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Research Rejects School Reforms Being Pushed by Obama Administration

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This month as some states are winning huge Race to the Top (RTTT) federal stimulus grants from the U.S. Department of Education and when President Obama is including RTTT strategies in his proposals for reauthorization of the federal education law, it is time to look at what research says about turnaround plans being required for states and school districts to qualify for the federal dollars.

On February 23, a Central Falls, Rhode Island school board fired the entire staff of the community's high school as one of four strategies the President and Secretary of Education are prescribing for schools deemed "failing" under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The President declared: "...if a school continues to fail its students... there's got to be a sense of accountability. And that's what happened in Rhode Island last week at a chronically troubled school..."

The four strategies include: **Turnaround**—replace the principal and at least half the staff, along with changing governance and the instructional program; **Restart**—reopen the school under a charter management organization or an educational management organization; **School Closure**—close the failing school and enroll the students in other schools; and **Transformation**—replace the principal, bring in new curriculum, more instructional time, and community connections. These strategies are untested; there is no evidence that, apart from the "transformation" model, they will raise academic achievement. Research instead supports efforts to work with existing staff for improvement. After five years studying schools that have been successfully turned around under NCLB, the Washington, D.C., Center on Education Policy concludes: "Schools that have raised achievement enough to exit NCLB improvement have often done so with multiple strategies tailored to their individual needs."

The Consortium on Chicago School Research (*Organizing Schools for Success*, 2010) reports that successful schools continually work at five essentials: inspired leadership; parent-community ties; professional staff capacity; student-centered learning; and academically demanding instruction. The Consortium demonstrates that school reform is more difficult to accomplish, while all the more important, in racially-and poverty-segregated communities with extremely high family mobility and high rates of child abuse and foster care.

Stanford University researcher Linda Darling-Hammond, (*The Flat World and Education*, 2010) declares that America must "finally renounce its obstinate commitment to educational inequality" by confronting poverty, growing resegregation, minimal social supports for children, and unequal allocation of well-trained teachers and excellent curriculum.

Diane Ravitch, education historian and long supporter of performance accountability, choice, charters, and merit pay, has abandoned such ideas. In *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (2010), Ravitch denounces strategies favored by RTTT, rejecting the "fantasy that schools serving poor children might be able to construct a teaching corps... exclusively of superstar teachers... if only school leaders could fire at will." "Closing schools," she writes, "accelerates a sense of transiency and impermanence." "The question for the future is whether the continued growth of charter schools... will leave regular public schools with the most difficult students to educate, thus creating a two-tier system of widening inequality." Concludes Ravitch: "The goal of evaluation should not be to identify schools that must be closed, but to identify schools that need help."

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