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Starting Fresh In Low-Performing Schools

OVERVIEW

State and district school leaders across the U.S. have long sought ways to create success for children attending schools where too many have failed for far too long. A new approach to solving this old problem is called *starting fresh*.

By beginning anew with the freedom to do things vastly different, a real opportunity is created to improve student achievement. Starting fresh is not the right tool in every circumstance, but it may be the right tool for you.

This issue brief compiles highlights from a five-volume series called *Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools* published by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA). *Starting Fresh* explains why education leaders are empowering schools to start fresh and gives an overview of the major components of a successful start fresh strategy.

A New Option For Our Most Challenging Schools

In Florida, Seth McKeel Middle School was one of Polk County's lowest performing middle schools when the district converted it to a choice school and then to a charter school. After this "fresh start," it is one of the District's highest rated middle-high schools, typically earning A's in Florida's accountability system.

McKeel succeeded in transforming itself into a high-performing technology academy by essentially building a new school from scratch within the walls of the old middle school. This "fresh start" school leveraged district and state resources to transform the facility, purchase technology, and train teachers. It also allowed school leaders to reach an agreement with the teacher's union to reconstitute the staff. McKeel has since gone on to launch a high-performing elementary school with a similar focus. Parents are clamoring to get in: the two schools had a combined waiting list of more than 2,000 in spring 2005.

How Does Starting Fresh Differ From Conventional School Improvement Strategies?

Chronically low performing schools like McKeel have been trying for years, even decades, to make changes that will improve student performance. Conventional approaches involving small to moderate changes in curriculum and instruction, staffing, and professional development have not been enough.

Starting fresh involves bold change in all aspects of school operations and leadership. Starting fresh occurs when a district enters into a contract or charter with a provider that has authority over all critical aspects of

McKeel Middle School succeeded at one of America's most difficult challenges: taking a school at the bottom and raising it to the top.

school's policies and practices. Two aspects of change distinguish starting fresh most clearly from conventional change strategies:

- **Across-the-board change.** Not only is the leader different; all or most of the staff are as well. The school is truly in a position to create a new culture and a new set of approaches to teaching and learning, and to ensure that every aspect of the school is coordinated and complements the overall focus and culture.



HOW CAN “RESTRUCTURING” UNDER NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ENABLE A SCHOOL TO “START FRESH?”

Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, when schools fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress for five consecutive years, districts must act to “restructure” the school. Within that broad mandate, though, NCLB offers districts flexibility on how to restructure schools:

- Reopen the school as a charter school;
- Contract with an external provider to manage a school;
- Replace staff and leadership;
- Turn the school’s operation over to the state; or
- Engage in some other kind of restructuring.

While the federal government has provided minimal guidance on exactly what it means to “restructure” a school, the term itself implies a dramatic change in business as usual, i.e., **starting fresh**. Whether restructuring really amounts to starting fresh depends upon how the district and school go about the change process. The first and second option, chartering and contracting, provide the clearest avenues for allowing schools to start fresh.

- **Authority to do things differently.** When a district starts fresh, it gives the provider a great deal more control over school operations – such as staffing, management policies, instruction, schedules, discipline, and parent relations. This control allows the start fresh school to target every policy and practice to the learning needs of that individual school’s students, even when their needs differ profoundly from other students in local district schools.

Extensive research from a variety of organizational fields suggests that this kind of fresh start is often the best way to achieve the dramatic change underperforming schools need.

Starting fresh requires big, sweeping and bold changes.

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Why Start Fresh?

Starting fresh requires big, sweeping, and bold changes. Clearly, starting fresh is a much more aggressive strategy than conventional change strategies, which in turn, implies that it is much harder to do. So why then would a district do it?

Starting Fresh Allows the District to Define Clear Expectations for Performance

A critical component of the start fresh strategy is the charter or contract that the district enters into with the start fresh provider. It explicitly defines performance expectations. This contractual arrangement enables the district to set a higher standard than districts have traditionally set for their most low-performing schools and gives them control over the explicit results it expects.

Starting Fresh Empowers School Leaders to Act

Start fresh providers are empowered with flexibility and freedom to act. Chartering makes it possible to establish new rules for a school rather than exemptions to standard rules. In many states, the charter law actually defines this broader flexibility. Using a start fresh provider makes it easier to give a school the freedom to do things differently – which is precisely what chronically low-performing schools need.

Starting Fresh Allows Schools to Create a School Culture that Works

Often, the pre-existing school cultures make it extraordinarily difficult to bring about dramatic change in schools. Starting fresh allows a school to redefine its purpose and mission and recruit a staff that buys into it, creating a team that supports the school’s direction. That kind of buy-in is likely to foster motivation, engagement, morale, job satisfaction, and “social trust” that researchers have found to be important ingredient in school success.

