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## NEPC REVIEW: *LEVERAGING ESSA TO SUPPORT QUALITY-SCHOOL GROWTH*

Reviewed By:

Gail L. Sunderman  
*University of Maryland*

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### Summary of Review

A recent report offers a how-to guide for reform advocates interested in removing communities' democratic control over their schools. The report explains how these reformers can influence states to use the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Title I school improvement funds to support a specific set of reforms: charter schools, state-initiated turnarounds, and appointment of an individual with plenipotentiary authority over districts or schools. While the report acknowledges that the research evidence on the effectiveness of these reforms as school improvement strategies is limited, it uses a few exceptional cases to explain how advocates seeking to influence the development of state ESSA plans can advance them anyway. As this review explains, support for the effectiveness of these approaches is simply too limited to present them as promising school improvement strategies. The report omits research that evaluates the models relative to other school reform initiatives, and it fails to take into account the opportunity costs of pursuing one set of policies over another. It also relies on test-score outcomes as the sole measure of success, thus ignoring other impacts these strategies may have on students and their local communities or the local school systems where they occur. For these reasons, policymakers, educators and state education administrators should be wary of relying on this report to guide them as they develop their state improvement plans and consider potential strategies for assisting low-performing schools and districts.



**Kevin Welner**  
NEPC Director

**William Mathis**  
Managing Director

**Alex Molnar**  
Publishing Director

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## National Education Policy Center

School of Education, University of Colorado  
Boulder, CO 80309-0249  
Telephone: (802) 383-0058

Email: [NEPC@colorado.edu](mailto:NEPC@colorado.edu)  
<http://nepc.colorado.edu>

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<http://www.greatlakescenter.org>  
[GreatLakesCenter@greatlakescenter.org](mailto:GreatLakesCenter@greatlakescenter.org)

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*Gail L. Sunderman, University of Maryland*

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## I. Introduction

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute and Education Cities released a report on March 30, 2017 titled, *Leveraging ESSA to Support Quality-School Growth*.<sup>1</sup>

Nelson Smith, a consultant on education policy and public charter schooling and former president and CEO of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, and Brandon Wright, editorial director for Fordham, authored the report. Education Cities consists of 31 organizations in 26 cities whose aim is to promote neo-liberal reform strategies.

This report is a how-to guide designed to show how Education City members, other city- and state-based stakeholders, and education reform advocates can influence states to use the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Title I school improvement funds to support a specific set of reforms. It identifies three models or approaches to school improvement that it promotes: charter expansion, state turnaround districts, and state-led, district-based solutions. The report defines each of these as follows:

- Charter expansion is an opportunity to convert or replace schools identified for comprehensive and targeted support with charters.
- State turnaround districts occur when the state removes control of a school from the district, and creates a “state-led entity” to operate the school.
- With a state-led, district-based solution, the state removes the powers of superintendents and school boards and vests that authority in a single individual.

The report begins with a review of ESSA Title I school improvement provisions, arguing that ESSA “opens the door to a variety of strategies directly managed by the state and/or carried out through intermediaries chosen by the state . . .” (p. 6). By delegating to the states responsibility for identifying interventions for low performing schools, the report argues that ESSA offers opportunities for advocates to leverage the law to support charters or governance-based interventions (i.e., turnaround districts and receiverships).

The report highlights the tightened evidentiary requirements that reform initiatives must meet for an intervention to be adopted by states and districts under ESSA, noting that “in the case of governance-based interventions (turnaround districts and receiverships, for example), the quandary is that the interventions themselves have not been subjected to the most rigorous forms of evaluation” (p. 7). To work around the lack of rigorous evaluation, the report makes the spurious claim that a particular model “. . . can be justified if there is a convincing argument that it will deliver school-level action that meets the [ESSA] tier 1-3 standard” (p. 8). The report goes on to explain how advocates can influence states to adopt

charters or governance-based strategies as school improvement strategies.

Scattered throughout, the report identified “action opportunities,” or recommendations for advocates to consider as they decide on their plan of action. For example, when seeking to influence the development of state ESSA plans, it “strongly recommends that members (i.e., of Education Cities) and their colleagues stress the importance of creating a competitive grant process . . . Members can offer to help SEAs design the RFP” (p. 11). It also encourages Education Cities members to be cognizant of local political currents, noting that some of the reform models may not have local political support and others will require “hard bargaining” (p. 13).

