

# Alliance for Quality Education: Agenda for School Improvement We need a plan to Put parents and students at the table

For many years, parent and community-based organizations have led the way in calling for dramatic action to improve low-performing public schools. But too often, low-income communities of color have been the targets of top-down, rather than inclusive, bottom-up school improvement efforts—like the New York City Department of Education school closings that have so angered parents and communities. These imposed transformation efforts will fail to close our state’s education deficit, unless they directly respond to the unique challenges and strengths of a school, and build the investment of the school community in the reform plan.

***Our public schools are community institutions.*** Their success—and their failure—are inextricably linked to the success and failure of the neighborhoods that they serve. The best way to ensure lasting change is to build it with, and make it accountable to the school community. When comprehensive reform is needed, the first step must be to initiate a comprehensive process that brings the entire school community to the table to create a vision for the school, and a transformation plan that addresses both the academic and non-academic needs of its students and families.

## Putting (and Keeping) Parents and Students at the Table

In any school, some parents will be active and engaged, and many others will not. As critical as it is that parents work to support their individual children—providing adequate study space and time, monitoring student progress, helping with homework, reading to children and more—the fact is that in some families, this basic and critical support is not available. Perhaps the parent or parents work multiple jobs, or lack the skills to offer academic support. Whatever the reason, the inability of all parents to be involved should not be an excuse for teachers, school districts, or policymakers to abandon our schools or assume that parents don’t care about their children.

In fact, many state, school district and school policies unintentionally contribute to the lack of parent engagement: some school offices are under-staffed and overwhelmed, and seem to give parents short-shrift when they come in. Many schools still do not have adequate capacity to help parents who may not be proficient in English. Elementary teachers may not have developed ways to include parents in the classroom, and may unwittingly offend parents who ask to volunteer. Some of the earliest areas of community organizing in public education revolve around these issues of “welcoming” cultures in schools. Organizing groups have been successful at breaking down many barriers to strong school-community relationships.

But in the current political and policy arenas, parents, students and community are also shut out in troubling ways. Instead of being encouraged to *come together* to improve struggling schools to benefit all students in the community, parents are left in the dark. And, when the federal government offers significant funding—through the School Improvement Grants or other federal funding programs—to develop and implement improvement plans, there is no expectation or requirement that parents, students and communities play a role in the building of those improvement strategies. Instead, improvement plans are developed by “experts” outside the building, or even outside the district, and imposed on the school without the investment of teachers, students or parents. Such improvement strategies are almost guaranteed to fail.

Research has confirmed the fact that when families, students, communities and school staff play a meaningful role in designing and implementing a school transformation plan, that plan is more likely to be both successful and sustainable. The process of planning and implementing school transformation is a key element in its success.

## **Building Education Policy that Respects Parents and Brings them to the Table**

Too often, State and School District officials believe that when a school is struggling, everyone connected to that school—principals, teachers, students, parents—are the problem. Too often, plans for school improvement are conceptualized as ways to get around or get rid of these perceived “problems.”

But that approach may be misguided. Most of the time, parents, teachers and even students know what the problems are in a school, and may have ideas for how to overcome them. And, when improvement plans are imposed on a school, rather than developed with the school community at the table, even the most dedicated teachers and parents may resist change—because they haven’t been involved or respected enough to help create the plan.

The Alliance for Quality Education believes that in order to sustain school change, members of the school community must be invested in the plan. This is particularly true in the state’s persistently lowest performing schools, where the state’s current “turnaround” efforts have little role for them, and are instead being imposed from the top down. Instead, New York State needs a plan, to invest parents, students and communities in school transformation. AQE is a member of a national coalition—Communities for Excellent Public Schools (CEPS)—that has developed a proposal for parent, student and community engagement in turning around low-performing schools. The full proposal is available at [www.ceps-ourschools.org](http://www.ceps-ourschools.org). Some key elements of our proposal are outlined below.

### **The Elements of Sustainable School Transformation:**

Families, students, communities and school staff, must play a meaningful role in designing and implementing a school transformation plan. The process of planning and implementing a school transformation is a key element in its success. We support the following elements in the process of designing and guiding reform:

- A school-based team of parents, educators, students (in high schools) and community representatives—the School Transformation Team—should be selected to undertake the development of a transformation plan. This team should be allowed a full school year to assess the school’s needs and challenges, and to develop a plan to meet them;
- The team’s assessment of school strengths and weaknesses should look specifically, for example, at such factors as:
  - teacher-student ratio;
  - teaching quality, the presence of experienced and effective teachers and conditions for quality teaching;
  - feeder school programs and shortcomings that impact performance at the target school;
  - how data is used to identify instructional strengths and weaknesses as well as student support needs;
  - measures of school climate and discipline issues;
  - the availability of wrap-around supports for students;
  - measures of parent engagement.

- A review of *external* obstacles that create barriers to school success should also be conducted. These might include district human resources or other structures that don't work effectively to support schools; contractual agreements; inequitable state or district funding formulas; community characteristics, and more;
- A team of outside experts—like the State's School Quality Review Team—should conduct a separate assessment of the school, and meet with the School Transformation Team to share and compare findings;
- Together, the school-based and state or district team should identify partnerships, agreements and structures that are needed in order to support a reform plan;
- The state and/or district should facilitate this process, and support it, making sure that the plan is accountable and fully resourced.

We also believe that districts should establish and support networks of schools in transition, so that leaders and educators can work together to share best practices and learn from each other. Such networks of schools help build a culture of collaboration rather than competition—as is often the result of top-down, mandated reforms.

Parents in low-income communities have seen “reform” after “reform” imposed on our schools, with little success. But it is wrong to assume that we—our students, our teachers, our communities—are the problem. Instead, we should be viewed as partners in reform. What is New York's plan to bring us to the table?

## Research and Resources

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