Starting Fresh Gets Needed Talent into the Right Schools and Classrooms

Study after study has shown that quality teachers are not in the classrooms in chronically low performing schools. Starting fresh provides the opportunity to attract the talent needed to significantly raise student achievement in these schools. Starting something appeals to leaders and teachers with high levels of drive and commitment – exactly the individuals who can make a start fresh school work. Additional control over staffing allows leaders of start fresh schools to employ incentives to keep effective teachers and let go those not fit for the challenge.

Starting Fresh Satisfies and Engages Parents

Parents are becoming more knowledgeable about how well their school districts are educating their children. Starting fresh in low-performing schools shows parents that the district is serious about providing a quality education for all students and is willing to pull out all the stops to make it happen. Districts need to effectively involve parents and the community in the process of change and accountability.

Starting Fresh Keeps Parents In District Schools

If districts are not successful at dramatically improving results for students in currently low-performing schools, parents will send their children elsewhere. Starting fresh allows districts to make fundamental changes in their low-performing schools, creating quality options that parents and students will want to choose.

Overseeing an Effective Start Fresh Process

Research across a wide range of organizations tells us that starting fresh has a great deal of potential as a strategy for achieving substantial improvement in schools that need it the most. To make starting fresh work, district leaders need to:

- **Engage parents and community members** effectively in the starting fresh process.
- **Select the right providers** to operate start-fresh schools.
- **Establish the right relationship terms** between the district and the providers.
- **Work to empower teachers** to overcome resistance to the strategy.

Parents are not customers, they are critical to the process that determines the quality of the outcome – student achievement.

The Engagement Challenge: Parents and Community

Starting fresh presents a huge opportunity to listen *and* respond to the community a school serves. Parents and community members know when a school is struggling. Engaging them early in the decision to start fresh can get a change effort off to a solid start.

Even the best-conceived engagement efforts can run into common obstacles that threaten the success of a fresh start. Attachments to specific staff, suspicions, and disbelief can surface. All organizations that attempt major changes, even when change is essential and is ultimately successful, experience resistance.

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Selecting the Right Providers: Governance, Leadership, and School Effectiveness

District leaders starting fresh have a very clear and specific goal: choose a provider highly likely to achieve academic success *with the specific children in the school that is failing*. District leaders will need to consider three areas critical to choosing the right start fresh providers:

- **Governance capacity:** Will people who know how to *oversee and monitor* an organization be governing the school?
- **School leadership capacity:** Will people with the particular competencies of successful *start-up* leaders lead the school's daily activities?
- **School effectiveness know-how:** Is there an understanding of the essential elements of a quality, high-performing school and how to *apply* those to a particular school's student population?

Governance Capacity

The quality of a start fresh school's day-to-day leadership is critical to success. As important as school leaders are, there must be something more to a "provider" than one charismatic leader. This "something more" is what we call "governance."

There are several variants of governance, but in all, the district charters or contracts with an *organization or board* of some kind. That organization's capacity to monitor and oversee the school is a critical criterion for the district in selecting a provider.

School Leadership Capacity

Leaders of successful start fresh schools must be capable of improving student performance – and doing it quickly. To achieve success with students coming from chronically low-performing schools, school leaders must be able to

COMMON DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH PERFORMING SCHOOLS:

- Using a clear mission to drive decisions in daily school life.
- Keeping high expectations that all students will learn.
- Monitoring students' progress often during the school year.
- Making frequent changes in approaches for children who are not learning.
- Maintaining knowledge of current instructional research about what works and applying it.
- Spending significant quantities of uninterrupted instructional time on core subjects.
- Maintaining a safe and orderly environment so that students may focus on learning.
- Establishing a strong connection between home and school so that parents can and will support their children's learning.
- Using leadership approaches that maximize the effectiveness of instruction.

exert great influence over the attitudes and daily behaviors both of students and of the adults who affect them (parents and teachers).

Research indicates that it is the drive for results – goal setting, problem solving, and perseverance – that most distinguishes successful start-up leaders. Successful educators, even those who are brilliant in the classroom or who shine as district administrators, may not have the right profile for leading a successful start-up school, while non-educators who have succeeded in similar endeavors in other walks of life might.

Start-up leaders with education backgrounds may be more likely to focus efforts on instruction-related activities rather than, for instance, marketing the school to parents or pouring over school finances. This factor provides one “edge” to a prospective leader with an instructional background, but not one that trumps the more important question: does the person have the qualities of a successful start-up leader?

