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*Address by the Secretary of Education
At the National Alliance for Public
Charter Schools Conference*

Turning Around the Bottom 5 Percent

The secretary introduced his speech with an overview of his Listening and Learning Tour and a summary of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. He occasionally deviated from this prepared text.

Today, I want to focus on the challenge of turning around our chronically low-achieving schools. These schools have failed to make progress year after year.

In some of these schools, the leadership has been replaced, but it hasn't made a difference. Many good teachers have left them and too few good teachers have replaced them. And many dedicated parents and ambitious students have also left and found other options.

The social and physical conditions around some of these schools are horrific.

They're often unsafe, underfunded, poorly run, crumbling, and challenged in so many ways that the situation can feel hopeless.

That is, until you meet the kids, talk to them, and listen to their dreams of the future. I went to Detroit where two out of three students drop out. However, the seniors I met are all going to college. They know what they want to be and they don't want to waste a minute.

I went to a high school on an Indian reservation in Montana where 80 percent of the adults are unemployed. They could name just one student from their school who had completed college in the past six years.

I talked to the ninth-graders and they begged to be challenged. They think everyone's given up on them. No one expects them to succeed. Yet, despite bleak conditions, they still believe in the redeeming power of education.

There are approximately 5,000 schools in this chronically underperforming category, roughly 5 percent of the total. About half are in big cities, maybe a third are in rural areas, and the rest are in suburbs and medium-sized towns. This is a national problem—urban, rural, and suburban.

I won't play the blame game, but I also won't make excuses for failure. I am much more interested in finding ways to fix these schools than in analyzing who's at fault.

States and districts have a legal obligation to hold administrators and teachers accountable, demand change and, where necessary, compel it. They have a moral obligation to do the right thing for those children—no matter how painful and unpleasant.

Yet, few districts in America have risen to the challenge. Too many administrators are unwilling to close failing schools and create better options for these children. There are some exceptions: Hartford, Pittsburgh, Denver, New York, Oakland, and D.C.

In a few isolated cases, failing schools were taken over by charter organizations, such as Green Dot in L.A. and Mastery Charters in Philadelphia. Some of these turnarounds are showing real promise.

Finally, in a number of cities and states—Alabama, Tennessee, New York, Chicago, Miami, and Baltimore—affiliates of the NEA (National Education Association) and AFT (American Federation of Teachers) have taken over failing schools.

I closed about 60 schools in Chicago, some for low enrollment and some explicitly because they were failing academically. We reopened about a dozen of these schools with new leadership and staff. Some are run by the district, and some are run by the Academy for Urban School Leadership, a non-profit partner. All of them use union teachers.

Today, these schools are doing much better. Our first two turnarounds—Dodge and Williams—have more than tripled the percentage of kids meeting standards in five years.

Sherman Elementary saw a five-point jump in the percentage of students meeting standards in the first year. Harvard reduced absences by five days per student in the first year. And Orr High School saw a 15-point jump in attendance in its first year.

Turnarounds aren't easy. It requires you to build trust with parents. The way it plays in the media can polarize people. Some adults are still protesting me back in Chicago for closing schools, but it was the right thing to do.

The parents in these turnaround schools now talk about their kids "looking forward to school for the first time," coming home and "talking about their teachers." They say it's "a totally different atmosphere" even though it's the same schools with the same kids and the same socioeconomic conditions.

It gives you hope that anything is possible with enough effort and determination and the right people. That's what we need in schools all over America. The fact is

there are still way too many schools that don't pass the "would we send our own kids there?" test.

And some of them, by the way, are charter schools. The charter movement is one of the most profound changes in American education, bringing new options to underserved communities and introducing competition and innovation into the education system.

All across America we see great charter schools, from Noble Street in Chicago to IDEA Academy in Texas, Inner-City Education Foundation and Partnerships to Uplift Communities in Los Angeles and Friendship Public Charter Schools in D.C.

What I like most about our best charters is that they think differently.

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The Denver School of Science and Technology serves grades six to 12. They take the sixth-graders on college visits. Those children spend years choosing a college—instead of months—and 100 percent of their graduates go on to four-year colleges and universities.

North Lawndale College Prep is in one of Chicago's most violent neighborhoods, yet they cut security staff and hired social workers instead. That extra personalization is one reason that more than 90 percent of their graduates are going to college.

I was just at the North Star Academy Charter School in Newark (N.J.), where they have reversed the achievement gap. Their kids are outperforming others in the state and every single graduate was accepted into a four-year college. These results speak for themselves.

So, I'm a big supporter of these successful charter schools and so is the president. That's why one of our top priorities is a \$52 million increase in charter school

funding in the 2010 budget. We also want to change the law and allow federally funded charters to replicate.

