

Usual Efforts to Raise Scores Have Weak Effect, Study Says

By Megan Greenwell
Washington Post Staff Writer
Thursday, December 6, 2007; B03

Common methods used to improve test scores in [Maryland](#)'s chronically underperforming schools have had little effect, according to a report scheduled to be released today, but [Prince George's County](#) and other school systems have shown a willingness to try other approaches that could lead to a reversal of the downward trend.

The Center on Education Policy, a nonpartisan agency, found that the number of Maryland schools designated for restructuring -- the sanction for schools that have failed to meet federal No Child Left Behind goals for five years or more -- increased nearly 40 percent from 2004 to 2006 despite new state guidelines intended to address persistent performance issues. The restructuring schools are all in Prince George's or [Baltimore](#).

"We certainly aren't in a position today to say that the schools are trying hard enough," said Jack Jennings, president of the nonpartisan center. "Nobody has found the answers."

The report comes a year after another Center on Education Policy publication criticized school systems' reliance on "turnaround specialists" to improve performance rather than attempting more systematic overhauls. State-approved restructuring methods include replacing all or most of the school staff, contracting with a private management company, converting the school to a charter school or appointing an accomplished principal from another school system.

Last year, Maryland State Superintendent [Nancy S. Grasmick](#) eliminated the use of turnaround specialists to restructure schools, but schools already using the specialists, including some in Prince George's, were allowed to continue.

"Both Baltimore City and Prince George's County were not producing data that supported this option as an effective strategy for turning around failing schools," Assistant State Superintendent Ann Chafin told the researchers.

The report commended the state and Prince George's for their innovation, citing county [Superintendent John E. Deasy](#)'s \$33 million plan, which creates remedial programs and revamps the turnaround specialist positions.

"Under the leadership of the new superintendent and new director of accountability, the district created new turnaround specialist positions whose sole responsibilities were devoted to restructuring schools," the report says, adding that principals said their specialists "become part of the schools and were providing valuable resources to teachers and leadership teams."

Jennings said he has not lost faith in turnaround specialists, saying they might help improve schools as part of a comprehensive approach. In Prince George's, implementing a curricular reform program called America's Choice and ensuring that the lowest-performing schools have the highest concentration of highly qualified teachers have shown promising results, he said. Although the number of Prince George's schools designated as in need of restructuring has increased in recent years, the number undergoing any type of corrective action decreased dramatically this year.

"We've been thrilled," said Prince George's spokesman [John L. White](#). "That's not to say there's not more work to be done, because there is, but the progress has been terrific."

Jennings said that efforts in Prince George's have had a positive effect on some underperforming schools but that, all in all, restructuring efforts have not had a significant impact on schools with chronically low test scores. Finding the answers, he said, will take more time.

"There's a lot of pressure on these schools from their school systems, the state, parents and the press; people are impatient," he said. "I believe eventually they will find the answers, but they have to work even harder."

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Log in](#) | [Register](#)

Submit

or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2007 The Washington Post Company

Ads by Google

[American Express® Cards](#)

Great Card Offers from American Express. Compare and Apply Online!
www.americanexpress.com