

starting fresh in low-performing schools

The *Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools* series provides district leaders with a blueprint for making deep and lasting change – the kind that is likely to lead to improvements in our most struggling schools. Presented in five parts, the *Starting Fresh* series honestly addresses the challenges of restructuring low-performing schools. Through these books, districts learn both why and how to use the Start Fresh strategy successfully.

- 1 A New Option for School District Leaders under NCLB
- 2 Engaging Parents and the Community
- 3 Selecting the Right Providers
- 4 Establishing the Right Relationship Terms
- 5 Collaborating with Teachers



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A New Option for School District Leaders under NCLB



The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) is a nonprofit membership association of educational agencies that approve and oversee public charter schools.

NACSA's mission is to achieve the establishment and operation of quality charter schools through responsible oversight in the public interest. We believe that quality authorizing plays a critical role in creating and sustaining quality charter schools. A quality charter school is characterized by high student achievement, financial stewardship, and responsible governance and management. Charter schools can improve public education by creating greater educational opportunities for students and educators and greater educational accountability for public schools.

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Dear School District Leader:

Today's school district leaders face a growing list of challenges, not only to ensure that their schools provide quality instruction, but to successfully manage employee relations, keep parents happy, administer finances wisely and successfully navigate complex state and federal accountability systems. All of these challenges come together and intensify when a school fails to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) for five years and the district must develop and implement a plan for "Restructuring" the school.

To date, schools around the country are only beginning to reach "restructuring." Initial reviews suggest that most district leaders, when considering the five restructuring options available under NCLB, are choosing "Other" instead of implementing more aggressive options¹, such as contracting with a school management company to operate the school or reopening the school as a public charter school. While choosing "Other" may make sense for some reasons, one of those reasons probably isn't because "Other" provides the best mechanism for creating a powerful, enduring, quality school. Indeed "Other" often looks a lot like incremental school improvement strategies that have already been tried and failed at the very same schools.

What's a school district leader to do? The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) suggests that you seriously consider all of the powerful tools that are available under Restructuring. Because we specialize in the profession of approving charter schools and developing, overseeing and enforcing performance-based contracts with such schools, we particularly suggest that you evaluate how "reopening as a charter school" or "entering into a contract with an entity to operate the public school" may be your best options, not only to improve instruction and student performance, but also to increase parental happiness, empower your teachers and successfully meet the demands of state and federal accountability systems.

But even if you choose one of these more aggressive options it doesn't guarantee success. Simply changing the name "Kennedy Middle School" to "Kennedy Middle Charter School" will do absolutely nothing to increase student performance. Likewise, entering into a contract with an outside provider that has no authority to make changes to Kennedy's instructional approach, curriculum, staffing, management structures, and budget is extremely unlikely to bring about academic improvements. Thus, even when districts choose to use these aggressive restructuring options they must use them *correctly* and enable the kinds of dramatic changes envisioned by NCLB. We believe that in order for this to work, districts must allow restructured schools to **start fresh**.

School district leaders face a growing list of challenges. Starting fresh is not the right tool in every circumstance, but it may be the right tool for you.

Sincerely,

Greg Richmond, President



A New Hope for Our Most Challenging Schools

The 2005-06 school year started in early September at San Diego's Gompers Middle School, just like it had for the past 50 years. Well, not exactly. On that Tuesday, California's governor was on hand to welcome back the students, along with his secretary of education, the chancellor of the University of California at San Diego, the superintendent of schools, the president of the local Urban League, and a host of other dignitaries. The school grounds were spruced up, thanks to hours of painting, remodeling and cleaning over the summer by parents and community members. The school literally rolled out a red carpet for the school's 1,000 seventh to ninth graders, almost all of whom were from low-income families.

The fresh start at Gompers had deep and wide support, from teachers all the way to the Governor. Most importantly, it had strong support from parents.

Why all the fuss? Gompers and its local school district – San Diego Unified – are on the leading edge of a new strategy for improving chronically low-performing schools, a strategy known as “starting fresh.” Last year, fewer than 20% of Gompers students were proficient in language arts and math, ranking the school as one of the lowest performing schools in the district. Years of improvement efforts had failed. The federal No Child Left Behind Act said the district had to do something significant to turn the school around. But what?