School Effectiveness Capacity

Because of the urgency to serve students who are failing in existing schools, district leaders will want to be as certain as possible that start fresh providers' school designs will work – and work quickly. Thus, districts will need a clear set of criteria to assess the proposed school designs. There are different ways to articulate these criteria.

Most charter school authorizers have developed criteria to judge the quality of a proposed school's educational design. These criteria are usually grounded in the decades of research that has documented the common characteristics of high performing schools (see box above). NACSA's Online Library of Resources includes links to authorizer evaluation rubrics, criteria lists, and other relevant resources. Visit www.qualitycharters.org for more information.

Defining The Start Fresh Relationship

The “performance contract” between the district and the start fresh school is the core document defining the relationship and expectations. Every relationship between districts and new school providers is different. There is no formula for the perfect charter or contract. Like any kind of contractual agreement between two parties where assets are provided (public money and a district school building) in exchange for a service or product (increased student learning), it is critical that the terms of the relationship be clear and fully documented.

While state charter laws often offer an ideal framework, it is not the only route for establishing a successful start fresh relationship between the provider and school district. The district could enable a school to operate “charter-like” through a well-structured contract.

Key Relationship Terms: Autonomy, Accountability, And Resources

Whatever the legal framework of the relationship between the district and the new school provider, the terms of that relationship play a critical role in the success of starting fresh. Strong relationships are built upon a clear delegation and understanding of each party's rights and responsibilities codified in a binding legal agreement between the two parties. Fortunately, charter authorizers around the country have developed expertise in creating strong performance-based agreements. NACSA's *Principles and Standards for Quality Charter Schools* embodies that experience.

A shared understanding of the terms governing autonomy, accountability, and resources is imperative to the success of the start fresh relationship.

Autonomy

The very essence of starting fresh is to allow a new school provider freedom to depart from what has not worked in the past. This may include new approaches to instruction, staffing, scheduling of the school day and year, parent relationships and discipline.

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The need to give start fresh schools true autonomy cannot be stressed enough. Here, we zero in on key points that warrant specific attention for establishing the right relationship terms with a start fresh school.

- **Autonomy with regard to personnel is a central ingredient of starting fresh.** Since starting fresh takes place within an existing school, there might be a cohort of incumbent staff members. The start fresh provider may want to hire some of these staff members to work in the “new” school; but compelling a provider to hire incumbents would run against the idea of starting fresh. District leaders should have plans and options for incumbent staff who will not continue with the school.

Personnel autonomy needs to extend beyond initial hiring decisions. Pre-existing staff terms can reduce the school’s success by diminishing the provider’s control. Implementing this kind of autonomy raises complex issues in districts governed by collective bargaining agreements with unions.

- **Autonomy over budget decisions is also critical.** A start fresh school cannot be truly autonomous without significant control over its own budget. Autonomy over the budget gives school leaders the power to use funds to best meet the school’s needs. Therefore, while state law or district allocation may set revenue levels, a school leader must be empowered to exercise authority over how to allocate money in order to get the job done.

The district ought to ensure the school is using public dollars properly. Requiring periodic reports will allow the district to monitor the proper use of funds while respecting the budgetary authority that is essential to the success of the start fresh school.

- **Start fresh providers must be free to implement their educational programs fully.** A strong start fresh provider brings with it an educational program that shows great potential for success with students who did not perform well under the school’s previous program. The relationship terms should allow the provider to implement curriculum models, instructional approaches, and teaching methodologies with a record of success with the school’s student population

and not be required to follow traditional district practices.

Finally, the relationship terms should be written broadly enough to afford school leadership the flexibility to make strategic changes to their plans and programs as needed while remaining faithful to the contract terms. The relationship between the district and the new school provider should give the fresh starters room to maneuver to achieve student learning first and foremost. In tandem with this autonomy comes the next critical aspect of the relationship: accountability for results.

Accountability

Dramatically improving student achievement in schools that have failed too many students for too long is the goal of starting fresh. Districts must hold start fresh providers accountable for dramatically improving student learning and for maintaining an effective organization in compliance with the law. Key requirements for strong accountability include:

- **High standards for performance.** Contracts should clearly delineate the student achievement expectations to which the school will be held accountable. Start fresh schools should be subject to at least the same level of accountability that applies to all public schools, and any additional measures, such as the “value” the school is adding to students’ education.

The relationship terms should also outline financial performance indicators, such as enrollment trends and financial reporting, for which the school will be held accountable. Like the student performance measures, financial performance must be measurable and capable of being determined objectively. The contract should clearly spell out the school’s legal obligations, either explicitly or by reference to relevant statutes and regulations.

