

May 28, 2010

Follow Us

[TWITTER](#)
[FACEBOOK](#)

Media Information

If you are a member of the media and would like more information on anything in this e-newsletter, please email Berk Brown at: Berk.Brown@PlatteInstitute.org or call (402) 452.3737. Members of the media may use any or all parts of this information in reproduction as long as proper credit is given to the author and to the Platte Institute for Economic Research.

Send a Letter to the Editor

The Platte Institute strongly believes in the importance of citizens participating in the public dialogue on issues important to Nebraska. Writing a letter to the editor is an outstanding way to partake in the discussion and have your voice heard by thousands of

PLATTE CHAT

Opportunity for Help is Passing By Low Achieving Schools

Authored by Rubria Jessica Hintz
with assistance from Jessica Strutzel
Platte Institute

The Nebraska Department of Education recently released a list of 52 schools labeled as "persistently low achieving schools" in the state. Schools labeled as persistently low achieving are the lowest achieving schools determined by three years of test scores and schools that have a graduation rate less than 75%.^[1] Districts are upset by their schools being placed on a persistently lowest-achieving schools list. There are some factors that may contribute to these schools low graduation rates that are out of their control. Factors such as teen pregnancy, poverty, violence, and family issues are believed to contribute to the low graduation rates. Schools in other states face similar problems in their school systems, yet are still able to help their students flourish.

Some Nebraska school districts are concerned about the higher percentage (75%) state officials set as a higher graduation target than federal officials required (60%).^[2] The reasoning behind Nebraska's decision to request a waiver to use a higher percentage stems results the way graduation rates have been calculated in the past. This does allow for more schools to be eligible for funding, but these schools are likely to have fit the criteria once graduation

people. To make the process easier, the Platte Institute has assembled a list of links which allow you to submit a letter to the editor to nearly all Nebraska newspapers. Simply [CLICK HERE](#) for a listing of the newspapers and follow the appropriate link to submit your letter.

Contact Us

If you would like to contact someone at the Platte Institute, you are always welcome to give us a call, drop us an email or stop by the office. Our telephone number is 402.452.3737. We are located at 10050 Regency Circle – Suite 120 – in Omaha. Below is a list of staff email address:

John S. McCollister
Executive Director
john.mccollister@platteinstitute.org

Anne Duda
Senior Policy Analyst
anne.duda@platteinstitute.org

Kimberly Stephenson
Development Director
kims@platteinstitute.org

Berk Brown
Director of Communications
berk.brown@platteinstitute.org

rates are calculated in accordance to the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate using the formula defined in 34 C.F.R. § 200.19(b) in 2010-11. Currently a variation of the National Center Education Statistics (NCES) formula that was approved to use for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) calculations is used therefore, the higher graduation rate did not unfairly target schools.

There are four options that schools can comply to in order to receive grants:[\[3\]](#)

- **Turnaround model:** Replace the principal and rehire no more than 50% of the staff, and grant the principal sufficient operational flexibility (including in staffing, calendars/time and budgeting) to fully implement a comprehensive approach to substantially improve student outcomes.
- **Restart model**
- **School closure**
- **Transformation model:** Implement each of the following strategies: (1) replace the principal and take steps to increase teacher and school leader effectiveness; (2) institute comprehensive instructional reforms; (3) increase learning time and create community-oriented schools; and (4) provide operational flexibility and sustained support.

It is not a realistic option for Nebraska's schools on the list to comply with the restart model that involves closing and re-opening schools, for example as a charter school, or to close down the school. The transformational and turnaround models are better suited for the state's schools. Other schools in the United States have already implemented these models successfully.

The Success in other States

In Chicago there are two shining examples of the turnaround model being used. Johnson Public school only had 40% of their students meeting state standards for reading, math, and science in 2008.[\[4\]](#) There was a high rate of violence and some students even feared for their lives. In 2009 the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) took over and implemented a turnaround model hiring a new principal, replacing most of the teachers, raising the curriculum standards, and changing the atmosphere of the school to one with more respect. Since

these changes have been implemented, students have been more highly engaged and disciplined; their attendance is up and the need for discipline is down. In addition, parent involvement has increased. Another example in Chicago is the Harvard School of Excellence which was ranked among the 10 worst elementary schools before 2007.^[5] After AUSL implemented the turnaround model the number of students that were meeting or exceeding state testing standards increased 25% in two years.