Spurred by strong demand from parents and community members, the school board agreed in March to enable the school to restructure and “start fresh” as Gompers Charter Middle School. During the 2004-05



school year, the school hired a dynamic new leader who remains at the helm. But Gompers started the 2005-06 school year with just about everything else new – and we are not talking about just the paint on the walls. Seventy-five percent of the staff is new, and all of them chose to teach at Gompers rather than being assigned there. For the first time in the building's history, there were no teacher vacancies on the first day of classes.

In a newly established partnership with University of California at San Diego (UCSD), the school is replicating the UCSD's highly successful Preuss School, a charter school that opened in 1999. Like Preuss and other high-performing middle schools around the country, Gompers will have a longer school day, uniforms, and a clear expectation that all students will go on to college after high school. As part of the partnership with UCSD, Gompers students will have access to the University's resources. University students will serve as tutors. And University teachers will train Gompers faculty.

Across the country in Lakeland, Florida, Seth McKeel Middle School was one of Polk County's lowest performing middle schools when the district converted it to a choice school and then to a charter school. After this “fresh start,” it's one of the highest rated middle-high schools, typically earning As in Florida's accountability system. Like Gompers is seeking to do, McKeel transformed itself into a high-performing technology academy by essentially building a new school from scratch within the walls of the old middle school. This “fresh-start” school leveraged district and state resources to transform the facility, purchase technology and train teachers, as well as reached an agreement with the teacher's union to reconstitute the



staff. McKeel has since gone on to launch a high-performing elementary school with a similar focus. Parents are clamoring to get in: the two schools had a combined waiting list of more than 2,000 in spring 2005.

McKeel's start fresh leveraged resources and enabled an agreement with the teacher's union to reconstitute the school's staff.

State and district leaders across the U.S. have long sought ways to create success for children attending schools where too many have failed for far too long. What's happening at Gompers and McKeel represent a new approach to solving this old problem: **starting fresh**. By beginning anew with the freedom to do things vastly different, Gompers and McKeel have a real opportunity to improve student achievement. This publication, the first in the *Starting Fresh* series from the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, explains why education leaders are empowering schools to start fresh and gives an overview of the major components of a successful start fresh strategy.

Charter schools are tuition-free public schools created on the basis of an agreement or "charter," which gives the charter school a measure of expanded freedom relative to traditional public schools in return for a commitment to meet higher standards of accountability.

Charter schools are approved and overseen by an educational entity – a charter school authorizer. Each charter school enters into a performance contract with its authorizer that defines the terms, conditions, and expectations for performance. It is the responsibility of the charter school authorizer to hold a school accountable to its contract.



The Challenge

Decades of well-intended reforms – including curriculum changes, increased funding and professional development – have produced disappointing outcomes for many students. While some children have benefited from these initiatives, numerous reforms have offered promise without delivering results for certain children, disproportionately from poor families. In 2003, a non-poor child was more than twice as likely as a poor child to meet basic standards in reading and math.² Some of these children are concentrated in schools where very few children succeed. Others are spread among schools with adequate overall results but large achievement gaps between poor and non-poor children and between racial subgroups.

Here we focus on a very specific subset of schools: those where school-wide performance is simply too abysmal to abide anymore. We call these schools "chronically low-performing." We are not talking about schools that have narrowly missed their targets for Adequate Yearly Progress, schools that are weak only in a particular grade level or subject area, or schools that have experienced a small dip in performance amidst an overall strong achievement record. Instead, our concern here is with schools where, year after year, improvement has far lagged expectation.

We're not talking about schools that have narrowly missed performance targets. Our concern here is with schools where, year after year, improvement has far lagged expectation.

State accountability systems and the No Child Left Behind Act have added new urgency to the task of "fixing" chronically low-performing schools (See "Restructuring" *Under No Child Left Behind*, page 8). The federal government mandates that districts make dramatic changes in schools that fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress for five consecutive years. Within





that broad mandate, school district leaders have options on how to “restructure” a low-performing school:

- Reopen the school as a charter school;
- Contract with an external provider to manage a school;
- Replace staff and leadership;
- Turn the school’s operation over to the state; or
- Engage in some other kind of restructuring.