The ability to set high standards for performance through a legally-binding agreement with the school provider gives district leaders much needed control over the explicit results it expects the school to achieve and leverage to act should the school fail to deliver.

- **Public reporting of results.** District leaders should require annual measurement and disclosure of student achievement and progress (as well as other measures, such as financial viability and parent satisfaction) to allow everyone, from school district officials to community members, access to the same measures of success.
- **Consequences.** The ultimate consequence of non-performance typically includes non-renewal or termination of the provider’s charter or contract. Any district embarking on starting fresh needs to be prepared for this possibility; it is likely that at least some start fresh providers will fall short of

expectations.

Resources

While start fresh schools are afforded greater autonomy the district will need to play an important role in ensuring that start fresh schools have access to resources necessary for operation, mainly funding. Furthermore, as districts have long been in the “business” of servicing schools, the district may have important resources that it can provide, either in-kind or fee-for-service, that will support the ultimate success of the start fresh school should it choose to take advantage of such resources.

- **Funding.** What level of resources will the new school receive? On what schedule? It is important that the relationship be based upon clear terms regarding the level of district funding the school can expect; including any start-up funds that the provider may need to reopen the school. It should also include an ongoing payment schedule that will realistically support the new school’s operations.
- **Services and benefits.** To what extent may the new school access the district’s services such as professional development, certification, and recruitment programs? Does the district plan to provide technical assistance to the new school provider and staff? Will the new school employees receive district retirement benefits or insurance? What about transportation, food service, accounting, and other non-academic services? A state’s charter law may require that districts provide some of these services for free or at a given cost.
- **Facilities.** Districts that are starting fresh will generally use the school’s previous facility to house the new school. However, there are several remaining “facilities” questions including responsibilities for capital improvements and routine maintenance. Again, charter laws may dictate some of these arrangements. The district and the start fresh school will need to negotiate others.

The Contracting Process

While the content of the contract ultimately determines the legal relationship between district and provider, the process by which it is developed can also have an effect on how the provider and district work together. The provider’s proposal can act as the blueprint for the school’s operations, management, and educational program, incorporated by reference into the charter or contract. Another way to tailor is through negotiation of specific terms. Working in good faith to adapt these can help get the district-provider relationship off on the right foot.

In addition to the initial negotiation, it is also important to have a clear process for amending the terms of the contract as the relationship progresses, since unanticipated situations will arise. This will go a long way in maintaining healthy and productive a relationship between the district

and the start fresh school.

Empowered Teachers: The Backbone of Successful Schools

Teachers who possess in-depth content knowledge are more likely to help their students succeed academically. Talented teachers have also expressed high interest in becoming more involved in school-level decisions concerning curriculum and instruction.

When leadership functions are formally distributed across a school, and teachers have opportunities to serve as leaders, they are likely to spend time helping fellow teachers improve their practice and monitoring instructional improvement efforts. Empowered teachers not only improve student academic performance, they can also help their colleagues improve their own teaching abilities.

What do empowered teachers look like? They possess several characteristics. Empowered teachers:

- Participate actively in school-level policy decisions;
- Have authority and flexibility to creatively meet their students’ needs;
- Possess easy access to resources and data that inform their practice;
- Can count on administrative support as they take intellectual risks in the classroom;
- Are valued for the unique abilities and styles that they bring to their school;
- Share credit with administrative leaders when their school excels;
- Hold themselves personally accountable for producing results;
- Receive rewards for truly outstanding performance; and
- Possess opportunities to grow professionally.

If empowered teachers are an essential ingredient for successful schools, starting fresh schools take that requirement to a new level altogether. Schools that start fresh put all questions of school organization and practice on the table. Even if district leadership deeply believes in and commits to empowering their teachers through a fresh start, traditional teacher contracts that undermine conditions for teacher empowerment can hamper efforts. District leaders must understand the potential clashes between starting fresh and these contracts and develop strategies to overcome such challenges.

Starting Fresh And Teacher Contracts

Central to any discussion of teachers and starting fresh is the powerful role that collective bargaining and teacher contracts have on school operations. Developing effective contract language that meets students’ needs and empowers teachers is a political, as much as a technical, exercise.

Sometimes start fresh reforms will only be realized through the force of a battering ram. At other times, advocates would be well advised to use a velvet hammer in launching a successful fresh start. A strategy calibrated to the local political

the burden of a fresh start primarily on the backs of new, inexperienced, teachers increases the likelihood of teacher burnout, mistakes, and, in the process, renders these teachers incapable of realizing their own full potential.

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context works best. The strategies presented in this section are no different.

