



School of Education, University of Colorado Boulder
Boulder, CO 80309-0249
Telephone: 802-383-0058

NEPC@colorado.edu
<http://nepc.colorado.edu>

RESPONSE OF TINA TRUJILLO & MICHELLE RENÉE TO SECRETARY DUNCAN:
*The Research on Turnarounds Doesn't Show What Arne Duncan
Thinks it Shows*

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Our recent brief for the National Education Policy Center points to the extensive body of research showing a lack of success for the types of turnaround mandates prescribed by the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) program. As we discuss, the SIG program can provide an important and needed temporary benefit to resource-starved schools. But the prescriptive, punitive elements, particularly the program's requirement of massive principal and teacher layoffs, can be quite harmful.

We contend that these school reform efforts are undermined in part because parents, teachers, and school communities are treated as an afterthought (as is adequate, sustained financial investment in public education). At a National Press Club event on October 2, 2012, Education Secretary Duncan responded to our report by stating that he vigorously disagreed with these key conclusions.

He also said, with regard to school turnarounds, that “the data’s really interesting,” and that, although he had not read our study, “lots of other studies ... talked about how much this is working in California.” But what do those “interesting” data really tell us?

The Secretary referred to two-thirds of schools in the first year of their turnaround efforts “showing real progress.” He claimed that 20-25% of those schools showed “double-digit gains in reading and math” in the first year. We searched high and low for the source of these numbers, but to no avail. We found no evidence from any research source to support this claim. And we’re not alone. Others have looked, too, and even after they pointed out why these numbers are misleading, the Department continued to share only incomplete information and not share its data.

In fact, when we asked the U.S. Department of Education press office about these claims, we were told, “The stats on academic progress no doubt came from the National Assessment of Educational Progress” (NAEP). But there is no doubt that the Department must be confused. NAEP is a periodic, nationally representative subject matter test based on samples of students, not entire student populations. Its results are reported by state and by large urban district. They are *never* reported for individual schools or students. It is impossible to use NAEP scores to track all or even most SIG schools. Keep in mind that Secretary Duncan has made these claims before and has had them publicly challenged, but his press office seems to be at a complete loss when asked to provide support.

Citing such shadowy “data” as evidence that federal turnaround policies are working is problematic in several respects.

First, when the public does not have access to the real data sources or a solid, peer-reviewed study that can attest to their usefulness or accuracy, it’s impossible to examine the validity of the Secretary’s claims.

Second, as we point out in our report, testing and measurement experts teach us that a single year’s test scores are highly unstable (see p. 9 of our report). In any given year a school’s scores increase or decrease due to a range of one-time factors (including measurement error), most of which do not include better teaching. Thus, while one would expect that – merely as a result of random variation – some so-called turnaround schools will show substantial test score jumps, others will show similar drops. A full look at the complete set of data would be needed to make any global statements about even short-term effects.

Similarly, the studies in California that we discuss in the brief and that Secretary Duncan is apparently referring to are preliminary, non-peer reviewed analyses of a single-year’s test scores. These studies examine a very small number of schools. As we discuss, these studies contribute to the overall research base, but conclusions about the turnaround program’s effects are pretty limited.

Third, by defining a successful “turnaround” in terms of scores on a single standardized assessment, the Department is promoting a troublingly incomplete notion of what we want our students, classrooms, and schools to look like. This definition of success

ignores parents' and teachers' civic, social, and broader academic goals for students. Moreover, years of research about the effects of high-stakes accountability and testing tell us that schools that improve quickly and dramatically usually implement quick fixes to prepare for or simply game the test. But they don't usually improve the quality of teaching and broader forms of learning. In fact, the opposite usually occurs. Scores go up, but school climate, instructional rigor, and student engagement stay low or go down. In schools with large numbers of children of color and English Learners, teachers' ability to meet students' sociocultural and linguistic needs declines. Historic inequities are exacerbated, not solved.

At the National Press Club event, Secretary Duncan was also asked about "parenting involvement." He admitted that with regard to "parental engagement" his department receives "a low grade." We hope that he will make a connection between this low grade and our critique of the SIG program.

The Secretary also noted, "the data's important to look at, but I encourage a lot of journalists here to go out and talk to real kids and real teachers in the community and find out what they think." We agree that this would be valuable—particularly if done in a rigorous way that spans the entire length of a reform. Reporters might want to ask principals how much they are able to focus on instruction when they have to hire and train a largely new staff. Principals should also be asked about the experience level and quality of the replacements. Ask parents what happened when their children lost all or many of their teachers. What would the families who rode busses to Washington DC on last month's "Journey to Justice" say when asked whether the reforms are improving their schools?

The answers to these questions would certainly be informative. But we should not create federal policy based on a few selected anecdotes and superficial analyses. Instead, all of this information should be brought together with the larger research base about best practices and school improvement. That's the research base we drew on for our report, and it's the evidence we hope will guide policy in the future.