## II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The purpose of this report is to prompt action among Education Cities members and others to take advantage of the changes in ESSA to influence states as they write their state accountability plans. In particular, it focuses on using the mandatory seven percent set aside in Title I. By outlining the ESSA requirements and evidentiary standards, it aims to equip members with rudimentary information to address challenges they may encounter when advocating for these models. The main conclusions of the report are as follows:

1. State ESSA plans are in the works so Education Cities members and other education leaders should act soon to help design and implement these plans.
2. There are three models they think worth considering as strategies that states might use the Title I school improvement set-aside: charter expansion, state turnaround districts, and state-led, district-based solutions.
3. Of the three models, they claim that charter school expansion is most likely to meet the ESSA’s evidence requirements.
4. There is little sophisticated evaluation of the state turnaround districts and the state-led, district-based strategies; nonetheless strategies that modify governance arrangements can meet the tier 1-3 ESSA standards.
5. ESSA, unlike NCLB, permits states to choose school improvement strategies as long as they meet the ESSA standards of evidence.

## III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report’s conclusions are interesting because, while they cite research showing the limitations of the suggested reform models, the report goes on to recommend ways that advocates and others can use the ESSA requirements to promote the adoption of them as school improvement strategies. The rationale it uses for advocating for any of the three models from an evidence perspective is that if there is at least one study that meets any of the ev-

idence-based standards, even the lowest standard, that is enough to consider a particular model. The report accompanies these conclusions with a number of caveats—“what works in one place may fail in another”—that are aimed at preparing advocates for any potential pushback or unfavorable outcomes they may encounter when choosing and promoting a particular model.

#### IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature

The use of the research literature is selective. It includes no peer-reviewed journal articles and many of the cited references are themselves advocacy pieces. On charters, it draws primarily from a 2015 study of urban charter schools conducted by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) to show that charters positively impact student outcomes.<sup>2</sup>

While CREDO has done significant work on the effectiveness of charter schools, the methodology used in the 2015 study contains a variety of technical and conceptual issues that raise questions about its findings.<sup>3</sup> Because of these methodological concerns, Maul (2015b) concluded, “the findings from the CREDO studies cannot be regarded as compelling evidence of the greater effectiveness of charter schools compared to traditional public schools, either overall or specifically within urban districts.”<sup>4</sup> Even setting aside the concerns over the analytic methods, “the actual effect sizes reported are very small, explaining well under a tenth of one percent of the variance in tests scores. To call such an effect “substantial” strains credulity.”<sup>5</sup>

The report’s review of charters recognizes that the performance of charters varies considerably, from “amazing to awful” but then asserts, without citing evidence that “when overseen by vigilant authorizers, charters can achieve powerful results . . .” (p. 13). It also acknowledges that charters as a turnaround initiative “has been little studied” and that there are few charter operators that specialize in school turnarounds (p. 14). Nonetheless, it asserts without evidence that charter expansion makes sense as a turnaround strategy “if we’re focused on turning around students’ lives rather than school buildings” and targets urban areas “where success has been best documented” (p. 14). It is unclear what turning around school buildings means and, as previously noted, the evidence from the CREDO report on the success of charters in urban areas is not compelling.

The report omits a rather large body of research on charter schools and market-oriented reforms that could provide a more nuanced review of the evidence on charter schools, and does not evaluate charters relative to other school reform initiatives that hold greater promise at less cost.<sup>6</sup>

The evidence on state turnaround districts draws on a few reports and newspaper articles in three states (Louisiana, Tennessee, and Nevada). The report cites two research studies that examined the School Recovery District (SRD) put in place in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.<sup>7</sup> The report overstates the positive effects reported in the study<sup>8</sup> and fails to acknowledge the authors’ conclusion that the reforms put in place were multifaceted,

that it is unclear whether the gains could be achieved in other cities without a tragedy like Hurricane Katrina, or that the analysis does not shed any light on which factors drove the improvements.<sup>9</sup> The report cites research that fails to find any positive impact on student outcomes in the turnaround districts in the other two states. Nonetheless, the report lays out action opportunities for those wanting to advocate state turnaround as a school improvement strategy.