Get the Discourse Right

Starting fresh has a powerful intuitive appeal. It can also evoke imagery that could undermine district leaders as they attempt to engage and empower their teachers. The district must work hard to get the discourse right and focus the dialogue where it rightly should be: on improving the performance of students left behind for far too long.

Envision Teachers as Collaborative Partners

By inviting all teachers to participate in the starting fresh process, district leaders make a strong statement about their own leadership. They demonstrate their willingness to learn from all teachers, not just administrative favorites, or easily impressionable “new kids” on the block.

Certainly not all ideas generated by teacher input are necessarily good or worth pursuing. The natural give and take of problem solving while starting fresh will mean that many ideas are put on hold, or never incorporated into a school’s program. But if teachers recognize that district leaders actively seek and often incorporate their input into school decisions—and that teachers are seen as school leaders themselves—then the immense challenges facing a school that starts fresh will begin to seem less insurmountable.

Balance Experience with Freshness

Does a fresh start necessarily require district leaders to seek new teachers to turn around a troubled school? On one hand, teachers new to a school, and often new to the teaching profession, jump into their work with much enthusiasm and energy.

On the other hand, as district leaders start fresh, they should recognize that when it comes to teachers, new is not always necessarily better. It is no surprise that many of the most troubled schools are staffed primarily with new or inexperienced teachers who frequently leave the profession after only a few years.

Thinking that “fresh” necessarily implies “new” can end up disempowering teachers in at least two ways. First, it overlooks the tremendous skills, talents, and motivation that many veteran teachers bring to their work. Second, placing

Thus, while relatively new teachers seem the more likely source of enthusiasm for starting fresh with charter or contract schools, district leaders should balance newness with experience and not overlook the still large numbers of seasoned veterans who support, and perhaps even crave, such a change.

Read the District’s Teacher Contract

Criticisms that teacher contracts are lengthy, complicated documents that can stifle fresh starts are often on point. But before either conceding that starting fresh cannot work due to inflexible teacher contracts or concluding that one can only start fresh by going to war with the local union, district leaders should take time to actually read the documents that they and others frequently criticize. Teacher contracts can contain more flexibility than district leaders may recognize. District leaders starting fresh may actually possess much formal power to creatively deploy a district’s teachers.

Seek Leverage from Federal and State Policy

NCLB can be a powerful instrument for district leaders as they establish license to push changes or lay the groundwork that can make more sweeping fresh starts possible. Especially where district leaders have found lukewarm or hostile union reactions to starting fresh, a more aggressive approach that uses NCLB as a lever can sometimes help leaders lay a foundation to make fresh starts possible.

District leaders can also engage teachers and build support for fresh starts by reminding them that state-takeover and more aggressive outside intervention from the state are NCLB-prescribed options for persistently struggling schools.

Consider Interest-Based Contract Negotiations with Union Members and Leaders

An interest-based approach to contract negotiation contrasts with the more traditional industrial-style bargaining that is more confrontational and symbolized by two sides sitting opposite one another at the bargaining table. Interest-based negotiations allow districts to work with union members to identify common beliefs and facilitate collaboration.

Teacher Empowerment And The Big Picture

Starting fresh, empowering teachers, and maneuvering out of the constraints that district-wide contracts erect is difficult work, both technically and politically. So why bother? Empowered teachers enjoy their work, thus gain deeper commitment, and are more able to do their jobs well. And in the end, that benefits those who matter most: the disadvantaged children who, for too long, have lacked the academic successes and rich learning environments that should

be available to all students in America.

NACSA's Role In Starting Fresh

While starting fresh is a relatively new strategy for most school districts, a wealth of experience with the core activities of starting fresh already exists. Some of this experience resides in the nation's charter school authorizers, education entities across the country that approve and oversee charter public schools.

Whether districts use charter school laws or another form of contracting to restructure, the relationship of districts to "start fresh schools," as defined here, is very similar to the

relationship between charter authorizers and charter schools. Just like charter authorizers, districts considering starting fresh must select providers to operate new schools, enter into performance contracts to give them the authority they need to operate, and hold the schools accountable for results.

In its role as the membership organization of charter authorizers, NACSA has led the development and dissemination of best practices among organizations authorizing charter schools. Districts considering starting fresh can learn from the accumulated experience of successful charter school authorizers who have preceded them in "start fresh" work.

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fresh | in low-performing schools



For more information, visit www.qualitycharters.org and order each of the titles in the series:

- 1 A New Option for School District Leaders
- 2 Engaging Parents and the Community
- 3 Selecting the Right Providers
- 4 Establishing the Right Relationship Terms
- 5 Empowering Teachers



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