

## **Failing Our Failing Schools**

*Latest State Strategy Lacks Quality Implementation, Essential Components*

### **Executive Summary**

To improve persistently poorly performing schools, Maryland is increasingly relying on “zero-basing,” i.e., replacing all or most of the existing staff. Two years after a large group schools were zero-based, there is no evidence that these schools have been able to attract and keep effective staff or implement the additional strategies needed to turn around failing schools. As the State uses this approach more often, it must require schools to implement activities needed to create a stable cadre of effective teachers, require schools to use the additional research-based strategies to improve the quality and quantity of instruction, and efficiently monitor and support implementation. The State needs to clarify its Race to the Top application to incorporate these changes.

### **Background**

In the 2008-9 school year, Maryland approved the first large wave of plans for persistently low-performing schools that relied on “zero-basing” their staff, i.e., replacing the principal and all or most of the staff.<sup>1</sup> This approach is increasingly favored by the federal government and is likely to occur with more frequency in Maryland. This issue brief examines the extent to which the approach is proving effective with the first set of zero-based schools in Maryland.

### **Methodology**

Advocates for Children and Youth examined all 13 schools that implemented zero-based staffing in the 2008-09 school year.<sup>2</sup> To examine the impact of the staffing changes, we looked for evidence that schools had successfully recruited effective staff and used the other best practices associated with zero-based staffing. We also looked for evidence that schools implemented other evidence-based

strategies, other than staff changes, needed to improve the quality and quantity of instruction.<sup>3</sup>

*Effective principals--at least three years of successful prior experience as a principal:*

Instructional leadership is one of the most critical ingredients for turning around failing schools. Among many things, an effective principal with a strong and clear vision is more successful attracting effective teachers.<sup>4</sup> Principals without sufficient experience may become effective; however, they are not the strongest candidates for turning around a failing school. On the other hand, just because a principal has experience does not mean the principal is effective. Thus, it is critical that a zero-based school have a principal who has experience *and* a proven track record, i.e., was principal at a school where test scores increased at least as much as they did in the district overall.

*Empowered principals--able to remove at least 50 percent of staff.* Principals need to have maximum authority to make decisions that have the greatest impact on the quality and quantity of instruction.<sup>5</sup> Research indicates “that without the ability to select and place staff, structure time and allocate funds, it becomes extraordinarily difficult for schools to succeed, especially in a turnaround context.”<sup>6</sup> An empowered principal may choose not to remove 100 percent of existing staff. However, if a majority of staff is retained, it strongly suggests a restraint on principal authority and contradicts the fundamental theory of change of zero-basing.

*Effective teachers--at least three years of successful experience as a teacher:* High student achievement

<sup>1</sup> Previously, the State had assigned coaches to these schools and required submission of improvement plans.

<sup>2</sup> In some instances, schools initially identified in the spring of 2008 for zero-basing did not move forward because they were closed or their test scores increased.

<sup>3</sup> Through a Public Information Act request, ACY obtained from the Maryland State Department of Education the regular reports that schools are required to submit on their progress.

<sup>4</sup> Center for Education Policy, *Improving Low-Performing Schools: Lessons from Five Years of Studying School Restructuring Under No Child Left Behind* (2009).

<sup>5</sup> Berends, M., Bodilly, S., & Kirby, S.N., RAND, *Facing the Challenges of Whole-School Reform: New American Schools After a Decade* (2002)

<sup>6</sup> National Council on Teacher Quality, *Human Capital in Boston Public Schools: Rethinking how to attract, develop and retain effective teachers* (2010).

is predominantly a result of good teaching.<sup>7</sup> The theory behind zero-basing is that a change in staff can dramatically alter the dynamic of a struggling school. However, this theory cannot work if the teachers coming into the school are less effective than the departing teachers. Teachers without experience are generally less effective than teachers who have at least three years of experience.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, there is no research to suggest that an experienced teacher is necessarily effective, or that a teacher with a teaching certificate is by definition effective. Thus, it is important to see whether the teachers coming into the school have experience *plus* a track record of success, i.e., an outstanding evaluation or evidence that test scores of their students increased significantly.

