



*A Union of Professionals*

## **Indicators of Low-Performing Schools**

Many schools are not educating students at the high levels needed to prepare them to lead successful and productive lives. It is also no secret that many students in these schools have been placed at an educational disadvantage as a result of social and economic factors beyond the purview of the education system. In far too many cases, these conditions have been exacerbated by education policy decisions that deny schools the resources they need, allow poor management to continue unabated, and deprive school staff of quality professional development.

To ensure that intervention and assistance plans are targeted effectively--and that states' and districts' limited resources are used efficiently--school systems must not only identify which schools are failing, but also why. The following list of indicators is intended to aid in an initial identification process, which should be followed by a more comprehensive investigation procedure, including site visits by evaluation teams that include staff representatives.

### **1. Lack of academic standards.**

Without clear standards, detailing what every student is expected to know and be able to do, and when, it is impossible for schools to determine whether student achievement is "good enough." Only with strong academic standards, a core curriculum tied to those standards, and assessments that provide educators (and students and their parents) with information about how well standards are being met, can schools provide the direction and, when necessary, the early intervention that can dramatically improve student achievement.

### **2. Low student performance.**

Schools in which a large proportion of students test near or at the bottom of the scale on valid and reliable tests of student achievement are in clear need of help. Ideally, these assessments should be on the knowledge and skills that were identified through standards and taught through the curriculum as the most important for students to learn. In the absence of well-articulated standards and valid and reliable assessments to determine whether students are reaching the standards, it is not unreasonable for schools to use student performance on tests of basic skills--reading and mathematics--as an indicator of low achievement.

### **3. Lack of improvement over time.**

In targeting schools for intervention and assistance, it is also necessary to look closely at test scores over time. Some schools, recognizing that they are not helping children to reach their full potential, may already have taken effective steps to correct the situation. Such schools should begin to show a pattern of improvement in multiyear comparisons. Indeed, these schools should have established benchmarks for improvement (adequate yearly progress) against which they can evaluate their efforts at improving student performance.

### **4. High levels of disruption and violence.**

Without clear and enforced standards of conduct, a small number of unruly students can disrupt an entire school and impede the learning of all students. Thus, failing schools often exhibit a general atmosphere of chaos and confusion: disorderly classrooms, lax discipline, and frequent fights.

## **5. High rates of student absenteeism.**

Students who are unsafe or unmotivated are more likely to skip school. Students who do not attend school are less likely to learn and more likely to score poorly on tests of achievement.

## **6. High rates of staff absenteeism.**

High rates of staff absenteeism may indicate a host of underlying problems -- such as a lack of discipline and safety, dirty or chaotic conditions, the lack of needed resources and materials, or a disengaged or incompetent administrative team -- all of which can lead to low morale and the physical effects of stress among staff. For such data to be useful, however, the procedures by which they are gathered must be reliable and should exclude scheduled absences resulting from foreseeable causes, such as long-term illness, sabbatical, parental leave, inservice training, etc.

## **7. High dropout rates.**

Although dropout figures can be misleading and inaccurate, high dropout rates are a sign of student disengagement and are often related to low student achievement. Some existing data are skewed, however, because school districts may count as a dropout any student who was enrolled in the district as a freshman but who did not graduate after an expected period of time. To be reliable, the dropout rate should reflect only those students who have voluntarily left all educational programs in the district prior to graduation and have not enrolled in another school district.

## **8. High rates of staff turnover.**

Teachers, administrators and other school personnel who want to work in a more rewarding environment (safer, with better leadership, more resources, etc.) will transfer out of failing schools. Therefore, low-performing schools are characterized by high rates of staff turnover and an unusually high complement of new or inexperienced teachers. Several factors contribute to such turnover: high levels of disruption, inadequate support in serving the needs of high-risk student populations, challenging physical conditions, lack of materials and resources, lack of support and professional development for staff, and district policies that give priority to experienced teachers for desirable reaching assignments.

## **9. A negative school atmosphere.**

Failing schools are often characterized by a school climate that indicates mismanagement, indifference, and neglect. Buildings are dirty and disorderly; hallways are devoid of samples of student work and other decorations that help project school pride. Often the governance structure has broken down in such schools. There is little opportunity for staff participation in decision making, which results in disunity and high grievance rates. Incompetent administration results in mismanagement of resources and an absence of school leadership. Furthermore, parents are inadequately or not involved in the school, and there are few if any viable connections between the school and the larger community.