The softer option of the two models is the transformation model. In 2000 a report ranked 20 low performing elementary schools in Tennessee; nine were identified in the Hamilton county school district. The Benwood initiative came together in reaction to this news and implemented the transformation model, firing their principals and requiring teachers to reapply for their jobs.^[6] Through their efforts they have discovered that professional development for teachers and principals, collaboration of teachers, and having principals that enter the classrooms truly makes a difference. In addition they have shown that "low income minority students can achieve high levels of academic achievement." From 2003 to 2009 the number of 5th graders passing the state exam improved from 57% to 89%, which was just one of their many accomplishments.^[7]

The Impact and Reaction in Nebraska

In 2008 those between the ages of 18 to 24 without a high school degree earned a cumulative total of \$105,518,166 less than those with a high school degree. On average, a high school dropout will contribute \$60,000 less in federal and state income taxes over his or her life time.^[8] When including social security contribution nearly \$98,000 less in total taxes than a high school graduate.

	2007	2008
Less than H.S. Graduate (18 to 24 yrs.)	24,522 people	24,844 people
Median Income of H.S. Graduate	\$25,218	\$26,018
Median Income of less than H.S. Graduate	\$20,839	\$21,715
Difference in median	\$4,379	\$ 4,303

income		
Total Income Lost	\$108,791,876	\$105,518,166

*Data obtained from Census Bureau, 2005 - 2007 & 2006 - 2008 American Community Survey

De Ann Currin, the Principal at Elliot Elementary School in Lincoln, has already agreed to be transferred so that Elliot can receive federal funds; the funds will probably be used "to ramp up teacher training at Elliott, keep kids in school longer and add summer school."[\[9\]](#) Superintendent John Deegan has strongly implied that Bellevue East High school, who was on the list for low test scores, will not be applying for the grant.[\[10\]](#) OPS still remains undecided and school board President Sandra Jensen is strongly opposed saying "we should not accept any tainted money from the state."[\[11\]](#)

Not everyone will be happy if any of the schools on the list decide to apply. But President Obama indicated that sometimes such actions may be a necessary last resort.[\[12\]](#) "If a school continues to fail its students year after year after year, if it doesn't show signs of improvement, then there's got to be a sense of accountability," he said.

The Change that Must be Demanded

Parents need to demand that their children's education be improved. Nebraska Governor Dave Heineman said that the listing provides an open the door to funding that Omaha Public School officials have been asking for.[\[13\]](#) By not applying for the funds available through the grant, these schools appear as though they simply want increased revenue without accountability. Money alone cannot bring about the change these schools obviously need - which is why one of the four accountability options is required. These schools should face heightened scrutiny for turning away funding because they refuse to acknowledge their current system is broken.

"If you are a high achiever they will do everything they can. If you're not they push you through like cattle," one, now successful, woman stated about a high school she attended that made it on the list. Nebraska can no longer shove students through the system like cattle. Rather than being in a low-achieving school which uses environmental factors as an excuse, students at these schools should be in a system

that provides the opportunity to attend classrooms that will have the capacity to teach them well. Citizens of Nebraska spend large amounts of money on educating their young people and have every right to demand accountability from their schools. There is a quote from an unknown author which states, "Leaders instill in their people a hope for success and a belief in themselves. Positive leaders empower people to accomplish their goals." Leaders do not run away from accountability, which is what it appears some of the leaders in many Nebraska school districts are preparing to do.

[1] Dejka, Joe. 52 schools labeled low achieving. 6 May 2010. May 2010 <<http://www.omaha.com>>.

[2] Title I Waiver for School Improvement Grants. 22 February 2010. May 2010 <<http://www.education.ne.gov/>>.

[3] What's Possible: Turning Around America's Lowest-Achieving Schools. 5 March 2010. May 2010 <<http://www.ed.gov>>.

[4] USED. Johnson School of Excellence: A turnaround story (video). 4 March 2010. May 2010 <<http://www.ed.gov>>.

[5] USED. Harvard School of Excellence--A Turnaround Model in Chicago. 1 March 2010. May 2010 <<http://www.ed.gov>>.

[6] Lessons Learned: A Report on the Benwood Initiative. May 2010 <<http://www.pefchattanooga.org>>.

[7] Public Education Foundation. Results. May 2010 <<http://www.pefchattanooga.org>>.

[8] Rouse, Cecilia Elena. The Labor Market Consequences of an Inadequate Education. September 2005. May 2010 <<http://www.literacycooperative.org/>>.

[9] Dejka, Joe. Of principals and principles. 27 4 2010. May 2010 <<http://www.omaha.com>>.

[10] Bellevue East High School continues focus on doing what is right for students. May 2010. May 2010

<http://www.bellevuepublicschools.org>>.

[11] Saunders, Michaela. OPS undecided on grant application. 24 May 2010. May 2010 <www.omaha.com>.

[12] Fletcher, Michael A. and Nick Anderson. "Obama announces get-tough strategy for struggling schools." 2010 March 1. The Washington Post. May 2010 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com>>.

[13] Dejka, Joe and Michaela Saunders. "Heineman, Mackiel in war of words." Omaha World-Herald 25 May 2010: 1.

www.platteinstitute.org

If you do not wish to receive this newsletter or if you wish to be removed from all future newsletters, please [click here](#) to manage your subscriptions.