An early survey of the national landscape suggests that very few schools to date have reached the restructuring requirement. But within that small subset, most districts are choosing to implement the “Other” option that has amounted to an array of changes such as modifying curriculum, altering the school’s management structure, or choosing a school reform model.³ These are, however, quite often the same incremental (See *Change in Low-Performing Schools*, page 11) change strategies that have been tried and failed in these very schools for years, even decades. These changes do not come close to the more aggressive changes envisioned by NCLB for chronically low performing schools.

There are, however, a growing number of examples across the country of education leaders that are using the options available under NCLB to make deep and fundamental changes to the way low-performing schools operate. This publication focuses on one strategy being used more and more in districts nationwide: **starting fresh** in chronically low-performing schools.

Despite all these efforts to lift the system, some of our 600 schools still struggle – even with reading specialists, after-school and early childhood programs, and other extra supports that we have provided over the years.

In cases like these – where schools simply cannot make progress – for whatever reason – we cannot wait any longer. Children can’t wait. Parents can’t wait. And taxpayers can’t wait.

When a school is not improving – not just for one year or two years, but, for five or ten – we not only have an educational obligation to step in and bring about real and meaningful change. On behalf of our children, we have a moral obligation.

ARNE DUNCAN, CEO OF CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

When they use starting fresh, district leaders allow a “new school” to start within the walls of a pre-existing school building. They empower a new team to start and operate the school under a clearly defined, performance-based contract. In contrast to more conventional “change” strategies, starting fresh allows the new team to create an educational program and culture from the beginning that is designed to meet the needs of their particular students. Instructional approaches, curriculum, staff and staff policies, materials, schedules, and discipline approaches are selected and managed from the start. Extensive research from a variety of organizational fields suggests that this kind of fresh start is often the best way to achieve the dramatic change underperforming schools need.

As described in more detail below, more and more district leaders are considering starting fresh because of its potential to help the district:

- Define clear expectations for performance;
- Empower school leaders to act;
- Create a school culture that works;
- Attract needed talent to the right schools and classrooms;
- Satisfy and engage parents; and
- Keep parents in district schools.





How Can “Restructuring” Under No Child Left Behind Enable a School to “Start Fresh?”

Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, when schools fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress for five consecutive years, districts must act to “restructure” the school. Within that broad mandate, though, NCLB offers districts flexibility on *how* to restructure schools:

- Reopen the school as a charter school;
- Contract with an external provider to manage a school;
- Replace staff and leadership;
- Turn the school’s operation over to the state; or
- Engage in some other kind of restructuring.

While the federal government has provided minimal guidance on exactly what it means to “restructure” a school, the term itself implies a dramatic change in business as usual, i.e., **starting fresh**. But whether restructuring really amounts to starting fresh depends upon how the district and school go about the change process.

The first and second option, chartering and contracting, provide the clearest avenues for allowing schools to start fresh. Chartering or contracting, however, that leads only to incremental changes or change in only one aspect of a school’s operations (e.g., a new curriculum only or a new leader only, or worse yet – just “charter” inserted into the name of the school) or that ties a new school to district-wide policies would not be considered starting fresh as defined here. Instead, district leaders empower, by way of a charter or contract, the school to truly “start fresh” with a clean slate on which to re-create all aspects of the school’s design and structure.

Starting Fresh with Charter Schools: Emerging Examples

While starting fresh by closing a low-performing school and reopening it as a charter is a new response to chronic low performance, more and more districts and states are employing this approach. In doing so, district leaders allow the school to start fresh. Examples include:

Colorado. Under Colorado state law, any school that fails to meet state targets for three consecutive years must be converted to a charter school by the State Board of Education. In 2004, Cole Middle School in Denver became the first to undergo the process. Fewer than 15% of Cole’s students were achieving grade level in most subjects and grades before the action, and in some grades and subjects the percentages were far lower. The state received proposals from four national providers and one local nonprofit all seeking to take over the operation and management of Cole. After a comprehensive evaluation process, the state board chose the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), which will re-open the school in Fall 2006 using the KIPP school model.

Louisiana. The Louisiana Legislature created the “Recovery School District” for schools that have been identified as “academically unacceptable” for at least four years or scored below the state average and are part of a district in “academic crisis.”

It is expected that the a majority of the 100+ schools in the Recovery School District, predominantly located in New Orleans, will start fresh and re-open as charter schools.

Sacramento. In 2003, former NBA star Kevin Johnson led an effort to convert his alma mater Sacramento High School into an independent charter school operated by the nonprofit St. Hope Corporation. The school, which now operates as five smaller academies, has seen its state Academic Performance Index rise by 60 points since the conversion.