*Professional development--offered to teachers to improve skills and recruit effective teachers:* Most schools currently have limited ability to measure the prior effectiveness of incoming teachers. As such, it is important to at least see that the school uses the strongest available strategies to attract and retain effective teachers. The knowledge that teachers coming into a zero-based school will receive significant support, including intensive professional development, is a critical tool for attracting and keeping effective teachers.

*Incentives--financial or other incentives to recruit effective teachers:* Offering significant financial incentives is another option that can be employed to attract highly-effective teachers.<sup>9</sup>

*Recruitment campaign--a school-specific recruitment initiative that incorporates the community:* Annapolis Senior High School, for example, collaborated with local community officials to create a job fair specifically for the school. A temporary co-principal facilitated management of the school while the school principal conducted interviews and focused on human resource issues to staff the school quickly.<sup>10</sup>

*Hiring based on quality--ability to hire based on effectiveness of instruction, not seniority:* Zero-based staffing does not work if principals are forced to fill vacancies according to seniority rather than skill or effectiveness.

<sup>7</sup> Rowan, B., Correnti, R. & Miller, R., Consortium for Policy Research in Education, *What Large-scale, Survey Research Tells Us About Teacher Effects on Student Achievement: Insights from the Prospects Study of Elementary Schools* (2002).

<sup>8</sup> National Council on Teacher Quality, *Best Practices for Teacher Effectiveness* (Nov. 2009).

<sup>9</sup> National Council on Teacher Quality, see note 4.

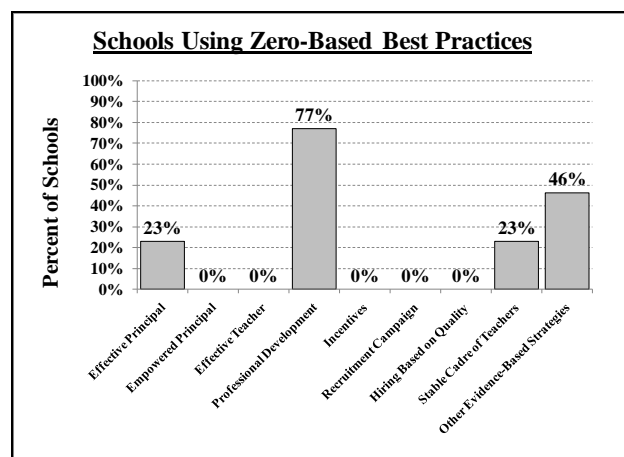
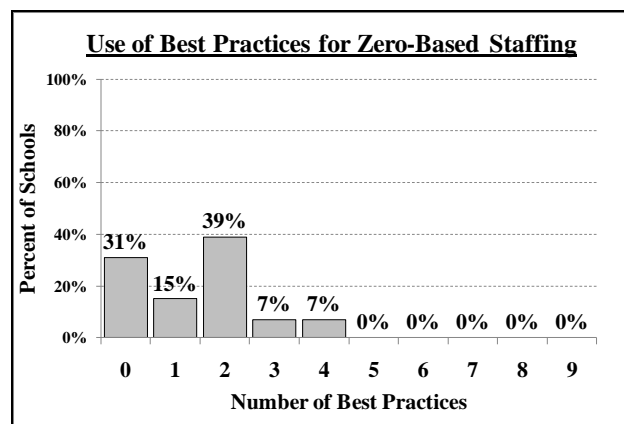
<sup>10</sup> Center for Educational Policy.

*Stable cadre of teachers--less than 20 percent turnover after the first year:* It is critical that once effective teachers are attracted to the school they stay.

*Other evidence-based strategies—at least three proven techniques needed to improve instruction:* Zero-based staffing alone is not sufficient alone to turn around a failing school. It must be part of other strategies to improve student achievement.<sup>11</sup> These strategies focus on the instruction and services in the school. One such example is Response to Interventions, in which teachers used enhanced classroom instruction, regularly assess student progress and then refer struggling students to successful small group or individual interventions.

