Brevard County, Florida

prior to the 1999-2000 school year, he communicated with his principals that he considered them the linchpins of any success the 80 schools in the district would have. Based on failing student achievement in several schools, DiPatri removed three principals in his first year and two more in 2000-2001.[39]

Moderate strategies raise the costs and challenges of the intervention compared with milder efforts. While wholesale staff changes are less common, many of the moderate interventions do require non-trivial changes in practices by school staff, which can be a wrenching process. Successfully moving to block scheduling in Jersey City, for example, required much discussion to secure staff assent and much training thereafter, lasting several months. After these efforts, when the changes in the schedule resulted in more teaching time even though the length of the work day remained the same, the Jersey City Education Association filed a grievance to secure additional compensation for the added instructional minutes that the more time-efficient Copernican Plan delivered to the district. While the grievance was ultimately adjudicated in favor of the association, the time, energy, extended deliberations, and battles associated with this process are suggestive of the higher costs of moderate interventions compared with milder efforts. It is these higher costs that lead to more parsimonious use of moderate interventions.

Strong

11. Reconstitution

The first strong intervention strategy is school reconstitution—the process of removing and replacing all, or almost all, of a school's staff and leadership. Typically near the end of a school year, a superintendent informs the school leadership and staff that, based on poor performance, a decision has been made to reconstitute the school. The existing staff is typically then required to reapply for their old jobs, with many not returning to the failing school. Over the summer a new staff is hired for the school and the school reopens in the fall with the same students but a significantly changed staff. At least nine districts have used reconstitution to improve failing schools. Further insight into this type of intervention is provided (in greater detail) later in this report when we examine the 1997 reconstitution of six Prince George's County, Maryland schools.

12. School Takeover

The next strong intervention strategy is school takeover, which has been used rarely. When used, the state has assumed governance of the school from the local district, designating the individual or entity that will serve as the school's new chief administrator.

Examples:

- The Alabama State Department of Education's Academic Intervention program prompted it to take over six schools in 2000 and four more in 2001. In these instances, the state assumes management of the local schools and assigns assistance teams to work with the schools.[40]

- In June 2000, as part of Maryland's school accountability system, the state took control of three failing Baltimore City schools, subse-

quently outsourcing their management to private companies.[41]

13. District Takeover

The next strong intervention strategy is state takeover of entire low-performing districts. Beginning with Jersey City in 1989, at least nine large districts and several smaller ones have been taken over by their respective states. These have typically included removing the local board of education and replacing the superintendent. In several districts, such as Compton, California and Paterson, New Jersey, the state hired superintendents who both ran the district and established policy. The traditional school board was done away with. In other instances, notably in Detroit and Chicago, state policymakers handed control of the districts to the elected mayors of these cities. In the District of Colombia, the federally appointed "Control Board" superimposed a new Board of Education of its own choosing and picked the new superintendent from nontraditional ranks. These interventions are based not on the failure of individual schools *per se* but rather a function, in part, of weak student performance on a district-wide basis.

Example:

• In 1995, the New Jersey Department of Education removed the superintendent, Board of Education, and several top managers from the Newark Public Schools. The Department appointed Beverly Hall, an experienced New York City educator as "state-district superintendent" empowered to make all policy and administrative decisions. Over the first two years, she replaced many of the district's principals and central office administrators and made changes in academic programs designed to improve student achievement.

14. Close School

Closing schools is the next strong intervention strategy. New York State's Schools Under Registration Review (SURR) is an example of this. The SURR process is designed to intervene in schools to turn them around, but if schools fail to progress within the period designated for improvement, then they are to be closed. As of January 2002, 27 schools in the state had been closed under this process.[42] A case study of the SURR process later in this report will further illuminate this intervention.

Closing schools differs primarily in degree from reconstituting them. As noted above, when schools are reconstituted, the existing education program remains, but a new or mostly new staff is hired to run the school. This new staff is typically expected to reconsider the various elements of the current school program and make needed modifications to improve student achievement. When a school is closed, on the other hand, only the building remains. This may happen, as in several New York schools, with a phasing out of the school program—current students are allowed to finish their program but no new students are admitted. Alternatively, it may happen through immediate closure of the school. In either of these cases, the district designs a new school, develops a new instruc-

tional program, hires a new principal and teaching staff, and places this new program in the recycled school facility. The old buildings may even be renamed.