Chicago. Under its Renaissance 2010 initiative, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is aiming to open 100 new schools by 2010, in many cases starting them fresh in low performing schools. The 18 schools that opened in Fall 2005 include a mix of charter schools, traditional CPS-run schools, and “performance-based schools” that operate on a five-year performance contract with the district.





NACSA's Role in Starting Fresh

While starting fresh is a relatively new strategy for most school districts, a wealth of experience with the core activities of starting fresh already exists. Some of this experience resides in the nation's charter school authorizers, education entities across the country that approve and oversee charter public schools.

Whether districts use charter school laws or another form of contracting to restructure, the relationship of districts to “start fresh schools,” as defined here, is very similar to the relationship between charter authorizers and charter schools. Just like charter authorizers, districts considering starting fresh must select providers to operate new schools, enter into performance contracts to give them the authority they need to operate, and hold the schools accountable for results.

In its role as the membership organization of charter authorizers, NACSA has led the development and dissemination of best practices⁴ among organizations authorizing charter schools. Districts considering starting fresh can learn from the accumulated experience of successful charter school authorizers who have preceded them in “start fresh” work.



Change in Low-Performing Schools: Moving From the Conventional to the Aggressive

“Change” is not a new term to public education. In fact, schools have been trying for years, even decades, to make changes that will improve student performance. However, to date these changes have been conventional, what we call “incremental change.”

Incremental change typically involves making small to moderate changes, often one at a time. Examples of incremental changes include:

- Professional development for teachers, other staff and school leaders
- Curriculum, instructional materials, or teaching methods
- Themes – adopting a new emphasis affecting curriculum or teaching method
- New discipline policies
- Facility and equipment improvements or additions
- Purchase of additional materials, such as texts and library books
- Changes in how teachers work together – grade level teams, for example
- Encouraging teachers to become certified or achieve national board certification
- Using outside experts for planning, training or coaching
- Bringing in a new principal without a mandate to make major changes

Sometimes, school leaders attempt a large collection of incremental changes over time, or to connect various piecemeal changes into some coherent strategy – like a **turnaround effort**.





But research on school turnaround attempts have, by and large, found lackluster or poor results.⁵ These outcomes should come as no surprise. Even the most successful businesses in the most lucrative industries find turnarounds disappointing because leaders who can effect them are rare. All change within an organization, successful or not, takes enormous amounts of staff time and energy.⁶

It is my belief that one of the principal reasons that incremental improvement initiatives have failed to create more dramatic change in failing schools is that they do not address the underlying causes of underperformance.

The educational problems we face in low-performing schools are fundamentally structural and systemic – not programmatic. Instructional practices in these schools may be weak and inconsistent, but they cannot be fixed by putting in place a new curriculum or a professional development program. Neither can they be fixed by simply replacing the staff or increasing resources. All of these things may be sorely needed, but without radically changing the context, they will prove unavailing.

Moreover, the incrementalism of our school turnaround efforts reflects a lack of imagination, a lack of will, and most troubling, a lack of urgency.

JIM PEYSER, CHAIRMAN OF MASSACHUSETTS BOARD OF EDUCATION



When is Starting Fresh the Right Approach?

When is it the right time to consider starting fresh? The simple answer is this: when incremental change has failed to significantly improve student learning. When years of incremental changes have been tried, and a school is still low-performing, leaders have a strong obligation to try something different on behalf of the children who attend the school – and will attend it in the future. At that point, continuing with the same types of strategies is a disservice to students and their families.

Starting fresh involves bold change in all aspects of school operations and leadership.

It would be one thing if those incremental strategies were likely to pay off for students if educators stuck with them. But a vast body of literature from other industries indicates incremental change is extraordinarily unlikely to work when the change needed is large, urgent, and complex – circumstances that apply perfectly to low-performing schools. When an organization is low-performing the literature makes clear, an aggressive approach is essential for success.⁷

Starting fresh involves bold change in all aspects of school operations and leadership. Starting fresh occurs when a district enters into a contract or charter with a provider that has authority over all critical aspects of school's policies and practices. The provider has the ability to “start fresh” with new leadership, staff, and school design. The “provider” (See *Who Are Start Fresh Providers?* page 16) could take any number of forms, from a team of educators who come together for this purpose to an organization in the business of operating schools.



