

Denver Public Schools

Turnaround Interventions

Frequently Asked Questions

October 26, 2009

Denver Public Schools is committed to ensuring that all students have access to high-quality schools that prepare them for success in college and careers. Our district has seen strong progress in the classroom over the past four years, thanks to the hard work of our students, teachers, and parents. But too many of our students are still not making sufficient progress to be on track to graduate, and we need to do more to meet the very tough challenge of dramatically improving student achievement.

DPS has seen encouraging results in transforming underperforming schools in the past few years, and the district's efforts are now being bolstered by a federal program that encourages all states and school districts to take significant steps to turn-around their lowest-performing schools, with millions of dollars now available from the US Department of Education to support these schools.

For this fall, DPS has identified Philips Elementary School, Greenlee K-8 School, and Lake Middle School, the three lowest-performing schools on the School Performance Framework (SPF), as eligible for turnaround intervention for decisions this fall. DPS will work with additional schools this spring.

In addition, the three lowest-performing charter schools on the SPF, Northeast Academy, P.S.1, and Skyland Community High School, have also been identified as schools in need of turnaround intervention through the charter-renewal process.

Below are answers to frequently asked questions about the specific turnaround interventions and the decision-making process.

Turnaround Interventions

1. What are turnaround interventions?

The US Department of Education, in making federal funds available to support struggling schools, has identified four turnaround interventions:

1) Transformation

- Change or modify the academic program, provide operating flexibility and extended learning time where possible, and leave the current staff, including the principal (where appropriate), in place.
- This intervention could be an option where the program is not demonstrating increased improvement, but a healthy school culture exists, effective teaching is taking place and it is determined that the leadership is of high quality.

2) Turnaround (School redesign)

- Replace the principal and allow the new principal to hire teachers of her/his choice, adopt a stronger governance structure and strengthen instructional program.
- This intervention could be an option when the diagnostic shows that principal and teacher leadership is unable to inspire, manage, and lead instructional improvement, and/or the school culture or quality of instruction is in need of improvement.

3) Restart

- Phase out existing school and phase in one or more new schools.
- This intervention could be an option when the diagnostic shows critical school quality indicators are not present, and where a new start holds more promise of successful change than a turnaround.

4) School Closure

- A school closure may be the best option when the school has, in addition to poor academic performance, a history of declining enrollment or under-enrollment and there is not sufficient student demand in that area to fully utilize the school building.
- The option may also be appropriate if the school facility is in need of significant repair or is incapable of meeting the needs of student.
- The decision to close a school will be informed by available space to accommodate students in a higher-performing school(s) within a reasonable distance from the closed school.

- DPS does not anticipate the closure of any district facilities this year, but replacing the educational program serving students in the school may be considered.

2. How is an intervention selected for a school?

A turnaround intervention is selected for a school based on many different pieces of evidence, including a comprehensive diagnostic evaluation conducted by an independent group of educators. The goal is to understand what is working at the school and what could be improved in order to assign the appropriate turnaround intervention.

3. How is the federal government involved?

The federal government is offering money to states that submit an approved plan to turnaround the lowest-performing schools. DPS will be applying for these funds through the Colorado Department of Education.

4. Has DPS turned schools around before?

Over the past several years, the district has taken action to transform schools that were consistently underperforming. Although the turnaround programs are still in the early stages, DPS is seeing strong signs of improved academic performance and culture at schools such as Brown Elementary, the new Place Bridge Academy, Cole Arts and Science Academy, and Bruce Randolph.

Timeline

5. What is the timeline for school turnaround interventions?

In response to the community's request for additional time for input, the timeline for making decisions on turnaround interventions has been extended.

District recommendations are expected to be presented to the Board of Education on Nov. 9. The Nov. 9 Board meeting will no longer include a public comment session.

There will be opportunity for the public to comment on these recommendations on Nov. 16 at 7 p.m. and Nov. 19 at 7 p.m. To sign up for public comment, call 720-423-3210 by 5 p.m. the day before the public comment session.

The Board of Education is scheduled to vote on the turnaround interventions for schools at its Nov. 30 meeting, which begins at 4:30 p.m.

6. Why the urgency to turn-around low-performing schools?

All students deserve a quality education, and these schools have been underperforming for several years. DPS wants to address the most immediate needs in our schools, with appropriate intervention, to provide a high-quality education for all of our students. The timing is part of the overall timeframe for DPS school reform, with attention being given first to lowest-performing schools in the district. In addition, the timeframe is set so that families at the affected schools could still participate in the school-choice process once final decisions had been made.

School Selection Process

7. Which schools are being considered for turnaround interventions?

DPS will make recommendations for turnaround strategy at Philips Elementary, Greenlee K-8, Lake Middle School, Northeast Academy, P.S.1 Charter School and Skyland Community High School, effective for the 2010-2011 school year.

8. How were these schools selected?

The focus of the turnaround process is on the six lowest-performing schools in the district, based on data from the SPF, which has been recognized as one of the most comprehensive school-evaluation tools in the nation.

The SPF contains roughly 50 measures, based primarily on state assessments that measure individual student academic growth from one year to the next, regardless of the achievement level at which students begin the school year. SPF information can be found online at www.dpsk12.org/spf.

9. Will DPS close schools?

The "School Closure" turnaround intervention will most likely not be selected for the district-run schools being considered in the current process.

School Diagnostic Evaluation Process

10. Who conducts the diagnostic evaluation of the school?

The diagnostic evaluation of our lowest-performing schools was facilitated by the Colorado Department of Education and included a week-long visit and conversations with school administrators, teachers, staff, students and parents and an evaluation of three areas: academic performance, learning environment, and organizational effectiveness. The evaluation's reports are being used to inform recommendations for specific turnaround interventions.

11. Are parents involved in the diagnostic evaluation of the school?

Yes. Parents are involved in the evaluation process. The evaluation team conducts interviews with the school administration, teachers, other school staff, students, and parents. Parent involvement and feedback are important components in the process.

12. Why are "outsiders" involved in the evaluation of the school?

DPS believes that the CDE-facilitated diagnostic is a strong, established process for reviewing a school's culture and performance. The evaluation team is made up of educational experts trained in conducting schools reviews.

Impact to Students and Staff

13. How is the district working to mitigate stress on students caused by this process?

The overall goal is to ensure that every student receives a high quality education. DPS is committed to working through the issues and the needs of students and staff.

14. What options will I have if I don't want my child to attend the turnaround school next year or they can't attend the school because it's being phased-out?

DPS is committed to supporting all of the students and their families. Staff members will be assigned to assist the families in the schools where turnaround interventions are being implemented to ensure an understanding of the options available for the 2010-2011 school year and to assist parents as they make choices about what school their child will attend next year.

15. Why bring in new staff when the school has good teachers already?

A review of staff and students' needs is a part of the diagnostic evaluation. The district's recommendations will identify if any additions or changes of staff should be considered. The goal is to offer all students high quality, rigorous curriculum, and a strong teaching force.

Community Engagement Process

16. What role will parents have in the implementation of the turnaround intervention?

If the turnaround intervention is approved by the Board, a comprehensive plan will be developed for the school. The process of creating the plan will include involvement from parents and community.

17. How can parents learn more about the process or the turnaround interventions?

Visit the district's website (www.dpsk12.org) or contact your school principal. Parent liaisons are also available to answer questions over the phone at 720-423-3054.