15. Choice

The next strong intervention is in use only in Florida. That state's A+ Program offers vouchers to students in failing public schools. The program is designed to provide, through market forces, an incentive for failing schools to improve by giving their students the means to attend different public or private schools. Simultaneously, as envisioned in No Child Left Behind (which extends choice only to other public and charter schools within the same district), it provides an alternative education for students while the school is in the process of improving. To date, Florida's program has resulted in over 600 students from 12 elementary schools being provided vouchers that they have used to enroll in different private or public schools (though over 7,500 students chose to remain in their then failing schools).[43]

16. Curriculum Change

Imposed curriculum change is another strong intervention. While schools regularly modify their curriculum to address student achievement, this intervention is one in which a district involuntarily imposes a notably different curriculum on a school. In the current era of comprehensive state curriculum standards, such a change is very rare.

Example:

- In Paterson, New Jersey, between 1991 and 1993, the district's superintendent, Laval Wilson (who happened to be the state-appointed superintendent after a district takeover by the state), implemented what he called the Paradigm Program. Under this program, the high school curriculum for low-performing students was focused exclusively on reading, writing, and mathematics. No science, social studies, art, or other course work was offered to low-performing students.[44]

17. Outsource

The next strong intervention is the outsourcing of a school's or district's operations to an outside provider. This may be done in tandem with some form of takeover. Thus, in 1989, the Massachusetts legislature voted to take over the Chelsea Public Schools and turn the management of the district over to Boston University. Similar outsourcings, to both for-profit and non-profit providers, have been part of the recent state takeover of the Philadelphia Public Schools, and part of the Maryland takeover of three Baltimore schools mentioned earlier.

18. Redirection of School or District Funds

19. Withholding of School or District Funds

20. Closing Failing Districts

Three more strong interventions exist, at present, only in theory and statute. Seven states permit the redirection or withholding of school or district funds based on lack of school

or district performance.[45] This author is not aware of any instances where these powers have been used. Similarly, 14 states have the statutory authority to withdraw the accreditation of and close failing districts. Under this scenario, the local political entity would be dissolved and the schools would be folded into other school districts. This author is unaware of any instance where these statutory powers have been exercised.[46]

Strong interventions are rarely tried because they are controversial and difficult to mount. They carry significant political costs. Just about everywhere it has been tried, reconstitution has raised the strong ire of local teachers unions. School choice in Florida is subject to a lawsuit challenging its constitutionality. New Jersey has avoided taking over more failing school districts because, having already assumed responsibility for three of the state's largest districts for an average of over 10 years, there is scant evidence that it has transformed these districts as originally envisioned.[47] Indeed, the New Jersey legislature recently authorized the state Department of Education to appoint school board members in Camden without having to use the district takeover law.[48] In Staten Island, New York parents and students even protested the closing of a school that was on the New York State SURR list for 13 years.[49]

Strong interventions are rarely tried because they are controversial and difficult to mount.

As noted above, it is important to recognize that interventions often, though not always, follow a graduated pattern. No Child Left Behind requires that milder interventions be tried first and, if they fail, moderate and then strong interventions follow. This general pattern applies to several of the intervention examples previously discussed. Comprehensive school reform has been implemented by districts whose local individual efforts at increased professional development, school planning, and increasing parental involvement have not yielded desired results. Similarly, school closings in SURR schools in New York have come after technical assistance, improvement planning, and leadership changes failed to yield the desired results.

To date, this pattern of graduated interventions has required decisionmakers to consider the costs and benefits of employing stronger medicines when the milder forms have not succeeded. Thus, after implementing a turnaround program, one that combines a set of interventions, the decisionmaker takes stock of whether the effort has succeeded or failed in raising student achievement. If milder interventions have failed, the decisionmaker is faced with the question "what do I do now?" At this point, he or she must assess whether the potential costs of stronger actions will be worth their potential benefit.

The pattern above—that stronger interventions are used far less frequently than moderate interventions, which in turn are used less frequently than mild ones—indicates that decisionmakers are more inhibited from taking the stronger actions. Why? They assess, perhaps implicitly, that the costs of doing so

exceed the potential benefits. Said differently, while 39 states have the authority to take strong actions, and while these same 39 states contain dozens of failing schools that have not appreciably improved for years, we still find strong interventions extremely rare. This is precisely what No Child Left Behind is designed to change.