## Findings

There was no evidence that any of the schools used any more than four of the nine best practices for zero-based staffing. Almost half used none or one.<sup>12</sup> There was no evidence that any of the schools used five of the nine best practices. Most significantly, there was no evidence that any schools were able to attract effective teachers, and only a few schools were able to attract effective principals.



<sup>11</sup> Center for Educational Policy.

<sup>12</sup> For details, see Appendix, Table I.

In numerous instances, the school districts did not provide information necessary for the Maryland State Department of Education to determine whether best practices were being followed. Missing information included the previous effectiveness of principals, the years of successful experience of incoming staff and the stability of the teaching staff after the first year.<sup>13</sup>

For non-staffing strategies, school districts were asked to report on the three strategies deemed as having the highest potential impact on student achievement. In many instances, these strategies were not evidence-based or of a nature or scope to have the potential to improve student achievement significantly. For example, schools said they planned to monitor student progress but did not indicate that students would receive different instruction or additional interventions. Other schools had worthwhile but non transformational strategies, e.g., a parent newsletter, monthly rewards for student attendance or “random acts of kindness.” As with staffing strategies, there was a significant deficiency in the nature of information provided about implementation. Even when an evidence-based strategy was proposed, schools often did not provide enough information to determine whether they had fully and successfully implemented it.<sup>14</sup>

### Recommendations

For persistently low-performing schools, the federal government is increasingly requiring states to zero-base, close or contract management to a third party. Other strategies are disfavored in the Race to the Top grants competition.

It will normally take three to five years to see a substantial improvement in test scores in a failing school. As such, test scores cannot be the sole measure of initial progress. The State needs to have a theory of change for these schools that is clear and evidence-based. It needs to then require a credible plan for each school that is consistent with this theory and monitor and support implementation.

1. Prior to recommending approval of a zero-based plan for a school, the Maryland State Department of Education should verify that there is a credible plan in place to use zero-based

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<sup>13</sup> Some school reports did identify whether a teacher was “highly qualified.” However, this only means that a teacher met minimum state certification requirements; it does not mean that the teacher had demonstrated success as a teacher.

<sup>14</sup> For details, see Appendix, Table II. This includes the three strategies verbatim with an analysis of whether they are research-based and whether there was evidence of implementation.

best practices. This plan must include the strategies needed to ensure that effective principals and teachers are attracted and retained, including financial and other incentives, professional development and a school-specific recruitment campaign.

2. The State should require that an effective principal already be identified.<sup>15</sup>
3. The State should require identification of evidence-based strategies that will supplement staffing changes and which will significantly improve the quality and quantity of instruction. This includes extra interventions for struggling students, e.g., one-on-one tutoring.
4. Prior to approving a zero-based staffing plan for a school, the Maryland State Board of Education should receive a summary of MSDE’s analysis that clearly and specifically shows how the plan includes zero-based best practices.
5. The regular reports submitted by schools and school districts relating to zero-based schools should clearly indicate whether a school is successfully implementing zero-based best practices. It should be clear whether a school has successfully recruited effective teachers, retained those teachers and has effectively implemented instructional improvements.<sup>16</sup>
6. The State should not approve zero-basing plans and then delay implementation when test scores come out two or three months later. If a fundamental restructuring is needed, a one-time increase in test scores does not negate that need.
7. The Maryland State Board of Education needs to provide and/or ensure that each school receives the support needed to implement the zero-based best practices. As part of its Race to the Top application, the State is seeking to expand its Breakthrough Center. The center needs to provide supports specifically for zero-basing, retaining effective principals and teachers and implementing other instructional improvements.

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<sup>15</sup> In April 2010, the Maryland State Board of Education approved zero-basing plans for four schools in Baltimore City. None of the newly assigned principals have prior experience as successful principals; all had served as assistant principals. Also, Baltimore City has recently advertised for “turnaround principals” with “proven results.” However, the job description does not identify any incentives, financial or otherwise, that would encourage effective principals to apply.

<sup>16</sup> In addition to accepting incomplete progress reports, the State is now only requiring one, end-of-year report.