For the third model—state-led, district-based solutions—the report acknowledges that few states have tried this model. It relies on two examples, a state takeover of the Lawrence, Massachusetts school district and “a watered-down version in New York State” (p. 22). The evidence that the model is working in Lawrence, MA relies on one report issued by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education that was prepared by the school district and the receiver put in charge of implementing the district’s turnaround plan.<sup>10</sup> While this report showed improvements in student outcomes, it is not a rigorous evaluation that controls for unobserved differences between students. Beyond listing the strategies put in place under the receivership, it does not clarify which aspects of the takeover are responsible for the observed impacts or whether the Lawrence program could be replicated in other districts.<sup>11</sup>

In sum, the evidence cited to support a claim of effectiveness is too limited to draw the conclusion that these three models are promising school improvement strategies. Few of the studies cited meet the criteria for identifying evidence recommended by the U.S. Department of Education non-regulatory guidance.<sup>12</sup> While Congress has repealed these regulations,<sup>13</sup> they have not been replaced. Thus, this is the only government document offering guidance on how to interpret the law’s evidence-based requirements. In addition, none of the models are evaluated relative to other school reform initiatives and thus fails to take into account the opportunity costs of pursuing one set of policies over another. Finally, the report relies on student outcomes as the sole measure of success. This ignores other impacts these strategies may have on students and their local communities or the local school systems where they occur.

## V. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

This report is an advocacy piece using a few exceptional cases to provide a rationale that Education Cities members can use to influence states to use their Title I school improvement monies to support charter schools and school governance takeovers of schools and districts. Thus, evidence matters only in so far as it can be used to advance a particular policy preference.

All three strategies lack a valid foundation in the literature. Charter schools do not perform better than traditional public schools, there is no evidence that state-initiated turnarounds have been successful, and the success of plenipotentiary approaches, where they have been tried, is weak.

## VI. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

Policymakers, educators and state education administrators should be wary of relying on this report—or Education Cities members who use it—as a source of information that can guide them as they develop their state improvement plans. The report provides very little useful guidance for states as they consider potential strategies for assisting low-performing schools and districts to improve. It is an advocacy piece with little to no foundation in the research literature. Given that charter schools are more racially and economically segregated than traditional public schools,<sup>14</sup> the lack of evidence that state-initiated district and school takeovers improve performance of low-performing schools,<sup>15</sup> and the anti-democratic effects of receiverships, these models are unlikely to promote school improvement and could have potentially negative consequences.



## Notes and Resources

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- 1 Smith, N. & Wright, B. (2017). *Leveraging ESSA to support quality-school growth*. Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute & Education Cities. Retrieved April 26, 2017, from <https://edexcellence.net/publications/leveraging-essa-to-support-quality-school-growth>
- 2 Center for Research on Education Outcomes (2015, October). *Urban Charter school study: Report on 41 regions*. Stanford, CA: Author.
- 3 Maul, A. (2015a). *Review of urban charter school study 2015*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved May 11, 2017, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-urban-charter-school>
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- 6 See for example, Baker, B. (2016, November). *Exploring the consequences of charter school expansion in U.S. cities*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.  
  
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- 8 The report stated that the positive effect of the reforms was about 0.4 standard deviations, or 15 percentile points, while the RSD study reported an effect size of 0.2 – 0.4 standard deviations or 8 – 15 percentile points.
- 9 Harris, D.N. & Larsen, M. (2016). *The effects of the New Orleans post-Katrina school reforms on student academic outcomes*. New Orleans, LA: Education Research Alliance for New Orleans. Retrieved May 12, 2017, from <http://educationresearchalliancenola.org/files/publications/The-Effects-of-the-New-Orleans-Post-Katrina-School-Reforms-on-Student-Academic-Outcomes.pdf>



- 10 Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education and Lawrence Public Schools (2015, May 29). *Lawrence level 5 district turnaround plan: Renewed plan*. Retrieved May 18, 2017, from <http://www.mass.gov/edu/docs/ese/accountability/turnaround/level-5-lawrence-plan-2015.pdf>
- 11 See also, Schueler, B.E., Goodman, J.S., & Keming, D.J. (2017). Can states take over and turn around school districts? Evidence from Lawrence, Massachusetts. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 39(2) 311-332.
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AUTHORS: Nelson Smith and Brandon Wright

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REVIEWER: Gail L. Sunderman, University of Maryland

E-MAIL ADDRESS: gsunderm@umd.edu

PHONE NUMBERS: (443) 932-1934

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