But the CREDO (Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University) report last week was a wake-up call, even if you dispute some of its conclusions. The charter movement is putting itself at risk by allowing too many second-rate and third-rate schools to exist. Your goal should be quality, not quantity. Charter authorizers need to do a better job of holding schools accountable—and the charter schools need to support them—loudly and sincerely.

I applaud the work that the Alliance is doing with the National Association of Charter School Authorizers to strengthen academic and operational quality. We need that, and we also need to be willing to hold low-performing charters accountable.

I closed three charter schools in Chicago and turned away more than 100 proposals because they were not strong enough. There should be a high bar for charter approval, and in exchange for real and meaningful autonomy there must be absolute accountability.

In some states—and the CREDO report singles out Arizona, Florida, Minnesota, New Mexico, Ohio and Texas—accountability is minimal. That's unacceptable, and instead of hearing it from me or from CREDO, the education community should hear it from you. Just as the American Bar Association polices the legal community and the AMA (American Medical Association) does the same for the medical profession, you must get more serious about accountability.

I want to salute the California Charter Schools Association, which recently announced an accountability proposal that links charter renewal to student achievement and growth. We should watch this closely and see if it can become a model for other states.

We also need to work together to help people better understand charters. Many people equate charters with privatization and part of the problem is that charter schools overtly separate themselves from the surrounding district. This is why opponents often say that charters take money away from public schools, but that's misleading. Charters are public schools, serving our kids with our money. Instead of standing apart, charters should be partnering with districts, sharing lessons, and sharing credit. Charters are supposed to be laboratories of innovation that we can all learn from.

And charters are not inherently anti-union. Albert Shanker, the legendary head of the American Federation of Teachers, was an early advocate. Many charters today are unionized. What distinguishes great charters is not the absence of a labor agreement, but the presence of an education strategy built around common-sense ideas: More time on task, aligned curricula, high parent involvement, great teacher support, and strong leadership.

All of these qualities exist in good traditional schools as well. We know what success looks like. I see it the moment I enter a school. It's clean, orderly, the staff is positive and welcoming, and the kids and the classroom are the focus. I see award-winning school work on the walls. I see discipline and enthusiasm in the children. I see parents engaged and teachers collaborating on instruction.

The hard part is to replicate those conditions everywhere, and you need to challenge yourselves and challenge each other to turn one success into a hundred and a hundred into 200.

At the same time, when you see charter schools that are not measuring up don't defend them or make excuses for them. Admit that the adults in that building, for whatever reason, just can't get it right and something has to change.

Children have only one chance for an education. You're giving them that chance. That's an enormous duty and I am grateful for every one of you who willingly took on that responsibility. I'm especially grateful to those of you who are succeeding.

But I came here today to ask you to do even more. We need everyone who cares about public education to take on the toughest assignment of all and get in the business of turning around our lowest-performing schools. That includes states, districts, nonprofits, for-profits, universities, unions, and charter organizations.

I know your typical approach is to start new schools with a few grades and ramp up over time. I respect that approach. It's a smart, successful strategy and we don't want you to stop. The president and I have expended a great deal of political capital urging states to lift charter caps and allow more charters to open—and states are responding. Illinois raised its cap and Tennessee came back into session to pass a charter expansion proposal.

But over the coming years, America needs to find 5,000 high-energy, hero principals to take over these struggling schools—and they will need a quarter of a million great teachers who are willing to do the toughest work in public education. We will find them in the union ranks and the charter community, the business world and the nonprofit sectors. We won't find them overnight. I don't expect a thousand to show up next fall. We can start with one or two hundred in the fall of 2010, and steadily build until we are doing 1,000 per year.

We have great charter networks like Aspire, KIPP, Achievement First and Uncommon Schools. You're steadily getting to scale. Today, I am challenging you to adapt your educational model to turning around our lowest-performing schools. I need you to go outside your comfort zones and go to underserved rural communities and small cities. We are asking states and districts to think very differently about how they do business. Your knowledge and experience can help shape their thinking.

Just as the American Bar Association polices the legal community and the AMA (American Medical Association) does the same for the medical profession, you must get more serious about accountability.

We have a lot of money to support this work. Aside from the \$5 billion in the Race to the Top and Invest in What Works and Innovation funds, we have \$3.5 billion in Title I school improvement grants. We're seeking another billion and a half in 2010. That's \$5 billion specifically targeting turnarounds, providing hundreds of thousands of dollars above normal funding levels for every turnaround school. And with the support of Congress, we will have even more money in subsequent years to support this work.

Leading foundations and the national education unions are both interested in turnarounds. Nonprofits like New School Venture Fund, Teach for America, the New Teacher Project and New Leaders for New Schools will also play a role. In the coming months, we will develop an application process that spells out exactly what we

mean by turnarounds—but let me paint a rough picture for you.