Two aspects of change distinguish starting fresh most clearly from conventional change strategies:

Across-the-board change. Not only is the leader different; all or most of the staff are as well. The school is truly in a position to create a new culture and a new set of approaches to teaching and learning, and to ensure that every aspect of the school is coordinated and complements the overall focus and culture.

Authority to do things differently. When a district starts fresh, it gives the provider a great deal more control over school operations – such as staffing, management policies, instruction, schedules, discipline and parent relations. This control allows the start fresh school to target every policy and practice to the learning needs of that individual school's students, even when their needs differ profoundly from other students in local district schools.

Starting Fresh: A Private Sector Example from GM⁸

In the 1980s, Japanese auto makers began seizing market share from U.S. auto manufacturers. Japanese-made cars had far fewer defects than U.S.-made cars and had constantly improving features. American makers began to examine Japanese manufacturing methods. What they saw was so different and deeply imbedded – in the organizational culture, work process and workers' roles – that implementing Japanese methods piecemeal in U.S. companies seemed futile.

Instead, General Motors (GM) tried a change approach highly akin to starting fresh within its own organization. The company formed a joint venture with Toyota, which was happy to gain a U.S. manufacturing location in exchange for helping GM create a facility that used the best of both Japanese and American production methods from the start. The joint organization was called New United Motor Manufacturing, Inc. or

“NUMMI.” NUMMI's leaders came from within the auto industry, but many were not from GM. All were charged with doing things very differently from the start, *without regard for GM's usual corporate policies*. For the Toyota executives, the ability of this new plant to craft its own policies and practices in all respects was essential to the deal; this was recorded in the contract forming the new organization. That included labor.

The plant's workers came from a recently closed GM plant and were union members. To give the plant a chance to succeed under new terms, the union accepted a wholly different labor arrangement for this plant. Seniority rights and the numerous, narrow job descriptions and lockstep pay grades gave way to flat teams of skilled partners working in close proximity to build great cars. Workers were inducted into the new plant from day one with a different set of expectations about “who does what.” The manufacturing process steps and floor layout drove the kind of teamwork and immediate, “open-air” quality discussions that are fundamental to Japanese production quality and continuous improvement.

In its first year, NUMMI had only a handful of employee grievances versus a backlog of thousands when the former plant was closed. They produced the same number of cars per year as the previous plant, but with far fewer defects and a work force half the size. The plant made cars at the top of consumer magazine quality lists, had daily attendance averaging 98% and, as the Wall Street Journal put it, “managed to convert a crew of largely middle-aged, rabble-raising former GM workers into a crack force that is beating the bumpers off [U.S.] Big Three plants in efficiency and product quality.” Today, NUMMI produces three popular car models – Toyota Corolla and Tacoma, and GM Vibe – that receive accolades from prestigious organizations like J.D. Power and Associates and, most importantly, consumers.

Not all large organizations are willing to allow a unit truly to “start fresh” within a larger entity; in fact it is rare for an organization to allow a unit to craft wholly unique policies and practices. In this case, GM's contract with Toyota and the union's willingness to do things differently ensured the plant's ability to start fresh successfully.¹





Why Start Fresh?

Starting fresh requires big, sweeping, and bold changes. Clearly, **starting fresh** is a much more aggressive strategy than conventional change strategies, which in turn, implies that it is much harder to do. So why then would a district do it? We offer the following:

Who are Start Fresh “Providers”?

Many different kinds of teams can serve as “providers” under the start fresh strategy. Some operate as for-profit companies, while others are nonprofit entities. Examples include:

- Self-formed teams of teachers in a local community
- Teams of parents, teachers and district administrators
- School management organizations, either new or experienced, local or national, that start and manage multiple schools
- Organizations providing education-related services (e.g., community-based organizations working in education or child development)
- Operators of stand-alone charter schools ready to replicate

Starting Fresh Allows the District to Define Clear Expectations for Performance

What we want from schools is quite clear – high student achievement. The federal government wants it, the state wants it, the district wants it and, most importantly, parents want it. But years and decades of wanting student success have proven not to be enough – districts must demand it and hold schools accountable for achieving it.

A critical component of the start fresh strategy is the charter or contract that the district enters into with the start fresh provider (See *Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools: Setting Relationship Terms*). The charter or contract explicitly defines, among other things, the performance expectations for the start fresh school. A contract, by its very definition, is a legal, binding and enforceable agreement between two parties. This contractual arrangement gives district leaders much needed control over the explicit results it expects the school to achieve and leverage to act should the school fail to deliver. It enables the district to set a higher standard than districts have traditionally set for their most low-performing schools.

Starting Fresh Empowers School Leaders to Act

Again, what we want from low-performing schools is clear – improved student performance. But as the old adage goes, you “have to give to get.” Quite often these words of wisdom are lost when school districts aren’t getting what they want. When a school struggles, more often than naught, central office tightens the reins and makes mandate after mandate in the

When is the right time to consider starting fresh?

The simple answer is this: when incremental change has failed to significantly improve student learning. When an organization is low-performing the literature is clear – an aggressive approach is essential for success.



hopes such efforts will turn the school around. This strategy has been tried over and over again, and it too often fails to get the results school district leaders want.

Over the past decades we have tried to regulate ourselves into success. The thinking was that more rules, requirements and prescriptions would do the job. But it hasn't happened, and more rules and regulation aren't going to do it. These kinds of vectors are not going to get us success.

JOEL KLEIN, CHANCELLOR OF NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Start fresh providers, rather, are empowered with flexibility and freedom to act. While it may be very difficult for a district to make policy exceptions for one of “its own” schools, it is more straightforward to do so as part of a chartering or contracting process. In the case of many states with charter school laws, the charter comes pre-loaded with many of these exemptions – there is no need to negotiate them. The use of a start fresh provider makes it easier for the district to give a school the freedom to do things differently – which is precisely what is needed in chronically low-performing schools, where doing more of the same is a sure path to continued failure.

Starting Fresh Allows Schools to Create a School Culture that Works

We know from experience – and from decades of research about schools and other kinds of organizations – that pre-existing school cultures make it extraordinarily difficult to bring about dramatic change in schools.⁹ Starting fresh allows a school to re-open its doors with a coherent mission and then build all aspects of the school's culture and operation in service of that purpose from the beginning. A school that is starting fresh can also recruit a staff that buys into the school's new mission, creating a true team that supports the school's direction. That kind of buy-in is likely to foster motivation, engagement, morale, job satisfaction and “social trust” that researchers have found to be important ingredient in school success.¹⁰

Starting Fresh Gets Needed Talent into the Right Schools and Classrooms

Study after study has shown that quality teachers are not in the classrooms that need them the most – in those schools that are chronically low performing. District employment policies and collective bargaining agreements often hamstring district leaders from placing their best teachers in schools most in need of quality instruction and recruiting great candidates from outside the district.

Starting fresh provides the opportunity to attract the talent needed to significantly raise student achievement in chronically low-performing schools. The chance to start something new is especially appealing to leaders and teachers with high levels of drive and commitment – exactly the individuals who can make a start fresh school work. Since teachers choose to teach in start fresh schools, rather than being assigned to them, leaders can be sure the entire staff is committed to the school's approach. And with additional control over staffing, leaders of start fresh schools can employ incentives to keep effective teachers where they are and let go those not fit for the particular task at hand.

Starting Fresh Satisfies and Engages Parents

State and federal accountability systems are requiring schools and districts to provide parents and the community with detailed information about how their schools are doing in raising student achievement. As parents become more knowledgeable about what is, or what is not, going on within the walls of their child's school, districts will feel the heat from parents demanding, rightfully so, a quality education for their child.

I sense this is going to be a really good thing. The kids are getting a fresh start.

A SAN DIEGO PARENT WHO WILL HAVE TWO CHILDREN ATTENDING A “START FRESH” SCHOOL





Overseeing an Effective Start Fresh Process

Starting fresh in low-performing schools sends the message to parents that the district is serious about providing a quality education for all students and is willing to pull out all the stops to make it happen. And the more effectively the district can get parents and the community involved in the start fresh process, the better (See *Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools: Engaging Parents and the Community*).

Starting Fresh Keeps Parents In District Schools

Over the past decade, the “menu” of educational options available to parents and students has rapidly grown through district and state programs such as intra- and inter-district school choice, charter schools and private school tuition programs. NCLB has accelerated this trend by requiring parents with children in schools identified for improvement to be offered expanded school options. According to a nationwide U.S. Department of Education survey, parents of low-income children, those most likely to be assigned to low-performing schools, are now the most likely public school parents to opt out of assigned schools.¹¹ If districts are not successful at dramatically improving results for students in currently low-performing schools, this trend toward choice is likely to increase.