At a minimum, for a turnaround to succeed you have to change the school culture. In most cases, simply replacing the principal is not enough. We want transformation, not tinkering.

We have four basic models in mind. Some will work better in big cities while others are more suited to smaller communities. And we're still working this through, so we welcome your ideas.

The first option is based on what we did in Chicago. We awarded planning grants in the fall so new principals and lead teachers could develop and adapt curriculum to better meet the needs of the students. During the spring, they begin recruiting teachers and they take over the school in June.

Under this model, the children stay and the staff leaves. Teachers can reapply for their jobs and some get rehired, but most go elsewhere. A few leave the profession, which is not all bad. Not everyone is cut out for teaching. Like every profession, people burn out. In our view, at least half of the staff and the leadership should be completely new if you really want a culture change, and that may very well be a requirement of the grants.

Our second option also involves replacing the staff and leadership and turning it over to a charter or for-profit management organization. As I mentioned, Green Dot, Mastery Charters and AUSL are doing this, but we need more of you to get in the game. I know this is tough work, but there is an upside. You start with a school full of kids so there is no student recruiting and you also get a building, which has been a big obstacle for many charter operators.

Obviously, you need to build a full staff more quickly, but that can be done. I am confident that many charter operators will figure this out and succeed brilliantly. I also recognize that you won't always succeed. I accept that, but what I won't accept is a nation that turns its back on millions of children in failing schools while successful models are flourishing in the next community or the next town.

Our third turnaround model keeps most of the existing staff but changes the culture in the following ways. Again, we are open to input on this, but at a minimum:

- They must establish a rigorous performance evaluation system along with more support, training, and mentoring.
- They must change and strengthen the curriculum and instructional program.
- They must increase learning time for kids during afternoons, weekends, and in the summer, and provide more time for teachers to collaborate, plan, and strategize.
- And principals and leadership teams must be given more flexibility around budgeting, staffing, and calendar.

They must use everything we know about how to create a successful school culture—but do it all at once—with enough resources to get the job done. This approach makes more sense in smaller communities where there isn't a ready supply of new teachers and leaders, and where the current staff won't have other job options. This model also gives unions an opportunity to take responsibility for fixing schools without replacing staff. We are beginning a conversation with the unions about flexibility with respect to our most underperforming schools. I expect they'll meet us more than halfway because they share our concern. They understand that no one can accept failure.

But we should also be crystal clear: This model cannot be a dodge to avoid difficult but necessary choices. This cannot be the easy way out. It has to work and show results—quickly—in real and measurable ways in terms of attendance, parent involvement, and student achievement.

All of these models assume a year or more of planning. We should be starting today to build teams that will take over schools in the fall of 2010. Schools and districts can use Title I funds right now to start the planning process.

The last of our four turnaround models is simply to close underperforming schools and reenroll the students in better schools. This may seem like surrender, but in some cases it's the only responsible thing to do. It instantly improves the learning conditions for those kids and brings a failing school to a swift and thorough conclusion.

Now let me also make something very clear: Closing underperforming schools is a state and local responsibility. It's up to state and district superintendents and the political leadership. If they won't make these choices, I can't force them to do it. My job is to support the work—provide funding, help define success, and drive the public consensus toward the desired outcome. But the people who run our schools, and the parents who depend on them, must demand change if they want it to happen.

I came to Washington because I believe in education. I know that change is possible. I know we have the talent and the ideas to succeed. The only question is whether we have the courage to do what's right for kids. We've seen what happens when caution trumps courage. Nothing changes and kids lose. But we've also seen the opposite—where bold leaders have fought the status quo.

And this only works with the full support of the community—the faith-based, the political, the social service agencies, the police, the boys and girls club—and all of the other institutions that serve children and families. A principal can't do this alone.

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We've seen traditional public schools where creative and dedicated educators built strong teams, boosted parental involvement, and raised student achievement. We've seen it in charter schools where gutsy entrepreneurs abandoned lucrative careers, staked a claim in struggling communities, and now are producing miracles.

There is no shortage of courage in this room. You wouldn't be here if you weren't risk-takers. So I'm asking you once again to put your reputations on the line and take on this challenge. I'm asking for your help because I believe in you. I'm asking because I am hopeful. I'm asking, above all, because our children need you and America needs you.

We may never have an opportunity like this again—this president, this Congress, \$100 billion, and a broad and growing consensus around the importance of education. So this is our time and this is our moment. This is our chance to transform the one thing in society with the power to transform lives. The path to success has never been clearer.

The education reform movement is not a table where we all sit around and talk. It's a train that is leaving the station, gaining speed, momentum and direction. It is time for everyone everywhere to get on board. Thank you.

U.S. Department of Education

Arne Duncan

Secretary

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Photo by Joshua Hoover