School districts are in the business of education and can't afford to lose their valuable customers – the students who attend their schools. Parents seeking quality public school options have more places to shop and districts, more than ever, have to compete for their business. And as any good businessperson will tell you, it's a lot easier to compete when you have a good product. Starting fresh allows districts to make fundamental changes in their low-performing schools, creating quality options that parents and students will want to attend.

Research across a wide range of organizations tells us that starting fresh has a great deal of potential as a strategy for achieving substantial improvement in schools that need it the most. To realize that *potential*, though, district leaders need to craft a well-designed approach to starting fresh that takes advantage of what we know about successful fresh starts in schools and in other kinds of organizations. To make starting fresh work, district leaders need to:

Engage parents and community members effectively in the starting fresh process. Parents and members of the community will take a strong interest in any effort to “do something” about schools they regard as “their own.” Starting fresh can empower parents and communities in unprecedented ways – or it can spark conflict that derails reform. Engaging parents and community members productively is thus a critical part of the start fresh process.

Select the right providers to operate start-fresh schools. Ultimately, starting fresh will only be as successful as the schools that are launched under its banner. The schools, in turn, will succeed or fail in large part based on who steps in to operate them, whether that provider is an established organization that manages schools or a group of committed educators or community leaders. Understanding what kinds of capacity are required for successful fresh starts – and selecting providers based on that understanding – is therefore central to a district's success with starting fresh.

Establish the right relationship terms between the district and the providers. As noted above, the very idea of starting fresh depends on the provider having wide authority to operate the school in ways that will work for students– even if those approaches deviate from established district policies. Granting providers that latitude – and then holding them accountable for results – is another essential element of an effective start fresh approach.



Collaborate with teachers to overcome resistance to the strategy. Starting fresh is controversial and much of the controversy has little to do with the children that are not learning and more to do with the adults who may lose jobs. Bringing teachers to the table to work in support of the start fresh goals can go a long way in implementing a successful start fresh strategy.

Each of these topics merits its own detailed discussion. As a result, NACSA is developing *Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools*, a series of resources to help districts with each of these challenges. The good news is that the accumulated experiences of the nation's charter authorizers, housed with NACSA, bolstered by considerable research about organizational improvement, gives districts and states strong guidance in all of these areas. And as more district leaders move to starting fresh in their chronically low-performing schools, the value of that guidance will continue to grow.

In the meantime, starting fresh represents a promising opportunity for district leaders everywhere who are serious about transforming chronically low-performing schools into places where all children learn and excel.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ R.W. DiBiase, *State Involvement in School Restructuring Under No Child Left Behind*. Education Commission of the States, September 2005.
- ² National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2003.
- ³ DiBiase, *State Involvement in School Restructuring*.
- ⁴ A clearinghouse of authorizer resources can be found at www.charterauthorizers.org.
- ⁵ See section on Turnarounds and reconstitutions of schools in Annotated Bibliography.
- ⁶ The stories and studies of turnarounds document both the changes that worked and previous efforts that failed. See section on Turnarounds across industries in Annotated Bibliography.
- ⁷ This is a very consistent theme in turnaround studies. See section on Turnarounds across industries in Annotated Bibliography for research and case studies in public and private organizations.
- ⁸ W.W. Wilms, A.J. Hardcastle, and D. M. Zell, Cultural transformation at NUMMI (New United Motor Manufacturing Inc.), *Sloan Management Review*, (September 1994).
- ⁹ Among the many examples of this line of research in K-12 education is R. Elmore, "Bridging the Gap Between Standards and Achievement," (Washington: Albert Shanker Institute, 2002), pp. 29-30. On the difficulty of changing existing cultures within organizations of all kinds, see C.M. Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press 1997).
- ¹⁰ For example, see A.S. Bryk and B. Schneider, "Social trust: a moral resource for school improvement" (Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 1996).
- ¹¹ J. Wirt, S. Choy, P. Rooney, S. Provasnik, A. Sen, and R. Tobin, *The Condition of Education 2004* (National Center for Education Statistics 2004-077), Table 25-2.

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